

**Department of Social Sciences and International Studies**

**Embroidering Myself into Otherness:  
An Auto-ethnographic Inquiry of Border-crossing**

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**Doctor of Philosophy**

**of**

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## DECLARATION

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any other university.

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this thesis I use auto-ethnography to explore the complexities and singularities of a western teacher immersed in the social reality of a Chinese university. I interrogate the unique experiences of my past life as ‘the foreigner’, ‘the special one’, ‘the imported expert’, ‘the cultural outsider’, and ‘the cultural novice’, in order to lay bare the complexity of what it means to work and live in China as a foreign university teacher and be recognised as different. This research focuses on notions 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 a foreign expert.

The conceptual framework underpinning my auto-ethnographical research is constructed from a theoretical approach that is emergent and cross-disciplinary, and incorporates cultural, social, postcolonial and feminist theory in relation to the paradoxical and ambivalent nature of difference. That is, this work attempts to make sense of what it means to live and teach in a location where everything is foreign, including myself.

My research methodology employs critically reflective writing that acknowledges the multiplicity of historical, cultural and social differences, whilst recognising that difference, at its heart, is a matter of relationship/s. In particular I use memoir and poetry as an auto-ethnographic 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. This form of writing as research makes it possible to challenge some of the generalisations western scholars inadvertently make when writing about their teaching experiences in China. In focusing on the specifics of my relationships with Chinese colleagues and students, four in particular, I offer an alternative way of interpreting intercultural relations. Through these relationships I foreground inclusion, exclusion, contradiction and the messiness of everyday life, and 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 a

whole to cut across any notions that my own stories are accurate representations of ‘Chineseness’ or ‘foreignness’.

The nuanced insights I draw inform my life as a university teacher, early career researcher and transnational professional, and may be relevant to the experiences of teachers, whether foreign or local, in a transnational higher education 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.

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**Embroidering Myself into Otherness:  
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**“Re-stitching the Voice” or New Curriculum for Embroidery**

In solitude I contemplate  
the self—edge—of—voice where distortion lies.  
Beneath the slippery surface  
voices within an invisible hem will ensnare;  
the strongest of warps will silence.  
With hem ripper  
I pierce the embroidered flesh and soul of voice.  
Unpicking blind stitches that bind us  
the unraveling of conflicting voices begins.  
Using needle and threads of resistance  
I anchor my position with trusty knot.  
Taking up translucent thread  
I embroider a cloister of heartfelt voices  
Like a mantra.  
Stitch by stitch—breath by breath.  
All Voices become silent.  
All Silence creates sound.  
All Sound ignites passion.  
Passion is Voice Pure. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (Scott 2011, 159)

# INTRODUCTION

## Positioning my voice at the centre of my work

*We know who we are by reflecting upon how we choose to communicate with others, or how we perform ourselves in everyday life.*

—Tami Spry, *Body, Paper, Stage: Writing and Performing Autoethnography*

My interest in writing this auto-ethnographic inquiry has evolved out of a desire to talk freely about my day-to-day experiences living and working in Shanghai as a foreign teacher; to unpick the underlying ambitions and intentions that led to a dramatic career change and relocation to China in search of a more meaningful life at the age of forty-nine; and to contemplate how my relationships with the Chinese have given rise to a deeper understanding of myself as a professional and human being. My reader may think the use of the term ‘foreigner’ here, and in its various guises throughout my thesis, somewhat overstated—or even an unfashionable postcolonial cliché. Yet for me it illustrates the essential predicament of my situation in a Chinese university as a non-Chinese teacher, a cultural outsider, a person continually situated between things (Jaya 2011, 745). Being referred to as ‘*Laowei*’, ‘the foreigner’ or ‘foreign teacher’ was/is a common occurrence in China.<sup>2</sup> My first Chinese work-permit named me as a ‘*foreign expert*’ with my second and subsequent permits labelling me as an ‘*alien employee*’. So it has come about that interrogating my own positionality in China, unravelling the complexities and the differences in my relationships with a Chinese academic called Chen and various Chinese colleagues and students, and the power structures that enmeshed them have become important themes of my work.

My thesis is also a critically reflexive response to a personal dissatisfaction with current 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 Shanghai. There is an abundance of intercultural transnational higher education discourse that frames the teachers and students of so-called

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<sup>2</sup> This thread like symbol  $\Psi$  indicates that further information can be found in Loose Threads at the end of this thesis. My rationale for using this approach to complement my use of traditional footnotes is explained in the following chapter on 36.

‘developing countries’ within the context of a western understanding of education and knowledge (Clark and Gieve 2006; Evans 1995, 1997; Evans and Treganza 2002). As a result of my own experiences in China I am challenging a hidden assumption in the literature that positions offshore Asian students and teachers as being in need of remedial action, which can be resolved through the assimilation of western academic pedagogy (Biggs and Watkins 2001; Evans 1995; Leask et al. 2005; Ryan 2003); this is a way of portraying the ‘cultural other’ in print, described by de Certeau as a ‘writing that conquers’ (1988, xxv). Moreover, my writing is a personal apology for earlier published work, where my writing was constrained by the disciplinary framework of positivist research methods. It was a form of writing that restricted rather than expanded knowledge by the application of a research paradigm which was not up to the job of illuminating the complexities of my experiences as a professional cross-cultural arts manager inside a Chinese university; a writing that constructed a homogenous representation of my relationships and experiences with my Chinese colleagues, that left me feeling frustrated, that I had done more harm than good; a writing whose 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, 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 both inside the Chinese classroom and outside it are but reflections of my own personal belief system, socio/cultural values and prejudices (Spry 2011, 60). By using memoir and poetry to write auto-ethnography I make it obvious who is speaking in my writing, I make myself answerable—fully responsible for what I write. It offers me the opportunity to go beyond the peripheral boundaries of the more usual traditional approaches to understanding and knowledge production that I have been talking about, and it

acknowledges that culture, even though people may be consciously ignorant of its influence, does significantly colour how we view and experience our lives (Ker Conway 1998, 6). However writing and doing auto-ethnographical research is not easy. For me it was a long and arduous journey. Not only did I have to learn the craft of writing memoir and poetry, I needed time to embody the ethical implications of writing and doing research in this new way. As I reveal in my conclusion I experienced a few false turns and a shift in thinking before I was able to imagine and create the work before you. 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.

### **Awakening to China**

My fascination with China began in May 1999 when, as a culturally naïve arts administrator, I first entered Shanghai as the country celebrated its fiftieth year of governance under the Chinese Communist Party. I escorted a group of eight Australian female artists on a three week tour through Shanghai, Hangzhou and Beijing, where we contemplated the atmospheric melancholy of Chinese traditional landscapes, immersed ourselves in the poetic traditions of the ancient Chinese literati, whose artistic sensibilities towards the interconnectedness of all things flooded our senses, and sampled the local culinary delights that were frequently tantalising and sometimes not. But what really impressed me was China's history and sense of place: the overwhelming feeling of being intimately connected to a cosmic order.

Near the end of my first visit I had a life-changing experience that opened me up to the possibilities of a life in China.



Saturday, close to noon, already hot and sticky we arrive at Badaling Great Wall in Yanqing County, seventy kilometres northwest of Beijing. On this first visit, although later I come to see it as rampant commercialism, Badaling has the appearance of a carnival. The streets are swarming with street hawkers and traders, all laughing, shouting and jostling with each other to relieve us tourists of our American dollars. Their Chinglish is friendly enough, but overwhelming in its persistence and repetition. As we enter the square that lies at the foot of the wall we are confronted by the picture postcard scene of the wall's eight peaks and seventeen watchtowers rising up and ribboning out in all directions, like a gigantic Ming dynasty dragon, across an azurite blue sky. The atmosphere is electric, extraordinarily hypnotic. Everything appears clothed in a flush of orange yellow haze. Chen, our host and guide, an academic from one of the universities in Shanghai, directs us all forward towards the left side of Badaling wall; it is much steeper here and rises sharply. As I approach the first watchtower I am confronted by the verticality of the ribbonesque sprawl of thousands of steps assailed by a gigantic rope of people travelling up and down the wall. The ascension looks arduous, the shape of the narrow steps appears as if they can barely accommodate a human foot, and are further compromised by absurdly deep risers. For a second I worry if I will have the stamina and nimbleness to make the climb without losing myself to vertigo or taking a tumble, but my hesitation quickly dissipates as I begin the hour or so stairway ascent. After a while the tightly clumped mass of people begins to loosen up and recede. Some of our group decide to stay behind but Chen and a few of us carry on. Gradually the air thins out and becomes still. A lightness of being comes over me—my ear catches a breath of a hum. I stop. I have this ridiculous overpowering desire to press my body flat against the cold, dense limestone and fired black brick surfaces of the historied wall. Feeling more exposed than childish, with my oafish body, when compared to the fine bones of many of the Chinese women, and my out-of-place gold red hair, I cautiously resist my embodied impulse, and continue on to the highest peak.



On reaching the last peak in this section of the wall, looking out across the tree-covered mountains, I feel intoxicated by the timelessness of the place. Maybe it is a mixture of excitement, myth, romance, lack of oxygen and a touch of heat stroke but whatever it is, I feel its presence and have the distinct impression of stepping off the wall and walking through air over the embellished green as its borders bleed blue and green into the skyscape. I have the sensation of spinning orb-like—entering the grasses, trees, mountains and the valley below and they also entering me.

I feel myself filling and overflowing with an abundance of hope and possibility—becoming consumed with the limitlessness of my potential.



I now look back on this early experience in China as a form of symbolic rupturing where I experienced an altered state of consciousness. Yet I must stress that my intellectualisation of this event as I describe it here in the present is to some degree a fiction. I am evoking experiences from memories of more than a decade ago and transforming what I am remembering onto the written page. In doing so, I fix what was once open to alternative interpretations. This suggests that the manner in which I reminisce in my writing is in a concrete way creating my own history (Rainer 1997, 102). But the essence of this experience is true. The sensory impressions I experienced on that wall ripped apart a life-long illusion, a constant striving for personal stability in the belief it would heal an ache that housed a lack of self-worth—of purpose. In that moment on the Great Wall my entire history lay before me.

I relived the mixed emotions of the fifteen-year-old securing a place in art school. An unworldly girl, who did not know how to resist her working class family's passive-aggressive response to personal desires; desires which had little to do with financial security; a girl who believed that she had little choice but to take a job as a shop assistant in a local pharmacy. I heard the voice of the seventeen-year-old child-mother refusing to be oppressed by a British class system that worked to silence her

wants. I re-experienced the passion of the young woman migrating to Australia with her young son in search of something more; a woman struggling and failing in her many attempts to imagine just what it is she needs to know. I saw the thirty-one-year old, recently married and with a small baby, abandoning her university degree to set up their first family home in Dubai. A petroleum wife trapped in a patriarchal, xenophobic expatriate community; a privileged social setting immersed in testosterone and superficiality. Again a misfit not belonging, questioning where does she belong? Five years on, returning to Australia to reclaim lost ground. Going back to university, reinventing self again—again—again, divorce, more study. Searching for a life just beyond reach; failing to imagine possibilities because still she had not learned to imagine what she needed to know...

A mass of memory—sensory-imprinted threads running through time linking up instantaneously to create an embodied embroidery of my past life. I had no sense of personal judgement, but rather these threads of visceral experience were part of my training and preparation for the journey before me. I allowed myself to feel curious, to reach out tentatively into unexplored territory, no longer afraid of the consequences. I was ready, as Carolyn Heilbrun writes, ‘to take risks, to make noise, to be courageous, to become unpopular’ (1988, 130), to be independent.

### **Background relational threads**

Since then I have returned to China many times, under different guises, as arts administrator, agent, foreign teacher, professional trainer, work colleague, friend and now early career researcher and life writer. All of these different selves are or were heavily dependent on relationships with members of the Chinese academic community. Although the power relations between myself and my Chinese colleagues, students and friends, and the contexts in which they are situated are bound to be different, there lies one enduring thread that runs through all these relationships. A thread that is continuous in its determination to unravel, ravel and unravel again its way into an understanding of self through relationships with Chinese other/s. This thread is of the flesh—my flesh, it weaves my positionality into my relationships and research. It is the embodied thread of the cultural novice embroidering herself into knowing.

Chen and Yue Wan, both members of the Shanghai academic community, have had a profound impact on how I have come to understand China. They permeate my memories of living and teaching in Shanghai. My research, touching only fleetingly on the intimate stories of Chen's personal life and even less on Yue Wan's, evolves from my relationships with them and their relatedness to my life in China. They, and Chen in particular, are the gate-keepers—opening the door into a Chinese world which until the last few decades was closed to foreigners such as me. Through work and friendship each in their different way has enabled me to have opportunities and experiences in the local academic community that otherwise might not have been possible. Chen, as I preferred to call him—also known as 'Shanghai Cool' by his fellow colleagues, due to his entrepreneurial approach to his work and his ability to charm and dine us foreigners—was the director of Foreign Affairs for a local art college in Shanghai.<sup>3</sup> During my first visit, we became friends and almost immediately began to collaborate on art exhibitions and exchanges involving artists and academics from his art college and my arts and academic networks in Western Australia. Within eighteen months I became the art college's first independent non-Chinese agent and commuted regularly between Shanghai and Perth. Aided by Chen, I moved to Shanghai in August 2003 to take up a teaching post at the art college, coordinating an arts management program for third year art history undergraduates, with Yu Wan eventually becoming my co-teacher.<sup>3</sup> Up until then, I had only socialised with Chen, senior academics, administrators and government officials.

The academic circles in which Chen and Yue Wan worked, although overlapping, had little in common; this resulted in a disparate range of life experiences and feelings, moving from a world where I felt protected and cosseted as the international expert, to a space where I had no power, no influence with people who mattered in my inner work circle. I stitch together these two incongruent strands of life experience in the following chapters, to create a richer, more nuanced interpretation of my life as a foreign teacher and my relations with my Chinese protagonists. By recognising the complexity of my social positioning within the

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<sup>3</sup> Undergraduate degrees accredited by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China are of four years duration.

Shanghai academic community, and how this has shaped my understanding, I have chosen auto-ethnography as the most appropriate method of inquiry. Through auto-ethnography in the form of memoir and poetry I consider the complicated and at times paradoxical nature of my lived experiences within the walls of Chinese academia. As Petra Munro Hendry puts it:

By acknowledging the social construction of knowledge, narrative has provided a methodology that has taken into account the situated, partial, contextual, and contradictory nature of telling stories. (2007, 497)

My initial understanding and experiences of China until May 2004 were strongly influenced by my friendship with Chen. China for me, during that period, was as much Chen, as Chen was China. For most of that first year of teaching I had little appreciation of what it was like to be a foreign teacher who enters China with no personal contacts. I did not feel powerless, so much as confused, for Chen was always there to support and guide me—in his own words as a fixer.☞ Although at the time I was ignorant of this aspect of our relationship, Chen shielded me from people and behaviour in the college that he thought might distress me, and things he felt I did not need to know about. Because I trusted him I did not think to question his actions, or wonder why I never seemed to socialise with other Chinese colleagues and friends unless he accompanied me. Personal invitations to dinner and people's homes were always extended to me through Chen. I accepted these occurrences as an idiosyncratic aspect of our friendship. I considered it the Chinese way of doing things. It was only much later with Yue Wan that I began to develop friendships separately to the ones I had through Chen. This has led me to appreciate that there are distinct differences in the ways Chinese university teaching/learning communities are experienced by those visiting academics and teachers who commute between China and their home country intermittently and those, like myself, who reside in China for a year or longer. My experiences and understanding of China prior to living in Shanghai are quite dissimilar to what occurred when I began to live and work there.

### **Sketching the research canvas**

Broadly, my research is concerned with how western border-crossing teachers such as I, immersed in the day-to-day teaching and learning activities of the local Chinese academic community, negotiate and create meaning with our Chinese colleagues and

students. But to be more specific, at the heart of this auto-ethnography lies my story as a border-crosser, a foreign university teacher living and working in Shanghai. My aim is to tell stories that provoke, disturb and enlighten my reader, by looking for differences at the edge of things, when something is and then is not; to reveal the slippage between these two states, a between space in which resides a cultural fuzziness. In such a self-reading, I am drawn to untangle the messy complicatedness and diversity of lived experiences that lie on the underside of teaching, in learning places where different ways of seeing, behaving and different moral codes border-cross each other. I find it necessary to reveal the anxieties of living and working in a foreign country, and how this impacts on my relations and understanding of Chinese colleagues, friends and students—not just their behaviours but also their underlying motivation and agendas. My research, a personal journey, is one in which I create an opportunity for my reader/s, both Chinese and non-Chinese alike, to look through my eyes and see how I experience the local teaching and learning academic community in Shanghai as a foreign teacher, a cultural other. My story is a collective one, involving not only myself but also my relationships with my Chinese colleagues and students, in an effort to move past the dualist notions of west and east that are frequently found in scholarly literature concerned with off-shore teaching and learning experiences. This is a narrative within which I learn to move between the voices of self and Chinese other/s—not as an expert but as a cultural novice—embroidering myself into states of otherness to generate a polysemic account of lived experience.

In the following chapter I present my reasons as to why auto-ethnographic research is an appropriate research methodology for exploring the complexities and singularities of my life as a foreign teacher in China. Explaining my use of memoir and poetry as legitimate forms of writing auto-ethnography I show how singularly and together they create a critically reflexive style of writing that acknowledges the multiplicity of historical, cultural, social and psychological differences. I introduce key researchers and writers whose ideas have influenced the concepts and cross-disciplinary theoretical approach that underpins my work. I will also discuss my appropriation of embroidery as a metaphor for articulating the essential process of conducting research and writing auto-ethnography.

The focus of chapter two is concerned with the ambiguous and ambivalent nature of difference and being different, and how this influences and is influenced by one's relationships with others. Here I interrogate my behaviour, attitudes and personal assumptions through a series of relationships and situations with particular Chinese colleagues that constitute the professional layers of my first teaching experiences inside a Chinese university. In exploring my own positionality I not only reflect on the closeness and distance between relationships but also the personal motivations and agendas that led to me taking up a teaching position in the art college.

In chapter three I continue the interrogation of my position in the art college as a foreign teacher. However, here I reflect on the more personal layers of my relationship with my friend and colleague Chen. This chapter confronts the difficulties of separating the personal from the professional in our relationships and how the closeness of them shapes how we see others and how we conceptualise our own reality.

Chapter four is concerned with my involvement with a group of students who were implicated in a cheating incident. Using memoir and poetry to illustrate the foreign teacher local student relationship, I seek in this chapter to negate the stereotypical representation of the Chinese student as a passive learner. Here I reveal my personal and professional engagement with one student in particular to illustrate the complexity of transnational relationships. And to foreground how various modes of resistance are played out in the need to maintain one's personal sense of identity.

Chapter five sees me revisit the four major relationships foregrounded in this thesis to explain the heterogeneous nature of my relations with Chinese colleagues and students. As the concluding chapter it articulates my main premise that differences between people cannot just be explained in terms of race, culture and gender; rather that difference is always implicated in the personal. Here I reflect on how each of the four relationships draw on different aspects of my many selves; selves that each generate specific types of behaviour and meanings. To illustrate further the relational nature of our embodied self/s I explore my relationship with my mother.

Through this primary relationship I demonstrate how we all learn through our early experiences to live in the world, and that as embodied processes our experiences not only illustrate our individual uniqueness but also that no two relationships are identical.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Creating the Writing Space

#### The performance of words

Writing of the body words of bone

blood

sinew

Suturing words to bind the flesh

to lick our wounds

Instinctual stick in the gut words

Slippery acts of resistance words

Culturally engrained lack of respect

for difference words

Unfuck our world words

Words that write the body of thee—me—others

into papery death beds

Insidiously precious words

Straddling borderland words

Mental walls built by words

Mapping histories out of words

that light the way

Head

Heart

Hand

feel the weight of my words



After the preceding brief look at the underlying experiences, relationships and motivations that have inspired me to undertake this form of research, I introduce auto-ethnography as my method of inquiry, and discuss the use of memoir and poetic techniques as appropriate forms of writing auto-ethnography. Here I will sketch out some of the key theorists who have influenced my polysemic, heteroglossic, cross-disciplinary work. In particular I will focus on those who write about border-crossing and residing in a between space, the art of being vulnerable in one's writing and research, and the paradoxical and ambivalent nature of difference and being the foreigner. I will also illustrate how I use embroidery as a metaphor for doing and writing research and how this influences the design layout of my thesis.

### **Word stitching my way into knowing with auto-ethnography**

*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 making; in turn this has facilitated 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, the situated and the partial perspectives of human experience. As a methodological device, auto-ethnography is capable of depicting the lived experiences of the relational self located within a socio/culturally specific 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, 788–789, 796).

In undertaking this research journey I know that I am encumbered by baggage—my historicity and positionality lie heavily upon me, in the shape of prior knowledge and past experiences, they follow every move or thought I make. As I became aware of this, I saw that my work has a place within the genre of auto-ethnographic

writing. Auto-ethnography situates me at the intercultural junction of my own belief systems, ways of knowing and moral conscience. Although much of my knowledge and experience was developed prior to my research inquiry, it creates a trajectory between my broad repertoire of lived experiences and that of my focused academic existence (Tedlock 2000, 467). As the frame through which I write and embroider stories of meaning making, auto-ethnography allows me to capture and weave together the fluidity and ephemeral essence of lived experiential moments, both mine and my Chinese protagonists.

