

## **Banks' sense of identification in Kazuo Ishiguro's**

### ***When We Were Orphans***

Akane YAGIHASHI

#### **Introduction**

Kazuo Ishiguro's works usually focus on recalling past memories of his protagonists. In his fifth novel, *When We Were Orphans* (2000), the protagonist Christopher Banks also looks back on his childhood in Shanghai International Settlement. The story is in the form of a diary and is separated into seven parts: 1) London, 24 July 1930; 2) London, 15 May 1931; 3) London, 12 April 1937; 4) Cathy Hotel, Shanghai, 20 September 1937; 5) Cathy Hotel, Shanghai, 29 September 1937; 6) Cathy Hotel, Shanghai, 20 October 1937; 7) London, 14 November 1958. The setting starts from his childhood in Shanghai in 1910s to London in 1950s, and then he narrates mainly England in the 1920s – 30s and Shanghai in the 1930s. The story starts from his memory of when he comes to London with an ambition to be a detective after graduating from Cambridge and then he invites his schoolmate James Osbourne in his house in London. After he becomes a famous detective in England, he decides to go to Shanghai because he wants to solve the mystery of his parents' disappearance and to deal with the crisis of World War II. However, he cannot do anything about these problems and he is told the truth of his parents' disappearance and then he goes back to England. Recalling his past memory, he begins to think his home is wherever he is. He attains honourable status because he becomes a consulting detective who solves some cases although he does not mention details, only these cases' titles; however, he is strongly fixed on his Shanghai days. His sense of 'home' is always unstable, vacillating between England and Shanghai. He changes gradually as he travels back to Shanghai. This essay deals with Banks' identity discussing the two locations connected with him: Shanghai and England.

#### **1. Shanghai International Settlement**

Shanghai International Settlement is the place that Banks can feel the strongest sense of belonging. Until his parent's went missing when he was nine years old, he lived there with them. It is identified as a fantasy of his childhood. He is fixing on this fantasy although he is already an adult. His strong thought of Shanghai can be obvious from his words. He again meets with Colonel Chamberlain in London, and then they talk about a

memory of when he was escorted to England by Chamberlain. Banks recalls being irritated by Chamberlain's word, '[...] you're going to England. You're going home' (*When We Were Orphans* 33). He pours out his feeling about his home that '[...] a strange land [England] where I did not know a soul, while the city [Shanghai] steadily receding before me contained all I knew' (33). However, he does not show whether his feeling about two places have changed at in this scene. Moreover, when Banks reunites with his childhood friend, Akira, who seems to be a Japanese soldier and then they go to the house where Banks' parents may be under restraint, he says to Akira that '[a]ll these years I've lived in England, I've never really felt at home there. The International Settlement. That will always be my home' (301). It is obvious that Banks' feeling for Shanghai is maintained into his adulthood. Besides, he describes happy episodes with his mother in Shanghai. His mother is a Victorian woman who always supports her husband but she is an active and brave woman because she joins in meetings against importing opium into China. Banks really respects and loves her. He narrates that he was looking forward to swinging on the grass with her. He says,

I can still remember a certain routine we developed around this time. [...] My mother would emerge from the house, still singing, step on to the grass and sit on the swing. I would be waiting up on my mound at the back of the garden, and come running up to her, pretending to be furious. [...] When all my pleading had failed, I would – the logic of this now eludes me – attempt a succession of headstands on the grass in front of her. Her singing would then become punctuated by gales of laughter, until eventually she would come down from the swing, and we would go off to play with whatever I had prepared for us. Even today, I cannot think about my mother's meetings without remembering those eagerly anticipated moments that would always follow. (74 – 75)

Takayuki Shonaka mentions that this scene is not only Banks' happy memory with his mother but also show that he is strongly attracted to her because the image of the swing give a possible sexual meaning (Shonaka 119 – 122). He succeeds in finding his mother and meets again with her in Hong Kong at the end of the story. Thus, the existence of his mother is related to the reason why he is fixated on Shanghai. Therefore, Shanghai International Settlement as his home is surely his important place he cannot forget and cannot separate in his thought.

However, Shanghai shows him a different side when he goes back to Shanghai in adulthood. After he experiences reunion and separation with Akira becoming a Japanese

soldier, on his way back to the British consulate, he talks to Colonel Hasegawa in a car as if he awakes from his dream, 'I thought he [Akira] was a friend of mine from my childhood. But now, I'm not certain. I'm beginning to see now, many things aren't as I supposed (*When We Were Orphans* 325). He also says, 'it's [Banks' childhood is] hardly a foreign land to me. In a many ways, it's where I've continued to live all my life. It's only now I've started to make my journey from it' (325). Thus, Banks' perceived notion that he can again meet with Akira and his parents links him to his child experiences. It is clear that he was tied to Shanghai as his childhood fantasy until he fails to rescue his parents. In addition, Banks notices his uncomfortable feeling about Shanghai from the beginning of his visit. He claims, 'It has occurred to me that I should try and view in a similar spirit something which, over these three weeks I have been here in Shanghai, has come to be a perennial source of irritation: namely, the way people here seem determined at every opportunity to block one's view' (181). His annoyance with their behaviour in Shanghai shows that he confuses the difference with his childhood. Hence, Shanghai International Settlement is the place which shows Banks' persistence of his memory of boyhood.

