

# REVISTA PORTO

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## How not to be a minority person

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# Revista Porto

It is said that Winston Churchill claimed to have Red Indian blood through one of his American ancestors. If true, it is strange that he should make the claim, for it is as if being a descendent of the Duke of Marlborough was not enough and that he needed the genes of an Indian chief for added luster. If perchance Churchill had Chinese blood, I doubt he would have boasted about it, for to him and his fellow aristocrats a Chinaman was a coolie or someone who sweated in a laundry shop. My point is that not all ethnic minorities are looked down upon. Some are admired for certain qualities, outstandingly, that of courage, which Europeans see in American Indian warriors.<sup>1</sup>

If I had never left China, I would be a member of the majority, with the confidence that such membership brings. But, given my affectional orientation, I would also be relegated to a more or less rejected group. As for my status in America, I am a minority person three times over: a Chinese in a country where whites dominate, a fellow traveler of Christianity in a university that is aggressively secular, and a man who finds male clumsy gentleness more touching than female delicate concision. The result is that I often feel isolated and, at times, despairingly alone, a condition that cannot be assuaged by simply joining a group. In fact, joining a group can exacerbate the feeling. My problem, I have come to realize, is that I am unique. But, then, so is everyone else! Uniqueness of individuals is a species characteristic, one that distinguishes us from other animals. Our sense of belonging, of being wholly part of a group, is more illusory than real. Consider the gathering in this room. All the chairs in it are identical, you are all UW students, you are all young and you all look much alike by virtue of your youth, and you are all listening to me. We are a community and almost one body. Yet, I would be bewildered—and probably shocked—if I were able to look into your minds.

We dread our uniqueness. We seek to belong. Belonging to a group makes the individual feel less vulnerable and more self-confident. As for the group, its collective sense of self is typically one of confidence, provided it is isolated from more advanced

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<sup>1</sup> Talk delivered in March 2011 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to an audience of students and faculty in Asian-American Studies, Gender Studies, Ethnic and LGBT studies, and English. Posted in <http://www.yifutuan.org/archive/2011/2011minority.htm> (04/24/2011).

neighbors. There were many such small, isolated groups a hundred years ago. Ethnographers of the time labeled them “primitive” on account of the simplicity of their material culture, but the people themselves had a more flattering view of their standing in the world. Given the fact that each time they moved away from their home base, they saw fewer and fewer people until only wilderness remained, they could believe that they occupied the world’s geographical, population, and cultural center. That belief was shattered when, from the 1800s on, they encountered Europeans in increasingly large numbers. Demoralization followed. Tribal groups that once took their centrality for granted could see that they were not at the center, but at the margins. As a result, their status in their own eyes dropped from being a people of the center, or cosmopolites, to being a people of the margins, or ethnics.

Ever since, the challenge for ethnics is to regain their former sense of centrality and self-confidence. One widely adopted solution is to withdraw into their own culture. Ethnic leaders promote this withdrawal, which is understandable enough, but so do affluent whites. Their support, though outwardly well-intentioned, is somewhat suspect. Why? Because it contains an element of self-interest. After all, ethnic cultures are an amenity for white people who, on vacation, can enjoy the exotic foods, costumes, and dances that ethnics provide. Now, as an ethnic myself, I ask, “Do we want to be tourist attractions? Do we want to be gawked at? Is returning to our roots the best way to regain our self-confidence and win esteem from the larger world?”

China offers a different answer to the problem of marginalization. China, of course, was not a small country even two thousand years ago. But it has something in common with the small groups that I mentioned earlier. Like them, though with better justification, the Chinese saw themselves as located at the world’s geographical, population, and cultural center. Every encounter they had with an alien people gave them further proof of their centrality and superiority: that is, until the 1830s and 40s when they suffered a succession of humiliating defeats at the hand of Europeans. The Chinese quickly saw that the European machinery of war, backed by science and technology, gave them a huge advantage. How to respond? One response was to withdraw into Chinese culture. After all, China had been a flourishing empire for thousands of years. But, in the end, this response was rejected as hopelessly retrograde.

Instead, the Chinese decided to follow the West's scientific and technological lead. Their rationale went something like this: "If we are good and wise as we have always claimed to be and if we merit the title we have given ourselves, namely, the Middle Kingdom, then nothing that is true and good can be alien to us, not a part of our heritage." As a further face-saving device, the Chinese used the word "modern" rather than "Western" to imply that progress is a matter of time rather than of the creativity of a particular people and place.