Deborah Reed-Danahay contends that auto-ethnography has the dexterity to articulate the multiple nature of the self, and suggests alternative approaches as to how lived experiences are written (1997, 3). She considers auto-ethnography better equipped to produce authentic knowledge than traditional ethnography, even though the voice of the outsider is still considered by some academics and others to be less authentic than that of the insider. Auto-ethnographic writing, Reed-Danahay suggests, takes the appearance of any one of three strands: ‘native anthropology’ whereby those who were the researched subjects of traditional ethnography take up the position of researcher so that marginalised other/s can speak for themselves; ‘ethnic autobiography’, life stories that are written by those who have been marginalised; and ‘autobiographical ethnography’ where the researcher introduces her or his own subjectivity into the research narrative (1997, 2–3).

### **The entangled I as autobiographical ethnography**

I have chosen the third strand, ‘autobiographical ethnography’, to tell my stories and those of my Chinese associates. Yet, in writing about my life experiences in China, a culture very different to my own, it is difficult to nurture a harmonious and plausible alliance between reality and my representation of it. I have the potential to get ensnared in the narratives I am writing about, which could place me in the tenuous clasp of ‘bias’ and the methodologies I choose could be equally biased, as they are intimately linked to the demands of my research and what I am trying to write about (Denzin cited in Ellis et al. 2008, 268). In reply to this problem, my positioning as an auto-ethnographer expresses itself in two ways. My work embraces Reed-Danahay’s notion of auto-ethnography as a performance that involves ‘boundary

crossing', moving across and between boundaries, and a concept that articulates the multiplicity of cognitive being and provides alternative threads of narrative that are concerned with the recording of everyday stories (1997, 3). I cross-stitch a writerly pathway across borders of geography, culture, discourse and pedagogical practice; but there lies another side, an under-stitch to my border-crossing performance—one that reveals the I as in-betweener enmeshed between two different worlds. A border-crossing in-between status that sees me as a foreign teacher, the expert and cultural novice residing in an intercultural space that lies betwixt different ways of knowing and being, between east and west.

### **A research writing that can be evocative, vulnerable and heartfelt**

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, 36).

Caroline Ellis and Art Bochner are pioneers of evocative auto-ethnography. Ellis says of writing auto-ethnography:

You'd want to tell a story that readers could enter and feel a part of. You'd write in a way to evoke readers to feel and think about your life and their lived in relation to yours. You'd want them to experience the experience you're writing about—.  
(1999, 674)

Including myself as a practitioner of this highly personal, evocative form of auto-ethnography, I interrogate the specificities of human experience and the struggle to make meaning within and between particular situational contexts. Such work demands research and writing that is vulnerable, empathic (Muncey 2010, 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, 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, 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 Lauren Jewett (2008), have also used

evocative, vulnerable and heartfelt auto-ethnographic forms of writing to interrogate their own social realities within higher education contexts.

### **Using memoir to write auto-ethnography**

For the reader 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. Auto-ethnography is the actual research framework in which I create a portrait of myself living and working inside a Chinese socio/cultural reality. Memoir as the creative process word-stitches together multiple strands of lived experience to flesh out the portrait of a foreign teacher in situ. That is, 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', myself/s that are implicated in a complex and messy arrangement of relationships with my Chinese colleagues. Similar to Sparkes' intentions in his stories of 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.

### **Memoir—capturing fragments of my life between worlds<sup>4</sup>**

My betweener positioning sees me bodily experience my reality as inside, outside and between two very different cultures (Diversi and Moreira 2009, 15), China and Australia. Nancy Mairs contends that through the act of writing about my life I am writing from the body (1994, 321), because it is this body that lives the life I am writing about. For Mairs it is the specificities revealed within one's embodied experiences that hold meaning. Like her, I write not from a position of authority, rather I write from an embodied positionality. A body that lived her life in China from moment to moment (Mairs 1994, 49), continually drawing on a multifaceted past to make sense of whatever life dealt her. Like other embodied beings my

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the theoretical strands of reflection throughout this section, although mostly revised, have evolved from an earlier published paper (Scott 2011).

emotions in China subjected me to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, rejection and being misinterpreted. When I faced difficulties and emotional turmoil, traces of the child-mother, the timid daughter or the disempowered wife were nearby, whispering in my ear that I was being taken for granted, abused, ignored, not respected. Remnants of my cultural, social and experiential legacies lie close to my psychic interiors. I am hardwired by these legacies to perceive events, people and myself in a multitude of ways—ways of thinking and being that do not necessarily reflect how things are or even how things should be. Writers and researchers like me, who write stories about self/s and other/s need to explore our interiors, our own ontological and epistemological roots and be aware of the potential for tension and conflict, between our own concepts and those we research (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 46).

My intention in drawing on my life experiences in Shanghai is to unravel some of the mysteries and irregularities of teaching and living in foreign cultures such as China. My writing does not suggest how I eventually became like other foreign or local Chinese teachers, or even that I was transformed into a different human being by the Chinese other. No—my writing is concerned with illustrating how my professional and personal selves have been shaped by these experiences and my life enriched by them. I use memoir to document my journey of ‘teacher becoming’ rather than any fixed notion of ‘teacher being’, so that I and my reader/s can develop deeper insights as to how our struggles and experiences with colleagues and students that are socially and culturally different can teach us new forms of knowing and different ways of living. I place emphasis on the notion of ‘teacher becoming’ because I feel strongly that as a professional who has the power to influence young minds I have a responsibility to know myself and other/s better. Yet this sense of responsibility, this desire to know different ways to mine—makes me vulnerable and positions me continually between things.

To illustrate the nature of my between existence, and how memoir is a purposeful device for writing auto-ethnography to reveal the irregularities and complexities of intercultural relations, the following piece of memoir is embroidered together from

real life events whilst teaching a cohort of third year undergraduate business students during my second year of living in Shanghai.



### **Silence and laughter speak louder than words**

It is 38 degrees Celsius outside and the air is sticky with the intense humidity. The large spacious classroom fans hum at high speed but make little difference to the room's temperature. It is suffocatingly warm. But I on the other hand am immaculate. Or so I think. Dressed in a carefully ironed mid-calf length white linen dress-coat, with matching tailored trousers, my red/blonde streaked hair pulled back and pinned up with a metal filigree clip, wearing a trace of lipstick and blusher, I hope I am projecting a graceful and professional impression to my new class of third year undergraduate business students.

A legion of eighty cold, blank faces stare through me. I feel drained, as if my psyche is pinned to the blackboard. There is no smile on their blood red lips, no facial features coloured by emotion, no eye contact—nothing—they are as ice. I try to calm myself.

It is the second week of a twenty week semester.☞ Last week I had informed this class that I could not possibly teach business writing to so many students; forty of them would have to move. Nobody had volunteered, so I had arranged for another class to be scheduled for the same time period, and had made the necessary selections myself. I had e-mailed all the students involved in the changeover, so I had expected to see only forty students.

I am flooded with self talk. Calm yourself Joy. Take a deep breath—in—out—in—out—breathe slowly through your nose. The situation is not going to go away—pull yourself together—deal with it! Remember. You are the teacher, you call the shots here. Do it—do it now.

‘I told you all last week’, I inform my students—standing erect and looking them straight in the eye, ‘that I cannot possibly teach eighty students. Impossible.’ Not a shuffle, a flicker, not even a twitch from any of them, total silence.

‘Now those forty students that I emailed last week, can you please go to classroom 5, on level 4. Immediately.’ Silence.

‘Now come on guys I have not got all day. Pack your bags and move to classroom 5, Ms Chester, your new teacher, is waiting there for you.’ Silence.

‘I am waiting,’ projecting my voice at a lower pitch so as to generate a confident air, but who am I kidding, certainly not myself. Silence.

A minute goes by that feels like an hour. My head is starting to throb with the sickly heat; panic creeps into my chest, I feel the heaviness of it and fear it might strangle the timbre of my voice; I feel a cloud of moisture gathering in the hollow under my arms, I pray that it will not seep through my clothing for all to see. I am a professional and professionals do not sweat or lose their cool!

Breathe Joy—in—out—in—out—breathe for god’s sake.

‘Ok’ I say ‘You leave me no choice. I will read out names randomly and ask you to leave and go to Ms Chester’s classroom.’ Cursing myself, for not remembering to bring the list of student names I have relocated to the other class.

I begin to read the names slowly from my class list. “WanG—Yiii—Tao, Li—Zhaoow—Hao.’ I stumble over the Chinese pronunciation. My mouth feels dry. There is no movement—I keep going. At last I have read all forty names out. Still silence, no eye contact or movement. I am at a complete loss what to do next. Suddenly my body takes over. I walk down the middle isle of the classroom. Gesturing with my left hand, I indicate by tapping with my fingers on the desks to the side of me, that I want those students sitting to the left of the isle, to move to the other classroom. They begin to stir. I am uncertain as to why this appears to be working. Maybe it is because I am entering into their personal space, but soon the students start to get up and leave the classroom. At first it is a hesitant trickle.

Suddenly it becomes a gush and students from the right hand side rush for the door too. Without thinking I grab a chair, close the door and wedge the chair under the door handle. I turn to face those who are left and dramatically thrust my hands upwards in the sign of a plea. ‘No—No’ ‘don’t leave me,’ I plead in an improvised overly theatrical tone. And then I begin to laugh. Shaking, gurgling laughter from the belly, my students see the humour in our plight and soon we are all laughing, and the space between us begins to lessen.



I have used this fragment of memoir, as I use other pieces of memoir throughout my thesis, to reveal the vulnerability of my position in a Chinese university setting. To highlight my feeling of being between things—a betweenness, that is neither one thing nor the other, as a way of narrating my professional and personal experiences in China. At this particular moment in the Chinese university classroom I was made invisible by my inability to be a Chinese teacher. I did not understand the policies and the procedures in this new university and did not have the life experience to understand how things are done in China, and that for my students eighty in a classroom was in all probability a normal occurrence. Not understanding the logic of my request, there may have been nothing that these students could do other than be silent. By writing about my immersion in teaching and learning spaces such as this one I can eventually come to understand or appreciate the echoes of this other life—this life that is not mine; remembering that this experience, like others that will unfold throughout this thesis, is not a concrete reality, only my interpretation of what these echoes and shadows might mean. As Hastrup (1990, 47) writes, ‘Culture is not a fact but rather a construction.’

Influenced by the idea that I am writing myself into becoming (Richardson 2000; Mairs 1994; Trinh 1989), and by Behar’s (2003) contention that how we learn things is through the process of unpicking what appear to be conflicting occurrences, the passages of memoir throughout this work are reconstructions of real situations, experiences, conversations and reflections. My stories are not strands of raw data to



be pulled apart and scientifically analysed; rather they are polysemic fragments of life experience which offer me the opportunity to unravel my own inner tensions of not understanding. Such work advances the possibility of being able to reconcile what seem to be conflicting ways of knowing and personal belief. Through auto-ethnographic writing in the form of memoir and poetry I discover new facets about myself, in particular as 'in-between' a hybridised self. This positioning of self between states of embodied location, not Chinese and yet somehow changed by my experience on the Chinese border and thus no longer entirely western, allows me to negotiate the multilingual/cultural exchanges between myself and my Chinese associates. Memoirist Susan Tiberghien (2007, 175) claims that in memoir, as both writer and reader, we are able to contemplate the ways in which human beings are related to each other. When we are able to find moments of knowing in one's own life through what we are writing or reading, she suggests that we are contributing new ways of knowing to what it means to be human. As a writer writing about the everyday, Tiberghien believes we are able to connect with the soul of the universe (2007, 175). Through writing memoir I not only discover new aspects of myself but I also end up discovering another world (Tiberghien 2007, 178).

### **The use of poetic devices to represent the Chinese voice**

Narrative is like embroidery in that words can be used to stitch fragments of lived experience together to create a textual and visual rendition of a momentary experience. Both writing and embroidery work on the reader/viewer's imagination to evoke deeper meaning and understanding. My ability as a writer to portray experiential moments in the Chinese academic community is dependent on my aptitude for experiencing the essence of my location, reflecting on the fabric and shifts of tension within these relationships and translating the threads of my experiential tension into words (Eisner 1991, 20). Weaving together memoir, poetry and embodied theory as a form of auto-ethnographic inquiry, my narrative evolves from constructed memories of past events and relationships whilst working within the local academic community in Shanghai. And, although occurring in the past, these events and relationships have the power to bring depth and understanding to my writing.

The poetic representations to be found in this thesis originate from three distinct origins. My voice in the form of free flowing poetry is used intermittently throughout the chapters. The Chinese chorus in chapter two evolved out of a series of recorded conversations I had with several Chinese teachers and students concerning their experiences with foreign teachers, during a visit to Shanghai in October 2009. Note that some of these same conversations are also embroidered into my memoir, some as voices within the narrative using their own words without editing and others are threaded into stories or located in the Loose Threads section at the end of my thesis, to signify an opinion or to expand a particular idea and/or context. In chapter four there are two forms of poetic verse—the individual student voice and the collective heteroglossic one. Here, I have drawn on a body of correspondence written by former students of mine who were caught up in a cheating incident during my second year working in Shanghai. Although the words ascribed to the many variations of the Chinese voice are their own words, the construction of the poetic verses are mine; their words pulled apart, reassembled and then sewn back together. Reading through my conversation transcripts and written communications I at first struggled with how I could write them into my narrative without losing the depth of raw emotion and energy. After several readings I began to notice that their words, spoken or written in English as their second language, had a poetic flow that would be lost if I attempted to assimilate them into my own words. My dilemma was how to write about events that involved these students without compromising the integrity of their own voices. Laurel Richardson writes:

Lived experience is lived in a body, and a poetic representation can touch us where we live, in our bodies. Thus, poetry gives us a greater chance of vicariously experiencing the self-reflexive and transformational process of self-creation than do standard transcriptions. (1997, 143)

I take from this that poetry is the personification of human experience and as such provides me with the means to play with the words of my Chinese protagonists so that I can evoke their feeling and mood for my reader. Similar to Susanne Gannon (2001, 790) in *(Re)presenting the Collective Girl: A Poetic Approach to a Methodological Dilemma* I am taking an interventionist approach by playing with the written words of my own students and those of interviewed teachers and students to craft free-flowing poetic forms that articulate both the solitary and collective Chinese voice. In pulling apart the words of my Chinese protagonists, I

imagine myself as embroiderer blending and entwining together threads of words to create a braided narrative that is capable of performing as a provocative rhetorical device; a narrative that can reveal their emotional angst and frustration and show how they are capable of resisting and using the power of the written word as a rebuttal to my actions or those of other foreign teachers. Free from the restraints of the more formal layout of writing, I play not just with the words but also the gaps and pauses between words creating spaces where the reader is able to introduce their own embodied experiences (Gannon 2001, 791; Richardson 1997, 143) and make comparisons between their world and other worlds. As I embroider together my words and those of my Chinese protagonists, I create a narrative that forms a border-crossing through which the reader can imagine multiple layers of Chinese reality as well as my own.

### **How memoir and poetry speaks**

Collectively, my stories and poetry speak, not so much of how education moulds us, but rather of how we mould education to satisfy our own requirements (Tierney 1998, 55). As Eisner suggests, our personal history moulds our experience (1991, 36). These stories unravel the notion of the foreign teacher, a cultural in-betweener residing within the cracks of an alien landscape; they interrogate modes of behaviour as to how people make meaning in the face of constant cultural misunderstandings, and depict the daily challenges of a life under the gaze of the Chinese or Foreign other. I am interested in these stories, both mine and my Chinese protagonists, because the experiences and associated assumptions embedded within them construct a framework from which our teaching and learning spaces are created. Rather than putting emphasis on what the ideal educational model is, Eisner believes I would be better advised to concentrate on a serious consideration of the context in which teaching is conducted and what the teaching objectives are (1991, 77). As auto-ethnographer I present the voices of my Chinese protagonists in my writing in either memoir or poetic form so that both Chinese and non-Chinese university teachers and readers can more fully imagine what is being said, and not said, and the context in which such things happen. It is 'I' that represents the voices of Chinese academics and students as well as the relationships I have with some of them. Tierney (1998, 52) implies that in the process of writing up our research, each of us has to confront particular issues as we border-cross between researcher and writer,

and the ways we confront them will vary according to what we are researching and who we are. So how I am situated within my own research and the relationships I have with my Chinese colleagues and students need to be understood in terms of my subjectivity and how it shapes these relationships (Madison 2005, 9), and my understanding of the Chinese other/s.

### **Struggling with Chinese history and how it influences the way I write**

As I sit at my desk reflecting on the numerous Chinese philosophical and historical narratives I have read over the years, the history of the Chinese literati unrolls before me: a long meandering landscape—written from the human experiences of the dead. My concern in creating this body of work has been how to reconcile these Chinese personae that I see embedded within these layered histories with the Chinese I write about. What connections, if any, are to be found between the writings of ancient Chinese scholars and traditional histories of the Chinese intelligentsia, written by both academics and historians, and how does this relate to the Chinese academic community I became familiar with in Shanghai? I have been somewhat perplexed by these Chinese historical texts, many of which are re-interpreted/translated by non-Chinese, as well as Chinese scholars from disparate geographical, psychological and cultural locations and histories. Unpicking the under-or-overstated words of these narratives, some of which open only to reveal a circuitous form of reasoning that plays tricks with my idea of what is scholarly, or not, has been difficult. This semiological puzzle of immense complexity has been further hindered by my positioning as a researcher and my close friendships with Chen and Yue Wan, and complicated by my struggle to untie my own inner biases, in an effort to interpret the lived events embedded within texts that are subjectively contextualised and asynchronous with my own experiences in Shanghai. So in what manner am I able to fasten together filaments of meaning from these Chinese histories and philosophical writings, stitching them into my own visceral experiences of China and the Chinese? How can research which underpins my quest to create holistic meanings and new knowledge/s expand current thinking on transnational higher education communities? How does delving into fragmented strands of history help to create a way of writing auto-ethnography that has nuanced appreciation for the past, present and possible future events? Asking such questions has helped me to imagine a research approach that allows me to weave in my own experiences,

together with those of my Chinese protagonists, so that what I reveal does not create an essentialist representation of Chinese higher education teaching and learning behaviour and transnational higher education experiences for those of us who are not Chinese.

As my friendship with some of my Chinese associates deepened during those years teaching in Shanghai, so did my trust in them; yet in coming to trust them, I later was faced with a moral dilemma. How was it possible to write about my colleagues and students, people such as Yue Wan who I now counted as one of my closest friends? What if I have interpreted the behaviours of my Chinese protagonists in ways that would not please them or that might do them an injustice? What aspects of their traditional and historical histories have coloured how I perceive them as a race?

Although I explain past experiential phenomena in this thesis from a mainly postmodern position, how will such an eclectic range of interpretations fit with my Chinese protagonists' conceptualisation of Chinese history and philosophy, their own understandings of being Chinese, and test their own understanding of what is genuine research? Does the position I take have the potential to cause offence or undermine our friendship? Chen is dead these past eight years, but my memories bind me still to a sense of loyalty and respect for the person he once was. I have found it not easy as his friend to reveal the darker layers of our relationship and of the country that gave birth to him. Reflecting on these relationships with my Chinese protagonists pressures me to continually examine my own ontological beliefs about the inner self—that partial western self, to question the way I structure the idea of the self—my sense of identity in my writing. This has also made me reflect on the manner in which my Chinese protagonists' conceptions of professional and personal relationships, cultural, social or otherwise, might have been different from mine.

### **The writing self's relationship with history**

It has been an arduous task separating and reconciling the myth promoted in Chinese history and in the general psyche of Chinese contemporary society that China is essentially homogenous in nature with my own personal and professional experiences suggesting the contrary. The desire of the many Chinese people I have

met to continually remind me that they are tied to a four thousand year history, does little to discourage the essentialist representations that I want to refute. Whilst reading about histories that concern themselves with Chinese scholarship, and writing about visceral experience, mine and Chinese others, I have noticed a dismantling of sorts between the boundaries of what is self and what is other that has been difficult at times to comprehend. Stuart Hall describes the ambiguous nature of my positioning in the Shanghai academic community, features of which I write about in chapters two and three, when he writes,

[t]he other is not outside, but also inside the Self, the identity. So identity is a process, identity is a split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the Other to oneself. (1989, 16)

Building on the philosophy of Karl Marx, Hall contends that our relationship with history is part of a dialectical process of formation, and that as a people within history we are continually ensnared in the behaviours and belief systems of those we live amongst (1989, 11). Elizabeth Ermarth argues that the dialectical aspect of history means, that to dwell in historical time, is to dwell within a form that is shaped by the nature of the dialectic, that is one lives in a temporal reality that is shaped by the inscribed fictions of our surroundings (1992, 34). To a non-Chinese like myself I was confused by the lack of symmetry between what I understood from Chinese historical/philosophical texts as Chinese cultural values and appreciation for education with those Chinese I met on a daily basis. I felt conflicted by the desire to reconcile my perceptions of Chinese ideals, with what I was experiencing at the time. Yet, in revealing such disparities that frequently shatter the mythologies that are thought to explain and naturalise Chinese behaviour, how does one avoid causing offence?

