

Squat for Tradition, Sit for Modernity

1.

I've often wondered how to describe a home.

First, what is a home?

A television set (including a VCR and disc player), a telephone (including a fax machine), a hi-fi system (including a radio cassette recorder, a CD player), a computer, an air conditioner, a washing machine, an electric iron, a cooker hood, a refrigerator, an electric stove (that bakes, roasts, pan-fries, deep-fries), a microwave oven, an electric kettle, a hair dryer, a vacuum cleaner, and of course, electric lights (including standing and wall lamps). Do these, together, make up a '90s-era home?

What exactly is a home?

It is Christmas Eve, and the fine drizzle outside has made its way through the gauze curtains, speckling the air like dust before descending onto the newly waxed floorboards. My first reaction is to wonder why I hadn't noticed this earlier, after which it occurs to me that I'll need to mop the floors again tomorrow. My first reaction should have been to get up to stand at the window, to feel the evening spray on my face, my hair, on this tranquil Christmas Eve, as the Female Lead makes her entrance...

But she doesn't enter. She has just fallen asleep in the bedroom. Prior to that, she handed me a list of the basic appliances that make up a home. Only five items have checkmarks next to them.

I ought to get up to walk to the windows to shut them, not to stand there transfixed, lost in thought. The rain grows heavier. I've begun to find the regularity of these showers intolerable, even though I had, in the past, spent countless rainy days in front of the windows with her.

I get up, and the only thing left in the living room is a six-foot-tall (I never could convert that into the darned metric system) plastic Christmas tree, one of the emotional ties that binds her and me. A Christmas tree in our house, festooned with lights like a starry night, creates a festive atmosphere in our home. The other furniture can wait.

As my breathing echoes in the bare, square hall with teak flooring, the question returns: What makes a home? The other day, I said to her that people in the past had to have livestock to set up a home. That is why the Chinese character for "home" (*jia*, 家) positions the character for "pig" (豕) under a "roof" (宀). But in today's homes, the component for "pig" can probably be replaced by the character for "electricity" (电):

電

No one can do without electrical appliances today; a home without these appliances no longer feels like a home. We may not even make it through a single day without them.

If we take the two characters that make up the word “family” (*jia ting*, 家庭), then the second character (庭), which means “courtyard”, should contain water (水) within, and be written as:

床

Since ancient times, homes have been associated with fire and water, but it’s no different today. If we were to reinvent the Chinese character for “home”, we can interpret this in the broadest sense and come up with the character:

𠩺
PUB

After all, the Public Utilities Board (PUB) is the source of all that is needed for a family to survive in Singapore today.

She suggested that the second character be written as:

𠩺
CPF

That’s because nothing is possible in Singapore without the Central Provident Fund (CPF).

𠩺 𠩺
PUB CPF

A strong gust of wind blows the windows open. The rain enters the house, heavier than before.

2.

I’ve also often wondered what tradition is. Suppose she and I celebrate a traditional festival together. Suppose we buy an old prewar house in our joint names. Suppose, she’s merely my girlfriend.

In all matters, a starting point is required to demarcate one stage from the next. Tradition is like a river that flows a great distance from its headwaters; we can only do what we can to extend its course. She and I can only extend the tradition of celebrating Christmas. I cannot understand how Christmas became a traditional festival that we celebrate. I only started celebrating Christmas in my twenties. How did it suddenly become my tradition? More puzzling still is that a

plastic Christmas tree, adorned with beads of light, is the thing that emotionally binds the two of us. To date, neither of us has even seen a real Christmas tree or a real snowflake. Nor do we know the connection between this type of tree and Christmas. Something must have happened to us on our journey to adulthood.

Of course I don't reject the possibility that some kind of explanation exists somewhere in my subconscious. As she would say, "Christmas is so romantic!" A Christmas tree does carry tremendous sentimental appeal.

