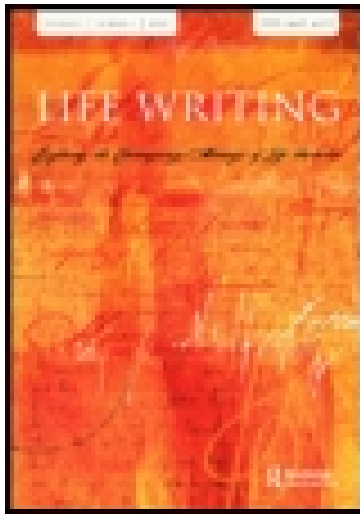


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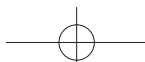
‘La Double Vie de Veronica’¹: reflections on my life as a Chinese migrant in Australia² | *Veronica Zhengdao Ye*

I am Chinese, and I am also Australian. My life as a migrant in this vast land began in January 1997. The second day of my arrival marked my twenty-third birthday, and a new chapter in my life. I thus embarked on a new life journey, wading into the unfamiliar waters of a new culture. Before coming to Australia, I had never been outside the People’s Republic of China, being born and raised in the more or less racially homogenous city of Shanghai.

Every day has been different for me since I entered this new country. Every day 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. This essay reflects upon a few selected aspects of my life in this new country over the past five years or so. Fragments of my life, in retrospect, record an ‘inward journey’ — my thoughts, sentiments, emotions and, above all, my inner worlds, reflecting upon what it means to be a young migrant living in, with, and between languages and cultures. It is not a chronicle of my life but a conscious attempt to recount my *suantiankula*³ in this lucky country, which is so dramatically different from China.

Coming to Australia

I came to Australia to join my Aussie husband, Tim, then my fiancé. Fate brought us together. The university that I went to was also attended by Tim, at that time a foreign student on a scholarship to



study Chinese. My coming to Australia put an end to our long wait that endured many years. It was only when I landed in Australia that I realised how limited my knowledge of Australia was and how unprepared I was for my life in this new country. It was beyond my imagination.

At the very beginning, the large empty spaces terrified me. Used to shovelling my way through crowds and *cuanmen* ('unannounced visits to others' houses') between friends and neighbours, I felt as if I was living in a vacuum created by huge spaces between people, who also seemed to have their own amount of space. I could not get close to them. In my previous world, every bit of space was filled with life and people.

With the passage of time, I became more accustomed to the physical environment around me. I also realised that more than adapting to a new physical environment was required to make me feel at home here. In carving out a day-by-day routine for my new life, I gradually came to realise that there was an entire hidden world lying in front of me, confronting me. I became lost in a matrix of massive social and cultural rules and norms that I was unfamiliar with, and which often conflicted with my own.

Learning to be 'polite'

I still remember the shock I had the first time when I was greeted by a male working in his garden on my way to the university. Seeing me passing, he turned around with a crisp 'G'day'. I flushed to the ends of my ears. Recognising that it was a friendly gesture, I forced a smile back before hurrying away. In China people do not greet strangers in the street. Furthermore, a greeting from a member of the opposite sex could also mean something completely different.

When I went to the supermarket, I was asked 'How are you?' by shopper assistants at the cashier. How was I supposed to answer? Why would a complete stranger ask me a question like this? Was she or he really interested in knowing how I was? Although I learned later that it was simply a form of greeting, it did not comfort my uneasiness every time 'How are you?' was directed at me, not just from shop assistants but also from acquaintances, from people whom I got to

know well later on. A mere reply of ‘not bad’ seemed so banal, stiff, and abrupt to me; I would have liked to say more. But I was not supposed to say how I really felt. It is just a greeting, a ritual.

Whenever I checked out books, librarians would say ‘thank you’ to me. I always felt *shouchongruojing* (‘overwhelmed by unexpected favour’) by this friendly closing. I did not do anything to deserve such gratitude, and if a ‘thank you’ was necessary in these situations, it should have been said by me, or so I thought to myself. From a Chinese point of view, there was no need for them to say ‘thank you’ at all in situations like this, because checking out books is a librarian’s job. Gradually, I got used to the ubiquitous ‘thank you’ said to customers. I also find myself starting to use it in situations in which I would not in China such as to bus drivers before getting off buses.

I have learned that it is polite and nice to greet people, even someone one does not know, with ‘How are you?’, and to say ‘thank you’ to customers even if it is one’s job. Gradually, I started to form all these new concepts of ‘politeness’. It also started to make sense to me why some expatriates whom I taught Mandarin in Shanghai often confronted me with such questions as, ‘Why are shop assistants here so rude?’