## 2. England

On the other hand, England is not accepted by Banks as his home although he has lived there for almost his entire life. As is mentioned above in the former chapter, his attitude obviously freezes off in his thought about his home as compared with Shanghai. Moreover, he never left Shanghai until he was nine years old. That is to say, his thought shows that he has never felt a mental connection with England or has not thought of it as his home. His way of life reveals that he cannot fit into naturally into England. For instance, when he was a student in St. Dunstan he tried to imitate the behaviour of his fellows. He says,

[...] my own memory is that I blended perfectly into English school life. [...] On my very first day, for instance, I recall observing mannerism many of the boys adopted when standing and talking [...] I distinctly remember reproducing this mannerism on that same first day with sufficient expertise that not a single of my fellows noticed anything odd or thought to make fun. (7 – 8)

This situation of worrying about his behaviour shows Banks' feeling of inferiority and anxiety that his background is different from other students. He always has anxieties that he cannot be integrated into British culture even though he wants to be similar to other English people. He does not want to admit his personality of differences with other

British people. As another example, he reunites with his schoolmate James Osbourne in London, and then they talk about their school memories. Banks envies Osbourne because he does not have any connection with British society. He says, '[...] now I look back on it, it seems probable that as least some of my fascination with Osbourne's 'well connectedness' had to do with what I then perceived to be my complete lack of connection with the world beyond St Dunstan's' (7). Thus, his isolation in England can reveal from this his thought because he obviously longs for links with British society. However, these thoughts show a gap with other people. He is irritated with Osbourne's word, [...] what I had taken exception to was his casual judgement that I had been 'such an odd bird at school.' (7) Osbourne's word reverses Banks's impression that he had completely fit with British society, and Banks's irritation emphasises that he cannot feel identification with England. Therefore, the reason why Banks has to look to Shanghai in seeking his spiritual salvation is because of his alienation from England. In addition, Banks' dream to be a consulting detective eventually is connected with his thoughts of Shanghai. His ambition to become a detective is born from his play of a game to rescues his father as a detective with Akira. Banks considers that being a consulting detective is a calling for him, and then he has an unrealistic sense of justice coming from his heroic fantasy that he triumphs over evil. Although the story does not tell the details of the cases or how he solves them, he is active in England as a detective. While he begins to realise that others have dissatisfaction with him, he concludes that 'such reactions had to do with something more general in people's perceptions of me' (159). In this way, Banks truly thinks a foreigner in England. Moreover, other people and he consider the roots of the European crisis of WWII or the evils of cases Banks examines are in East-Asia, that it to say Shanghai. Because he is from Shanghai, he has a sense of ownership and stands in the centre of these problems and then feels that he has to solve them. Thus, it is clear that he wants to fulfil his obligation as a detective.

However, his sense of value of England completely changes after it is revealed that his parent's truly are missing and he goes back to England. He understands that he has holding on to his boyhood in Shanghai. He changes his point of views from his past to future. He meets again with his mother in Hong Kong after the war, learns that she has always loved him and hopes for his happiness, and then he goes back to London. He narrates at the end of the story that he can enjoy his life in London that he has been there for long time and then he mentions, 'I have come to take a foolish pride in sifting through old newspaper reports of my cases in the Reading Room at the British Museum. This city [London] [...] has come to be my home, and I should not mind if I had to live out the rest my days here' (368). Obviously, he thinks that England is not his home but he can change

his feeling about London being his home. In other words, he can overcome the feeling that had persisted in his boyhood. He looks at cases he has solved as showing that he has left his footprints in London, that is, London becomes the place he can identify with. The reason why he is bewildered by England and Shanghai as his home is that he only looks at his home in his childhood's fantasy. When he realises that Shanghai is his illusion in his boyhood, he can admit England as his home. Therefore, England is the opposite to Shanghai in Banks' thought, that is to say, his adult world.

