

Memoir as a form of auto-ethnographic research for exploring the practice of transnational higher education in China

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that memoir, as a form of auto-ethnographic research, is an appropriate method for exploring the complexities and singularities in the practice of western educational practitioners who are immersed in the social reality of offshore higher education institutions, such as those in Mainland China. I illustrate this proposition by showing how my own use of memoir is guided by a need to interrogate the unique experiences of my past life as ‘the foreigner’, ‘the special one’, ‘the imported expert’, ‘the cultural outsider’, in order to lay bare the complexity of what it means to work and live in China as a foreign teacher and be recognised as different. I am interested in the notion of foreignness, and the ambiguities that arise when one operates as a teacher in a foreign culture, with a misguided and naïve understanding of one’s own specialness as the foreign expert. My research methodology is based on critically reflective writing that acknowledges the multiplicity of historical, cultural and social differences, and the uniqueness of all individuals, whilst recognising that difference, at its heart, is a matter of relationship/s. This form of writing as educational research makes it possible to challenge some of the generalisations western scholars inadvertently make when writing about their teaching experiences in China.

Keywords

Memoir; auto-ethnography; Chinese higher education; foreign/offshore teachers

Introduction

With lived experience, there is no separation between mind and body, objective and subjective, cognitive and affective. Human experience does not reduce to numbers, to arguments, to abstractions.

—Ronald Pelias, *Performative Writing as Scholarship: An Apology, an Argument, an Anecdote*

This paper is conceived out of a desire to talk freely with fellow academics about my experiences in China as a foreign teacher and person. Some readers may think my use of the term ‘*foreigner*’ here is outdated and overstated. Yet, for me it articulates the fundamental predicament of being the outsider, continually situated between things (Jaya, 2011, p. 745) in China. Being referred to as the ‘*foreigner*’ or ‘*foreign teacher*’ was/is a

common occurrence; even my Chinese work permit named me an '*alien employee*'. So it has come about that unravelling the complexities and the differences in my relationships with Chinese colleagues and the power structures that enmeshed them has become an important theme of my work. In this paper I use small pieces of personal memoir as a form of auto-ethnographic writing, in order to reflect on the idea that being inside or outside, being a foreign teacher in China, is not just a matter of cultural difference. It is more than this: it is about the relationships with people that position one's self with or apart from them, making it nearly impossible to determine exactly where one stands. I am equally concerned with how my Chinese colleagues were also faced with a similar dilemma when dealing with me, a so-called foreigner in their midst: can the foreigner be trusted or not? Thus, my writing unfolds to reveal not only my own feelings of displacement within my intercultural relationships, but also how my presence as the foreigner disturbed the social reality of my Chinese colleagues. Having said this, I recognise that my interpretation of their disturbances is partial and subjective, since I can never stand in their shoes or know their realities.

My work is a critically reflexive response to a personal dissatisfaction with the transnational higher education literature; I find that much of it does little to provide any deep insights or explanations into the kinds of experiences I had whilst teaching and living in China. I am challenging a hidden assumption in the literature that positions offshore students and teachers as being in need of remedial action, which can be realised only through the assimilation of western academic pedagogy (Biggs & Watkins, 2001; Evans, 1995; Leask, Hicks, Kohler & King, 2005; Ryan, 2003); this is a way of portraying the 'cultural other' in print, described by de Certeau as a 'writing that conquers' (1988, p. xxv). Moreover, my current work is an act of personal atonement for previous published work, where my writing was confined within the disciplinary rigour of traditional organisational theory. It was a style of writing that constricted rather than enlarged understanding by its use of a research paradigm which was not up to the task of revealing the complex nature of my experiences inside a Chinese university; a writing that smoothed out any irregularities or messily complex relations; a writing that delivered homogenous, sanitised descriptions of experiences and relations, that left me feeling dissatisfied, that I had done more harm than good; a writing in which its silences spoke

loudly of my self-deception in my representation of self and the Chinese academic community.

