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Full Circle. A Life with Hong Kong and China

Ruth Hayhoe, 2004

Hong Kong, Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong
US\$32, 276pp.

ISBN 962-8093-31-2

One might ask if to be a well-known academic is reason enough to publish an autobiography. Automatically, one assumes that only famous personalities are entitled to write their own memoirs – at least if they are going to be published. Ruth Hayhoe, an outstanding China expert among comparative educationists, cannot exactly be called 'famous'. But both an 'inner compulsion' (p. 17) and friends convinced of the richness of her life encouraged her to pursue her autobiographical project, which has now been published by the Comparative Education Research Centre under the title *Full Circle. A Life with Hong Kong and China*.

Why 'full circle'? This image reflects the life of Ruth Hayhoe, coming back to Hong Kong as Director of The Hong Kong Institute of Education in 1997. It is the city where she went as a young missionary and teacher in the 1960s, and which itself returned to Mainland China in exactly the same year; and it is a distinctly Chinese metaphor of development and progress as moving in cycles instead of following a linear model. Furthermore, the Chinese circle symbolises completeness both in terms of achievement and a fulfilled emotional life – in this case a perfected academic career, along with many joyful reunions with friends and family. We learn about a woman who set out as a young missionary, whose views were narrowed by the religious environment in which she grew up. We see this woman emancipate herself from this narrowness through the encounter with a different culture, China, and through her growing interest in expressing herself academically rather than religiously. However, never does she try to settle the score aggressively with the world left behind, and only towards the end the reader becomes aware of how she has continuously sought to reconcile these two worlds, the subjective, spiritual, religious world with the objective, positivist, academic world. In her eyes, both the fact that she is a woman and the fact that she is dealing with China (or, more generally, Asia) nourish this endeavour, assuming a (certainly disputable) parallel between Asian ways of knowing and woman ways of knowing – a topic she developed also in her recently reedited volume *Knowledge Across Cultures: A Contribution to Dialogue Among Civilizations* (co-edited with Julia Pan, whom she calls her 'Chinese daughter' in this autobiography; CERC Studies in Comparative Education 11, Hong Kong, The University of Hong Kong, 2001).

In its approach, the book is personal and historical at the same time. This dichotomy is both its greatest advantage and disadvantage. It is fascinating to follow this missionary, teacher, and, later on, researcher and diplomat into the Hong Kong of the late 1960s, shaken by the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution taking place on the Mainland; into the China of the 1980s, changing face so rapidly after the implementation of the Four Modernisations; into the Beijing after June 4th in 1989, when the Chinese people were painfully aware of their lack of freedom; and finally into the Hong Kong of 1997, when Great Britain gave the colony back to China. For the European reader, it is also intriguing to get acquainted with the North American and Canadian missionary activities in Asia, since they look so archaic in a modernising world. However, somehow neither the places providing the background to this personal story – for the most part, Hong Kong and China – nor the person undergoing all these changes, Ruth Hayhoe, will convey themselves to the reader as vividly and directly as they might have done. Somehow we can never fully *see* these places as we would see them in a good novel or historical account; and somehow the protagonist, although disclosing some of her deepest concerns such as not being able to find a husband, remains distant to the reader. Why is that? The book tries to do justice to too many aspects at the same time: it is full of references to family members and friends, while family and friends remain strangers to us; it recalls historical events such as the Cultural Revolution or the Tiananmen Tragedy, without giving these events the chance to stir up the reader's imagination; and all the while, the book attempts to present answers to (sometimes very specific) research questions.

Still, for some other odd reason, one does not feel tempted to criticise this lack in, say, illustrativeness. This is because of the extremely kind-hearted, honest, and enthusiastic undertone that pervades the entire book, which leads us to the important question of whom this book has been written for. Certainly, it is not an academic book despite some academic digressions and despite its focus on the life and career of an academic. It is also neither a history book nor a kind of personal diary, for the reasons noted above. Ruth Hayhoe herself presents the book as a kind of memoir for her 'children' in a broad sense – her family, but also her students. To be sure, her life story may serve well to motivate young (and possibly female) academics. But more than everything else, the book reads like a big 'Thank you' to all of Ruth Hayhoe's friends, supporters, and mentors – and to the fact that her life turned out the way it did. It is thus less an autobiography than a declaration of love, to her friends (and among them, most of all, to her husband), to the Chinese people and Chinese culture, and, finally, to life itself.