Now, let me turn from group to individual self-confidence—to me. Although I am a minority person in more than one sense, I nevertheless manage to feel central, not marginal. How come? My mandarin family background is no doubt partly responsible in this reassuring feeling, but it is by no means the only cause. Another is psychological, namely, my strong desire since childhood to know the Good and human virtue. Knowing the Good and being virtuous just seemed to me matters of unchallengeable importance, and so to be engaged with them was to be central. In any case, given the strength of my desire, it could never have occurred to me to restrict my search to my own culture. Indeed, some deep-seated dissatisfaction with my own culture may well have prompted the wider search in the first place.

By goodness or the Good, I have in mind an order of achievement that goes beyond the normal and the natural. To me, the human species itself is abnormal or unnatural. We say over and over again that we are a part of nature, but even to say it separates us from nature for no other natural being makes any such claim. But there is no need to appeal to logic. We have only to look around us to be convinced. Living close to the ground is natural, but above the cloud on the eightieth floor of Chicago's Hancock building? Communicating with body language and the spoken word is natural, but with Twitter and Facebook? Knowing the local geography is natural and practical, but the universe in its outermost reaches? Caring for kin and neighbor is natural—the chimpanzees do it too—but for strangers thousands of miles away?

I have always known that I lack the gift to truly achieve or to be truly good. Such awareness can be debilitating, but it has done me little harm because I am blessed with a compensatory gift, which is the knack of crediting to myself, on grounds of shared humanity, the goodness and good works of others. It is this inclination to reach

out and cannibalize other people's virtues that makes me feel central and, yes, important. Needless to say, society doesn't see me in that light. What it sees is a minority person, confined to and limited by his culture. Society stereotypes, its excuse being that administrative efficiency requires it. That we civilians do much the same thing in ordinary social exchange is less excusable. How will an unbiased observer see me? And who might he or she be? Here I allow my imagination to run wild. The ideally unbiased observer—one untainted by human social priorities—can only be an Extraterritorial. To an Extraterrestrial I am simply a human being, with the capabilities and deficiencies of one. The Extraterrestrial might also see that I am a Chinese and, more closely, that I am an American-Chinese, but such secondary characteristics can hold no great significance to a visitor from outer space.

The primary sense of Good is moral. More than intellectual and aesthetic excellence I want to know what moral excellence is. The desire to know the superlative Good led me away from what I have come to see as the mere social niceties of Confucianism and, even more, those of Chinese-American ethnic culture to the stringent ethical demands of Christianity. Unknown to me at the time is that my identification with a universalist religion will one day make me, paradoxically, a minority person at a secular State university. In a letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul declared that “there is no such thing as Jew and Greek” (3:26-29). He saw little significance in ethnicity. Our university's position is almost the opposite. We are ethnics first. As for the universalist values we pick up in mathematics and physics, they are a secondary acquisition, a surface polish like the cosmetics we put on our face.

To see how Christianity has so strongly entered my life, I need to go back to my childhood. I was twelve years old in 1943, and I lived with my family in Sydney, Australia. My Father was the Chinese consul, and as such he had many visitors. I noticed that he prepared gifts for them, the value of which varied with the visitor's rank. I asked him why he was doing this since he hardly knew them. His response was a lesson in modern sociology. He said that society was based on relationships of power and that gifts were an outward expression of those power relationships. The outward expression need not be a gift, it could be a gesture. For instance, my Father said to me,

“rather than present my boss with a necktie, I could kowtow to him. Would you like that better?” I was stunned. I said to myself, “Is this the world I will one day enter?”

At school, I had to attend chapel once a week. Raised in a world of secular values, I found Christianity strange and incomprehensible. One day, a school master called me into his office to explain to me the meaning of Christianity. He mentioned the miracles, which astonished me, but astonishing me even more was for him to present a value system that completely reversed the one I learned from my Father. Who will enter the Kingdom of God? Not the powerful and the learned, but children. Who is great? Not one who demands to be served but one who serves. It is unnatural to love one’s enemies and unrealistic to be perfect, as God is perfect. Yet both are demanded in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:43, 48). In all religions, men kneel before God. Only in Christianity does God kneel before men: he did so when he washed his disciples’ feet. In Christianity the Good runs counter to what comes to us naturally. It is, in this sense, unnatural. Strange to say, I find going against the grain—both the natural and the social grain—exhilarating.