Similarly, narrative ethnographer H. L. Goodall Jr., reflecting on the many researchers who turn to telling stories in order to write better research, says:

[f]rustration was or is caused by reading and writing work—often very good work—that either did not seem to capture the fullness of complexity of lived experiences and/or do [sic] not allow for creative methods of expression about those experiences. (2008, p. 12)

I feel compelled to take responsibility for how I present others in my writing. I want a style of writing that makes it clear to my reader that what I am interpreting as Chinese behaviour and cultural values in the Chinese classroom and associated spaces are but reflections of my own personal belief systems, socio/cultural values and prejudices (Spry 2011, p. 60). By telling stories in the form of memoir I make it obvious who is speaking in my writing, I make myself answerable—fully responsible for what I write. In turning away from the path of the objective, distanced writer of research, I write about my journey of self-discovery so that other professionals working in the transnational higher education sector can understand, appreciate and learn from my experiences, and feel what it means to work in a teaching/learning environment where your colleagues and students share with you commonalities and distinct differences.

The conceptual framework underpinning my auto-ethnographical research is constructed from a cross-disciplinary theoretical approach, and incorporates cultural, social, postcolonial and feminist theory in relation to the paradoxical and ambivalent nature of difference and being deemed foreign. The use of memoir in this paper is sourced from a body of writing which highlights aspects of my life as a teacher in a Chinese university's art college, where I taught arts administration to third-year undergraduate art history students during 2003-2004. These pieces of memoir deliberately exploit notions of foreignness and focus specifically on my relationship with a Chinese academic named Chen, blurring the boundaries between the professional and the personal.

The ritual of writing and the dilemmas we face

Both fascinated and challenged by the changeable and ambivalent nature of my previous life in China as a university teacher and person, I recognise that my auto-ethnographic research into this past, and the associated ritual of writing, are defined and sustained through my relationships with particular Chinese persons. Further, the persons I write about are positioned in a culture, and have a traditional legacy, different to mine. Hence, my challenge, as a non-Chinese, is how to describe, interpret and elicit meaning from the many experiences I shared with my Chinese protagonists. In writing about relationships that criss-cross the borders of the professional and the personal, how do I avoid creating inflexible knowledge about my Chinese colleagues and students? The challenges are significant ones, when the industry I belong to in Australia is under continual economic pressure to retain its position as a leader and provider of transnational higher education without compromising the quality and professional delivery of its programs.

How I choose to represent Chinese teachers and students in my writing carries an ethical responsibility to my reader/s in terms of the creative processes I use and the kind of knowledge forms I produce (Spry, 2011, p. 125). Elizabeth St. Pierre (1997, p. 280) says that, for centuries, the western world has been caught up in writing fictions; that is, we have created narratives that represent reason, knowledge and goodness in the interests of shielding ourselves against the chaos of the outside world, a world that is not rationally programmed. Trapped in the false reality of our own fictions, she argues, we now feel ethically compelled to rethink how we write our stories, protagonists, locations and the performance of everyday life. She asks, '[w]hat kinds of strategies do researchers use to find points of exit from the stern and rigid regularities that continue to try to shut us down, shut us out, and shut us up?' (1997, p. 280). It is against those regularities, which shut me out from understanding the relational experiences of my Chinese story as it happened, that I use auto-ethnography to exit from the narrative of the 'foreign expert', to deconstruct the fiction. By sharing my stories I am creating opportunities for learning and gaining new insights into living and teaching in offshore locations, such as China and other non-western countries, emphasising the importance of relationships with one's local colleagues and students. No matter where I and my readers stand ideologically, such

work can inspire us to put our differences aside and work towards building a better future together (Spry 2011, p. 72).

Taking the auto-ethnographic path

The key to pursuing and evaluating the self as a legitimate source of knowledge is to recognise that autoethnographic claims are necessarily part of a larger struggle over the scholarly production of knowledge.

—Morgan Brigg and Roland Bleiker, *Autoethnographic International Relations: Exploring the Self as a Source of Knowledge*.

Postmodern philosophies have cut deep into the territory of traditional forms of knowledge construction and in doing so have raised a growing awareness of other forms of knowledge production and meaning making. Combined with a rising interest in utilising research for social justice, and for resisting the centrifugal forces of ruling hegemonies, this has created a demand for a style of research writing that is capable of articulating the diversity, the distinctiveness, the complexity and the situated and partial perspectives of human experience. As a methodological device, auto-ethnography is capable of depicting the lived experiences of the relational self situated within a specific socio/cultural context. It does this by positioning the researcher's experiences centre stage of the research inquiry, demanding that the researcher be highly reflexive and responsive to their situatedness (Brigg and Bleiker, 2010, pp. 788–789, 796). Auto-ethnography sees the research performance as one that involves 'boundary crossing', moving across and between things; as a concept it articulates the multiplicity of cognitive being, and provides alternative threads of narrative that are concerned with the recording of everyday stories (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 3).

