

# Postcards from chinatown – analysis

Business



In “ Postcards from Chinatown”, the poet examines how, in a place that had been renovated as a tourist attraction, the past lurks in the shadows of the present, which is unauthentic and seemingly all just a performance for entertainment.

“ An Empty Cinema”, on the other hand, laments the vanishing of Singapore’s past and heritage, likening the past to no more than just a cinematic film, where it is just a hologram projected onto a screen. In “ Postcards from Chinatown”, the poet calls our daily lives “ our performance”, and our proclaimed culture as merely a “ stage”.

But what can we draw from the poet assimilating the past to a stage performance? Firstly, stage performances provide the audience with a sense of intimacy as well as reality. The performance is acted out live in front of the audience, with the characters in close proximity to us and the actors’ stage presence being palpable and tactile. This draws the audience into the show, momentarily allowing them to imbibe in the performance. The poet using this metaphor to relate the present to a stage performance is making a mockery of the present, which has pulled people into its deception which is nothing more than a tourist attraction.

The line in the third stanza, “ Souvenir shops selling Chinese hats and fake pigtailed stapled to the end. Umbrellas for holding water” scoffs at this charlatan modern-day Chinatown, which is now nothing but a huge stage putting up a performance for tourists. The idea of dimensions on stage allows the poet to toy with the idea that the past is still lurking in the shadows of the present’s folly. In the second stanza, “ background” is

repeated so many times while the poet is relating the past, “ Background of the closed down emporium, background of the foreign worker outside an unopened shophouse”.

The emphasis on “ background” insinuates that the past has not quite completely vanished yet, but it has just been pushed into the background and backstage, while the present takes centre stage. Of course, in a performance, the focus is always only on what is in the foreground, while items in the background are blended into the scene, out of the limelight.

Interestingly, in theatre, downstage centre is always well-lit, with spotlights focused on it, while in the background; the lighting is dim and unspectacular.

This is similar to how the “ spotlight” meaning our attention, is always focused on the attractions of Chinatown, while backstage and in the background, the past is hidden. The fact that this stage performance is a parallel to real life, shows that the unique heritage and culture of our past has been consumed by the performance of the present, and only hints of it are left in the shadows, practically nonexistent if one does not observe closely. The title of the poem, “ Postcards from Chinatown”, relates to how the place is fake, and in place merely as an attraction.

Postcards show scenes of attraction, and typically, tourists purchase them as mementos. Oftentimes, pictures on these postcards are “ perfect” in the way that they only show what people want to see, and not the whole picture.

The authenticity of the past, consisting of some disarray which gave Chinatown some of its unique flavour, has no place in postcards which would

naturally shoot the eye-catching present where scenes are shiny, polished and “ picture perfect”, for the sole purpose of looking nice for its audience.

This can be interpreted as bitter mockery on the poet’s part, as the present might as well be a “ dead” picture instead of an elaborate stage performance which is nothing but a sham, as represented in the lines “ postcards of nothing that we really do” and “ This is Singapore, although you don’t see the locals anywhere”. “ An Empty Cinema” focuses more on the reminiscing of the past, which he likens to a cinematic film, “ after the movie” “ a paradise of images was last seen”. The present, in contrast to “ postcards from Chinatown”, is described as a hazy, bleak blur filled with emptiness.

Films are much more detached and distant than stage performances. Scenes that we view have been cut and edited many times over in a typical movie, with special effects added and whatnot.

We only view what the producers want us to see, everything edited to near perfection. The fact that a film is merely an image projected onto a screen sharpens the distant feeling. No dimensions are given to the whole scene playing out in front of the audience; even though the camera zooms in and out of the scene, in the end it is just a two-dimensional hologram.

Even if we reach forward to touch it, all that would meet our hands is just the cold, flat screen, which is blank when the projector is switched off. However vivid and real the scene may seem, the difference in dimensions would always form a barrier between the real world and the hologram, and when it ends all you are faced with is the “ whiteness of the screen”. The poet feels

this way about the past as well; that it is now nothing more than just a film playing from a projector.

In "Postcards from Chinatown", the poet could still sense the past skulking right behind the sham of the present, however here the past is just like a fantasy world in a film, which he can only view from afar. It seems unreachable, with the screen and curtain acting as an impenetrable barrier "last seen behind the curtain". After the film ends, there is nothing left of the past, and he is left facing a blank screen. We can also see that the poet feels that the present is meaningless, and he yearns to escape from it. The present is indicated by the ending of the movie, "the closing credits bring you to earth", and this is when he is brought back to his reality, "after the movie, an empty cinema", and the illusions of the past are no longer there.

At this point, he dazedly "stare[s] ahead into the distance", indicating a sense of loss and dejection. "By the warmth of the still huffing projector" indicates that the movie has just ended, but yet it brings the truth crashing down - that it was nothing more than holograms projected from an electronic box. Images of emptiness are associated with the present in this poem. The "whiteness of the screen" signifies blankness, which is all that is left after the film is over. The last line of the poem, "unedited sequence of your life" signifies that life is a boring drag, with events succeeded others with not much occasion.

In comparison, we can see that both poets detest the present, for either losing all of its meaning or authenticity. The difference is that in "Postcards from Chinatown", the past still exists, even if only in the shadows and

background of the present while in “ An Empty Cinema”, the past is no longer existent in this world, and it only exists as a hologram projected on a screen, intangible and incorporeal. These two poems bring out the striking differences between the two “ shows”, through the poets’ implementations of them as metaphors for Singapore’s past in one case, and present in the other.

By making use of traditional stagecraft, Heng emphasizes the folly of the present in “ Postcards from Chinatown” using one of Singapore’s attractions as a prime example. At the same time, the dimensions of a stage provide whispers of the past behind the glare of the present. In “ An Empty Cinema” on the other hand, the reality of a “ film” being nothing more than a hologram is highlighted, together with the harsh truth that the past is no longer existent, and with it, all the distinctive heritage of Singapore has disappeared as well.