### 3. Relationship with Kazuo Ishiguro

Kyoko Hirai mentions that Ishiguro's works are related with his background with his first and second novels located in Japan. However, *When We Were Orphans* is the nearest analogue to his background (Hirai 162-163). According to Barry Lewis, Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan in 1954. When he was five years old, his family moved to Guildford, Surrey because his father was invited by the British government as an oceanographer. In 1982, he became a naturalised citizen of Britain. He published two works, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) which is set in Japan. After he was awarded the Booker Prize in 1989 for his third novel, *The Remains of the Day* (1989), he returned to Japan for a short visit (Lewis xi–xii). In the interview with Masayuki Ikeda in 1987, he claims that he is disgusted with many critics in England who often say there are some Japanese elements in his novels (Ishiguro, 'Nikkei Igitisujin Sakka no Uchinaru Nihon' 137); however, he considers that he has some connections with Japan. In regard to Christopher Bigsby's question in 1986 how Ishiguro thinks his Japaneseness and Englishness, he says,

I don't think I am wholly British in the cultural sense, simply because I have been brought up by Japanese parents. My education outside the home was very British. I went to state grammar school and then to two British universities. In that sense, yes, I had a very typical British education. But inside the home we speak Japanese still, in my parent's house. I was always very conscious that they brought me up differently to the way my friend's parents were bringing them up. (Ishiguro, 'In Conversation with Kazuo Ishiguro' 16)

Barry Lewis mentions that 'Ishiguro's home is a halfway house, neither Japanese nor English, somewhere in-between departure and arrival, nostalgia and anticipation. He is, in short, a displaced person; one of the many in the twentieth century of exile and estrangement' (Lewis 1). Therefore, Ishiguro also seesaws between two countries

likewise Banks. As a result, it is possible that Ishiguro see this novel as a kind of his autobiographical, with elements from his background.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, Banks' persistence to his child memory makes his sense of belonging to Shanghai International Settlement. His fixation reveals the conversation with Chamberlain and his memory with his mother. In addition, it is obvious from Banks' words about Shanghai that he still keeps his past memory fixed in his adult mind. In a similar way, it also brings a feeling of strangeness to England. His thought that he must fit naturally into his school life in England emerges rather than his conflicts about his feeling of belonging between England and Shanghai. On the other hand, oppositely, England becomes a more realistic world for him. Thus, it is clear that he cannot identify England as his home because he has strong memories to Shanghai. Eventually, Banks' fault of his parents' rescue and knowing the truth of his parents' disappearance destroy his childhood world, that is to say, he has a tragic experience. As a result, however, Banks' increasing sense of identification with England shows that he can live his adult life there, to live in his adulthood. As noted, Banks' situation where he struggles between England and Shanghai is similar to Ishiguro's background. In the interview with Sean Matthews in 2007, Ishiguro says, 'I had a 'Japanese phase' in my early twenties when I was hungry for everything about Japanese culture' (Ishiguro, *Kazuo Ishiguro* 116). However, he struggles with the fact that people try to look for only his Japaneseness in his works although he has lived in England for a long time. If *When We Were Orphans* could be seen as Ishiguro's autobiographical work, it can be that he hopes that people look at him from both sides, of Japan and England.

### **Works Cited**

- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *When We Were Orphans*. London: Faber and Faber, 2000. Print.
- . 'In Conversation with Kazuo Ishiguro', Interview. By Christopher Bigsby. *Contemporary Literature*, vol.30, no.3 (Autumn 1989) Rpt. in *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*. Shaffer, Brian W, and Cynthia F. Wong, eds. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2008, 16. Print.
- . "'I'm Sorry I can't Say More': An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro," Interview. By Sean Matthews. Kazuo Ishiguro. Sean Matthews and Sebastian Groes eds. London:

Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009, 16. Print.

- . 'Nikkei Igrisu-jin Sakka no Uchinaru Nihon', 「日系イギリス人作家の内なる日本」, Interview. By Masayuki Ikeda. *Igrisu-jin no Nihon Kan - Eikoku Chinichi-ka ga Kataru "Nippon"*. 『イギリス人の日本観－英国知日家が語る“ニッポン”』. Masayuki Ikeda ed. Tokyo: Seibundoh, 1990, 137. Print.
- Lewis, Barry. *Kazuo Ishiguro: Contemporary World Writers*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000, xi – xii, 1. Print.
- Hirai, Kyoko. 'Gensou no Shanghai Sokai-Watashi tachi ga Koji datta koro', 「幻想の上海租界－『わたしたちが孤児だったころ』」, *Kazuo Ishiguro: Kyoukai no nai Sekai*, 『カズオ・イシグロ：境界のない世界』. Tokyo: Suiseisha, 2011, 162-163. Print.
- Shounaka, Takayuki. *Kazuo Ishiguro - <Nihon> to <Igrisu> no Hazama kara*, 『カズオ・イシグロ－＜日本＞と＜イギリス＞の間から』. Yokohama: Shumpu-sha, 2011, 119 – 122. Print.