Although there are many forms of auto-ethnography it can be loosely organised into two groups, analytical and evocative. Analytical auto-ethnographers, such as Leon Anderson (2006) and Paul Atkinson (2006), believe in research that retains its objectivity, and are committed to developing theoretical knowledge that is capable of explaining social experiences that can be generalised (Muncey, 2010, p. 36). Caroline Ellis and Art Bochner (2006) and Ellis (1999) are pioneers of evocative auto-ethnography. I count myself as a scholar and practitioner of this highly personal, evocative form of auto-ethnography; I interrogate the specificities of human experience and the struggle to make meaning within particular situational contexts. Such work demands research and writing

that is vulnerable, empathic (Muncey, 2010, p. 36) and heartfelt. Ronald Pelias suggests that alternative modes of academic writing like auto-ethnography are able to combine evocative strands of real life experience with empowering fictions, to create stories that the reader can accept as being reliable (2005, p. 418). Such writing can draw the reader into my Chinese reality, not only to see what I saw but also to feel what I felt; as Pelias claims (2005, p. 419), it is an invitation to see and feel things from another viewpoint. In recent years, many academics, such as Andrew Sparkes (2007), Ronald Pelias (2004, 2005), Tami Spry (2011), Claudio Moreira (2008, 2011) and Laura Jewett (2008), have used evocative, vulnerable and heartfelt auto-ethnographic forms of writing to interrogate their own social realities within higher education contexts.

Memoir as a form of auto-ethnographic writing

Recognition of the Other entails recognition of our mutual particularity and vulnerability, recognition that the Other is enfolded within us and we are enfolded within each of them and that rigorous imagining and writing can take us into those folds.

—Susanne Gannon, Writing into the Space of the Other

For those readers unacquainted with the differences between auto-ethnography and memoir, auto-ethnography is a reflexive research approach which creates informed knowledge; it encompasses the remembering self plus the reflexive, researching self. Memoir writes the personal story, without the theory. Memoir is used by auto-ethnographers to record their memories of lived experience, Auto-ethnography is memoir refracted through the researching, enquiring, conceptualising mind. I situate myself at the centre of my stories, but my stories are not about a central 'I'; rather, I draw on memoir to situate my stories as a relational 'I', my self/s that are implicated in a complex and messy arrangement of relationships with my Chinese colleagues. Similar to Sparks' intentions in his stories about academics' struggles within an audit culture in the United Kingdom (2007), I want my writing to speak for itself. I do this with the understanding that any insights my readers gain from my stories of being a foreign teacher may differ considerably from mine. By choosing memoir over other forms of writing, I make a case for what Donna Haraway sees as the 'politics of and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims' (1988, p. 589). Memoir enables me to research,

through writing, my life as a university teacher in China and my responses to the places, events and people. Memoir explores how my experience of being a transnational teacher, a ‘foreigner’, is relational. This is a position that reveals as much about myself and my limitations and misconceptions, and the ambiguities of intercultural encounters inside and outside the classroom, as it does about the culture and identities of my Chinese colleagues and students. As I see it, there is a need to unravel the tangled threads that lie along the edges of our relationships, our research and our writing, to undermine the subtle act of ‘othering’ those who are different to us, or have less power (Fine, 1994, p. 75).

Memoir has the potential to reconcile such issues; it is a writing style that lends itself to being continually open to interpretation and not read as a ‘passive reflection of reality’ (Trinh, 1991, p. 13). Writing is, as Gannon says, ‘a relational act’ (2007, p. 2). My rationale for using memoir is akin to bell hooks’ practice, in that I do not intend to accurately recreate my experiences in Shanghai as a foreign teacher, but rather to capture and make visible my ‘state of mind, the spirit of a particular moment’ (hooks, 1998, p. 431). As hooks explains, the compulsion to tell a story and the desire to rediscover one’s past are both liberating acts and visceral experiences. From this perspective, memoir becomes a conduit for acknowledging how living memories of past experiences, although no longer physically connected to one’s life, continue to instruct and mould the present (hooks, 1998). My writing should not be considered as providing the reader with pure description. Rather, I unravel strands of visceral experience to distinguish the known from the unknown, as a way of working through what seem to be opposing kinds of understanding and personal considerations (Scott, 2011, p. 9).