Recently I have come to appreciate the ideas of Hall and Ermarth as to how my sense of identity is continually being formed and constrained by my surroundings. I can now appreciate that identity is similar to the writing process, in that I was caught up amongst many becoming and non-becoming selves in search of the most appropriate voice/s to tell our stories, mine and my Chinese protagonists. Although as a writer and researcher I may not always be sensitive to the process, it is a state of affairs that is inherently conditional upon my relationships with others. Through

interrogating my relations with my Chinese colleagues and students I was forced to interrupt my own cultural and personal belief systems and values. Thus I became caught up in the process of revisiting and exploring my own inner truths and constructions of self, past and present. In writing about my life and relationships with the Chinese, a concern evolved around my own understanding of self-identity; through revisiting particular relationships, I became interested in exploring what lay behind my own motivations and responses to particular situations I found myself in.

So how does a postmodern writer like me approach history—what can I take from it to expand my understanding of contemporary Chinese academics and students?

British historiographer Keith Jenkins (1991, 5), suggests that how I read history will be different according to my discipline and the ways in which history is interpreted and understood across time:

[W]e have to understand the past and history are not stitched into each other such that one and only one historical reading of the past is absolutely necessary. The past and history float free of each other, they are ages and miles apart. (Jenkins 1991, 5)

When I talk about the past—history, I am not talking about the same thing. Jenkins' postmodern consideration of the past and history implies that history is narrative—discourse. And similarly, that there is no possibility to close the space that divides reality from discourse (de Certeau 1988, 9). Jenkins' concept of what is history suggests that when I am in the act of reading about the past, in my case a Chinese past involving the life experiences of Chinese literati long dead, what I am really doing is looking at past events through the eyes of an historian; that is I am reading the historians' account, an interpretation of past events, not actual lived experiences per se (Jenkins 1991). I agree with Jenkins and with de Certeau (1988, 8) in that historians, although not physically involved in the actual events that make history, are implicated in the way history is constructed. And, that the act of reassembling past events in the present creates a fiction (de Certeau 1988, 10), that is, history normalises the performance of writing as if what is being written is founded on undeniable truth. For de Certeau history could be comparable to mythology, in that it mixes together belief systems and conventional values in such a way that society is able to comprehend the roots of its own origins (1988, 21). Similarly, Chinese

philosopher and human geographer Tuan Yi-Fu sees this notion of mythology as bringing together two ways of knowing:

[A] fuzzy area of defective knowledge surrounding the empirically known; it frames pragmatic space. In the other [socialised individual] is the spatial component of a worldview, a conception of localized values within which people carry on their practical activities. (1977, 86)

Donald Polkinghorne (1988, 69) also sees history as a form of myth. He advises that the historian works with strands of lived experience that exist already as various strands of elaborated stories within society (Polkinghorne 1988, 69). Contending that tenuous remnants of past events are woven into stories by those who were originally involved in the experience, Polkinghorne believes what the historian does is rework the meanings of these stories to introduce new perspectives. Thus the identification of narrative as an instrument of knowledge-production and meaning-making intimates that the historian does not create stories from past information, but rather writes the stories of the past from their own temporal location (Polkinghorne 1988, 69). Schwartz also alerts me to the dangers of examining Chinese history as a way of explaining the specifics of contemporary Chinese behaviour.

All general statements dealing with categories that embrace vast expanses of time and the lives of millions upon millions of men are at best crude, statistical statements that describe nothing more than predominant tendencies and by no means preclude the existence of contrary phenomena. (1968, 277)

His words remind me that I cannot examine the position of my Chinese colleagues and students within a rigid historical framework, without taking into consideration their positionality, and the contexts that underpin traditional Chinese behaviours and discourses (Schwartz 1972, 79). This is further complicated in that the historian and the people and events s/he is writing about are all intrinsically interwoven in culture. I believe there are no clear-cut boundaries between traditional and non-traditional contexts but rather that the transition between the two is continuous and dynamic. As Brewster argues:

...the very nature of selfhood, not just its context, is historically and culturally conditioned, because selfhood is an historical emergent in a changing world of cultural diversity. (cited in Eakin 1992, 76)

In this sense culture moulds the self, not only in how lives are lived, but how lives are written about in respect to self (Eakin 1992, 88) and other/s. So my dilemma has been trying to understand the Chinese past and yet recognising that although



historians cannot create past events, they do create the various ways history is defined and imbued with meaning (and in China's case a seemingly homogenous conceptualisation of the Chinese as having a long racial legacy that is pure) and that consequently, the past is presented to me through a series of narratives in the form of conversations and stories (de Certeau 1988; Jenkins 1991; Polkinghorne 1988).

Cultures, according to Eakin, have particular styles of emotion (1992, 95). Therefore how can I know, as a non-Chinese, the feelings of a dead people that come from a different cultural and historical time period to mine? If history as a theoretical construct is dependent on other people's sight and speech, then the Chinese past I understand through the historical texts I have been reading is also conditional upon my worldview, my location in the present and my own experiences with the Chinese. Although I am the offspring of my past, I am a being of my own time (Jenkins 1991, 12). Jenkins says that,

[e]pistemology shows we can never really know the past: the gap between the past and history (historiography) is an ontological one. (1991, 19)

From this positioning, the term history is a site of struggle, it represents different things to different people (Jenkins 1991, 18).

Moreover it is not the case that the laws of temporality are fixed and can transcend all historical and cultural dimensions understanding of time; for instance, the histories of the Manchu, Herodotus and Augustine are fundamentally different in terms of culture and methodology (Ermarth 2004, 64–5). So the ways in which I utilise postmodern theory and consequently understand Chinese history as a narrative construction can be very different to the ways Chinese historians and thinkers contemplate their own history. For instance, Chinese philosopher and historian Huang Chun-Chieh (2007) contradicts the postmodernist assertions of historians and philosophers like Jenkins and Ermarth who propose that the past does not exist. Huang views China in its entirety as being synonymous with history and that its people are influencing and being influenced by history (2007, 186). Huang implies that the Chinese people are intricately connected to their history, in that they are the embodiment of their cultural past, that is, to be Chinese is to be in a permanent relationship with history (2007, 184–5). Yet there are other Chinese

scholars who view this relationship with history differently. Liberal scholar and philosopher Wang Fu-chih (1619–92) a critic of the authoritarian governance of the late Ming dynasty and its subsequent decline, believed that,

...the institutions cannot be isolated; there is not only necessity in evolution, but congruence between society and institutions at each stage of this evolution. Thus the old system of local selection and recommendation of civil servants in use during the Han age could no longer be resurrected, because all the conditions which made it viable had disappeared. (Gernet 1996, 500)

Wang Fu-chih's perception of history and how it related to the social world is realised over three hundred years before the ground-breaking structuralist work of Berger and Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality* (1960, 73) in which the authors claimed that all institutions, no matter what form they take, are located in a particular history. Some of my Chinese artist friends affirm Wang Fu-chih's ideas in their persistence in looking for the root of things in their own art practices Tuan (1977, 190) alleges that in countries like Japan and China there is a highly cultivated notion of history. The Chinese, he argues, are renowned worldwide for their devotion to ancestors, maintaining classical archives and paying homage to traditional knowledge. The eastern notion of history, suggests Tuan, is substantially different to that of the western world, particularly from the eighteenth century onwards. He contends that the Chinese people's sense of history is not so much based on myth but rather should be seen as a guideline for enhancing a healthy and virtuous life:

[i]n traditional China the image of an ideal world, in which society conforms to the nature of things, tends to override any sense of history as cumulative change. The constant references to a Golden Age in the past are exhortations to restore harmony to the present in accordance with an idealized model. They call for the return to a former social order and to the rites that sustain it. Their tone is not sentimental or nostalgic. The Chinese do not postulate that the material furnishings of life were more gracious in the past and hence merit the compliment of imitation. What ought to be imitated and perpetuated are the abstract and rather austere rules of social harmony. (Tuan 1977, 190)

But was I aware of this in my colleague's and students' thinking and associated behaviour? My problem in reconciling the tradition with the contemporary reality was exacerbated by the difficulties of comprehending the full extent of four thousand years of Chinese experiences, when they were already past events. As Jenkins (2003, 10–11) argues with humour, the past is wantonly playful in spirit and will offer itself to any of the academic disciplines or professions without a care. The

past can do this because it is not a tangible thing; so once lived it is without physical form, and so can never be owned. Signalling that the past in itself has no meaning apart from that imposed upon by its visitors, or embodied in memories or artefacts or remains, Jenkins insists that those who visit the past as historians come out of the experience with threads of meaning that are partial—fragments of past lives, that they themselves have embroidered; in this way, the past is what the historian makes of it, the historian is part of the embroidered texts s/he creates (Jenkins 2003, 11). Jenkins convinces me that in appreciating that there is no objective reality awaiting within the shadowy fabric of the Chinese past for me to rescue, I have the ability to write about my Chinese protagonists in a manner that is open to interpretation, and as such will not suggest absolute certainties of what it means to be Chinese or non-Chinese.

### **Embroidery as a metaphor for a way of writing and the embodiment of the research performance**

the ritual of sewing is an embodied act  
strand by strand, layer upon layer  
silk floss becomes as arterial blood  
fabric transforms into living flesh  
outpouring of emotion—reflection—passion  
construct multiple varieties of stitches  
creating embroidery that speaks of lived experience

My passion for stitching stretches back to early childhood memories—of sitting on a scrubbed, white stone, doorstep; of warm English summer nights; of chubby little fingers, guided by smooth slender hands, busily stitching dolls' clothes; of chattering to my mother as we wait for father to come home from work. This passion of mine—to sew—to fill between times when studying or working, or through the need to create a personal space when moving to some new country or location, never leaves me. I recognise these performances of stitching as a necessary part of my personal ritual. They comfort and ground me in the present, and yet provide a space for reflection. No matter where I find myself in the world, be it as a

teacher in Shanghai, a wife and mother attempting to create her own place in a community not of her choosing, sailing the Aegean sea in a thirty-four foot yacht around the western coast of Turkey, or here at home in Australia, when I pick up my embroidery or begin sewing, the ritual aspects of the sewing, the meditative rhythm of the needle gliding in and out—in and out—grounds me, creating a sense of personal place. Inner feelings of alienation, disconnection and tension unravel, crafting threads of connection with my immediate surroundings. For me, the practice of embroidery and the construction of a special place for sharing a quiet time are suggestive of meditation, and open up a thread of personal reflection in my writing. As someone who sews and does research I draw parallels between making embroidery and undertaking a research project. Michael Polanyi, a chemist and philosopher, describes learning that is achieved by doing rather than by discussing ‘how to do’ as tacit knowledge; it has to be experienced rather than just talked about (cited in Flannery 2001, 633). Likewise, an embroiderer has to get a feel for how the threads, cloth and design of a potential embroidery come together—it is an experience in itself. Helen Stevens, embroiderer and author, says that in order to interpret a subject one must first acquire a strong body of knowledge (2004a, 7); for interpretation and observation are the central principles of good embroidery (Stevens 2004a, 5).

Getting to know the structure and habits of individual flowers and understanding the ways in which they relate to each other, their surroundings and more importantly from a practical viewpoint, how they best allow realistic interpretation through embroidery. (Stevens 2004b, 5)

Although Stevens is discussing embroidery, it is little different as to how we go about designing and undertaking research. As a social science researcher I look at the personal habits and ritual practices of people, the structures and contexts in which such behaviours are carried out and how they are related to each other. The undertaking of both research and embroidery requires that we make calculated choices, based on knowledge, interpretation and skill, to offer the most believable interpretation. As a skill, embroidery can be considered analogous to conducting research; both require training, discipline, patience, an eye for detail and an ability to interpret the subject of the gaze. This latter aspect is a subjective call. The embroiderer leaves traces of herself in her work, just as an auto-ethnographer weaves aspects of herself with what or whom she is writing about. The work of both

is an embodied performance. Both work through something to reach a completion and then begin all over again. In this way the acquiring and honing of skills is a continuous process.

Research and embroidery designs become more complex as skills and knowledge of the subject matter develops. There is always a sense of something new happening, discovering a particular way of doing things, something to unravel or relearn. Life writer Annie Dillard articulates this act of embodiment in cultivating one's skill:

Only after the writer lets literature shape her can she perhaps shape literature. In working-class France, when an apprentice got hurt, or when he got tired, the experienced workers said, "It is the trade entering his body." The art must enter the body, too. A painter cannot use paint like glue or screws to fasten down the world. The tubes of paint are like fingers; they work only if, inside the painter, the neural pathways are wide and clear to the brain. Cell by cell, molecule by molecule, atom by atom, part of the brain changes physical shape to accommodate and fit paint. (1989, 69)

Applying the metaphor of embroidery, but using experience and words instead of needle and thread, I word-stitch meaning from a glossary of embroidery and sewing terms to create a culturally inclusive site from which I can write. A space where I am able to share ideas, introduce voices and experiences as a way of self learning.

It is through an incident involving embroidery, sometime after the events that unfold in the following chapters, that I began to appreciate that what I thought I knew about teaching and learning in China was somewhat limited, based on my own partial understandings of what had transpired, with no consideration of my own positioning and relationships.



### *The art of embroidery and discourse*

In Autumn 2006, I returned to Shanghai to take up teaching again after a one year break. Anxious to combat the personal isolation I experienced in China after my relationship with Chen had been interrupted by his death, I decided to take up Chinese embroidery, and straight away began to look for a teacher. This was no easy

task. Yue Wan my former co-teacher remarked that it was not typical for educated women in Shanghai to practice embroidery, and that the possibility of finding a teacher who could communicate with me in English was remote. But I continued my search, and after a few weeks, found a young Chinese woman advertising in *What's On*.<sup>4</sup> Qiao Yi, a woman in her mid-twenties from the far north of China, although ambitious like many of her university educated peers, had given up a promising career in contract law within a year of gaining a masters in law from a top ranking university. She had chosen instead to follow her lifelong dream of teaching and selling embroidery. It struck me at the time how different she appeared to my students, how single-mindedly she pursued her dream in spite of the strong possibility that she might never gain financial security.<sup>5</sup>

Qiao Yi proved to be a reasonable teacher, but it was our conversations about university life in Shanghai that gave me new insights into the lives of Chinese university students. I learnt more during my embroidery lessons about the problems of Chinese university students than I had through my own teaching practice. Each week Qiao Yi would come to my apartment, where we would spend three hours together embroidering and chatting. She would tell me about her life as a university student. Qiao Yi spoke at length of how she had suffered from depression since a child, and as a consequence was shunned by both her family and peers, who viewed her character as strange, rather than having a treatable illness. When I asked about the counselling service in the university, she replied that there was a lack of awareness about mental illness in China, and that the university counsellors' usual response was to handout Prozac tablets, which she did not like to take as she said it made her feel lethargic and cut off from her surroundings.<sup>6</sup> Qiao Yi spoke of the difficulties she faced as a postgraduate student, the long hours of study, from early morning until late in the evening, seven days a week, to secure a high grade; the unrelenting pressure from the university to publish articles. According to Qiao Yi it was not uncommon practice for students to download articles from the Internet, cut and paste texts together and present the finished product as their own work. She believed everyone knew it was wrong but it was the only way the students could survive the gruelling workload. Qiao Yi suggested that many of the professors turned a blind eye to it because they felt sorry for the students and were powerless to

change the system. Prior to hearing Qiao Yi's stories I had felt little empathy for any student's behaviour I considered not appropriate, particularly cheating in exams and plagiarism. Listening to Qiao Yi as we stitched at our embroidery gave me an opportunity for reflection. It explained some of the behaviours I experienced with my own students, particularly in the business faculties where workloads appeared to be relentless and competition high.<sup>5</sup> Qiao Yi allowed me to see such issues in a more compassionate light and consider how I might deal with these problems differently. It also suggested to me that much of what I learnt from my students did not occur in the classroom, but rather arose through my intimate relationships and conversations with Chinese friends, such as Qiao Yi.



My research journey, the way I express myself in embroidery terms through my writing, and the metaphors I use to articulate the notion of a cultural novice 'embroidering myself into otherness' (Scott 2011), evolve out of these textured moments with Qiao Yi.

#### *The art of bricolage*

*[T]he bricolage highlights the relationship between a researcher's ways of seeing and the social location of his or her personal history. In this context bricolage with its multiple perspectives is well designed for research into cultural diversity and multicultural concerns.*

—Joe Kincheloe, *Bricolage, and the Quest for Multiple Perspectives: New Approaches to Research in Ethnic Studies*

In taking a cross-disciplinary approach to my handling of theory I extend my usage of embroidery as a metaphor for conducting and writing research as a kind of bricolage; a means of piecing together strands of theory from across a range of different disciplines as a theoretical framing device for writing auto-ethnography in the form of memoir and poetry.

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<sup>5</sup> Chapter four focuses on a cheating incident during my second year of teaching in Shanghai.

### *Loose threads as supplementary footnotes*

*The foot note varies as widely in nature and content as any other complex scientific or technical practice. ... Footnotes moreover, vary in origin as well as style.*

—Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote a Curious History*

*The junctures between analytical, fictive, poetic, narrative, and critical genres will be marked clearly in the text but will cohabit the same volume.*

—Dan Rose, *Living the Ethnographic Life*

The page layout of my thesis is designed so that memoir, poetry and the critically reflexive voice can co-exist side by side on the written page as a way of conveying the complexity of lived experience. In order not to disrupt the sensory flow and polysemic arrangement of my writing I employ conventional footnotes only to alert the reader to a reference or brief aside. For those times when I have more to say but either it interferes with the flow of the narrative or I have insufficient space to expand further, I have appropriated Donna Merwick's unusual reference style from her work *Death of a Notary* (1999). In a section titled 'Notes and Reflections' at the end of her book Merwick elaborates on her research through notes, mini-essays and further references. A decade earlier in 1989 American anthropologist Michael Moffat in his book *Coming of Age in New Jersey* took a similar approach by including his field notes, observations and impressions at the close of each chapter and naming them as 'Further Comments'. My elaborations and addenda 'work basket' is titled 'Loose Threads' and is organised according to chapter and subheadings. Here I will refer to theory from different disciplinary perspectives, draw on threads of conversations from interview transcripts, and on my own reflections to extend the concepts and experiences being discussed in the relevant thesis chapter. The reader will be alerted to "Loose Threads" when they see the thread symbol √ where normally a footnote number would appear.

### **Theoretical strands**

Unlike the expatriate life I led in Dubai, where I had little opportunity to mix with local residents, when I began to teach in the art college and live amongst the local Chinese I encountered firsthand the manner in which race and culture are etched on the outer fabric of our bodies for all to see. No matter how hard I tried to fit in it was



near impossible in Shanghai to escape the racial and cultural legacies of my white Anglo-Saxon past. My awakening, during this research inquiry, to the limitations and privileges of my situation as a foreigner in Shanghai and the continual fluctuations between being perceived as the foreign expert or the unsophisticated foreigner alerted me to the paradoxical nature of difference and to writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Audrey Lorde, bell hooks, Stuart Hall and Trinh T. Min-ha. I found these writers understood what it meant to be marked as different by the colour of one's skin and cultural legacies. Written from personal experience their stories and thoughts showed what it felt like to dwell in the borderlands where nothing was as it seemed. Through comparing their writing and others with my own experiences in China I came to recognise my own position in all of this and to question why this mattered. Unlike in my previous research I now make my position clear—I locate myself in my work as a between-er within an educational and socio/cultural context that frames the professional and personal relations of a foreign teacher and cultural novice.

In border-crossing, writing vulnerably and reflecting on my between status in its various manifestations throughout this auto-ethnographic journey, I am influenced by writings that seek to unravel the boundaries between self and other/s; in doing so they articulate embodied theories, created through lived experience.

*The art of being a vulnerable researcher, between states of being*

Ruth Behar's autobiographical reflections in her research motivate me to look beyond the traditional positioning of an objective self in relation to the researched other; such reflexivity pushes me to examine the physical and psychological borders between myself and my Chinese protagonists. This approach illuminates the paradoxical and vulnerable nature of border-crossings, through which I am continually confronted by my own constructions of identity. Behar infers that although I cross borders, the act of crossing them does not eradicate them, but rather they remain with me wherever I go (2003, 320). Her writing complicates the boundaries between self and other by selecting a position between the observer and the observed—an in-between positioning that makes me just as vulnerable, sometimes more so, than those I am writing about. Through negotiating this in-

between space Behar illustrates the dialectical nature of my relationship as researcher to the Chinese other. Only through the act of knowing myself will I discover things about my Chinese associates, and equally so in my quest to know them, I will discover more things about myself (1996, 30) showing how self and other are 'knottily entangled' (Fine 1994).