The rules of ‘being polite’ are so different between Chinese and Anglo-Australian cultures that sometimes I find Aussies to be utterly ‘impolite’ or sans *renqingwei* (‘human touch/interest’)⁴ from the vantage-point of Chinese culture. An ‘honest’ response of ‘no, sorry, I can’t’ to a request of any kind, or an upfront negative request of asking others not to do something, which are perfectly polite and acceptable from an Anglo point of view, simply leaves a Chinese with little *mianzi* (‘face’). A Chinese is obliged to say ‘yes’, even if unwilling: *qingmian nanqie*, as the expression goes (‘It is hard to refuse human relationship and face’). For a Chinese, human relationships are built, bound and strengthened through mutual obligations, *renqing* (‘human feelings’) and *yiqi* (‘personal loyalty’). When a person does a favour for another person, there is *renqingzhai* (‘debts of human relations’) to repay. One refrains from expressing one’s own ‘wants’ so as not to harm the *mianzi* (‘face’) of others, or to put others into trouble, making others feel bad. Personal ‘wants’

are trivial, subject to the consideration of the ‘face’, feelings and desires of others. Though slowly — very slowly — I got used to the polite ‘no, thanks’ in Aussie rules, I still find it difficult to bring myself to say ‘no, I can’t’ to a request. When I have said so, I would feel bad for a long time, as if I had offended or hurt the other person. Seeing me in anguish and self-blame, Tim would comfort me by saying, ‘Honey, you must learn to say “no”. You can say “no” if you do not want to do something. People will understand’. He would also say to me: ‘You should also learn to say what you want to do to make life easier. Do not always say *suibian* (literally, ‘it does not matter, whatever’) when people ask you what you would like to do’.

But it so contradicts the cultural beliefs that I was brought up with. It is not an easy thing to do or to follow, or to do so without much emotional stress. Indeed, in coming to a new country I have come to a different world operating on different rules, and different judgments and assumptions that make up these rules. In learning to be ‘polite’ in Australia, I am in fact learning different concepts of what are socially acceptable norms and behaviour. In learning to assert my own ‘wants’, I actually started to listen to my true ‘wants’, which had been buried deep within myself, and thought hard about what I really wanted or did not want.

Among all the differences, the strangest thing for me was that I had to be ‘polite’ at home. The first time I said ‘Tim, give me a plate’, his response was ‘I am waiting for the “magic” word’. What was this word that is so magic? I was baffled. When I heard the sound of P-L-E-A-S-E, I could not believe my ears. How strange and bizarre the idea of using please to one’s husband! After the few seconds that I needed to take in this incredible idea, I bantered, ‘So you want me to treat you like a *wairen* (literally ‘outside person’; ‘outsider’)’. For a Chinese, a polite marker such as ‘please’ sets distance. Why does *zijiren* (literally ‘oneself person’; ‘insiders’) need *keqi* (‘polite/courtesy’)? And why does a couple have to thank each other for the little things that they do each day for the family? And why would a couple ask each other ‘permission’ for just passing a plate — ‘Could you please pass me the plate on the other side of the table?’.

To some extent, the English ‘magic’ word has a different significance to me than it would to a native speaker of English. Never

would I imagine speaking to my husband with *qing*, the Chinese counterpart of 'please'. But I do use the English 'please' from time to time. I am speaking another language, which does not evoke the same feeling and significance to me as it would when I am speaking my own language. But in most cases when I use 'please', it is always like a 'tag' after the request, with a few seconds' interval between the first part of the request and the please. It is only because I remembered to use it. It has not become a habit; I use it only because I am aware of the rule, and of the idea that a married couple should still be 'polite' to each other, and respect each other's autonomy.

Most of the time, I do not use 'please', 'thank you' and the so-called 'Wh-imperatives' like 'could you' and 'would you' to my husband at home, thanks to Tim's cultural understanding and forbearance (it was only when I was back in China and was 'told' what to do by service personnel or officials, after getting used to the ubiquitous 'please' here in Australia, that I could possibly imagine how Tim would have felt being 'ordered' to do things). I do follow the Australian rules in public so that I am not perceived as a domineering wife. Sometimes, Tim would still tease me with, 'What is the magic word?' in response to my English-coded, Chinese-styled request (which would sound like an order to any English speaker). And I would tease back, 'I can use it if you want me to treat you as an outsider'. This kind of exchange, however, has become part of our code of communication in our own hybrid language, and a source of enjoyment in our cross-cultural relationship.