In the following excerpt, I illustrate how I purposefully exploit my own vulnerabilities, not just to undercut any implication of authority, but to show the reader my professional arrogance when I first took up my teaching position in Shanghai.



On receiving Chen’s letter welcoming me to come and teach arts administration in the art college, I felt the inner murmurs of a rather self-satisfied purr. I was amused by Chen’s words; yes I did realise that they were not yet true (OUCH—from this self of the present), but I have to admit, I liked the ring of Profound Esteemed Scholar. Three seemingly innocent words, that I translated as saying ‘I am special’. I thought to myself, Joy, you are going

to show these Chinese people how to do things properly; they need you, you are the professional—the teacher—you are the Expert. But as I was soon to find out being the expert was a highly ambivalent position.



In sharing and exploiting such vulnerable moments, in this case my professional arrogance, I am drawing attention not only to the significance of my relationships with the Chinese in my writing, but also to how I was feeling and thinking at that time. Like Claudio Moreira, who says, ‘the only way I could write about “the Other” was through my own lived experience as an “Other”’ (2011, p. 590), when I write, I am not speaking on behalf of my Chinese protagonists; it is not their voices the reader hears, but mine. I admit that writing about my relationships with my Chinese colleagues and students has transformed my way of seeing the world. That is, I am attempting to make sense of what it really means to live and teach in a location where everything is foreign, including myself. Richardson contends that whatever style of writing we use, our intentions implicate us in whatever we are doing, and this demands a duty of care; that is, no matter how we choose to write up our research, our position of power in this activity cannot be removed (1990, p. 27). Reflecting on the principle that ‘writing is a moral site’ governed by one’s intentionality, Richardson writes, ‘[w]e can choose to write so that the voice of those we write about is respected, strong and true’ (1990, p. 38). As researchers, we write from a position, location and history that is specific and contextually situated (Hall, 1989; Richardson, 1990; Pelias, 2005). Thus, the use of auto-ethnography for writing stories (in this case, about our lives as teachers in offshore locations) permits us to reveal voices that might otherwise have been silent in traditional research, or misused as tools to interpret culture (Tierney, 1998, p. 66).

In the following memoir fragment I show how feelings of closeness with my Chinese colleague, Chen, heavily influenced how I perceived other colleagues in the college.



Gradually over the years I had become aware of various political factions in the college, but with no prior knowledge as to how such power rifts had evolved, it was difficult trying to figure out who was in and who was out of favour and why. Chen could not easily be drawn into any such discussion.

There were times when some of the local artists I worked with would hint at these matters, but when I mentioned them to Chen, he would admonish the person involved for implicating me in things I did not understand. I had the distinct impression that I was being managed, or being steered away from certain groups or people in the college. Sometimes Chen's overly protective behaviour would get to me and we would have heated words about it, but for the most part, it did not bother me much. Why would it? I trusted Chen. I accepted his behaviour as a safeguard protecting me from a world I did not understand.

Chen warned me to be wary of Professor Wu and Feng Hong. 'I know Professor Wu and Feng Hong. Keep your distance,' humorously adding, 'some people are like glue, everything sticks to them.' I knew from personal experience to take his advice seriously. In this instance, as in many others, Chen's interpretation of people or the situation proved to be an accurate assessment. That is, an accurate assessment from my limited and somewhat biased perspective...



In focusing on the specifics of particular aspects of my relationship with Chen, and exploring how the closeness of our friendship coloured the way I viewed Feng Hong, my co-teacher, and Professor Wu, Feng Hong's mentor and the dean of the art college's art history department, I offer an alternative way of interpreting intercultural relations. Through memoir I show how the specificity of one's relationships with people in an intercultural setting cannot be exclusively attributed to cultural differences and differing concepts of professional and personal behaviour. My location and circumstances in the college were very much stitched into my relational ties and sense of obligation and loyalty towards people such as Chen; this strongly influenced my relationships with other Chinese colleagues. Our longstanding personal relationships influence how we relate to others we are less close to, regardless of whether we are perceived, or perceive our selves, as cultural insiders or outsiders.