In her seminal text *Working the Hyphen* (1994), Michelle Fine explores the relationship between self and other as an expression of boundary crossing, and interrogates the dialogical frameworks of culture and behavioural practices in order to realise human dignity and equality. By 'working the hyphen' Fine persuades me to create braided threads of intercommunication with my Chinese protagonists. In doing so she, like Behar, calls attention to the dialectical nature of the space/border between self and Chinese other/s, a fluid, temporal, between place, rather than an insurmountable boundary between two opposites. Fine believes it is only when the researcher chooses to explore her/his own positionality in the field, and examine the ways in which the balance of power is positioned, that someone like me can begin to untie the insidious nature of western hegemony, and how it shapes both my research and my notions of the Chinese.

Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* (1987/2007) pulls my attention towards the idea of mutable borders that bridge the space between cultures and a way of life that suggests a continual performance of ontological becoming rather than a fixed state of being. Her work describes border-crossings where people are always betwixt things and in the process of change, an in-between or hybrid positioning. Her writing beckons me to negate any dualist tendencies I might hold, to examine the borders between my English-Australian cultures and that of the Chinese as sites of non-dual aspects of difference rather than looking for general patterns of behaviour to define binary opposites.

In writing about inclusion and contradiction, Claudio Moreira asks the question who is the Other? His work shows me that everyday life is not orderly but messy and complex and that I need to pay particular attention to this realisation in my own

work. Through auto-ethnography as performance, Moreira undermines the scholarly pursuit of replicating history and lived experience as whole and complete in themselves. He argues that his lived experiences come back to him in various ways, they appear in bits and pieces, through conversations with others and recollections. Recognising that the only thing about experience that has a sense of wholeness is the physicality of his body, Moreira argues that this is paradoxical; his body cannot perform wholeness but rather creates a translation of lived experiences as a series of fragments (2008, 682).

Locating himself in opposition to the scholarly voice that excludes the language of others, Moreira asks for a communication that is more inclusive as a means of clarification, and that we improve our understanding of the other. He suggests that it is not about polishing and changing the other into the model of an academic. Rather it is about generating a discourse where by visceral and culturally produced epistemologies are valued and given the respect they deserve (Diversi and Moreira 2009). Moreira's work inspires me to engage with theory as lived experience and not just as words on a page; to tell theory like a story in order to articulate my own development of ideas and why this matters. His work shows me how theory evolves through those things that engage my passion for discovery.

Ien Ang's writing warns me about the myth that the borderlands, the third space, the between space, is a space for liberation in which all voices are able to speak (2001, 166). She argues that although this space has the potential to be a platform for political empowerment and intercultural nourishment, it is a place of knotty entanglement where engagement is difficult. Ang warns me of the possibility that I may not be able to always capture the essence of how things are in China. One of the central issues in writing about intercultural spaces, she says, is that particular spatial concepts, such as border-crossing, are employed but have been stripped of their historical roots, and thus the meaning has become abstract rather than specific. Thus the dilemma for an auto-ethnographer such as me is: how can I interact and make meaning from my exchanges with my Chinese protagonists in a world that is heterogeneous in nature? In what ways does this inform cultural theory (Ang 2001, 166)? How can I move beyond the metaphor of borderland in such cultural contexts?

How do I unravel the ways in which Behar, Anzaldúa and Moreira's experiences of the borderlands are both different from and similar to my own experiences on the Chinese border? How does their positionality situate them on the border and how does mine situate me? Are the differences bridgeable or are they entirely different in colour and sense? Ang advises that sometimes there is no answer to such questions, sometimes connection is not possible. She infers that sometimes the actual experience of difference means that communication cannot be achieved, for the borderlands is not a romantic utopian space but can be a site of blood, sweat and tears. Ang believes that what is important is the ways in which we, as in you and I, or I and other, share and do not share the same experiences and understanding of events or things such as identity and culture (2001, 176).

*The foreigner, the ambiguous, ambivalent nature of difference and being different*

Social theorist Zygmunt Bauman sees foreigners as different from strangers, in that the former are free agents and are free to go wherever they please, whereas strangers are transient, always on the move, never permanent (1991, 79). Features of his theory concerning the ambiguity and ambivalence of strangers in *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991) complement the conceptualisations I am sewing together to embroider my own research bricolage; specifically, the paradoxical and ambivalent nature of difference, the mutability of borders and the idea of being continually between things. In rethinking Bauman's work, I supplant his use of the word stranger with my chosen term foreigner, accommodating his theory to suit my own theoretical need. Bauman (53–57) argues that it is the illusion of social classification to know who we are, a dualist system that organises and disguises the chaotic nature of the real world which creates the problem. In a social system which is dependent on organising society into insider or outsider groups to determine who is friend or foe, he claims this leaves zero space for those we have no knowledge of—the stranger (foreigner). In the absence of knowledge, the foreigner not only defies social classification, but also, there is no ability to determine where they sit as insider or outsider. Rather, they are always positioned between the two, neither one thing nor the other (Bauman 1991, 53–57). Sharing history with the social world they find themselves in, Bauman argues that such individuals question the inner social group's historical roots of existence; the foreigner highlights the possibility of chaos. The problem then becomes how to move forward when there is no shared

understanding of meaning between my various Chinese protagonists and me. The nature of the border-lands is not a place, according to Ang (2001, 169), where people can talk freely. She claims it is a contested zone where people negotiate their ability to communicate with others according to their position, and that such a process does not guarantee a successful outcome (Ang 2001, 169). Thus, the necessity to classify the foreigner as friend or foe becomes highly relevant in order to secure the stability of the group (Bauman 1991, 59). The inability to predict where I or my Chinese colleagues stand describes many aspects of my own experiences in China. By drawing on Bauman's social theory I am able to explain how, as the foreign teacher my presence might have threatened or disturbed the social order of my Chinese colleagues and students (1991, 56) and how my status as insider or outsider was a contentious issue.

The writings of Trinh T. Min-ha and Stuart Hall complement Bauman's theory concerning the stranger (foreigner) in their conceptualisation of outsider/insider positions as being unstable and subject to shifting. Their theories inform my imagination and help me to visualise and untangle the complicated nature of my own situation as the foreigner within the Chinese academic community. In appropriating Trinh's (1989) ideas on being the special one and the token foreigner as both the authentic and inauthentic professional, I am able to relate this to my own experiences and conceive partial explanations of what I saw in my Chinese colleagues as contradictory behaviours, and how their attitudes and behaviours towards me were inconsistent and not easy to predict. Trinh's (2011, 54) comment that '[l]iving at the borders means that one constantly treads the fine line between positioning and de-positioning' alerts me to the delicacy of my marginal situation in my first teaching position in the art college. Having to continually weave my way between the positions of belonging and not belonging complicated my ability to sustain good working relationships with my colleagues and students.

As I have experienced diverse lifestyles in England, Australia, the United Arab Emirates and China, like Hall (1993, 135) I have learned to live with feelings of displacement and the idea that one is different. Yet, as I mentioned earlier, it was not until I began to reflect back on my experiences in China that I began to understand

the nature of difference and how it works. My experiences, which shaped my uniqueness as a person like everyone else who is more than the sum of their parts, reflects the paradoxical nature of my positioning as a foreigner in China. Hall (1991, 57) affirms my belief; he argues that the dilemma of difference is wrapped up in one's personal uniqueness; even though people's identities are situated, intricately orchestrated and historically pieced together, they cannot be fixed. Rather, each person is subject to shape shifting by a whole range of external economic and socio/political factors which can be expressed in numerous behaviours and senses of being. All people, he claims, consist of not one but of a multitude of social identities, that can position them in multiple ways at the margins of society and in inferior positions, but how this occurs for each of us is not the same (1991, 57). People are not 'cultural idiots'; if they engage in something it is because there is a connection that binds them together without disrupting their differences (Hall 1991, 57-58). Chinese people know where they come from. They know their ancestral roots, their status in society and their communities. The Chinese know the manner in which they are different but they do not know how I, 'Joy', a non-Chinese, am different; hence my dilemma. In *The Spectacle of the Other* (1997) Hall explains that difference has an ambivalent nature; it is essential to determine cultural meaning and yet at the same time it is treacherous. He contends that difference is relational in that it is reliant on differences between opposites to make meaning; a dual relationship which simplifies phenomena that are anything but simple (1997, 235), and it is not easy to overcome what one has been classified to be. By revealing the differences in one's ethnicity and race, the body of the other becomes marked as different and that notions of these differences, as they are interpreted by mainstream society, articulate the ways difference is represented (and by this I also include negotiated) in mainstream society (Hall 1997, 230).

Hall's theories, along with Bauman's and Trinh's, help me to untangle the paradoxical nature of my relationships with the Chinese. In doing so they highlight for me the significance of interrogating one's own positionality and relationships in cross-cultural research, and provide me with the theoretical tools to negate essentialist representations of self and other/s in my writing. My response to the issues of difference and its ambivalent characteristics is to write imaginatively in a

manner that is able to articulate the sensory movements and tensions of living in Chinese society as a socio/cultural other.

*The threads that bind us—power and resistance*

My work foregrounds the nature of my relationships with the Chinese. Specifically, it examines the power relationships between myself and my Chinese colleagues, students and the organisational structure of the Chinese tertiary system. It is not just a matter of writing about my professional and personal relationships with Chen and my other Chinese protagonists, rather it concerns how these relationships, which I frequently perceived as oppositional, were constituted within the Chinese university community. To grasp the varied and complex nature of these power relationships I borrow from Foucault and de Certeau's respective theories pertaining to the nature of power and tactical resistance.

Power, argues Foucault (1982), homogenises human behaviour, it creates a sense of normality. Describing power as relational, as a set of interactions that play off one another, he contends that the use of power is concerned not only with the nature of relationships between allies, person/s or groups but also the manner in which particular activities moderate others. A power relationship, Foucault suggests, is constituted by the existence of two basic principles; first, that the subject being acted upon is understood as a free agent, continually disposed to being in action, and second, that when confronted with a 'relationship of power', a network of effects and possibilities are invoked (1982, 787–789). Foucault (1988, 2) sees it as a consequence of an unequal relationship in that one party exercises power over the other, and the other knowingly or not permits this to occur. As such he claims that power is not necessarily exploitive, it can take various forms, some of which are transparent, and although unequal, he believes power relations are reversible. Claiming that power relations are not naturally repressive, he suggests that organisational structures in contemporary society are designed to immobilise power relations and maintain equilibrium to ensure that some individuals gain social, political, economic and or institutional advantages over others (1988, 2–3). Every power relationship, according to Foucault, is a site of struggle and instability (1982, 794).

I draw on de Certeau's (1984/1988) theory of tactical resistance, the 'art of making do', as a means of exploring what Foucault perceives as the reverse nature of power. Tactical resistance enables me to see how my Chinese colleagues and students had personal agency and were not victims of circumstance. Situated as they were in a highly regulated system of governance, staff and students, at a cursory glance appeared to be conforming to or appropriating the rigid policies set by the university and the Chinese Ministry of Education. Yet through passive compliance and other tactical resistance behaviours, I suggest that staff and students covertly maintained their own principles, values and personal agendas.

By exploring the professional and personal layers of my relations with the Chinese I show how people with seemingly little power are complicit in particular kinds of tactical behaviour to manipulate and subvert relations of power to fulfil their own needs. Such complicity, de Certeau (1984/1988) believes, is constructed out of the art of living in a space not of one's own choosing; people become complicit in particular kinds of behaviour to serve their own needs, a situation which is dependent on the ability to understand your opponent and to use tactics to counter your opponent's move. Although it is impossible to operate 'outside' power, this does not suggest that people are confined and predestined to lose regardless of their situation (Foucault 1980, 142). Tactics is a political tool. It is the employment of particular kinds of diversionary behaviour through one's knowledge of a system and how things are, and used to control and disguise what is really going on. de Certeau says '[t]he space of the tactic is the space of the other. ... In short a tactic is an art of the weak' (1984/1988, 37). Tactical devices according to de Certeau are a mode of behaviour that does not openly challenge the highly visible structures by which power is constrained; rather tactical devices are of the moment. They are undertaken by the collective or the individual, and are opportunist, invisible and involve deception to obtain what they need (de Certeau 1984/1988). In my quest for a more emphatic and genuine reading of higher education intercultural relationships, I make use of de Certeau's 'art of making do' and Foucault's conceptualisation of power relationships to illustrate the details of the irregular and unpredictable rhythms of my everyday affairs with the Chinese.



## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that the use of evocative and vulnerable auto-ethnography is an appropriate research methodology for portraying the relational I, and for illustrating the vulnerable nature of my positioning as a non-Chinese teacher inside the Chinese academic community. I have explained how memoir as an instrument for writing auto-ethnography can reveal some of the ambiguities and irregularities of working and living in Shanghai as a foreign professional. In representing the voice/s of my Chinese protagonists I have discussed my use of poetry as a provocative rhetorical instrument that is capable of disrupting a more essentialist representation of Chinese teachers and students. I also explain my use of embroidery as a metaphor for conducting and writing my research. In questioning my postmodern position within this thesis, I consider how my knowledge of Chinese history may shape my writing and understanding of my Chinese protagonists. Taking a cross disciplinary approach, I have introduced those theorists that have contributed significantly to my work in relation to border-crossing and betweenness positioning, the paradoxical nature of difference, the ambivalence of foreigners and notions of power and resistance.

In the following chapter I foreground my positioning inside the Chinese academic community as both foreign teacher and international arts manager. I do this by exploring some of my personal and professional motivations for taking up a teaching position in China. Here I also begin to interrogate my professional relationships with various Chinese colleagues to highlight the ambivalent nature of my status and the paradoxical characteristics of difference.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Ambivalent Foreigner

#### Attempting to understand the other that is not me

in opening myself to your gaze  
interrogating my interpretations of your interpretations  
unpacking my words about your words  
revealing my own inner biases and prejudices  
my arrogance lies cracked open  
my vulnerability spills bleeds

But!

Although...

I still might...

never see as you see

feel as you feel

endure as you endure

at least

I will have tried

## Preface

My intention in this chapter is to reveal unique experiences of my 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 university teacher and be recognised as different. I explore my position as a foreigner in its many guises; I show how I work both with and against the grain of being the foreigner, a complicated persona that is both limiting and deceiving (Trinh 1989, 85). I take my cue from Stuart Hall’s understanding of difference, in particular, the paradox of difference in *The Spectacle of the Other* (1997); here he explains that although being able to recognise and classify the differences between socio/cultural groups is essential to establishing meaning, the nature of difference between individuals creates meanings that are fundamentally ambiguous. I draw on Zygmunt Bauman’s social theory in *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991) pertaining to the ambivalence of strangers (a term I claim as referring to foreigners) and their ability to disrupt the conceptual stability of the insider’s world. To complement and extend Hall and Bauman’s perspectives on difference I appropriate Trinh Min-Ha’s interpretation of the special one, the token foreigner, in *Woman, Native, Other* (1989). Within this conceptual frame, I work together memoir, poetry and a Chinese chorus to interrogate the notion of foreignness and show the complications and ambiguities that arise when one operates in a foreign culture with a misguided and naïve understanding of one’s own specialness.<sup>6</sup>

My narrative, although situated within the Chinese academic community, is woven together from strands of personal experience and histories that were shaped by and directly tied to three cultures: England, Australia and China. England was my ancestral birthplace and my home until I was twenty-three; Australia was the place I migrated to as a single parent in search of a better life for my six-year-old son and myself; and China was a stepping stone to new beginnings and the possibility of inventing the self I thought I wanted to be. I make no claim that what is revealed in

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<sup>6</sup> The Chinese chorus consists of threads of dialogue mixed and worked together from my interview transcripts with Chinese students and teachers, as explained in Chapter One. Together they produce a collective voice that expresses their understandings and experiences of foreign teachers. Although the words are theirs, the poetic arrangement and the contexts in which they speak are mine.

my research is uniquely representative of any of these cultures. Australian feminist and academic Carmen Luke (1994) reveals her own personal histories and socio/cultural/geographical locations as a child of an immigrant family in Canada in the 1950s, and her interracial marriage, to position herself, her research and writing. Taking a similar approach, I write about people, events and places as a way to position myself in my research; that is, my experience of being the foreigner is a relational one that reveals as much about myself and my limitations and misconceptions, and about the ambiguities of intercultural encounters, as it does about the culture of my hosts.<sup>7</sup> As a performance that seeks to reconcile my between states, my narrative is continually open to interpretation and thus is not meant to be read as ‘a passive reflection of reality’ (Trinh 1991, 13). My rationale for using memoir is akin to that of bell hooks, in that I do not intend to accurately recreate my experiences in Shanghai as a foreigner, but rather to capture and make visible my ‘state of mind, the spirit of a particular moment’ (hooks 1998, 431). As hooks explains, the compulsion to tell a story and the desire to rediscover one’s past is both a liberating act and a visceral experience. From this perspective, memoir becomes a conduit for acknowledging how past experiences, although no longer physically connected to one’s life, continue to instruct and mould the present as living memories (hooks 1998, 431).

In these pages, I reveal an elaborate lacework of vulnerable selves, all of which represent the way I as a human being, professional and foreigner attempt to situate myself in the Chinese academic community. Although this reality is stitched together from lived events that involve real Chinese people, it is a hybrid reality embroidered by a foreign hand. Here you will discover a self who holds the naïve opinion that she is bringing her expertise to China in order to teach her Chinese students and colleagues how things ought to be done; a self who arrives with the perception of herself as the special other, the foreign expert who brings international status and professional knowledge to the Chinese university; a self who does not always carefully consider the ways how, with her Chinese protagonists she re-enacts

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<sup>7</sup> See also McCorkel and Myers (2003, 200) whose aim in their research was to understand how the politics of identity are actively engaged in how we make meaning within the context and act of discovery, as white, middleclass heterosexual women. The authors focus on how their positions within society influence the framework and character of their research.

her experientially, psychically and culturally engrained behaviour in teaching and relating to others. A self who works hard to meet other's expectations, without stopping to think if they are realistic or not; a self who uses her relational powers to get what she wants; and a self who is a foreigner, who is not able to live up to the expectations of others and self. I show how my many selves do not remain constant, but rather are in a continual state of change, as she (multiple I's) interrogates her angst, passion, faith, professionalism, morality, judgment and lack thereof. The fabric of a life lived that holds these strands of writing together is vulnerable to shape shifting, because:

To write vulnerably is to open a Pandora's box. Who can say what will come flying out? (Behar 1996, 19)



### **Anchoring my position: A beginning of sorts...**

On an autumn morning, in early April 2003, I received a letter from Chen offering me a one-year teaching position to develop and coordinate an arts management course for his art college. At the age of forty-nine, without partner, nor young children to monopolise my emotions, energy or time, I sat, ready to border-cross yet another convoluted chain of geographical, psychological and cultural spaces, in pursuit of new beginnings, but one that for the first time I would undertake alone.

*come—foreigner from far away*

*enter our open door*

*step forward foreigner*

For much of the previous four years, I had become an expert at juggling many selves. Freelancing as a visual arts consultant for a local fine arts college in Shanghai, I border-crossed between Australia and China, piecing together the material of work and life, as I stretched, pinned, basted and backstitched together art exhibitions, artist residencies, academic visits and cultural exchanges. As well as this, I was working on my masters thesis, an inquiry into the impact of cultural values on arts management practices in China. The pace I set myself was demanding but energising. I blossomed professionally, enjoying what I was doing and the

recognition I was achieving. Having come to academia late in life, I saw China as an open door of opportunity. While I loved being involved in Perth's local arts scene, the lack of secure employment and financial independence was inwardly troubling; the hours spent writing grant and sponsorship applications to fund my projects and provide a minute income were becoming burdensome, especially as the pool of potential money grew less and the competition intensified. From discussions with my Chinese artist friends, where we bemoaned the organisational complexity and inefficiency of many Chinese arts establishments, it was becoming apparent to me that Chinese universities in the major cities like Shanghai and Beijing were in need of western professionals like me. The Vice President of the art college, Professor Zhou, had himself identified this gap and was keen to incorporate arts management in the college's curriculum. On an earlier occasion, I was asked by Chen and Professor Zhou to investigate the possibility of a local university in Perth designing and delivering a short, intensive arts management training module for twenty or so of the college's art history students. However, in the end it had proved to be too difficult.

At the time I attributed this to incompatible agendas; the university in Perth had built a successful program, and to ensure that it continued that way they required students who could easily adapt to their program to ensure a beneficial outcome for students and the university. Although the university provided extra language support to facilitate the gaps in the students' comprehension and ability to adopt specialist terminology and disciplinary theory, it still insisted on a reasonably solid grasp of English in reading, writing and speaking from participating students, English language competencies that the majority of the college's art students did not possess. Professor Zhou's wishes, according to Chen, were twofold: he wanted his students to have the opportunity of travelling overseas; and he was dedicated to raising the national and international profile of his college. He did not appear to think his students' lack of English was a problem, as if the experience of being in a foreign country was more important than the ability to communicate effectively. When an Australian university in the Eastern states offered a similar program and waived the English requirements, Professor Zhou began to look favourably on them as a more appropriate course provider. When Chen told me I was shocked; I had

raised my concerns at the time with Professor Zhou, but they had fallen on deaf ears.