Between languages

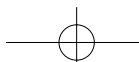
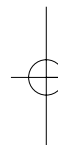
Every day I travel to and fro between English, Mandarin Chinese, and Shanghaiese, my mother tongue.⁵ Of course, I use English most of the time. Speaking the language has become a much more conscious activity. While adapting to English speech routines, I am not parroting wholesale those that do not make me feel comfortable. I consciously follow some and avoid using others such as 'How are you?', replacing it with a mere 'hello' or something of the sort. 'How are you?' still sounds more like a genuine question to me than a greeting. Holding back from giving a more detailed account of my

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wellbeing shows indifference. Naturally, I would expect more from the addressee than a short, formulaic response. I try to find a middle point where the English I use is at once socially acceptable and sets me at ease, and where I can spare myself some anxieties resulting from a departure from my Chinese expectations. I find myself negotiating between languages all the time. I have formed a chosen vocabulary, and a way of speaking that I feel most comfortable with, albeit they may sound idiosyncratic. Still, I do not use 'no worries'. It is too light-hearted for me. For a Chinese soul, life is heavy, filled with hardship and worries. I just cannot overcome this emotional stumbling block.

But the struggle between English and Chinese is constant. When speaking English, I may think in English, but only partially; the next moment, it flicks back to Chinese. Sometimes I get confused and the two languages merge — one on top of the other. I can hear myself speaking in English, but the substance seems to be in Chinese. It is my thoughts wrapped in a loose mantle of another language. I am desperate in trying to find the perfect fit, the best expression. But often, after a careful search of an array of synonyms, I still fret about that word. It pains, distresses, and angers me not being able to fully express myself in another language. I mourn quietly, in the corner of my heart, the loss of meaning, the subtlety, and the beauty of my own language in the trajectory of trying to reach the other shore of another language. English, though it has become my main language for communication, is just a shadow of my self.

It is at home that I feel much more relaxed, where I am free to speak either Mandarin Chinese or English, or a mixture of both, as I choose. Tim and I have taken to speaking our own homemade language between English and Chinese, which has been developed as a result of living with the differences between the two. But my heart aches constantly for Shanghainese, my own dialect. I miss speaking it. I miss the sound of it. Although I have learned to speak and think in another language, it is not the same as engaging in my mother tongue. I miss the images and smells that it evokes of my hometown, and the past that it connects me to. It surprises me constantly how all my interjections are exclusively in Shanghainese, how I remember numbers only in Shanghainese, and how I often unconsciously add a



particle of my own dialect to an English sentence.

One of my biggest joys when returning to my hometown has been that I was able to speak my 'heart language' freely. I strained my ears for conversations and shouting vendors on the roads, and kept talking and talking just for the sake of being able to speak it, as if the opportunity were once in a million. By speaking my mother tongue, I felt my previous world beginning to come back to me.

Sadly, I no longer had exactly the same experience in speaking Shanghainese. Sometimes I had to pause to search for the right word simply because I lagged behind in lexical access, or because I had become used to English ways of expressing something that I knew could not be translated into Shanghainese, or was not appropriate for the Chinese situation. I found myself learning new words just like any other second-language speaker. It came as a painful realisation that I also had to speak my mother tongue with much more consciousness. I had to refrain from using too much *xiexie* ('thank you') to relatives and close friends, for fear that they might feel 'slighted' and treated like 'outsiders'. I did not mind the disbelieving look on the face of service people when I said *xiexie* to them. I simply could not stop the inertia of using these 'polite' expressions that had built up over these years of living in Australia. I have adapted to saying 'thank you' and 'please'. It has become a habit. I could not speak as 'freely' as I would have liked, as I thought. The joy was dampened by the bitter realisation that, when speaking my own language, I could no longer be free from the influence coming from the other language of my quotidian use in Australia; the joy was mingled with anxiety, distress, and much frustration. I felt like a pendulum swinging between two languages, but never able to hit home at either point.

Emotionally, I remain Chinese

In adapting to a new environment and culture, some of my ways of thinking, my attitudes, and even my judgments, have changed by varying degrees over the years. But I know I remain fundamentally Chinese deep inside. My sense of self is Chinese. I feel most at home when I can express myself, especially my feelings and emotions, in

the Chinese way — subtle, implicit and without words. I smile to smooth over embarrassing situations. I wear big smiles even when my heart is crying and bleeding. Feelings are my self, and should only be known to me. I do not feel comfortable talking about my true feelings; in doing so, my inner self feels stripped and vulnerable. Chinese ideas about expression of emotion are so different from those of English that such expression is often misinterpreted and misunderstood, which places stress on cross-cultural relationships.