Auto-ethnography enables me to highlight my difficulties in understanding those who see and experience the world differently. It makes me realise that not everything I experience can be attributed specifically to cultural or racial differences. In the form of memoir it allows me to interrogate the multiple and overlapping relationships and experiences that surrounded my working relations with the Chinese—relationships that, by their closeness or distance, as shown above in my total faith in Chen's behaviour and

opinions, significantly influenced how I saw and related to the people I worked with. By remembering and writing these shifting and partial perspectives, I highlight the complexities in our relations and how I was blind to them at the time (Goodall, 2008, p. 15). Writing auto-ethnographically, I refract this awareness through concepts of difference and the situated self. In the following passage, I illustrate how one's local (Chinese) colleagues also have complicated relationships that undermine their own positioning within their social group.



With a talent for reading situations and putting people at their ease, Chen was an invaluable asset as the university's public relations face in the international academic community. Chen, the second youngest of four children born to educated parents, was sent out at sixteen years of age to work in the remote countryside, together with millions of other teenagers and intellectuals from across the urban regions of China. This was part of the Chinese Communist party's rehabilitation program. Unlike most of his peers, who stayed for two or three years at most, Chen remained in the countryside working as farm labourer and bookkeeper for eight years. Although this ordeal would have been traumatic, robbing him of youth and education, I saw little outward bitterness or hostility towards others, but rather the quiet dignity of a man who appeared to enjoy the simplest of pleasures. Nonetheless, I noticed his wariness of people's behaviour and underlying motives. He was inclined to keep his own counsel and on many occasions cautioned me for being too generous with my emotions, time and energy in my dealings with others. Even though Chen was friendly with his colleagues, some of whom he had known for more than twenty years, I noticed he never appeared to get overly involved in office gossip; he would listen but say little. A couple of times mutual friends mentioned that whilst Chen was reasonably well liked, his tendency not to listen to people's troubles or disclose what he was thinking had the effect of unsettling people. Never sure of his true feelings, they always felt uncertain as to where Chen's loyalties lay.



That a number of Chen's colleagues in that tight-knit community viewed his reluctance to involve himself in gossip as disingenuous suggests that even the position of an insider in a community is complex, and continually subject to change according to situation and context. Similarly, the fact that I was viewed by my Chinese colleagues as an outsider may not have been solely because I was a foreigner, but may have been

further distanced and complicated by my relationship with Chen. My position, as I have already suggested, was shaped and constructed, not only by my physical location and position as a “foreign teacher” or “alien employee”, but also by the ways that my judgment and beliefs were influenced by close relations, thereby affecting how I saw the people I was working with.



On several occasions during the first semester, Feng Hong, my co-teacher and the person responsible for organising the art history department’s teaching schedules, made a point of asking me not to discuss my teaching activities with Chen. This was an unusual request, considering it was the Foreign Affairs office within the central university that paid my salary, not the college; it was a request that made me uneasy. Feng Hong’s inconsistent behaviour during the planning, organisation and delivery of our classes combined with this desire for secrecy made me suspicious of her motives. As she was undertaking a full time doctorate by course work in arts management practices, I would have thought we had much in common, but her manner towards me suggested the opposite. I could not fathom Feng Hong out. What did she really want from me? Strained as our relationship was, I did not want to make matters worse between us; but nor did I intend to ignore my gut feeling and compromise my relationship with Chen. I declined as best I could, explaining that as both Chen’s colleague and friend I did not want to be involved in any activities that were not transparent to all. My refusal to comply with Feng Hong’s wishes increased the tension between us...



