CHAPTER 13

A Feminist Politics of Region?

Reflecting and Revisioning IR from Asia and the Pacific

Jindy Pettman

This chapter reflects on a life lived in and around international relations, a life lived in and out of place. It does so in the context of both the discipline of International Relations (IR), and the region called the Asia-Pacific. It asks what significance biography and nationality play in shaping academic research and personal politics; in particular, what it means to do feminist IR as an Australian, in the context of Asia and the Pacific. Identity thus figures centrally—identity of the discipline and of feminist IR, and of feminism in Australia, in the region, and the world. So, too, does the notion of a feminist politics of location, as I ask what pursuing feminism as an engaged practice means in terms of a feminist politics of region, at a time when domination relations operate so relentlessly in anti-feminist, militaristic, and exploitative ways.

Backgrounding

I have earned my academic living under many disciplinary labels over forty years. But my working life has been bookended with IR in the early and later years, and my initial IR training and experiences have been formative in all my work. At the same time, my engagement with (the subject matter of) IR did not spring fully-formed from my first university studies. Rather, it stemmed from my fascination with and misgivings associated with war, identity, belonging, and difference, which I now see as significantly shaped by my childhood and family experiences. These experiences are representative of Australian and international power plays and gender relations, which, in turn, became central to my research and teaching in my adult years.

My mother’s family was early settlers in eastern Australia; they were from Ireland and Scotland with a tradition of marrying out in each generation. In
their rural, sectarian community, the only common meeting place, for men, was the rural fire-fighting brigade. That association proved fatal; when Australia declared war in World War I, the entire fire-fighting brigade volunteered in the name of King and Empire. My grandfather fought at Gallipoli, the archetypal foundation of the nation in men’s blood on foreign soil. This is a long tradition in Australia, from the Sudan and Boxer rebellion in the nineteenth century to Iraq and Afghanistan today.6 My grandfather returned injured and died in 1921, when my mother was a toddler. His brother died in France in November 1917. The war stories I was told were not the usual heroic ones—the recent rediscovery of letters from both men and a diary that my great uncle kept writing until just before his death has given immediacy to the disasters and the grief that marked my mother’s growing up.7

War marked my father’s family too. My father’s father was German, living in Australia in 1914, escaping internment but subject to considerable nationalist attack and abuse, despite his own anti-militarism. War name changing gave us an anglicized family name, and a refusal of those with any memory of my grandfather or the German connections to speak to me about them. Nevertheless, silence does not mean absence, and the silences drew me to try to fill them in my imagination.

I was a war baby. My father left for (then) Dutch New Guinea shortly after I was born, and did not return home until well after the war ended, being involved in the demobilization of troops. My mother’s war-shaped story, through her fatherless childhood with her farming and breadwinning mother who insisted that she go to university—one of only two women studying economics in the late 1930s—continued through her rapid rise in government departments and boards that channeled women into munitions factories and other war labor. After my birth, my mother returned to this work, until my father finally reappeared and insisted on the re-establishment of proper gender rules and the conventional division of labor, which returned her to home and housewifery.

Australia has a remarkably militaristic history for a small, geographically secure country that has only been invaded once, ending indigenous sovereignty. War and soldiering shadowed my family and my emerging political consciousness. These shadows and a somewhat sentimental humanism in my early teens led me to declare myself a pacifist and a socialist. Meanwhile, many migrants came to Australia fleeing war, violence, and exclusion based on minority political or dissident family associations. International conflicts can be mapped through the source countries of migration and refugees to Australia over the postwar decades. International identity markers continue to color conflicts within Australia, including recently through competing youth cultures and recreational violence in the Cronulla race riots of late 2005 between ‘Australians’ and ‘Lebanese,’ and conflicts between Kosovar and Serbian Australians at the declaration of Kosovan independence in February 2008. War and migration, identity and difference play through endless media, and political and academic