

*"Mishpacha – Family* by Rebecca Tomasis – A Universal Issue of Love, Pain, Struggle, and Healing"

Review by Yeeshan Yang

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This is the most outstanding piece among numerous publishing grant applications I have examined under the HKADC guidelines in the past two years. I was engrossed when I first read it, and then I could not put it down after 2am when I read it again for writing this recommendation.

Like other Chinese, I grew up in Hong Kong without attachment to religion. I am neither familiar with the Jewish life nor do I possess a strong curiosity to explore it. But my eyes were captured by the struggles of the families presented in *Mishpacha*. The families come from different corners of the world, practice rather extremely different cultures carried over from their host countries, yet binding into a single block – Judaism – their desire of leading a real Jewish life. As a result these families encounter traumatic transnational experiences in their "homeland". On top of this kind of rough situations, these families are torn by inter-generational conflicts. This raises an interesting debatable question: whether the passive immigrants – the children brought to Israel by their parents' idealisms and motivations – should have the rights to be nurtured by their own culture? In fact the novel's main characters constantly rethink the myth of creating a Jewish state and critically question: What has my life got to do with the state that is called my ancestral country?

In this sense the novel deals with a universal issue – the dynamic relationships – between family and state, between cultures, between the varied world-views and motivations possessed by young and old generations.

My father was an Indonesian-born Chinese. He went to Maoist China in the 1950s to fulfill his idealism – building a new China for his ancestral nation. Although he lived in his "home country" for nearly twenty years, my father never felt at home there; he even refused to use chopsticks as a protest against China's assimilation policy. In the 1970s he wanted very strongly to go back to Indonesia, and claimed that he finally realized that his real "homeland" was nowhere else but Indonesia, although his daughter (me) felt Hong Kong to be her home. My father's obsession with constantly seeking a symbolic home nation is extremely beneficial as a means for me to understand the beliefs, behaviours, desires, and strategies of the families portrayed in *Mishpacha*. Although I am a complete outsider from the Jewish communities and do not even have any close Jewish friends, *Mishpacha* touches me deeply.

In the process of creating the Jewish state, the concept of Judaism can be manipulated by religious leaders and power-hungry politicians. Families residing in "host societies" also actively exploit the concept of Jewish blood to maximize opportunities by tackling rules and resources available in the "homeland". Similar to my father's idealism that had so much included my grandparents' desire to find social mobility for their offspring, where the new-born China promised numerous privileges to "repatriates". Unfortunately, they could not foresee the traumatic Cultural Revolution, although they

were good at risk calculation. In the late 1990s the world media reported that Indonesian Chinese were brutally assaulted by indigenous Indonesians, who alleged that ethnic Chinese controlled the national economy. During that financial crisis a comparison was current among Indonesian Chinese – they claimed that their fate was similar to the history of the Jews.

As for the repatriated families, some of their aspirations have been hindered in Israel and some families have done well. Behind the moral of returning to the Jewish ancestral homeland, the motivations of these "returnees" are not so much different from migrants who seek social mobility or personal advancement through international migration. The difference is whether the Jews adopt unique strategies to make the best deals that can advance a new life in their ancestral country, which are better than other migrants do. However, *Mishpacha* seems to give a hint that the Jewish strategies are similar to others, and actually they often make the same old deals.

Dealing with this kind of grand topic, it is easy to present a tedious textbook somewhat like political science. However, the author sensually delivers a vividly colourful story-telling about how young women negotiate for favourable lifestyles, love, and power while dealing with family difficulties and the external forces in Israel. From this "bottom up" angle, we learn more social and cultural implications of a peculiar transnational environment rooted in the history of Judaism.

The transformation of people's private lives is one of the very characteristics of modernity. In the past neighbours or fellow villagers could be ascribed as one's life friends, whilst making friends nowadays is up to personal choice and mutual interests that require individuals to present a best self to others. Family, traditionally an economic unit, is now injected with new ideas – marriage is increasingly based upon emotional communication; having a child is more related to psychological and emotional needs; parental authority is replaced by equal interaction with offspring.

Leading a city life in Hong Kong, we get used to measure an ideal family life with liberal and modern values. Interestingly, *Mishpacha* sketches some young women who grew up in the modern world who want nothing but desire to lead a rigid religious lifestyle and form a feudalistic family. Even though the desire for fundamentalist tradition requires them to sacrifice the comfort, education, and parental love they had at home in the US. Perhaps this is the only part of the novel that I could not relate to. However, I believe in differences and I accept differences. There are some women who can find the sense of security and thus happiness in strict religious rules, and they do not need modern women to liberate them from tradition.

In this sense, the novel presents more than a dynamically exotic culture to non-Jews. Its charm lies in its clever way of delving into the myth of religious institutional systems. People who want to make their lives meaningful tend to use cultural and religious logics to restructure their lifestyles. The more extreme tradition they practice the more heroic they may feel about themselves.

From the narrations of several Jewish women, the novel reveals that the Jews from a variety of countries who practice the Jewish culture and religion are extremely diverse – from ultra orthodox to modern liberal. Yet these dissimilar people are urged by a peculiar obsession – going "back" to their ancestral land. Through the young women's painful experiences, *Mishpacha* creates an ambitious thinking place in itself – throughout the

book it desperately tries to find out: What on earth has my life got to do with this abstract and symbolic homeland?

The novel has a rhythm composed by its black humour and sometimes by light humour. It has its own characteristic literary style. Its structural plot runs smoothly with the recurring serious discussions about Judaism and the creation of Israel. It is delightful to see that Hong Kong – an international city upholding freedom of creativity – has eventually become the birthplace of Mishpacha.

—Yeeshan Yang