The differences between my relationships with Feng Hong and Chen, my suspicions of Feng Hong’s behaviour, and my trusting acceptance of Chen’s advice and actions, as shown above, illustrate the complexity and ambiguity of my situation. Where I had developed a close association with Chen through our long history of working together, this was not the case with Feng Hong, whom I had met only briefly on a previous visit. Although I e-mailed Feng Hong regularly during the three months prior to taking up my teaching position in the college, it was a somewhat one-sided conversation. I found the constant gaps in our communication very frustrating, and her irregular responses far too vague for my liking. From this perspective, it is easy to understand how I came to perceive Feng Hong’s behaviour as not only threatening my personal code of ethics and

sense of professionalism, but also as an attempt to undermine my relationship with Chen, regardless of whether this was her intention or not. In writing about these tangles, I resist rationalising my reactions and attributing my Chinese colleagues' behaviour to cultural values or personas that can be interpreted as essentially Chinese. Instead, I direct my own and my readers' attention to the ways my Chinese protagonists and I were relationally positioned to each other inside the university, and how the nature of our positioning influenced the degrees of closeness or distance, of trust or mistrust, the understanding or misunderstanding, which coloured these relations. Through memoir, I remember and write the differences in my relations with Feng Hong compared to those with Chen, and in auto-ethnographic retrospect, I reflect on how I was prepared to suspend judgment when dealing with Chen's behaviour but not with Feng Hong's. In this doubled, refracted vision, using memory and reflection, I explore how the personal can interfere with and cloud one's professional judgment. Retrospectively, informed by the wisdom of hindsight and the scholarship of auto-ethnography, I interrogate the personal and the relational composition of professional practice.

The specifics of location

I use auto-ethnography to weave memoir together with passages of reflection, in the quest to create new kinds of knowledge and discover the relational and personal roots of difference. My auto-ethnographic journey also explores how knowledge evolves from locations, locations that are rooted in the specifics of particular moments in time, and relationships that are disjointed, incomplete and highly personal.



Then quite suddenly, I was informed by Professor Wu that I and another foreign teacher in the department (there were only two of us in the entire college) were to have our own office on a different floor of the building. I was somewhat puzzled by this. I did not understand the logic of being separated from the other staff members. I could not see how this would encourage deeper relations between Feng Hong, the other Chinese teachers and myself. Try as I did to look pleased, I was anything but; this only added to the feelings of alienation that were beginning to gather.



By revealing the specifics of my location in the college I use memoir as a practice of mindfulness, gathering multiple strands of lived experience together onto the written page; I reflect on what I have observed, heard, participated in and understood in the process of living a real life.

Reality is fluid, nothing is fixed

But have I set myself an impossible task? As Stuart Hall writes, ‘Meaning “floats” (1997, p. 228). It cannot be finally fixed.’ Here, I meet this challenge, inspired by Dorinne Kondo’s emphasis on specificity: ‘the specificity of my experience—a particular human being who encounters particular others at a particular historical moment and has particular stakes in that interaction’ (1990, p. 24). I fuse this with Patty Sotirin’s call for ‘radical specificity’ in evocative auto-ethnography that moves past the abundance of detail to capture the subtle complexities of specific experience; lived experiences that generate a multiplicity of interpretations rather than an accurate mapping of cultural footprints and essentially bound meaning (2010, p. 4). Thus, memoir recaptures the complexity of my lived experiences with my Chinese protagonists during particular moments in my past and theirs. The specificity of these moments and relations are entwined with threads of embodied theory (Kondo 1990, p. 24) that enable me to write about my foreignness in China as a non-Chinese professional. Memoir reveals how my presence caused uncertainty amongst my Chinese colleagues. When I took up my teaching position it was unclear as to how I would fit into the social networks of the college. Besides Chen, with whom would I align myself politically? I was an unknown entity to my colleagues—my professional and relational agendas were not transparent. As I now pull apart the cultural and relational agendas placed upon me by my Chinese protagonists and myself, I uncover the visible and invisible layers that framed me as the foreign expert.

In the following excerpt I illustrate the power of memoir by revealing the discomfiture I experienced as a foreign teacher and, in doing so, seek to undermine the temptation of cultural stereotyping, whether by others or one’s self.