What we seek is a sense of *joie de vivre* in our lives. Our pursuit of tradition is but a quest for this. But what is romance? What is sentimental appeal?

She said to me before Christmas, "I don't care! You have to buy me a gift. It's our tradition."

Yes, our tradition: a Christmas tree, a candlelight dinner, a Christmas gift that can be found in every department store. In other words, department stores play an important role in perpetuating traditions. We've gotten used to vesting retailers with the responsibility of passing on the torch of our traditions, including the Lunar New Year and all the other festivals.

I need to shut the windows again.

We actually bought this house on impulse, driven by a sense of delight in tradition. She had said, "Wow, it feels amazing. So local, so familiar, so right. And anyway, we happen to need a place." It was only afterwards that we discovered that urgent repairs were necessary to keep our delight in tradition from collapsing. But we didn't want to buttress the old with the new, nor were we permitted to. However, faced with the reality that the original materials were no longer available, we could only use new materials to come up with a facsimile of the old, an imitation of the original that appears authentic only when viewed as a whole.

Of course we considered the property market when we applied for a joint loan to purchase this long-abandoned and dilapidated place. For me, the significance of upgrading and conservation lies in enhancing and retaining the value of the asset. I must admit that I know little about the value of heritage. In my mind, there's no difference between restoring a house with damaged beams and no remaining tiles and replacing the house with an exact replica. Besides, what's the point of keeping a house in its original form when the surroundings have changed beyond recognition? To me, such a house is just like a street corner on a movie set. In any case, history needs to be continually written. To be caught up in preserving the past while forgetting that the present will become the history of the future will result in a disconnect in history.

Market considerations are more practical, as she came to realise. At the very least, the market value of our house has gone up by 50 percent, so she has no regrets about the purchase – this is what heritage value means to me.

But even if it was just a business decision, buying a prewar house also demonstrates one's inclination towards tradition. After all, one could just as easily have bought a newly built one.

She analysed this unconscious behaviour of mine in our conversation. Such an explanation certainly helps support the view that I am someone who desires to safeguard traditional culture (though I don't give two hoots about it). However, I still find myself enmeshed in a sea of abstract symbols.

That chat took place the afternoon we moved in. The heritage conservation area we were in was so quiet that we could hear a baby crying and the sound of a radio wafting intermittently from the housing estate across from us. She got up and put on her blouse. She pried the blinds open with her index and middle fingers, perhaps searching for the source of the crying. The sunlight outside might have been too glaring, because she returned to lie next to me on the straw mat, speaking in a tone of acceptance and contentment, "This feels wonderful." She inclined her head and gazed at me. Noticing that I didn't respond, she assumed I agreed. She said languidly, playing with her hair in her typical way. "I think ultimately all of us will go back to tradition. It's something I feel increasingly strongly about, especially these past few years. What about you?" she turned to ask me.

I was contemplating a different question, so I didn't reply and just smiled. She went on. "I don't know whether you've ever had this feeling. When you're lost in an ocean of sameness, you feel a sudden urge to figure out what makes you different. Who exactly are you? Or perhaps everyone is looking for the thing that makes them different. Or perhaps you quickly discover that difference – innate and unchangeable; it's just you've never realised it. Then you feel the need to go back, to turn back to tradition, instead of existing in a sea of sameness with some variances. When you think like this, you've already unconsciously returned to tradition. Have you ever had this feeling?"

I forgot what my answer was. I might have told her that I was a bit duller than most and never had this feeling. She was disappointed and quickly lost interest in talking. Soon, she fell asleep in my arms.

In fact, I didn't pay attention to what she was saying. When she talked about how "ultimately, all of us will go back to tradition", my mind wandered to our relationship and I wondered if she was hinting at something else.

