

Reading: Living In Translation

When you arrive at NYU Shanghai, you will be entering into a culturally and linguistically diverse community of students, faculty, and staff. Your experiences here, as you encounter new people, new customs, new languages, and new modes of thinking, will be exhilarating and perplexing, affirming and humbling. In an essay about her life as a Chinese migrant to Australia, Veronica Zhengdao Ye describes the complexity of an intercultural life. “Every day,” she writes, “has presented me with challenges and new discoveries about my surroundings and about my inner self. And, every day has brought me wonders, disbeliefs, confusions, agonies, frustrations, and myriad other feelings in bridging and living with the tremendous differences between two languages and cultures.”

One of the reasons you may have selected NYU Shanghai is because you are excited to “[bridge] and [live] with the...differences” among many languages and cultures. But it is inevitable that you will experience moments here when you feel “lost in translation”—you’ll feel that others can’t understand your culture, your beliefs, your habits, your jokes, your speech, and your silences. In turn, you may find yourself puzzled by the habits and expressions of others.

During your time here, you will be asked to stretch your understandings—to expand your awareness of different cultures and people. You will also be asked to help others stretch their understandings of you. You will need to honestly and generously translate your own experiences—whatever they may be—for others. The following readings represent two authors’ work of stretching their understanding and translating their experiences.

Our writers:

Ye Zhengdao (“Veronica”) is a lecturer at Australian National University. In “La double vie de Veronica,” Ye reflects on her identity as a Chinese migrant living in Australia.

David Sedaris is an American humorist. In “See You Again Yesterday,” a short excerpt from the novel “Me Talk Pretty One Day,” he tells the story of a trip to Normandy, France. The excerpt shows the difficulty of (and humor in) trying to navigate a foreign land and foreign language.

Reading Instructions

- Read the two essays before Student Orientation. Feel free to look up cultural references with which you aren’t familiar.
- Reflect on how these texts fit together and reflect this theme of “living in translation.”
- Think about your own experiences “living in translation” and the aspects of your life you’d like your classmates to understand better. What stories do you want to tell?
- Think about those aspects of others’ lives you might not understand. What questions do you want to ask?
- Be ready to discuss the texts and your thoughts on them during our Reading Discussion at Orientation.