A 'honey' in public would make me blush. I was brought up with the Confucian code of behaviour that *nannü shoushou buqin* ('man and woman do not touch each other's hands'). Any intimate behaviour in public would make me extremely uncomfortable. Any expression of emotion should be controlled and subtle. Chinese couples do not say 'I love you' to each other, as people in Australia do over the phone, when seeing each other off, and before going to work. We do not place so much emphasis on verbal expressions of love and affection, because they can evaporate quickly. For a Chinese, love and affection are embodied in care and concern, in doing what we believe are good things for the other party. We 'force' our husbands to eat in the belief that it is good for them. We criticise them directly as a way of showing endearment and true concern. We do not need to compliment our husbands, saying 'I am proud of you', because 'honeyed' words are niceties for social purposes. As long as we know this in our hearts, we do not have to say them out aloud, and the other party would know this. When we say our innermost thoughts to our partner and point out their 'bad sides' for improvement, we are thinking truly and purely in the interest of the other; it is the ultimate care. It took a few years for my husband to get accustomed to this Chinese 'logic' of love, and for me to be more communicative in expressing my love and affection. To me 'honeyed words' are lubricants in the relationship. But in discovering and coming closer to these different ideas about the ingredients of 'true love', we found that our ways of expression can be multi-dimensional.

Though I have also come to ponder more about the importance of words, I still believe that the essence of true love lies in deeds. My parents have never said 'I love you' to me; neither have I to them. Even the first time when I left them for a long time, flying ten-

thousand miles to another part of the world, at the airport, we fought back our tears and urged each other repeatedly to take care; we wore the biggest smiles to wave good-bye to each other, to soothe each other's worries. Just like any other Chinese parting between those who love each other, there were no hugs and no 'I love you'. Yet I have never doubted my parents' profound love for me. I know that they have worked hard so that I could live a better life, and they will always be there for me. These are comforting thoughts, ones that have always sustained me and given me strength in these years of absence.

As I write this, my mother is staying with me in Australia for a short visit. It is her first visit to Australia since I migrated here. Every day, when I get off the bus near my home, I see her emerging from behind a bush, walking towards me across the street, and trying to take my bag, which is often heavily loaded with books. We walk side by side in silence toward the house. We feel a bond that is beyond words. I always wish that the road leading to the house would be longer so that that I could prolong the moment, and the eternity contained therein. The picture of her face emerging from the hill is deeply etched in my memory. I know, emotionally, that I will remain Chinese in Australia.

The tyranny of distance

While I am rapt with the rare opportunity of having my mother with me, I also grieve the loss of my father. I still cannot come to terms with his death, which has compelled me to face squarely the inescapable and poignant reality of my physical location and the tyranny of distance that has dictated the other half of my life.

It was a rainy evening in September. I was still in my office working when I was alerted by an urgent email from my cousin asking me to call home. I did so with a dangling heart. 'Can you come back soon; your father is in a critical condition'. It was my mother's voice, trembling, yet trying to be calm and composed. 'Can you come immediately; in fact your father did not survive ...', my mother broke down. I fell in the chair, cold all over ... All I wanted to do at that moment was to be able to be at my mother's side at that

very moment. But I was powerless to do so. The next day, I tried desperately to get on the first flight out of Canberra and out of Australia. With a heavy and apprehensive heart, I was on my way to my home on the other side of the world the day after. The flight seemed endless. All I could see in front me was my father's silhouette enveloped in the mist of an early winter morning when the taxi taking me to the airport backed out of the driveway nearly two years before. I regretted deeply that I never hugged him. I decided that I would give my mother a big, long hug when I saw her, to abridge the physical separation. So I did when I saw her, a long and tight embrace; the first hug I have given to either of my parents.

Homesickness comes and goes. At times, the sense of nostalgia becomes so strong that it seizes me, to the point that it becomes unbearable, permeating all my senses. I satisfy my craving by indulging myself in Chinese restaurants; I listen to Chinese classical music; I leaf from cover to cover photo albums and picture books. But there is something that I can never get over — the sense of profound guilt for leaving my parents behind. Every day I am gnawed by the guilt of not being able to *jin xiaoxin* ('to fulfil my filial duties and obligations'), a cardinal value of being a Chinese, and to be with them and look after them. I had deprived them of the *tianlunzhile* ('the happiness derived from natural bonds', 'family happiness') of being with their only child. No matter how advanced technology has become, the fact that I am miles away from them is a harsh reality. I was made fully conscious that I am conditioned by geography. I sent them money regularly, knowing that they did not really need it. But it was symbolic more than anything else. It was a way of alleviating the sense of guilt that overwhelmed me. The emotional debt resulting from physical separation is something that I can never, and will never, be able to repay.

Where am I?