Up to now, I am still unsure of her intent. As I said earlier, the river of tradition flows long and far. We can only do our best to continue it, marking a new starting point at the furthest extent of our reach. "Ultimately all of us have to go back to tradition" could mean "it's best that we eventually get married" or "it's best our relationship remains in a state unconstrained by institutions that stretch back even further than the institution of marriage". It all depends on where you draw the line of "tradition". However, what she said set me thinking. Do we all have to ultimately go back to tradition? Other than the institution of marriage, aren't there also things like lifestyle, systems of thought, and values? Very quickly, I gave up on this pointless question, for in merely contemplating the question, I had already gone back to tradition.

It's just like how she and I, in moving into this very traditional house, have in fact grown more traditional. We've set up a home (albeit one that still lacks many electrical appliances), even though a house alone may not necessarily make a home.

The window cannot be shut tight because the handle is broken. Tomorrow I'll need to check if a new window can be installed.

3.

I also wonder occasionally what natural instincts are.

Crawling, walking, standing, squatting, sitting (if we restrict ourselves to just the physical aspect).

Will natural instincts change? Can they be changed? For example, can someone who walks, crawl? Can one who sits, squat?

There must have been records of such instances in the course of human evolution. However, there must also have been certain things forgotten in the evolutionary process. For example, why can men "already" stand up to urinate, while women "still" need to squat? Did humans first urinate standing up, or did they squat in the beginning? Isn't there uniformity between the male and female species in the animal kingdom today? Why are humans the only species in which males and females differ from each other in this respect?

Also, is humanity, in relative terms, actually devolving in the course of its evolution?

For example, she discovered on the first night we moved into this traditional house that both tradition and natural instincts gave her problems. The toilet in the new home was the squat type. She could pee in it but not defecate. She needed to sit down for the latter.

That morning, thoughts of instincts and devolution had yet to enter my mind, and I assumed that the problem could be solved with a lifestyle adjustment. She would be fine once she got used to it (we all respond to changes this way). I thought it would help if she had something to distract her and suggested that she bring a magazine along.

But old habits die hard, and I heard a scream from the toilet two minutes later. I forced open the door (thank goodness it was an old house). She said her legs were numb from squatting and she needed my help to stand up.

That day, she had a pressing need for the toilet. She was in a foul mood, worse than when I had made her angry.

The next day we asked an experienced renovation contractor to install a sitting toilet. He told us that the toilets in the heritage conservation district were protected by regulations and couldn't be replaced.

A tussle between tradition and natural instincts thus took shape. After the contractor left, she was willing to try again. I was proud of her tenacity. I told her to drink more water, to go to the toilet only when the need became sufficiently dire, and not to lock the door, just in case.

After three glasses of water, the urge came. She rushed to the toilet, and I heard intermittent groans. Before five minutes had passed, I heard a container falling on the floor. I rushed in and found her holding onto the sink, her face ashen. She looked at me like someone who had only just recovered from severe illness.

"What happened?"

"I almost fainted when I stood up," she said weakly.

"Did you manage to go?" I asked with concern.

She shook her head, put her hand on my shoulder and wobbled out of the toilet.

I have to get up again. I suddenly remember that I should check if all the windows are closed.

That was the first time that the question of devolution of natural instincts crossed my mind. I also thought about the importance of flow and balance (whether physiological, psychological, social, or even political). Two days of not emptying one's bowels violates natural body rhythms and affects one's health. In the end, we managed to overcome the problem with a solution I resort to when I'm not at home and urgently need to answer the call of nature. I drove her to a nearby five-star hotel so she could use the toilet there to restore her physiological balance.

She reappeared before I could finish reading a single article in the newspaper. She looked relaxed and happy. The radiance of her smile reminded me of how she looked on our first date.

"Let's celebrate. My treat." She took my hand and led me towards the hotel café.

As we drank tea, she was quizzical but serious.

"Don't your legs get numb? Don't you get dizzy?"

I was stumped for I had never thought about this. So I casually said, "Perhaps it's because I'm younger."

She snorted. A question crossed my mind. "Don't you do aerobics?"