In this and the following chapters I will return again and again to a key motif of this thesis: that cultural relations are messily complex. As Elizabeth Wheatley writes, ‘knowledge, in the postmodernist perspective, is always situated, partial, contingent, and interpretative’ (1994, 408). By highlighting how my public and private selves and my relations with self and other are continually crossing and interrupting each other, I foreground the complexity of my journey as a foreign teacher across territories known and unknown.



The timing to begin a new career in China seemed right. Yet there was another reason I wanted to make this life change. It was not just about career. As a mature woman, I detested the way I felt invisible inside my own culture. Although I was gaining a solid reputation and being applauded for my entrepreneurial activities between the Chinese and Western Australian arts communities, when it came to getting a permanent position, things were not so favourable. Of the many arts management positions I was interviewed for, it was the younger professionals who usually got the job. During one interview, the two interviewers, who were a good twenty years younger than myself, asked, with serious faces, if I could give them any tips as to how they might manage an older staff member such as myself. I knew no matter how strong my experience or impressive my resumé, they would not be asking me back for a second interview. Such experiences for me were the norm rather than the exception. Perth’s art institutions seemed to be increasingly obsessed with youth, paper qualifications and one’s physical appearance, and less concerned with real hands-on experience; this left women like me with no place to go. I felt old, powerless, redundant, hung out to dry like a sexless sack, with no appealing prospects.

I am still uncertain whether my state of mind was self-induced. I now ask myself, were such feelings more intense because of my personal situation? I was recently divorced, and with both my sons having reached adulthood, perhaps I was experiencing empty nest syndrome; or, was it my North of England working-class heritage, whose voice constantly shadowed me with ‘know thy place’ at every opportunity, whenever I attempted to stretch myself or reach out for something more challenging. Or perhaps I felt out of place because of the adoration of youth, which has evolved from the colonial history of Western Australia. I suspect that all these elements were responsible for my anxious state of mind. I felt helpless—unable to escape the cultural and psychological legacies of my past. Lurking beneath the surface I had this nagging doubt that in my own country I was not good enough. A radical change of direction seemed my only course of action. Perhaps this is why other western middle-aged women pack up and go off to teach or study in distant locations? A need to be valued, to feel we are contributing something of worth to modern society; to make sense of our lived experiences, whether they be positive or negative ones. What the hell did it all mean? Was I at that time so different from other women my age? I think not. On the other hand, in Shanghai, I had come to see myself as different, but in a way that I interpreted as special, exotic, intelligent and appreciated.<sup>8</sup> I had awakened to the realisation that this could be my last chance, to find fulfilment, to finish what I had started when I had first migrated to Western Australia twenty-six years before as a young single mother. The desire to change my situation, at any cost, be it at the expense of my family or person, did not deter me. I was darting about on blind faith with no thought of the consequences. Nearly a decade later, I see a desperate woman struggling to claim her voice, her dignity; a woman who had embroidered for herself a complicated set of agendas.

*come be our teacher*

*upward standing foreigner*

*come be our EXPERT...*



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<sup>8</sup> The idea of the exotic in one’s relationships is explored in the next chapter.



Although the actual shape and intensity of my inner turmoil and feelings of displacement on entering China were unique to me, I argue that no one is free of emotional baggage or a particular agenda; that wherever we are, inside our own culture or not, such things impact upon our lives and disrupt and influence the ways we relate to people and situations. What I am drawing attention to is the idea that, in order to appreciate differences and how they are played out within an intercultural teaching/learning setting, one's first response should not be to look for the differences in the cultural other, but rather to first acknowledge the differences within one's self.<sup>9</sup> In the years working with Chen and Professor Zhou and in the early months of working and living in Shanghai, I was unaware of the need to be reflexive. I did not consider how my foreign status in the college might disrupt the lives of those around me; I was too intent on examining my colleagues' and students' behaviour and how their responses affected my work, my person, my world, and did not reflect on how I was reacting to them and the situations I found myself in. Nor, eager as I was to get myself into the college, did I give much attention to the consequences of Chen's actions in repackaging me in a form that his superiors would find professionally appropriate and desirable.<sup>10</sup>



That April morning I read Chen's invitation letter repeatedly. His words looked up at me, so verbose, circuitous and flowery; they appeared so unlike the cheerful, pragmatic and down to earth 'Mr Fix it' Chen I knew. Trust him to go way over the top, I thought...

Dear Ms. Scott

On behalf of our university... it is with our deepest  
pleasure... that we invite you, a profound and  
esteemed scholar...

Inwardly I chuckled at the idea that Chen really had pulled it off; he had as promised—fixed it. A blush of pride stained my cheeks. Inside my own skin, I felt

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<sup>9</sup> Acknowledging differences within oneself is discussed in chapter five.

<sup>10</sup> The consequences of Chen's actions unfold in the following chapter.

redeemed, recognised, respected. At last, I thought, I am being rewarded for the long hours with little pay and continuous drama. All those stressful, tortuous, intercultural and managerial somersaults that Chen and I had performed to organise Chinese and western academics alike in the name of academic/cultural exchange, my frayed nerves and sleepless nights, now seemed worthwhile. No more arguing with Chinese customs and excise staff, because they had no comprehension of western deadlines, and my need to plan things to the exact detail or millisecond. An end to misunderstandings with Chen; for instance, when we were coordinating the freight of forty-five Chinese art works into Western Australia for an exhibition. I had constantly repeated to Chen the mantra, ‘No wood—no wood—no wood’, only to find Perth quarantine officers breathing down my neck, not because there were wooden objects in the exhibition freight cases, which of course there were, but because the freight containers themselves were built from pieces of old scrap wood.

*over here foreigner*

*inside the Forbidden City*

*come—this is the way*

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...

*welcome to China foreigner*

*we trust you foreigner*

*we bow to your EXPERTISE...*



Have I set myself an impossible task? For what it means to be a foreign teacher, a so-called expert, cannot be translated into a sanitised collection of meanings that can replicate all that there is to know or needs to be known. As Stuart Hall (1997, 228) writes, ‘Meaning “floats.” It cannot be finally fixed’, and as Iain Chambers writes:

Here nothing is fixed, our analyses are constantly forced to change focus and attention. There are no unambiguous positions that are eternally true, but shifting constellations of meaning, identities, openings and possibilities. Such an enframing of our lives requires analyses attentive to the different histories, nuances and narratives that combine in making up our present. (1993, 192–3)

Here, I meet this challenge by drawing on 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, 24). I fuse this with Patty Sotirin's call for 'radical specificity', a way of writing 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, 4). Thus, I write memoir to reveal the complexity of my lived experiences with my Chinese protagonists during particular moments in time. The specificity of these moments and relations entwine as threads of embodied theory (Kondo 1990, 24) that enable me to word-stitch a representation of my foreignness in China as a non-Chinese professional. The notion of foreignness itself is a complicated business. At the border, in that between space where people unfamiliar with each other meet, there manifests an exaggerated response to those who are the most dissimilar—the foreigner who, by their appearance, is marked by the paradox of difference, both friend and foe (Trinh 2011, 1). And, as Bauman writes:

The stranger [foreigner] is, indeed, someone who refuses to remain confined to the 'far away' land or go away from our own and hence a priori defies the easy expedient of spatial or temporal segregation. The stranger [foreigner] comes into the life-world and settles here, and so – unlike the case of mere 'unfamiliar' – it becomes *relevant* whether he [foreigner] is friend or foe. (1991, 60) [my emphasis]

My presence caused uncertainty amongst my Chinese colleagues; it was unclear as to how I would fit within the social networks of the college, where or with whom, besides Chen, I would align myself politically; I was an unknown entity whose professional and relational agendas were not transparent to those around me. As I pull apart the cultural and professional assumptions placed upon me by my Chinese protagonists and myself in this and the following chapters, I uncover the visible and invisible layers that frame me as the foreign expert, a privileged positioning that appears tolerated, as long as I abide by and do not challenge the rules of the game (Trinh 1989, 87).



### **A lack of connecting threads**

From when I received my invitation letter to teach in the art college, little had materialised according to plan; or, to be more honest, according to *my* plan. For the three months prior to moving to Shanghai, I had worked solidly, putting together an arts management unit for the college's postgraduate art history students. I had already met my designated co-teacher, Ms Feng Hong, on a visit to Shanghai some six months earlier, when I had been co-managing a Western Australian contemporary visual arts exhibition in collaboration with the college. So, eager to make a good impression, and show off my expertise, I was constantly e-mailing Feng Hong, asking questions about the students. How would my unit relate to their other subjects? Should I be more practical or theoretical in my approach? What were the needs of the students? Did any of them have any experience in the arts sector? So many questions asked... However, Feng Hong's responses were frequently too vague for my liking. She never said no or yes to my questions, but rather was non-committal. Not being friends with her or having the same easy rapport as I had with Chen, I found the constant gaps in our communication frustrating. I felt uncomfortable working with so little information. But needing to get things happening if I was to realise my ambitions, I made the foolish assumption that anything I did would be fine.

I didn't consider the implications of working from personal assumptions, such were my desire and haste to be teaching in the art college. Not for a moment did I consider that the reason why Chen and I communicated together so well was Chen's wealth of experience working with international academics and arts professionals; something that Feng Hong, as a young and recent masters graduate of the college, did not have. Being exposed to so many different forms of professional behaviour and practices meant that Chen had acquired a confidence that enabled him to cope more easily with my obsession for deadlines and details. In turn I had adapted to his way of doing things, and felt secure in our working relationship. Although Chen and I in the past had not always agreed with each other, we had always managed to work

through our differences by talking and building on our shared sense of humour. I realise now that there was also another very important reason why our working relationship survived its ups and downs. Chen and I benefited significantly both professionally and personally from our working together; our professional reputations as cross-cultural project managers in academia were growing; we had begun to develop strong networks in the international academic/arts communities, and we were each travelling to exotic locations. Our working relationship was very much one in which there was mutual respect and a shared benefit. I should have reflected on these things; I should have realised that the uniqueness and closeness of my alliance with Chen had the potential to disrupt the college's inner social life; I should have prepared myself better; I did not.



Unravelling the complexity and the differences in my relationships with Chen and my other Chinese protagonists are an important strand of my work. My aim is to focus the reader's attention on the idea that being inside or outside, being the foreigner, is not just a matter of cultural difference; it is more than this, it is about the relationships between people (like Chen, Feng Hong and other Chinese colleagues) that position oneself with or apart from them, making it nearly impossible to determine exactly where one stands. I am concerned as to how my Chinese colleagues were 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 memoir unfolds to reveal not only my own feelings of displacement within my intercultural relationships, but, as mentioned earlier, how my presence as the foreigner disturbs the social reality of my Chinese protagonists. As Bauman suggests, the foreigner 'disrupts the spatial ordering of the world. ... disturbs the resonance between physical and psychical distance: ... is physically close while remaining spiritually remote' (1991, 61).

I reiterate my central point: if one undertakes a reflexive approach and

acknowledges the differences within one's self, this is a starting point for unpicking the complexities of one's relationships with others. This includes paying attention to one's communication slippages with colleagues and students, and not allowing oneself to fill such slippages with assumptions.



Having faith in my relationship with Chen, I assumed that whatever I did would be more than acceptable with Feng Hong; after all, I was the professional in this relationship, wasn't I? I designed the unit as a series of twenty-four three-hour classes that would run four times a week for six weeks. I e-mailed Feng Hong my program outline; when I received the usual vague response, I again assumed the unit was acceptable. Naively I continued on, producing a large body of support materials, in the form of detailed teaching plans, instruction/task sheets, student handouts and project management document templates for each of the classes. In my mind it was an impressive piece of work, of which I felt deservedly proud.

The one thing that Feng Hong was specific about was the need for reading materials on current arts management theory. I expressed concern that the students' level of English might not be strong enough to cope with the business theory and jargon in such texts, and that they might not be culturally appropriate. However, Feng Hong assured me the students' needs were urgent, and that organising translation into Mandarin would not be a problem. I was not convinced, but wanting to please Feng Hong, and impress on her my knowledge of such things (there goes that need to be admired again). I put together a set of articles that I considered to be relevant to my unit yet not theoretically dense. I copied them to CD and had them couriered to Chen a month before my arrival. I should have paid more attention to things said and not said in my communication with Feng Hong in order to appreciate our differences; but I had not yet developed the imagination to see much beyond my own assumptions and needs.



I have said that it takes imagination to be aware of the ways difference is played out. As Gloria Anzaldúa explains, to be able to change how we teach people culturally different to ourselves, we should begin by engaging ourselves in the performance of imagination (1987/2007, 109). To cut through what I see as the limitations of my own imagination at that time, I confront and compare the attitudes and feelings to my approaching appointment that I held just prior to living in China and the ways I experienced my existence once I was there. By tearing apart and exploring the cultural and psychological fuzziness of my in-between positioning, all too easily ensnared in the stereotypical trappings of east versus west, in this and the following chapter I cast a shadow over the whole notion of foreignness. Thus I seek to extend the boundaries of my reader's imagination and perception, as I have my own, and highlight the kinds of relational activities, behaviours and communication slippages that might be occurring in the fringes and centres of higher education intercultural teaching and learning situations in China. In so doing, my study will illustrate how our success or failure as professionals is intimately tied to our relationships with others.



### **Not living up to expectations: Life as a site of struggle**

The first semester of eight weeks was a disaster.

I departed Perth for Shanghai in late August, a week before semester was due to start. The day after my arrival, Chen arranged for me to meet informally with the Dean of the art history department Professor Wu, and Feng Hong; we made some small talk about my unit, but nothing was mentioned as to when my classes would begin, and feeling uncomfortable I did not ask. Having never taught before in a university, I did not know what was expected of me. I decided the best approach was to cultivate a regular work routine; so every day I went to the staff office, shared by Professor Wu and other academics within the art history department, and continued working on my unit or masters research. The staff frequently laughed and talked amongst themselves, yet while they were highly polite, there was no attempt to engage in conversation with me. On rare occasions, Professor Wu invited me to join

him, Feng Hong and a few other colleagues for lunch in one of the many restaurants on campus. Ordinarily, though, I would dine with Wei Wei, a young woman from the administration office whom I had befriended on earlier visits when, as a fine arts Masters student, she had acted as my personal assistant and chaperone. I would frequently see Chen at lunch with his colleagues but never did he ask me to join him. I thought this behaviour strange at first, as on earlier visits it was customary for us to lunch together. After this occurred a few times I started to get the impression that Chen was encouraging me to find my own place in the college, and that it was not appropriate for him to be seen favouring me as a special friend amongst his foreign affairs colleagues, now that I was an employee of the college. I never told him I felt a little uncomfortable with this change in our public relationship on campus, and he never explained his behaviour.

The first week of the semester came and went, but I had no word from Feng Hong as to when my classes would commence. Feeling a little insecure, I spoke to Chen about this; he advised me not to worry, to take things easy, there was no great rush. A few more days went by, but still no word about my teaching. Then, quite suddenly, Professor Wu informed me 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. Neither could I 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. In my dealings with Chen and Professor Zhou I was always given an opportunity to have my say. I took it for granted that my opinions mattered. Therefore, the decision to move the other teacher and me out of the main office without first consulting us took me by surprise. In hindsight, what I failed to understand was that my status had changed; I was no longer Joy the arts management expert, a visiting professional, but Joy the teacher, an employee. And, although my relationship with Chen created a gateway for me to enter the college as a professional, a teacher with some status, what I was forgetting was that it did not necessarily allow me to enter the world of the Chinese university as one of them. I was inside but still very much an outsider,



and unaware of how the ambiguous nature of my insider/outsider status would create tensions as to what exactly my position in the art college was.<sup>11</sup>



Once I was submerged in the complexity, multiplicity and culturally confusing experiences of the art college and its densely populated surroundings, any illusions I might have had about a unified self and the relationships I had with my Chinese colleagues, both existing and new, were disrupted. My preconceived and essentialist view of China as a highly collectivist culture whose people would behave in ways that I could recognise as being typically collectivist soon disappeared. I was left with little choice but to surrender myself to the unknown territories of the Chinese academic community and feel my way through the labyrinth. In such places, Iain Chambers advises:

the individual does not dominate, but rather lets go and loses him- or herself in order to explore and find parts of that self... It leads to the release of diverse voices, an encounter with an 'other' side, an unfolding of the self, and negates the possibility of reducing diversity to the identical. Knowledge takes a holiday. (1993, 190)

Chambers contends that the notion of confronting the other, of accepting differences between people and the associated narratives that define reality, is not just an intellectual exercise in mapping a geographical location; rather it is about exploring our own cultural and linguistic interiors, our own positioning (1993, 194).<sup>12</sup> Whether I participated willingly, knowingly or not, I write about my in-situ performances with my Chinese colleagues and students as a way to understand my own positionality during that time, and how I affected their social reality, just as they affected mine. Through memoir, poetry and the voices of a Chinese chorus, my intention is to pierce the ideological fabric of the personal and cultural stability of self and others; to disclose to my reader how my Chinese protagonists and I did not behave according to universalised stereotypes.

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<sup>11</sup> The complex and ambiguous nature of one's insider/outsider status is a central theme of the following chapter.

<sup>12</sup> For further discussion on the interrogation of one's positionality see Stuart Hall's (1993) essay *Minimal Selves*, particularly page 135.

There are many histories to events and many pathways to follow or decline. As Ien Ang writes,

...what is at stake in autobiographical discourse is not a question of the subject's authentic 'me', but one of the subject's location in a world through an active interpretation of experiences that one calls one's own in particular, 'worldly' contexts, that is to say, a reflexive positioning of oneself in history and culture. (2001, 23–24)

Using memoir as a way to flesh out my experiential encounters in the Chinese academic community with my Chinese protagonists gives me the potential to destabilise my sense of self—a rupturing that provides me with the opportunity to explore behind the mask-like self. It is a way of exposing my hidden selves that shapes how I feel and relate to the people and situations I find myself in. To understand this experiential journey of the self, Mary Catherine Bateman says, is to appreciate that life is mutable, precious and continually being formed and reformed by one's learning (1994, 64). Yet, such a journey is a site of struggle. As Bateman believes, it is a struggle drawing on the difficult times in one's life in order to cultivate new awareness and learning in one's research and teaching (1994, 27). She argues 'we all arrive as strangers at the moments of crisis in our lives, having to improvise responses from previous learning' (Bateman 1994, 27). She stresses that such awareness evolves from 'experiences, yours and mine, familiar and exotic; new and old, side by side, learning by letting them speak to one another' (Bateman 1994, 14). The dilemma before me was how to deal with relational differences that I would have probably known how to resolve at home. Further, I needed to realise that the intentions and levels of reciprocity embedded in my relationship with Chen, as highlighted earlier, were realised through shared experiences that saw us working together on a more equitable playing field; and that the nature of our work and friendship was completely different to the kinds of working relations I could expect to have with my colleagues in the college. That is, I had a shared history with Chen, something I did not have with my new colleagues.<sup>13</sup> Their way of doing things was as foreign to me as I was to them.

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<sup>13</sup> More personal aspects of my relationship with Chen are revealed in chapter three.



At the close of the second week, Feng Hong informed me that I would be presenting one class a week for the next six weeks, for the fourth year art history undergraduates. This meant that not only was my unit reduced from twenty-four classes to six, but I also had a different cohort of students to the ones I had originally prepared for. For want of something to say, I asked if the articles I had selected as readings for the unit had been translated? No, Feng Hong replied, the students would be translating the articles themselves as part of their learning process. I was shocked, my mouth, uncharacteristically, buttoned shut.

*they are not told what they should be told  
they do not know on which day university begins  
on which day there is a break  
a week long holiday  
a change of classes  
they are not told the way I get to know  
foreign teachers totally forgotten*

When I let loose my feelings with Chen later on in the day, I sensed he was a little upset too; but rather than joining in with my cursing, he attempted to reassure me, suggesting that I should focus my efforts on doing the best I could; this, in his opinion, was all that was expected of me. Not wanting to cause a fuss, nor wishing to personally embarrass Chen, my only choice seemed to be to just get on with it. I was culturally aware enough to realise that many of Chen's colleagues saw me as his special protégé, and that were I seen to be behaving inappropriately, then this could reflect badly on him.

In my struggle to work through the miscommunications I was experiencing with Feng Hong, I failed to appreciate that some of our differences were irreconcilable because of differing personalities and sense of responsibility to our teaching practice and students. Regardless of culture, some people have personality clashes where compromise is not a plausible option, making failure a strong possibility.