Unsurprisingly, the first class, a one-and-a-half-hour introduction to the history of western arts management, does not go well. The majority of the students' English speaking and listening skills are weak, complicated by an unfamiliarity with English accents. Feng Hong does not appear to be making much effort with the interpreting; although I make a concerted effort to pace my delivery, pausing frequently for her to translate key points, she appears to elaborate only momentarily, with a somewhat resigned ineffectual manner. Soon shoulders sag, heads slump forward, blank faces gaze listlessly into space, conjuring a sombre mood of frustrated resignation between us. I falter, not knowing how to provoke their interest or passion, nor mine, which has by this time slithered off and hidden itself in a dark corner somewhere! Humiliation and fear creep closer, my angst threatens to fasten my throat closed. Minutes slide on.... As the class comes to a close, Chen arrives to take me to lunch. Putting my anxiety and confusion aside, I start to pack away my papers, whilst the students rise from their desks and cluster around Chen. Whereas, moments before there had been a wretched silence, now the air swishes cheerfully to the tinker of giggles and the shrill chatter of Shanghai dialect.

During lunch, Chen diplomatically turns our conversation around to my class. With that beguiling smile of his, that I had come to recognise was just as much a tactic of covering up feelings as revealing them, he says,

'The students seem happy with you! They say they learnt a lot today, best presentation they have ever heard...'

There is a pause, our eyes do not meet. I am sceptical, but not able to work out what Chen is thinking or what kind of response he wants from me. I feel awkward, I do not want to disappoint him, nor do I want to lose his faith in me. This is so not how I imagined things would be. ... Keeping my opinions to myself, making my best modest smile, uttering no words, I go along with our little pretence; but I know, I know I was bloody rubbish today. No matter if the students say otherwise to Chen or not, it changes nothing. Intuitively, I feel that the students' praise has nothing to do with me; rather they are more concerned with creating a good impression on Chen. In their eyes he is a leader and thus not one to complain to.

In the late afternoon I speak to Feng Hong about my fears as to the students' lack of English competency in listening and speaking, and the need to build better communication between her and me, as well as with the students. Rather than responding directly to my thoughts, Feng Hong explains that actually she is now busy with other teaching and administration commitments, and so has nominated Li Peng, the class monitor, as my interpreter. Again I say nothing. What could I do but attempt to make the best of a hopeless situation?



All the complexities of my experience, Feng Hong's withdrawal, Li Peng taking on responsibilities he was not equipped to fulfill (that I felt rightly belonged with Feng Hong), and the solace I sought from Chen are indicators of an understanding of pedagogy that is shaped by teaching and learning experiences very different to those of my Chinese protagonists. These culturally determined experiences are further complicated by the degrees of closeness or distance in my everyday relationships inside the college, with Chen, with Feng Hong, and others. Trinh states 'the understanding of difference is a shared responsibility, which requires a minimum of willingness to reach out to the unknown' (1989, p. 85). Consequently, the power of writing memoir in this instance lies in its ability to bring to the surface the specificities of my relationships; the suspicious and unsettled nature of my relationship with Feng Hong, and the closeness and loyalty I felt towards Chen, highlight that my relationships with the Chinese were as varied as they were complex. In unfolding the specificity of these relationships from a foreigner's perspective, I offer an alternative method for reflecting on the socio/cultural, professional and personal experiences of western educationalists and other western professionals living and working in Asian countries such as China, and the complex nature of difference.

Conclusion

My auto-ethnographic writing draws on nuanced insights to inform my life as a university teacher, early career researcher and aware transnational professional, and may be relevant to the experiences of teachers, whether foreign or local, in a transnational higher educational setting. When auto-ethnographers write about the particulars of everyday life, it is not as a way of extrapolating generalisations from such experiences, but in order to unravel how global and local influences are manifested in the specificities of people's behaviour, and of lived experiences that are marked in people's flesh and their relations with others (Abu-Lughod 2006, 160). Like Abu-Lughod, I am arguing for a way of writing that can convey the specifics of visceral experience in professional practice and disrupt any possibility of essential representation. Thus, in this paper I have used memoir as a device for blurring the boundaries between self and other, and to evoke particular moods, emotions and images that work towards destabilising any essentialist notions of living and working as a foreign university teacher in China. I have used

remembered fragments of my personal experiences with Chen, Feng Hong and others to foreground inclusion, exclusion, contradiction and the messiness of everyday life, and to ask: who is the Chinese other? Who is the foreigner? What can they teach each other? I have challenged the Positivist tradition of narrating history and lived experience as whole and complete, to cut across any notions that my stories are accurate representations of “Chineseness” or “foreignness”.

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