She had obviously never thought of a possible connection between aerobics and going to the toilet, and was nonplussed for a while before replying, "Well, that's different. One doesn't do aerobics to go to the toilet."

Although I nodded, I wondered why her leg muscles were not stronger because of aerobics. To amuse her, I changed the subject and told her a story.

“Want to hear something funny? I used to have a squat toilet in my old house. When we moved and installed a sitting toilet, guess what my parents did?” I mimed a posture. “They squatted on the toilet seat.”

“Really?” She was amazed. “No way.”

“Come to my place one day and look at our toilet seat. There are footprints all over it.”

“You’re exaggerating.” She guffawed.

I imagine my parents would have reacted the same way if I were to tell them about her experience.

That was our happiest day together after several hectic months. When we reached home, the floor was illuminated with the rays of the sun. As she let down the curtains, I could see the sunlight shining through the thin material of her tee-shirt. I walked over and gently lifted it.

She turned around and tugged the shirt back into place. She said apologetically, “Sorry, my legs are exhausted after these last two days.”

I looked at her, vaguely disappointed. Suddenly, I wanted to laugh. “What shall we do in the future?”

She looked at me blankly and shook her head.

I never mentioned my ruminations on natural instincts to her. Instead, it was she who brought up something related. Our plans to backpack across Mexico would have to be cancelled. Mayan culture is no match for the modern toilet.

The gauze curtain needs to be taken down. It’s already soaked through.

4.

There was a time when I thought I would become a researcher. I’ve always enjoyed drawing charts and tables to explain things.

I have no idea how I ended up becoming an insurance agent, and quite a successful one at that. Thank goodness I didn’t become a researcher. Some time back, I made some space in my planner, amid jottings of my client appointments, and wrote down:

Home · Tradition · Natural Instinct

I haven't been able to draw any relationship or differences between them by way of a simple diagram since then. Not even a single line.

But my client list grew longer and longer. Meeting clients now consumes almost all my time. Occasionally, I feel guilty, and I would make time to take her out for a meal or shopping. It's usually when I am squatting in the toilet, with nothing to do, that I start thinking about these questions. I've no idea why these silly questions have surfaced again tonight. Perhaps it is because we've yet to buy all those electrical appliances. Or perhaps it is because of that plastic Christmas tree.

Oh yes. Since putting up the Christmas tree, we haven't had a moment to sit down to take a good look at it. That includes tonight – Christmas Eve. She's asleep, exhausted by the household chores, while I've been busy shutting windows. Why did we get a Christmas tree in the first place?

Suddenly, she dashes out of her room. "Quick! To the hotel!"

Christmas Eve.

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About the Writer

Born in Singapore in 1959, Chia Joo Ming was presented with the Young Artist Award for Literature by the National Arts Council of Singapore in 1993. He was subsequently invited to participate in the Iowa International Writing Program in 1995. In 2014, he was appointed as Writer-in-Residence at Nanyang Technological University. He was conferred the S.E.A Write Award in 2017 and the Cultural Medallion in 2021.

He has been described as “one of the ten keywords of Singapore’s Chinese cultural perspectives” by Professor David Der-Wei Wang, Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University.

Chia has 11 published books. He won the Singapore Book Award in 1996 for *New Words of Worldly Tales*. He also won the Singapore Literature Prize in 2006, 2010 and 2020 for *Reconstructing Nanyang*, *m40* and *Kian Kok* respectively. His novel, *Exile or Pursuit* received a commendation award at Singapore Literature Prize in 2016.

In 2016, Taiwan’s literary magazine (*Wen Hsun*) put *m40* on its list of top 20 novels (2001–15) while *Kian Kok* was on *Yazhou Zhoukan*’s list of 2018’s top 10 novels. *Exile or Pursuit* was selected as a Chinese literature textbook for secondary schools by the Ministry of Education in 2018. An English translation of the novel was published in 2019, and the novel was adapted into a Chinese stage performance in 2021.