*foreign teacher thinks knows everything  
maybe personality so cannot change  
you do not know what they really like  
one third are quite useful—functional  
quite a few have problem adapting*



Laura Getty (2011), writing about her experiences teaching two undergraduate programs in world and Victorian literature in a Chinese university for a semester in 2009, shares similar experiences to some I had in my dealings with Feng Hong:

It had seemed so straight forward to me: ask the Foreign Language Department for the classes that I would be teaching, a description of my accommodations, and perhaps a syllabus or two. Instead, I received answers that changed, no answer, or answers that I would later discover to be completely false...The administration never decided the class schedule before the last minute, so they gave me their best guesses, which changed over time. (Getty 2011, 349)

Getty reconciles her situation by interpreting the differences between herself and her Chinese colleagues as issues pertaining to the cultural values of face and politics, and therefore part of a cultural gap that existed between them and her. There are no threads left dangling, no messy complicated reality torn apart so as to unravel the uniqueness of Getty's experiences as herself a foreigner in China. She writes:

Simply put, it was more important to preserve 'face' than to tell the truth...The political aspect was more complicated; in a communist country, administrators were accustomed to change their minds regularly without being challenged (as one of my colleagues said with typical Chinese understatement, he could speak out, but he preferred to live with his family). (2011, 349)

By neatly slotting her Chinese protagonists in under the cultural gap, both Getty and her Chinese colleagues' performances become stitched up in a closed, homogenised narrative. By smoothing over, de-problematizing the cultural gap, she denies the unruliness and intricacy of intercultural relationships and the very nature of the cultural gap, which suggests differences that cannot be erased. The actual lived experience of the foreigner teacher brings them into direct contact with a multiplicity of differences; this radically changes one's thinking and feeling. In revealing no relational or personal histories, Getty undermines the complexity of meaning-making, reducing any perceived negative behaviour traits, such as the act of silence and an unwillingness to speak out, to cultural stereotypes. In doing so, she

ignores the gap, wherein the ability to create meaning is complicated by the communicative differences in relationships; such differences cannot be explained in cultural terms alone. As my unfolding relationships with Chen, Feng Hong and later Yue Wan, who replaces Feng Hong as my co-teacher in second semester, illustrate, the other is always implicated in meaning; the negative aspect of this is that one can never secure meaning, so no person can ever be solely responsible for meaning (Hall 1997, 236). Meaning is always negotiated and what transpires between two people can only ever be partial at best.<sup>14</sup> In Getty's narrative, which explains her situation in terms of cultural and political values, there is a refusal to interrogate the uniqueness of her story. The reader is unable to move beyond a universalised interpretation of Chinese teacher and student behaviour and their relations with western others, leaving little opportunity to discover what lies beneath the surface of Getty's relationships with her Chinese protagonists.

In the ensuing chapters, I narrate the life journey of the foreign teacher (me) as a discomfoting one. And by revealing such discomfort I undermine the potential for cultural stereotyping—mine and others.



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! Humiliation and fear gather closer, my angst threatens to sew my throat closed. Minutes slide

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<sup>14</sup> This idea of meaning between two people being a partial one is taken up in the following chapter.

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 group around Chen. Whereas, moments before there had been a wretched silence, now the air swishes cheerfully to the melody 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?



In drawing attention to the differences and misunderstandings in my teaching experiences and relationships with Chinese colleagues and students, and how these experiences were judged by each of us as good or bad, I show how intercultural relations are messily complex. How I prepared for my classes; what I expected and did not receive from my co-teacher Feng Hong; the unsatisfactory situation I found myself in, with Li Peng taking on responsibilities that I felt rightly belonged with Feng Hong; and the solace I sought from Chen—all these experiences are indicators of an understanding of pedagogy that is shaped by teaching and learning experiences very different to those of my Chinese protagonists. Such experiences illustrate Bateman's claim that 'Each person is calibrated by experience, almost like a measuring instrument for difference' (1994, 17). These experiences are further complicated by the degrees of closeness or distance in my every day relationships inside the college. Trinh states 'the understanding of difference is a shared responsibility, which requires a minimum of willingness to reach out to the unknown' (1989, 85). Consequently, the power of writing memoir in this instance lies in its ability to bring to the surface the specificities of my relationships with my Chinese protagonists, highlighting that my relationships with Chen, Feng Hong and others were as varied as they were complex.<sup>15</sup> The specificity of these unfolding relationships offers the reader a different way of reflecting on teaching in China from a foreigner's perspective. As Sotirin writes:

the goal is not to evoke a sense of empathy, cultural insight, or deep significance, but to confront us with the *radical specificity* of living life, not in the sense that we all live our own lives but in the sense that life is lived in the flows, multiplicities, and provisionality of each moment, event, emotion. (2010, 8)

The recurring communication slippage between Feng Hong and myself raises the question of where my foreign status located me professionally and personally in the college. What exactly was my position? What were the local teachers' and students' expectations of me? Although I never openly challenged Feng Hong, inside I held an inflated sense of superiority as the genuine arts management professional, something I saw as lacking in her. But is such thinking racist? Or was it more to do with the incompatible nature of our personalities? Had our working relationship been better, would I still have had such a low opinion of Feng Hong's professional

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<sup>15</sup> The use of memoir to foreground the specificity of one's relationships in order to illustrate the multiplicity and complexity of a lived life is explored further in the following chapter.

qualifications? Earlier, when Professor Wu requested that I and my western colleague move to another office, thus separating us from the local staff, were his actions racist, lacking imagination as to our feelings of isolation and need to fit in, or were they an expression of care for our personal comfort and privacy? Or were they all these things and more?

*Chinese people are lacking  
We do not make the first move  
I don't know you  
I won't come and say how I can help you  
But once I know you  
Chinese people are very friendly*

Where does one draw the line between tolerance and intolerance? Ien Ang suggests that the word racism has a powerfully negative and moralistic tone that does little to invite a more culturally nuanced understanding (1996, 40). She contends it is not easy to work out where racism starts and finishes, and so how can we know where the border lies between our understandings of tolerance and intolerance? Although the amount of tolerance might be disproportionately smaller than is wished for, Ang believes it is still a better position than that of intolerance. Yet, 'tolerance is never unconditional, it is never sufficient as a guarantee for acceptance or equality' (1996, 40).

*I have a tape you know  
teaching English and Speaking  
a certain American guy says:  
'We Americans should set a good example for the world  
if we cannot do this  
how can we expect the other part of the world to.'  
I was totally...  
Sounds patronising?  
Yeah.*

Luke argues that the racial markers that situate people as different in a given society work from two positions: those persons with the power to say who is different and in what ways difference is determined, and those whose bodies marked by difference



use it as a politically legitimate form of identity (1994, 50). She warns that the relationship between racial identity and difference should not be mistaken for being ontologically grounded (Luke 1994, 50). In revealing the specificity of emotions and tensions that I perceived as underpinning the relational fabric I shared with my Chinese protagonists, I foreground how my professional and personal situation in Shanghai was shaped and complicated by such relationships—relationships that had me classified as belonging and not belonging. And, that the differences in each of my relations, such as those with Chen, Feng Hong and others, were not necessarily concerned with being Chinese or western, but rather with how we disrupted or contributed to each other's lives.¶

Luke suggests that the ability to discuss racial issues from the perspective of a white person is deeply problematic; many of the theoretical discourses required for such inquiries have a tendency to be constructed from the perspective that white people are racially unmarked, and thus do not experience acts of racism (1994, 49). Luke believes that:

Racial constructs and prejudice manifest in particular regional and historical contexts as consequences of specific race-cultural configurations of colonial, military, settlement and invasion encounters. (Luke 1994, 53)

*As Chinese person I admit  
Chinese people are humble—modest  
always feel westerners more advanced  
do not have right judgement of ourselves  
everything in the west is best  
always have this false judgement*

I suggest that western history preceded my entering Shanghai; it marked my body with unforgotten histories—unwanted legacies not of my choosing. I am not responsible for what the west did or might have done, but there did appear to be a Chinese psyche that could not forget. Colleagues would from time to time go to great pains to remind me of my cultural legacies, for instance, the British treatment of the Chinese during the Opium Wars of the mid 1800s, or America's (supposedly) accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in May 1999. Similarly, my own father has not forgotten the atrocities performed by Chinese soldiers during his

time in the Korean War in 1952 and continues to remind me of it periodically. ♪  
When visiting a Chinese tea house with foreign as opposed to local friends, sometimes I was asked to pay in advance, when local patrons were not; when shopping for groceries in the local markets I was often charged more than double the price the locals paid. But are these acts of racism or is it just taking advantage of my foreignness? And if it is nothing more than being taken advantage of, how does one resolve such a dilemma when one is the outsider in that particular context?

Sensitive now to how such things touched me and shaped my visible appearance, I lace together strands of lived experience to disclose my inner turmoil, in an attempt to dismantle my foreign status, a fictitious racial persona that was thrust upon me; a persona that Gloria Anzaldùa believes is predetermined and yet involves my complicity (2000). We are all capable of racist acts whether we acknowledge them or not, and sometimes we think such behaviour warranted, even logical.



To be fair, Li Peng took his work seriously. He would spend hours poring over my lesson plans and support materials in preparation for our class; but, however diligently Li Peng worked, the reality of the situation determined the outcome. Li Peng was a final-year undergraduate student who had studied his whole life; he had no work or life experience and had no understanding of what I was talking about; nor did he have a sophisticated enough grasp of English to emphasise the main points from my lecture notes. I knew this; Li Peng knew this; and the students knew this. Any possibility on my part or Li Peng's to connect with the students was doomed before we had begun.

I continued not to communicate well with Feng Hong and, from the visible interrelations in our classroom, it seemed to me that the students did not have a good relationship with Feng Hong either. I ended the first semester feeling discouraged—a failure. Chen said I was being hard on myself, that at least the students had the experience of being taught by a foreigner! His words were small comfort. I had so

badly wanted to do a good job, but I had fooled no one, least of all myself. Was this all that was expected of me? Where was the value in what I was doing—for the students—for Chen—for me? What had Chen meant by the students having the experience of being taught by a foreigner?



From my entry into China as a resident teacher rather than a fly-in-fly-out arts project manager, a complicated reality emerged, a reality within which my body and behaviour not only marked me as different but stitched me up in conflicting visions of difference. In this new reality I moved to and fro between the authentic expert, the one who could do no wrong in Chen's eyes, to cultural novice and awkward foreigner, straddling a sino/western/global border. Hemmed tight, in an ill-fitting, prickly in-between space, heavily laced with strands of ambivalence, I began to worry my way through the centres and edges of my relationships with Chen, Feng Hong and Chinese others in search of some inner security. As Trinh argues, the centre is as much at the edge or margin as the edge is at the centre of things:

...how possible is it to undertake a process of decentralization without being made aware of the margins within the center and the centers within the margin? Without encountering marginalization from both the ruling centre and the established margin? Wherever she goes she is asked to show her identity papers. What side does she speak up for? Where does she belong (politically, economically)? Where does she place her loyalty (sexually, ethically, professionally)? Should she be met at the centre, where they invite her in with much display, it is often only to be reminded that she holds the permanent status of a 'foreign worker,' 'a migrant,' or 'a temporary sojourner'—a status whose definable location is necessary to the maintenance of a central power. (Trinh 1991, 18)

I was psychologically and emotionally bereft when I thought about my recent poor teaching performance. In hindsight, I should have realised that there was a price to be paid for my specialness; that I could remain special only if I worked within the parameters of those who were letting me in. Thus, my experiences of teaching in China highlight the natural tendency for people to place expert knowledge in high regard, without realising that expertise of any kind is limited (Crapanzano 2004, 5). Having been originally described in Chen's invitation as the profound esteemed scholar, the value of my employment to the college, I suggest, was not in my so-

called expertise. After all, my professional arts management skills in China were limited to the collaborative projects I had undertaken with Chen and Professor Zhou during the previous four years. Rather, the reality was that the college leaders could be seen as providing their students with a privileged opportunity of a so-called ‘international experience’. A foreign teacher in this light becomes a product for promoting the appearance of international learning experiences, a product owned and delivered by the college, as if I were a someone or a something that could be put to good use, or appropriated in some way or other. Trinh argues that the notion of being the special or the authentic one in such situations is much like being a thing of consumption, a something that is purchased according to one’s need or personal desire (1989, 88).

*some college leaders think  
foreign teachers look good  
you foreigner ok  
need foreigners—  
go into the classroom  
shut the door  
that’s it*

Was this all that was demanded of me, that I look the part? As Trinh recalls, ‘it is as if everywhere we go, we become someone’s private zoo’ (1989, 82). But as Professor Wu’s conversation with Yue Wan below reveals, it is more complicated than this. Professor Wu being closer to his students would have had a more pragmatic view of their needs, and was more likely to possess different expectations of my teaching role in his department to those of his superiors. To be a foreign teacher is a complex matter when it comes to meeting the expectation of other people’s ideas as to who they are or what they are supposed to do...



### **The ambivalent nature of specialness**

Unbeknown to me, Yue Wan, one of the department's English teachers, who herself was involved in arts management projects in Shanghai, had been watching my class with keen interest from the sideline. Much later, she confided in me, revealing the details of a conversation she had with Professor Wu at the close of that first semester. Professor Wu, it appears, had mentioned to Yue Wan that he was not impressed with my teaching performance, and that he felt unsure about giving the foreign teacher (me) more classes in the following semester. Feng Hong and most of the students, he said, had complained, and were most dissatisfied, declaring that the foreign teacher was—boring; they could not understand her strange accent and there was no useful purpose in attending her classes. According to Yue Wan, she had replied that she was not surprised that the foreign teacher's classes had not been successful. What did he expect! The students' English was poor. Li Peng was a student with only rudimentary English skills. He was totally unsuitable as a co-teacher and interpreter. How could anybody, she argued, do a good job under such circumstances! Let me have a try with the foreigner, she advised him, I am sure I can do a better job. Professor Wu agreed, but made mention that Feng Hong was still to be included in our classes.

If Yue Wan, who was not directly involved, could see that my classes were ineffective to a significant degree because of inadequate support, why did Professor Wu not take Feng Hong, as my co-teacher, to task over the students' complaints, rather than laying the blame solely with me? What did this say about his expectations and assumptions of the foreign teacher?



The fact that I did try to collaborate with Feng Hong, that I repeatedly asked for advice and support and that this appeared to be ignored, does not mean that I was some innocent pawn in a game. Along with Professor Zhou and Chen, who had invited me into the college as an expert in arts management, I was complicit in my

role as the foreign teacher, not a helpless victim. It was more the ambivalence of my role in the college that made me feel so unsettled and unappreciated. My relationships with Chen, Professor Zhou and some of the artists from the college had, as explained earlier, given me a new sense of direction and purpose and contributed to my feelings of specialness and being one of them. But once inside the college, working alongside Feng Hong, and with Professor Wu as my immediate boss, I quickly began to feel very much the outsider.

On several occasions in the first few weeks Professor Wu and Feng Hong met with me to discuss my involvement in the arts management undergraduate degree program they were developing; yet our exchanges were always one-sided, more innuendo than anything specific. So much so, I found it impossible to contribute anything of significance to such discussions or imagine how or where my expertise would fit in the new program. Such conversations only added to the frustration I already felt about how my classes were being managed. I was at a complete loss as to what I could do or offer.

Professor Wu's conversation with Yue Wan on my teaching performance reveals an expectation that I should show myself, reveal my authenticity to my Chinese hosts, but only in a way that would not challenge their own social reality (Trinh 1989, 88). Unlike Yue Wan, Professor Wu did not appear to make allowances for the limitations placed upon me. His manner suggests that he did not see Feng Hong, as my co-teacher, as having a shared responsibility in the preparation and delivery of our unit. Nor, that he himself had a duty of care to me as one of his staff members, regardless if I was foreign or not. It was as if the provision of a desk, a classroom, the pretence of an interpreter and some students, regardless of their interest or not, was sufficient for the creation of a successful outcome. That is, I was expected to deliver my expertise in isolation, without the need of my colleague's assistance and with as little disruption to the normal routine of the department as possible. The underside of his behaviour might suggest that rather than having a choice, he was compelled to provide me with a teaching position in his department because of

Chen's influence with Professor Zhou and university leaders.<sup>16</sup> From this consideration, Professor Wu's behaviour, and similarly Feng Hong's, could be explained as a form of tactical resistance to take advantage of a situation not of their choosing.<sup>17</sup> The acceptance of difference in others, in this context, is built on playing the game; as Trinh writes, 'don't overstep the line' (1989, 87). Stuart Hall explains this ambivalent nature of difference further:

[P]eople who are in any way significantly different from the majority – 'them' rather than 'us' – are frequently exposed to the binary form of representation. They seem to be represented through sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes – good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive, repelling-because-different/compelling-because-strange-and-exotic. And they are often required to be both things at the same time! (Hall 1997, 229) (Emphasis in the original)

However, although the application of binary opposites has the dexterity to articulate diversity, Hall contends it is also rather primitive and reduces meaning to a simplistic two-way form of interpretation (1997, 235). Such dual representations, he argues, do not retain a neutral balance of power; rather, there is a continual slippage between the two, with one being more dominant than its opposite (Hall, 1997, 235). Hall suggests that '[d]ifference is ambivalent. It can be both positive and negative' (1997, 238). The ambivalence of my position can be illustrated by the two opposing responses from Professor Wu and Yue Wan to my reported teaching performance. Whilst Professor Wu, basing his judgment solely on the opinions of his students and Feng Hong, makes the conclusion that foreigners do not work hard, Yue Wan shows a willingness to suspend judgment until she can experience firsthand what my capabilities are. That is, she denies the need to classify me until she knows what my actual expertise is and if it can be put to good use for the students.

Hall, influenced by anthropologist Mary Douglas's work on how society creates meaning by enforcing a system of classification to define social reality, writes that: 'Stable cultures require things to stay in their appointed place.... What unsettles culture is 'matter out of place' – the breaking of unwritten rules and codes' (Hall 1997, 236).<sup>18</sup> Unlike Professor Wu, Feng Hong and the students, both Chen and Yue

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<sup>16</sup> In the following chapter I explore how one's close relational alliances impact on our relationships with others.

<sup>17</sup> Tactical resistance and what Michel de Certeau (1984/1988) describes as the 'art of making do', is a major theme of chapter four *The Chinese Learner*, and will be discussed at length there.

<sup>18</sup> See Douglas (1966).

Wan had been widely exposed to people of different nationalities. They were familiar with diverse working approaches and behaviours: Chen through his public relations work with international academics and visitors, and Yue Wan in her private consultancy practice as the staff coordinator of an international business training consortium. Thus they had cultivated an empathy that enhanced their tolerance to the ways my behaviour was sometimes culturally, socially, emotively and organisationally clumsy. Ironically, not only was it my foreignness that made it difficult for college staff such as Professor Wu or Feng Hong to readily accept me or not, but also my relational closeness with Chen and Professor Zhou and distance from other colleagues that further complicated my situation, making it difficult to ascertain whether I was friend or foe. Thus, as Hall contends, difference is connotative of both positive and negative emotions, and is a necessary component of making meaning. However, difference has built into it a relational instrument of power in which the other is demonised, victimised, castigated; the legacy of difference is that it has a nature that is at odds with itself (Hall 1997, 238).

*foreign teachers interesting  
but helpless  
different from our teachers  
do not know our education system  
do not know what we need  
we know a different culture  
different way*

This legacy of difference can be understood in Yue Wan's reported conversation with Professor Wu. Here it becomes apparent that I did not live up to expectation: neither Professor Wu nor his students were impressed with my teaching abilities. But, realistically, was it possible that their or my expectations could be met? Our respective imaginings as to what each could offer the other, in terms of teaching and learning, were flawed and not based on experience or accumulated knowledge on either side. Apart from one other foreign teacher, who had started the previous year, there was virtually no history of non-Chinese teachers working full time in the art college; thus there was no experience from which realistic expectations could be formed. I, on the other hand, as I mentioned earlier, had some limited experience of working on arts projects in China, but I had no teaching experience and no concept



of Chinese students' learning habits other than those few I had met in social situations. Yue Wan's initial response to my perceived failure and subsequent actions suggests that she recognised what Professor Wu did not: that people are unable to perform well in isolation, and that creating any form of meaningful dialogue in the classroom is a shared responsibility between colleagues and between teachers and students.

*Some students say we just talk  
teacher is furious.  
I say why did you talk?  
They say because we do not understand.  
Say I don't understand.  
If I say I don't understand I will lose face  
I don't want to say that.  
So easy every day we do this way.  
We do not have that kind of etiquette.*

Under the persona of the professional arts manager, I knowingly manipulated my perceived specialness for my own advantage, to build a more professionally and personally rewarding life for myself in China. Rightly or wrongly, as I mentioned earlier, I saw my professional self, a university educated arts manager, as more authentic than that of Hong Feng as local teacher and PhD candidate. Being referred to as the foreign expert, as I was in the college, it was easy to slip into a heightened and false understanding of my importance. Hong Kong-based educationalists Bodycott and Walker (2000) claim that some western professionals, when teaching in non-western countries, hold preconceived ideas about their duties, and that all too often they perceive themselves as superior because they are western educated, and thus consider themselves custodians of the local educational process. This assertion of academic superiority has a tendency to attract the label of 'foreign expert' to teachers working offshore. Wenger, Mc Dermott and Synder suggest that 'being viewed as the expert in a domain also makes it easy to believe that what one knows is all there is to know' (2002, 141). Yet, as I reveal in the following pages, one can move away from this shallow way of being...