As I write this, I have just returned from China. The purpose of my trip, which was perhaps the saddest and most difficult journey I have ever made, was to attend my father's funeral. I was there for nearly three months, observing time-honoured folk mourning practices. I

will also make another trip in a few months time for the entombment ceremony on the day of Pure Brightness, a day for sacrificing to ancestry and for visiting the ancestral tomb. In going through this whole process, my bond with both my mother and my father has become closer still. Paradoxically, at the same time when I felt that once again I was pulled back to my Chinese roots, I also felt a stronger sense of belonging to my adopted country.

The past ten weeks has also been the longest time that I have spent in China since I migrated to Australia. My previous two trips were both during the Chinese Spring Festival, and were regrettably short. My most recent trip brought me back to the depths of the Chinese world, and allowed me to consider and reflect on my life in Australia from a distance and from a Chinese perspective. The unforeseen and unfortunate events in life, while leaving me to lament the impermanent nature of life, have also prompted me to ponder my journey over the past five years or so, and my gains and losses as a migrant.

Sorrow and guilt in not fulfilling my filial duty as a daughter will haunt me always. The agony and frustration in struggling between two languages and the bitterness of never feeling an adequate expression of what I mean in another language are like shadows, accompanying me. The estranged feeling of being distant from my mother tongue is ever-present.

At times, I have felt terribly sad, crushed by the weight of loss of and disconnection from some parts that existed in my past, and doubted my in-between existence that lacked a firm sense of belonging. But it was through loss and incompleteness in life that I came to grips with and pondered the meanings and essence of my existence and being.

Entering a new world does not mean that I have to forsake my other world. I have not given up, and I will never give up my other Chinese world. My own new reality, which lies somewhere between my two worlds, and also between my past, present, and future, has been built on new and varied meanings and forms, and enriched by my experiences in both worlds.

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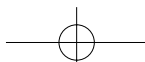
My life has taken on new meaning by having two worlds, out of which has grown an awakened and richer self. I am neither exclusively here, nor exclusively there. In this world, where I arrived with both conscious decisions and judgment, and unconscious forces in life, I have access to both cultures, and am able to view one from the perspective of the other. I have become more sensitive to differences, more ready to examine my own assumptions, and am more open to different ways of thinking and doing things.

It is true that, sometimes, we need a mirror to be able to look at ourselves. Being in-between, I feel that I better understand myself. It was only in Australia that I started to ask myself where I was from, and to reflect upon my own cultural roots. Differences and changes can be discerned and gauged only in comparison with a reference point. If I remained in China, I would not have thought about the meaning of being Chinese. Without Australian culture as a reference point, I would not have had a better and more concrete understanding of the meaning of 'Chineseness'. Had I not been inside a predominantly Anglo society, neither would I have come to think about the underlying Chinese values and beliefs that I was raised with, that have guided my behaviour, and that were so deeply ingrained within me. In entering another world, I have embarked on a journey of self-discovery and self-building. Between the two worlds, I have begun to notice something hidden deep inside me, which I did not previously know.

As a young migrant, I continue my journey.

Notes

- 1 This essay first appeared in *Mots Pluriels* 23 (March 2003), and is republished with the author's permission.
<<http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP2303vzy.html>>
- 2 I borrowed the title of Krzysztof Kieslowski's film *La Double Vie de Véronique* to narrate and reflect upon my double life as a Chinese and English bilingual living within two cultures. It happens that my English name for social purposes is Veronica. Its etymological meaning of 'a true image' echoes my Chinese name, Zhengdao, meaning 'straight path', 'truth'. Thus, the title seems to be appropriate for this personal account of my cross-cultural experiences in Australia. This essay is based on a self-introduction that I wrote for an Intercultural Communication unit taught at the University of New England. I



wish to thank Professor Cliff Goddard, the unit coordinator for inviting me to be a guest for the course. I also wish to express my sincere thanks to Dr Mary Besemeres for the trust that she has placed in me and for her encouragement to redraft my original piece into a longer narrative about my life. I am also deeply indebted to Professor Anna Wierzbicka for her inspiration and support, and the faith that she has in me.

- 3 The literal meaning of this set Chinese phrase is 'sour, sweet, bitter, and spicy'. It is used to describe the joys and sorrows of life.
- 4 The literal translation of *renqingwei* is 'human feeling/relationship flavour'.
- 5 Mandarin Chinese is the standard, official language in China. Shanghainese is regarded as a regional dialect. Mandarin Chinese and Shanghainese differ most in pronunciation and vocabulary. When I use 'Chinese', it is in a general sense, referring to *zhongwen*, which means the written equivalent of Mandarin Chinese.



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