Given my religious inclination, I should feel marginalized at the University of Wisconsin, but I can’t say that I do. To the contrary, I have the impression that my secular colleagues and students are out of step, their lives a little grayer for not heeding a religious viewpoint that despises all forms of power, with only the power to love and the power to create as exceptions. Atrocities have been committed in the name of Christianity. We all know that. Shocking as the fall is, we shouldn’t be caught off guard for, as Shakespeare put it, “Lilies that fester smell far worth than weeds” (Sonnet 94). But don’t, on that account, deny the lilies! A religion that can inspire such great works as the Canticles of the Sun, Chartres Cathedral, and the Mass in B Minor, and, above all, such individuals as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Simone Weil, and Dorothy Day, deserves our respect. The great works and the saints are a testimony to the heights that we humans can reach, heights that ensure the Christian religion’s centrality in history even if few people now know its creeds.

Lastly, I come to the fact that I am drawn to members of my own sex. Such a disposition makes me and my kind a despised minority. One way to escape the hostile atmosphere is to retreat to the culture of my kind, participate in same-sex parties and

gay pride parades. To do so would provide me with the same sort of satisfaction I would have if, as an ethnic, I were to join a dragon dance in Chinatown or a dim sum feast in a Chinese restaurant. But participating in these events will provide me with only a temporary glow. The straight mainstream will continue to see me—to see us—as colorful exotica, good for brightening up the monotone of its so-called normal life.

I have coupled the idea of the superlative Good with the idea of the unnatural. Now, many straight people even today see homosexuality as unnatural—as nature’s mistake. They are wrong, of course. On the other hand, we undeniably occupy the tail end of the bell curve and I can’t help envying those men and women who nestle so snugly at the bulging center. Although being in the minority does not make us unnatural, our affections do not naturally lead to the propagation of the species, which is the thrust and *raison d’être* of so much of biological life. In the sense of not propagating, we may be said to be unnatural. How then can I claim that we are nonetheless central and that, moreover, we are in a unique position to practice one form of the Good?

“Central” need not be a purely geometric idea. In a football stadium, the players are at the center. They are the actors, they know what is going on. The spectator up on the bleachers is, by contrast, at the margin. He is not the game. He merely observes it. And yet, who really knows what is going on? Who has the big picture? Not the players in the heat of contestation, sweaty and overcome by the demands of the moment. Rather it is the spectator. He is located at the margin, but it turns out the marginal location is one of privilege. The gay man or woman, to the extent that he or she is exempt from the chores of raising children and maintaining a family, has the privilege of being their spectator. Rather than being observed, we do the observing. Rather than providing flamboyant parades to entertain straight couples and their families, we observe their spoony marital bliss, their endearing pride in offspring, as well as, on the flip side, the cloying intimacies of their legal union. Christopher Isherwood, a writer of gay sensibility, says that he is “the camera.” We can say with him that we are “the camera.”

Every privilege has its obligation. The obligation of the spectator is to be impartial. Impartiality is an intellectual virtue. It is also a moral virtue. But impartiality is rare and, indeed, it can be regarded as unnatural, for humans, like other animals,

naturally seek advantage for their own kin first and for the rest later, if at all. Confucianism sees this order of priority as natural and good. Not, however, Buddhism and Christianity, which strive to transcend nature. Both religions require celibacy of their monks and nuns and, in Catholic Christianity, of their secular priests as well. The idea is that they, unburdened by the demands of family, can devote their lives wholly and impartially to the people under their care. Given my affectional orientation, nature has made me a monk, with all the disadvantages of that calling, but also the advantage—the privilege—of giving my time and energy unstintingly to students who stray into my orbit; and by unstinting I mean without the necessity to balance their needs against those of wife and children. In this regard, I and others like me are in the minority. But it is a minority to which we can belong with genuine pride. Why? Because caring for strangers is not just a quaint custom but rather an ancient and potentially universal ideal.

To minority students in this class, I say by all means study your own tradition and roots, cultivate them, but do not be imprisoned by them. At some stage in your life, move out of your cozy enclave to claim the best that humankind has to offer. Don't be afraid that you will then lose what is uniquely your own. This does not have to happen. The large world you have come to know may actually serve to highlight your native culture by giving it an illuminating context. At the same time, it will cleanse your culture of its unsavory elements. Dare to explore. Why fear it, when, as a poet once said, at the end of the exploring, you may find yourself at where you started and “know the place for the first time.”