*Two different ways of teaching  
problematic.*

*Students complain.  
Is it foreign teachers fault?  
Hard to say...*



### **Embroidering a space between**

A few days after the conversation between Yue Wan and Professor Wu, Yue Wan invited me to meet with her for a coffee at Starbucks in West Nanjing Liu, next to the Shanghai Art Museum, in downtown Shanghai. Apart from a couple of outings with Feng Hong early in the first semester, I had never socialised with any of my teaching colleagues. Apart from Wei Wei and her friend with whom I had lunch each day, I experienced minimal contact with any of my departmental colleagues. Any social outings were with Chen and his work associates from the foreign affairs office. I was both excited and intrigued by Yue Wan's invitation. But I was also suspicious of her motives. Having not particularly warmed to Feng Hong, and feeling socially a little awkward without Chen's presence, I was not sure how I should relate to Yue Wan, or what it was she wanted from me.

I need not have worried. Yue Wan was quite different to Feng Hong: whereas Feng Hong was distant and revealed little about herself, Yue Wan appeared disarmingly open and friendly. There was no need for superficial cultural niceties, like the state of the weather, did I like Shanghai, or what did I think of Chinese food? Yue Wan had that rare quality of being able to put people instantly at their ease. Maybe it was also that we were closer in age, and had sons of a similar age. Effortlessly we slid into work talk. I shared my thoughts with her as to how frustrated I felt about my teaching and inability to communicate with Feng Hong and the students. Although Yue Wan said little at first, just having a seemingly sympathetic ear reassured me that I was being taken seriously.

Once I had finished, Yue Wan brought the topic of our conversation around to the upcoming semester's teaching program. Mentioning that she was to be my new co-teacher, Yue Wan suggested that maybe we could discuss what I would like to teach. At this point I still had not learned from my recent experience. Because I had put so

much energy into developing the original unit and did not want to feel that I had wasted my time, I was loath to let it go, so I began to talk about how I could salvage and repackage it. Yue Wan listened attentively for a while, but I could tell from the frowned lines across her forehead, that she did not think much of my idea.

‘They are not ready for such a program’ she said sharply, shaking her head. ‘The students need to learn some basic skills, before they can begin to appreciate the value of project management. What we need to do,’ she advised, ‘is to develop a program that is of practical benefit for the students. Arts management is a new discipline in China. Everybody wants to learn about it, but first we have to encourage a change in people’s thinking. If you provide too much theory, the students will have difficulty in conceptualising what you are saying and thus lose interest. You need to remember that the students’ listening skills are weak; their confidence in being able to speak English needs lots of encouragement. They have the passion and will follow you if you give them something that will maintain their interest—motivate them to work harder. The students need to feel they are developing practical work skills that will assist them in finding a job.

‘My thinking’ she continued, ‘is to start with something simple like how to communicate effectively with an artist. We could teach the students how to conduct simple research tasks. Our students do not know the international method for referencing, but they are eager to learn. We can instruct them on how to prepare for an interview, and get them to interview a local artist as a real case study and write up a final report and bibliography. This in my opinion is our first priority—we must build the students’ conceptual and practical skills step by step.’

For the first time since my arrival, I felt someone actually understood what I had to offer and how best my skills and experience could be used for the benefit of the students.

Yue Wan explained that although she was the art college’s English teacher, she had for several years worked on arts projects for the British Council and the local arts community. She informed me that she also arranged for some of the students to

work as volunteers on public arts exhibitions in Shanghai, and that sometimes they assisted artists from other countries. Although they received only a little money, she felt the students learnt much from their exposure to international artists and their ways of doing things. Yue Wan explained how much she loved this kind of work, and was eager to know more about arts management as a discipline, so that it informed her work practice as well as her teaching. As she told me her story of how, through her own work, she was creating opportunities for her students to gain real hands on experiences, I felt a connection with Yue Wan that I never experienced with Feng Hong. We appeared to share similar values in that when it came to our students we were both prepared to extend ourselves; we were on the same page.

During the next couple of weeks, we met regularly to discuss the ongoing preparation of our unit. We decided to pool our talents and divide the teaching so that the students would benefit from our combined wealth of experiences and ideas. While Yue Wan modestly always considered herself in a support role, in reality we contributed equally to the planning and hands on teaching. We each gave presentations and handouts for every class, based on our joint teaching plans, and collaborated equally on the class components. There were times that our interpretation of the week's teaching activities were not quite compatible, and sometimes this caused some confusion amongst the students. However, this was a small price to pay in relation to the good will that was developing between us, and the positive impact this had on our students. Our intention to work together from the start never faltered; we continually shared our resources and presented ourselves to our students as a team.

From our first class together it was evident that the students highly respected Yue Wan—they paid attention to her words. When I gave a presentation, if they failed to understand they would ask Yue Wan to clarify a point or ask me to give an example they could more easily comprehend. They consistently made strong efforts to please us both. Together, we created a space in which the teaching and learning went both ways. By the end of the second semester our class was being lauded around the art college as a great success, such a different outcome from the previous classes with

Feng Hong. We continued on with the same students in the third semester, building on and extending the skills set acquired in the first unit. This too was successful.

What I learnt from this experience was that first I needed to recognise my own limitations; I might be a professional expert in my own right, but I was also a cultural novice whose expertise meant little without the right attitude and relationships.



I reflect on the professional and ethical dilemmas of foreign teachers such as me: how is it possible to work with one's local colleagues without undermining their professional knowledge and personal integrity? How can we/I extend the local students' learning experiences that build on their existing cultures' pedagogical tools, rather than undermining them? Bateman says that this requires an attentiveness, a sensitivity to the ways of difference (1994, 43), ours/mine as well as theirs. Anzaldúa (1987/2007, 109) asserts that such a sensitivity begins with the inner self, and once we recognise this, transformation becomes a possibility, which in turn influences social change.

During the time I worked with Feng Hong, I never came close to knowing what we might share in common, or what she wanted from me other than the knowledge I shared in the classroom with our students. If Yue Wan had not seized on the opportunity to work collaboratively with me, my teaching experiences and the research journey I am taking now would have been so very different. Maybe I too would have fallen into the same trap as Getty (1997) and purposefully smoothed out the contours of Feng Hong's behaviour and explained them as aspects of Chinese cultural values in the belief that all my teaching experiences would be similar. I may not have recognised that the slippages in our communication might have had more to do with the incompatibility in our personalities, further complicated by our own relationships and professional agendas in the college. Nor might I have been able to understand the desires and needs of my students if it had not been for Yue Wan taking a chance with me.

Yue Wan's initiative, and her ability to be frank with me from the beginning of our relationship, encouraged me to be more open and confident about what I could contribute to our students' learning. Although my behaviour in part was initially influenced by the idea of being the expert, it was to a great extent tempered by my relationships with my colleagues. From my partial and (what was to become) highly critical perspective, Feng Hong appeared to be both lazy and greedy, in that she took a lot but gave little to her students or colleagues. She seemed to me to be incapable of sharing, and as a consequence I lost respect for her quickly. I believe that my loss of respect for a colleague contributed to my own sense of superiority, my belief that I was the expert, not her. Yet I did not feel this way with Yue Wan. Though she did not have a postgraduate qualification or the official status in the college that Feng Hong had, Yue Wan had a totally different attitude; she showed an awareness of how I might fit in and accommodate the needs of the students and herself as the co-teacher. Yue Wan had what Anzaldù (1987/2007) refers to as the imagination to comprehend the ways each of us was different, and showed a genuine desire to work with our differences rather than escalating them. There was a willingness on both sides to learn from each other. We did not always get it right, but the desire between us to do the best we could for our students was a driving force for us both. Over time, as our relationship and comfort with each other grew, we got to know what our strengths and weaknesses were and how to work through our differences. As Bateman writes: 'The problem of an outsider as teacher is to enrich students with new learning skills, not to replace the old ones, and this demands an awareness of difference' (1994, 43). An awareness of difference however, is not a one-sided process, but needs to be based on shared responsibility, generosity and reciprocity, as my relationships with Chen, Yue Wan and Feng Hong demonstrate.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Ambivalent Foreigner continued: Underlying Relational Threads

#### Foreigner in the city

Foreign teacher exported commodity

dressed in colonial sheep's clothing

sweating occidental appearance

see my skin white mask.

Touch my hair lack lustre gold.

Smell my perfume—opium— exotic not.

Sense my fear of Tao-like other.

Me—caught deep in marginalised gap.

Something intangible cannot define.

No longer secure.

Not nestled in culturally formed safe cocoon.

Feel self unravelling—transparent—thread bare.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Author's poetry revised from the original in Scott and Grellier (2012, 57).

## **The ritual of writing and the dilemmas we face when writing about self and other/s**

*Standing on shifting ground makes it clear that every view is a view from somewhere and every act of speaking a speaking from somewhere.*

—Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Against Culture*

In the previous chapter, I interrogated my positionality as a foreign teacher inside a Chinese university to illustrate the paradoxical nature of one's differences, and to draw attention to the conceptualisation of foreignness as complicated and ambivalent. I demonstrated, through memoir and reflection, how my position as the foreigner disrupted the social reality of my Chinese colleagues, just as they disrupted mine. In writing about the specificity of my lived experiences I unravelled the complex and ambiguous nature of my relationships with Chinese colleagues and revealed how easy it was (is) to operate from the misguided assumptions of one's own difference and specialness.

In this chapter, employing memoir as an auto-ethnographic device for reconceptualising what is generally understood as ethnographic fieldwork, I continue to interrogate my position as a foreigner and the complexity of my relationships with the Chinese; here, I illustrate the specificity of a foreign teacher's lived experiences inside Chinese university and teaching spaces. These are private spaces, where my personal reflections go deep into more intimate and painful memories and lessons to show how difference cannot be attributed solely to race and culture, but is woven into the relational strands of social reality. As Pat Usher suggests, 'the self is relational and learns to define itself through a host of voluntary and involuntary relationships' (2000, 23). In particular, memoir offers me the opportunity to disclose more personalised layers of my professional relations with Chen and other Chinese colleagues and allows me to describe how my sense of professionalism, emotional intelligence and knowledge of China were all cognitively buttoned up in my understanding of these relationships. I reflect on how the fabric of human experience is located in ways of seeing, behaving and meaning making that are relationally constructed. By using memoir, in this manner, I am able to unpick the dualist principles of insider/outsider, professional/personal, public/private, to



emphasise that one's position is never fixed but always a matter of negotiation and that what eventuates from such research cannot be discretely labelled and stitched down as being uniquely Chinese or western behaviour.

My attention in this chapter to the specifics and particulars of certain incidents in the final stages of my relationship with Chen celebrates the uniqueness of relational experience and the ways people are connected and disconnected in and through their relationships with others. In focusing on the more private relational moments between us and how these are sewn into a floating network of multiple relationships, I show how people's personal and professional selves are intricately interwoven, no matter where one thinks they are situated, be it in public or private life; as Haraway reflects, '[s]ituated knowledges are about communities not about isolated individuals' (1988, 590).

Both fascinated and challenged by the changeable and ambivalent nature of my past experiences in China as teacher and person, I recognise that the scaffolding underpinning my research, and the associated ritual of writing, are sustained ultimately through my relationships with particular Chinese persons. And, that these persons I write about are positioned in a culture that is ontologically and epistemologically different to mine. Hence my dilemma, as a non-Chinese, a *laowei*—how do I describe, interpret and create meaning from the many experiences I shared with Chen and my other 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? These challenges are significant when one looks at how we as western scholars and writers have narrated our experiences with non-western people in the past. Elizabeth St. Pierre (1997, 280) suggests 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 the everyday life. St Pierre claims that the highly cumbersome hierarchical chains of

command that organise people and how they think are being ripped apart, to the extent that even the traditional binaries of classification are being undermined and circumvented. 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, and shut us up?' (1997, 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 in the form of memoir to exit from the narrative of the 'foreign expert', to deconstruct the fiction. Thus, to undertake auto-ethnography is to interrogate and write stories about one's relationships with self and other/s; entangled and multiple relationships that involve border-crossing cultural and social terrains. Consequently, I respond to my dilemma by refusing to smooth out the complex and contradictory nature of my experiences and relationships with the Chinese, and the understanding that comes from these occurrences. That is, in writing stories about my life in China, I do not explain Chinese behaviour according to what is commonly considered typical Chinese cultural values and behaviour, in the interests of producing universalised knowledge claims. To do so is to risk making invisible the differences and the uniqueness of the people I lived amongst and worked with, regardless of the cultural heritage and legacies they may have shared.

In this chapter, I reflect on the period leading up to and beyond Chen's death and the resultant sorrow and anger I endured during my final weeks in the art college. I explore my journey of anxiety and grief not as a space for bringing Chen back from the dead, but as a reflexive exercise on comprehending one's sense of loss and how such experiences affect one's sense of being and becoming (Behar 1996, 175). Writing story can be an act of reconciliation in that it brings to the surface the manner in which one's relationships with others are essential elements of human development and continual transformation. Paradoxically, the potential to create knowledge, scholarly or otherwise, is constrained by one's inability to stand outside the cultural, social, historical and political specificities of one's own time (Said 1989, 211). Consequently, I rely heavily on memoir to embody theory, to problematise the manner in which I perceive and interpret the relational Chinese other, and in the process, to create new knowledge.

I permit much of my writing in this chapter to speak for itself; I do this with the understanding that whatever 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 and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims’ (1988, 589).

Like Moreira, ‘the only way I could write about “the Other” was through my own lived experience as an “Other”’ (2011, 590). When I write I am not speaking on behalf of Chen or my other Chinese protagonists, it is not their voices the reader hears, but mine; my dilemma, confusion, anger, grief and loss. And, in a similar manner to Richardson, when reflecting on the transformational power of poetic writing, I admit that writing about my relationship with Chen and his death has transformed my way of seeing the world and that ‘[t]hrough writing ... I am rewriting myself’ (Richardson 1992, 134).

The agenda that underpins my writing about my relationships with Chen and my other Chinese protagonists is entirely mine, not theirs. In the very act of writing I am stitching my own values (and ways of seeing and feeling) onto these pages (Richardson 1990, 12). Thus my writing is a construction that relies on memoir, and the devices for writing memoir, not just to tell a good story but also to create knowledge (Richardson 1990, 13). My desire also, like Moreira, is that my stories be useful to my reader/s in terms of making the provision for more nuanced insights into our lives as professionals whether working in foreign or local locations, in the same manner in which they inform my own life as a university teacher, early career researcher and person (2011, 590–591).

In writing a memoir about my relationships with the Chinese, I mix the personal with the professional and the public with the private; my reason, as mentioned earlier, is not to extrapolate generalised meanings of what it means to be a foreigner living and teaching in China, but to negate the propensity for cultural stereotyping,

recognising that social science writers are people of flesh and blood and not ‘theoretical puppets’ (Narayan 1993, 681). Several times in the previous chapter I mentioned the need for imagination so that one can be responsive to the complex and diverse characteristics of difference. In doing so, I deliberately apply what Elizabeth Wheatley (1994) refers to as ‘*a feminist imagination*’. That is, an imagination that is capable of subtlety in its ability to unfold the multiple strands of emotion, intentionality and assumption that underpin one’s relationships with others. A feminist imagination, Wheatley reminds us (1994, 413), demands that I write about the disorderly and uneven surfaces that pave my ethnographic journey, and that this requires a considered and imaginative illustration of my experiences in China.



### **Insiders as relational outsiders—the foreigner resides within us all**

I begin my memoir in this chapter by illustrating how my local (Chinese) colleagues also had complicated relationships that undermined their own positioning within their social group.

Whilst he was warm and generous to a fault with those he considered his friends, I saw Chen as neither naïve nor the sort of person one could easily deceive. A culturally unaware foreigner who failed to appreciate how differences in lifestyle and personal values would affect her ability to establish a new life for herself in Shanghai would not have fooled the likes of Chen. With a talent for reading situations and putting people at their ease, Chen was an invaluable asset as the university’s public relations face with the international academic community. The second youngest child of four children, of educated parents, at sixteen years of age, Chen, together with millions of other teenagers and intellectuals from across the urban regions of China, was sent out to work in the remote countryside as part of Mao’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. This would have been a traumatic ordeal, to be robbed

of his youth and education and socially marked with the legacy of his class, and later the stigma of chronic illness, Yet 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 in Chen a 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 emotion, time and energy in my dealings with others. Even though Chen was friendly with his colleagues, some of whom he would have 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 get caught up in people's troubles or disclose what he was thinking had the effect of unsettling people; never sure of his true feelings, they 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 or outsider of a close-knit community is complex and continually subject to change according to situation and context: 'the fact remains that we are *foreigners* on the inside' (de Certeau 1984/1988, 13–14). And, as Narayan writes '[e]ven as insiders, or partial insiders, in some contexts we are drawn closer, in others we are thrust apart' (1993, 676). Narayan suggests that it is the state of affairs and power structures that surround us that determine what aspects of our subjectivity we draw on, willingly or not, to articulate our sense of self; thus our sense of self, being at the mercy of such factors, is open to change (Narayan 1993, 676). In retrospect, I realise Chen would have understood the precariousness of his situation and it was this awareness that influenced his manner towards his colleagues. Although he was a locally born Han Chinese and had been with the college for over twenty-years, there were persuasive reasons as to why he might be viewed by his colleagues as more of an outsider—what Trinh refers to as both 'a deceptive insider and outsider.... this inappropriate Other' (1991, 74), when one considers the particulars of his situation. From the early 1990s onwards, which coincided with Chen being promoted from the college's Librarian to Director of Foreign Affairs, western universities were enthusiastically courting Chinese

universities in search of students and institutional affiliations. As the main person liaising between the college and university leaders and their many international academic visitors, Chen was in a unique position that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier. Not only was he the spokesman for both the Chinese and their western visitors, because of his adeptness for diplomacy and making people feel comfortable—what Yue Wan called Chen’s ability to perform cultural massage—he also had the trust of both parties. Chen had an eye for detail that appealed to westerners and as a man of his word he made doing business with the Chinese a relatively pleasant experience. Unlike the majority of the college’s teaching and administrative staff, the nature of Chen’s work meant that he was relatively unsupervised; with the exclusive use of a college car for private as well as business use (at this time owning a car or having the sole use of a company car was relatively uncommon, not just in the college but the university as a whole) he appeared to have considerable personal freedom, and was able to come and go as he pleased. Thus, it seemed as if Chen had an unusual amount of power and autonomy, with access to an outside world that the majority of his colleagues would not have been privy to. It is easy to imagine how his colleagues would have viewed him with suspicion, particularly those of his own generation, many of whom would have been recovering from countless catastrophic physical, mental and economic misfortunes, made all the more complex by the remnants of a Maoist socio-political machine which had brought about feelings of discontent, intense fear and paranoia.

Similarly, being viewed by my Chinese colleagues as an outsider cannot be exclusively attributed to me being a foreigner, but may also have been influenced by my relationship with Chen. Jayati Lal writes, ‘all of us live in contradictory locations, and not just those of us who are perhaps involuntarily placed into those contradictions’ (1996, 199). Lal (1996, 193) suggests that researchers are confronted by the continual need to negotiate their position as insider and outsider, rather than operating from some fixed positioning whilst conducting fieldwork; this, I believe, was true of my position in the college. A researcher’s locations make her highly vulnerable (Haraway 1988, 590); a vulnerability that, as I have already suggested, is shaped not only by my physical location, but also by the ways that my judgment and beliefs are influenced by close relations, thereby affecting how I see other people.

The closeness of my relationship with Chen was further complicated by the indebtedness I felt towards him, accumulated over some five years. I had, and still have, a tendency to be obsessively loyal to those I feel close to, and this heavily influences my relationships whether they are close or not. Thus, to a significant degree, I believe that the unconditional sense of loyalty I felt for Chen clouded my judgement and perception of our mutual colleagues' behaviour, particularly my co-teacher Feng Hong. I write here about the complexities of my close and distant relationships with my Chinese colleagues, specifically in relation to my notion of personal loyalty and obligations, to explore the manner in which such thinking influences how we see and communicate with those around us on a personal level.

### **The complexity of one's close and distant relations with others**

On several occasions during the first semester, Feng Hong made a point of asking me not to discuss my teaching activities with Chen. 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 administration, I would have thought we had much in common, but her manner towards me suggested the opposite, or so it appeared to me. 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 Chen's colleague and friend, I did not want to be involved in any activities that were not obviously transparent to all. My refusal to comply with Feng Hong's wishes not only increased the tension between us but also appeared to further strain my relationship with Professor Wu. As indicated in the previous chapter, Professor Wu's conversation with Yue Wan suggested that he held me solely responsible for the failure of the first arts administration unit, even though Feng Hong had done little to support the students and myself. Just as Chen and I were close so too it appeared were Professor Wu and Feng Hong.

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.

Consequently, when 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.

The differences between my relationships with Feng Hong and Chen, my suspicions of Feng Hong's behaviour, and the way my trust in Chen further undermined any motivation I had to work with Feng Hong, illustrate the complexity and ambiguity of my situation. In writing about the tangles in my relationship with Feng Hong and Chen, I resist rationalising my reactions and attributing their behaviour to cultural values or personas that can be interpreted as essentially Chinese. Instead I direct my readers' attention to the ways my Chinese protagonists and I were relationally positioned to each other inside the college, and how the nature of our positioning influenced the closeness or distance of these relations. I demonstrate how it is impossible to be impartial inside or outside one's relationships with others because



they are invested with personal interests and emotions (Said 1989, 216–17). In doing so I subscribe to Edward Said's notion that if

[w]e no longer think of the relationship between cultures and their adherents as perfectly contiguous, totally synchronous, wholly correspondent, and if we think of cultures as permeable and, on the whole, defensive boundaries between politics, a more promising situation appears. Thus to see Others not as ontologically given but as historically constituted would be to erode the exclusivist biases we so often ascribe to cultures, ours not least. (1989, 225)

Thus in this auto-ethnographic process, I remember and relate the differences in my relations with Feng Hong compared to those with Chen, and in retrospect, I reflect on how I was prepared to suspend judgement when dealing with particularities of Chen's behaviour but not Feng Hong's. The ambiguity that arises from these two relationships and how they impact on my life in the college, suggests that I am walking a fine line here, there is a danger of slippage, so I need to be constantly vigilant and keep returning to my positionality. Through personal memory and reflection, I illustrate how the personal at times does interfere with one's professional judgement; that is, I must use the personal to interrogate the personal and relational composition of professional practice. In focusing on the specifics of particular aspects of my relationship with Chen, and exploring how the closeness of our friendship shaped the way I viewed Feng Hong and Professor Wu, I offer an alternative way of interpreting intercultural relations. I am suggesting that close relations have the potential to influence how we relate to others, regardless of whether we are perceived or perceive ourselves as being insiders or outsiders.

### **Personal strands of a professional relationship**

Chen, having stayed in my home twice as a guest, along with senior academics of the university and artists from the college, was familiar with my Australian way of life. Impressed by Perth's spaciousness, its expansive blue skies and lack of smog and pollution, so different to Shanghai, Chen considered Perth more a country garden town than a metropolis. On his second visit to Perth in March 2002, Chen arrived a week earlier than the rest of the delegation—Professor Zhou, the Vice Chancellor of Foreign Affairs and two of the exhibiting artists—to oversee the moving of the exhibition crates of Chinese fine art works through Perth customs and quarantine, and into the exhibition venue. Enjoying the beauty and serenity of my home, nestled in the hilly suburb of Gooseberry Hill on the outer reaches of the city,

Chen appreciated the relative freedom my Perth lifestyle offered him. He slipped naturally into my daily routine, delighting in the idea that he could stay in bed until seven-thirty in the morning instead of his usual six o'clock, and the simple pleasures of cooking, shopping and visiting friends when we were not busy setting up the exhibition. To Chen it might have appeared I had the perfect life, and he may have wondered why I would want to give it up and live in a densely crowded, polluted city of twenty million people. Living in a large detached, multi-level house, with city views, a twenty five metre swimming pool on a half-acre block, would, I imagine, have sent a powerful message to Chen that I was financially secure, (which I wasn't) and accustomed to soft comforts. At this time, Chen was divorced and lived with his parents and thirteen-year-old son in three rooms on the middle floor of an early twentieth-century, three-story tenement building, in the inner city sector known as the French quarter. Chen's family had originally owned all three floors of the building, called a shikumen, a form of tenement housing that is unique to Shanghai. However, during the Cultural Revolution all the family's worldly assets were confiscated, leaving them with just these three rooms. After the Cultural Revolution, many families received compensation for their losses or had their properties returned, but some families like Chen's received nothing. Comparing my lifestyle with his, it is no wonder Chen had reservations about my ability to cope with the university's on-campus hotel accommodation and a lifestyle that was so very different to the one he had experienced in Perth.

But as I often did when I wanted to get my own way, I would make little jokes and keep at him until he saw my way of thinking:

'but Chen there is no passion in paradise, Perth is beautiful yes but career-wise my opportunities are somewhat limited. You must help me to persuade Professor Zhou to give me a teaching job in the college.'

He knew what I meant. Although Chen loved the tranquillity and greenness of Perth it was a little too quiet for his liking. He missed the swarms of people and the buzz of Shanghai—a city already with a major international presence. Compared to

Shanghai, Perth would have appeared laid back, conservative, a little sterile, with practically no history.

‘Perth is nice for a holiday’ he would say, ‘nice for a holiday but!’

Not wanting to undermine Chen’s good opinion of me, yet at the same time wanting to prove that I was more worldly than he was giving me credit for, I attempted to counteract his concerns by freighting six boxes of personal effects to Shanghai at my own expense. I assured him that with my books, music, a few pieces of favourite chinaware (I even packed my Sheffield silver cutlery and some soft furnishings) I would be able to brighten up the utilitarian bedroom cum study of the four by four metre square box and adjoining bathroom that the hotel provided. I would be able to cope. Chen had read me wrong, or so I thought...

In disclosing some of the specifics of my personal history with Chen I show how memoir is a process of mindfulness. By highlighting selected specificities of our personal relational histories, I create a portrait of a lived life and demonstrate how relationships and knowledges of other/s evolve over time and, in our case, across geographical locations. In doing so, I foreground the importance of our relationships with others, and illustrate how personal knowledge of others influences and shapes both how we perceive other people, and how we imagine them to behave in alien settings and situations. Likewise, Chen’s understanding of how I would adapt to my living environment when moving to Shanghai was shaped by his previous relational encounters with western academics, and his impressions of the times we shared together in my home environment in Australia. This gave Chen a considerable advantage over me, whose experiences of the Mainland Chinese were somewhat limited. I had much to learn...

### **Attempting to make do**

Within a matter of weeks, I began to appreciate exactly what Chen meant. The dodgy plumbing was a nightmare: a leaky toilet bowl which left the bathroom floor continually wet, blockages that required an adept hand at wielding a plunger or else. Then there was remembering not to switch the hot water jug, toaster and iron on at the same time, or risk fusing the circuit breakers. The onerous chore of washing one’s delicates and not-so-delicates in baby pink or blue plastic bowls, and hanging

them over the bath to dry for sometimes days at a time. The mundanity of bread and jam for breakfast, as my stomach could not accustom itself to the more typical local breakfast of rice porridge, boiled egg, pickled vegetables and pieces of sour bean curd washed down with a glass of warm milk. Such things were a constant irritation but were minor in comparison to not being able to cook or entertain friends. There was a communal kitchen on each floor of the hotel, equipped with sink, fridge, microwave, a few cooking utensils and a stovetop with several gas burners. However, the foreign teachers rarely cleaned up after themselves, and when they did the place still looked grubby and had a disagreeable smell of left over cabbage. It was nearly impossible to have friends over, as there was only my bed and one office chair to sit on. There was no common lounge to relax in, and if there had been, would I have used it? Most of the other foreign teachers in the hotel were young American graduates, the rest were close to or into retirement; they were pleasant enough but we had little in common. When teachers got together in any number, talk would generally deteriorate into negative cultural bashings against the local students and teachers. So apart from a retired Scandinavian couple, I kept my distance from them.

When I wasn't enjoying the occasional night out with Chen or other Chinese friends I would eat in a nearby restaurant. The proprietor and her husband treated me kindly, like family, as they did all their regular customers. Even on those nights when the restaurant was full, if you were a regular they would squeeze you in somewhere. But after a while, the novelty began to wear thin. The constant negotiation as to what to eat, the sameness of the cooking smells to a non-Chinese nose, became a trial. I craved simple food, without bones or sauces; meals that did not smell of star anise, Chinese five spice or sesame oil; food that begged to be eaten with a knife and fork...

Though he had warned me, Chen felt guilty about my living situation. My efforts to personalise my room seemed to only reinforce Chen's belief that I was a little too genteel for such basic living conditions. He made comparisons between my efforts, what he called 'little bird nesting', to the other foreign teachers in the university who made little or no effort to decorate their rooms. Why would they? Many of the

foreign teachers in the hotel were teaching Oral English and were in China mainly to travel and learn about Chinese culture. At the end of the academic year, most would return home. It did not help matters that sometimes I would whinge about my situation, enough to make Chen feel obliged to do something about it. For four months, Chen badgered the university leaders week after week, seeking their permission for me to have my own apartment, and they kept refusing, until finally they relented and gave into my request. What piqued my interest about this whole affair was the stamina required to negotiate the hierarchical chain of command, and that this continual dance to get anything done was considered a normal state of affairs. I wanted to give up at the first hurdle. I saw it as a huge investment of time and energy and just not worth it. Unlike Chen, who appeared to take it all in his stride, and stuck at the task working away at the constrictive threads of the university's ruling until they unravelled into nothingness.

University policy dictated that most foreign teachers should live in the university hotel for the duration of their contracts. And, although there were exceptions to the rule, these were generally foreign teachers employed by an offshore partner of a joint university venture to deliver a specifically designed undergraduate course with the local university. Such teachers worked more than the standard twelve forty-five minute teaching periods per week. In return, they had appreciably higher salaries than the base award of 3,500 Yuan per month (approximately \$550 AUD) and the provision of a rental allowance for their own private accommodation off campus.

### **A taste of double happiness—an erotic encounter**

Once Chen had secured me a rental apartment in late February, I began to enjoy my new life living in the suburbs with other Chinese families. On the third floor of a seven-story apartment block, bordered by lushly established gardens and an exercise courtyard designed for the elderly rather than for children, my two bedroom, two bathroom home was in a compound with twenty or so similar style apartment blocks. Recently built, these independently owned dwellings, like others emerging across the metropolitan areas, were mostly owned or rented by what was officially recognised as a rapidly expanding moneyed social class.

It felt good to haggle with the local vendors in the fresh food markets and cook in my own kitchen, even if it only had the standard Chinese two burner stove top with no oven. Few in the compound spoke much English, but they were friendly enough and made me welcome, much more so than the staff in the university hotel, apart from the cleaners who had been very kind to me. Adults and children alike seemed bemused by the foreign bird living amongst them and were always ready to say ‘hello teacher’, or practice a word or two of conversational English. It began to feel like home.

Newly built, with me as the first occupier, the apartment’s plumbing was tricky, but the maintenance man showed me how to treat it right, so that I controlled it, rather than it controlling me. Chen and friends popped in regularly. Most weeks I had friends over for dinner. There we would be, all squeezed up around my metre square two hundred-year-old Qing Ming style table, that I had purchased along with five accompanying chairs from an antique furniture factory run by an artist friend of a friend, on the outskirts of the city. We sat eating, talking, eating, laughing, eating, enjoying each other’s company well into the night. One evening, whilst having dinner with Chen, Professor Zhou, an artist friend and a curator friend from Perth who was staying with me for a couple of weeks, there was a knock at the door. It was the security guard from the gate, asking Professor Zhou to move his car.

‘How did he know that the car belonged to one of my visitors?’ I exclaimed.

‘He knows everything’ responded Chen. ‘You are the foreign bird. Everyone knows your comings and goings.’

We laughed. It just never crossed my mind that the guard’s behaviour was anything more than a genuine care for the residents, including this foreign bird. I no longer felt alien—displaced. Now that I was working alongside Yue Wan I had begun to feel appreciated; a local western arts agency had approached me to design and facilitate an arts management workshop for their staff. Stability and happiness seemed within reach...

In writing about the specificities of the domestic and private sides of my relationship with Chen I draw my readers’ attention to the way in which the underlying

fascination that binds me to the Chinese is a relational one that began with Chen. China would have been little more than a short interlude, a pleasant memory if it was not for our meeting on the first day I arrived in Shanghai in 1999. Looking back, I now see my relationship with Chen as a kind of erotic encounter; a meeting that was significant. It was one of those rare occasions where you meet someone and it is as if you have always known them. While I had gone to China with little thought of initiating any collaborative exchanges, on meeting Chen such an idea seemed to manifest naturally. That is, from our first meeting I began to imagine a whole world of possibilities—a new way of living that felt stimulating and aroused in me a sense of the erotic.

My erotic encounter with Chen was not of a sexual nature. Chen and I were never a romantic couple. Our relationship was what Nancy Mairs spoke of as ‘an erotics of place and space’ (1994, 114); it was the continual performance of two people involved in living that was pleasurable—whether in Shanghai savouring a delicious meal together in Chen’s much-loved restaurant the *Lu Bo Lang*, famous for its snacks called ‘*Chuan Dian*’;<sup>20</sup> or Chen with me in Perth marvelling at its wide open spaces and relaxed lifestyle in contrast to his professional and personal life in Shanghai. It is these visceral, sensory and emotional experiences that tie my early conceptualisation and understanding of China to Chen. It is the performance of living that embraces and suggests an erotic tone in my work. These are erotic moments, but ones that are grounded in spirit—my past—Chen’s past. Such moments are not diminished by the rawness of sexuality, but add to the fabric of a lived life and the treasuring of a special relationship.

Tuan says that, ‘[i]ntimacy between persons does not require knowing the details of each other’s life; it grows in the moments of true awareness and exchange’ (1977, 141). Intimate moments cannot be planned. By experiencing close moments with Chen over time I came to appreciate that the Chinese people have their own way of seeing and being, that they have a personal and historical legacy that is different, but not less than mine. As I reveal intimate and exotic moments of my daily routine,

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<sup>20</sup> Small traditional snacks shaped in the form of flowers, fruits and animals

beyond my professional life as a teacher, I resist collapsing the histories of my Chinese protagonists into a homogenised narrative of Chinese teaching and learning spaces. I destabilise ethnocentric notions of racial difference and one's specialness as a foreign expert, as well as offering an intimate space in which the reader may connect with my experiences and emotions. I expose my underbelly, to show what it feels like to be relationally close or distant to one's Chinese colleagues. In particular, I foreground my close friendship with Chen, and to a lesser extent Yue Wan, and my relations with Feng Hong, to interrogate my own vulnerabilities and personal beliefs and to highlight that it is relationships more than anything else that shape the outcomes of our social reality as foreign teachers, be it in public or private spaces. It is the specificity of our relations (Kondo 1990; Sotirin 2010) and what Abu-Lughod calls "ethnographies of the particular" (2006, 160) that enables us to see how we are all knottily entangled (Fine 1994) with each other—self is always slip-stitched into the other. Within this slip-stitching, re-making, retelling of my erotic encounters with Chen I discover how our relationship like most relationships were bound together by experiential strands of similarities and differences. This realisation, suggests Audre Lorde (1984/2007, 56), gives rise to new knowledge, a border-crossing, a foundational between place where I discover what I do not share with the other, and in doing so my fear of difference is reduced.

### **The relational eye—the art of seeing**

How dependent we are on our relationships, to make sense of who we are and where we are going! When our relationships, for whatever reason, begin to change, our lives are changed also.

The last weeks of the art college's third trimester were interrupted by the arrival of the week-long May national day holidays. As with other national holidays I came to experience in Shanghai, they did not appear to follow a logical sequence. Yes, I had a vague idea of when a holiday was due, but the exact date a holiday began and ended and how this affected my weekly teaching schedule remained a mystery until a few days beforehand. Chen and I had planned to meet mid-week of the holiday for lunch to discuss the feasibility of a new cross-cultural exchange proposal. The week before this, with the permission of Professor Zhou, I had organised to go to



Shenzhen, a major city in Guangdong Province, to deliver two workshops for a western cultural arts agency whose headquarters were in Shanghai. On the Monday before I left for Shenzhen, Chen complained of not feeling well and went home early. On the Wednesday, still feeling ill, as those around him told me later, Chen returned to his office to continue working on a special project for the university.

The Foreign Affairs staff, unlike the majority of academics, worked throughout the calendar year receiving and hosting foreign academics and international delegations, as well as organising overseas visits for the university's leaders and academic staff. For the five years I had known Chen it was not unusual for him to work on a weekend or a public holiday. On one occasion during the Shanghai summer of 2000, the college having recently amalgamated with four other universities as part of the *211 Project*, Chen forewent most of his annual vacation to supervise the packing and transportation of the college's belongings to the new university campus, more than an hours' drive away. After the relocation, Chen's position was absorbed into the central Foreign Affairs department, which serviced all of the university's many faculties, with an understanding that the college was his main but not only portfolio. Just working for Professor Zhou with his numerous international projects and academic exchanges would have been more than a full time job for anyone, without having to undertake work from other faculties across the university or the Vice Chancellery. Chen's workload seemed to increase considerably after the amalgamation between the university and the college. Now that I was living in Shanghai I could see for myself just how irregular Chen's working hours were; too often he was working late into the night on a project or entertaining some delegation or other. And yet, even after such a gruelling day, there he would be the next morning bright and early, smiling with a warm word or a joke with no hint of a grumble or complaint. In a frequent, though rather one-sided topic of conversation between us, I would try to reason with Chen that he was juggling too many projects, working too many hours. Chen's response was always the same. He would shrug his shoulders, saying he enjoyed the freedom of not having a nine-to-five desk job like most of his colleagues. That the long hours and heavy workload were the cost he was prepared to pay for some independence. Later I was to reflect on his words—did Chen realise what the real cost was to be?

During the three days I was away in Shenzhen, Chen and I said little to each other apart from a short phone call confirming our plans for the coming week and that he had collected my wages so I would not be without money during the holiday. It pains me to think that even at his lowest ebb Chen was still thinking about others rather than his own health. On Monday, the second weekday of the holiday, I called Chen on his mobile. He answered quickly enough, except his voice was subdued—hesitant, with no trace of his usual teasing. Mumbling that he was feeling a little poorly, Chen said that he was being driven to the hospital by his brother to see a doctor, it was just a cold, nothing to worry about, really, he would call me later. The university had its own medical centre, but on the couple of occasions when I had needed to see a doctor, Chen had suggested that I attend one of the public hospitals, or better still the Number One Hospital, a private hospital for foreigners and Chinese, arguing that although it cost more, it was a better service. So going to the hospital for a minor ailment seemed entirely natural to me. Even though Chen's behaviour suggested things were not right, I did not pay it much attention.

When Chen did not call back I dismissed it as him needing to take a bit of a well-earned rest. God knows he deserved it. But when Wednesday then Thursday came with no word, his mobile and home telephone going unanswered, I became anxious. But who could I call? Yue Wan and Chen were not close friends so I felt awkward asking for her help. Both Chen's wife of two years and his parents spoke little English, and my Mandarin was non-existent. Eventually Wei Wei, a young teacher and mutual friend, phoned Chen's parents on my behalf. Chen's father was confident that Chen would be fine, it was just a bad bout of flu, I should not worry, Chen would be home soon. But as the days continued, Chen's health did not improve.

Because of the change in the timetabling due to the national holiday, Yue Wan and I took our usual Monday class on the following Saturday. After class we took lunch together, and the conversation turned to Chen's illness. As young college graduates, Yue Wan and Chen had started work together in the college more than twenty years before. In the early days Yue Wan's husband also worked in the college and had been friends with Chen until he had left academia for a job with better prospects in

the government sector. These days Yue Wan and Chen did not move in the same social circle and so were not close. Yue Wan disclosed that before class, she had been chatting with the office staff and had discovered that Chen was seriously ill with chronic Hepatitis C, due to a contaminated blood transfusion many years before. Shaken, I fought to keep my emotions in check. I could not believe what I was hearing. How could Chen, one of my closest friends, keep such a terrible secret from me—why? I felt crushed—enraged—wretched. Completely out of my depth emotionally, I did not know how to react. Yue Wan on the other hand had known that Chen had a liver problem because of him being seriously ill some fifteen years earlier, but what she had not realised was that Chen had not fully recovered from the disease.

Chen was a strong man, he would get better, Yue Wan confidently assured me.

‘You must understand Joy that Chen will need quite a few months of rest when he comes out of hospital. His lifestyle will also need to change.’

I imagine that Yue Wan was trying to prepare me for the likelihood that even if Chen did recover, such an illness was bound to have an impact on his lifestyle and our relationship; that Chen would probably retire early and become more dependent on his inner family circle for his care. Once Chen’s liberty was curtailed, I knew enough of his family life and personal circumstances to know that a foreign friend, no matter how close, would have no place in his new life. I felt torn between concern for Chen’s health and fear that no matter what happened, I would lose him. And, where would that leave me? Although its form was as yet nameless, death shadowed our horizons...

Yue Wan kept me relatively up-to-date with Chen’s progress. It amazed me that for a man who kept his own counsel, so much personal information was known about him, and was freely spoken about in the college. It appeared to be common knowledge amongst the college’s administration staff that Chen’s health had deteriorated in recent years, not because he told them—I later found out from his wife that he had not even told her—but that it was noted in his medical files. My

doubts about the integrity and personal values of Professor Zhou started as a little niggle that would just not go away, and grew as Chen's illness progressed. He was someone whom, until then, I had always respected and admired. How could he have knowingly permitted Chen's workload to increase to the extent that it had, when he must have known it would compromise Chen's health? Why had he not made sure that Chen's work duties at the very least were limited to the college? Sometime later I voiced my concerns to an artist friend who was also a close friend of Professor Zhou's. But even he had no answer for me, other than to say that I was bound to feel this way, because Chen and I were close as friends, not just work colleagues.

Whilst I believe that Chen and I were close friends, there is no way of knowing how he understood or interpreted our friendship. The memories I embroider together to describe the complexity and depth of a relationship that crosses cultural, socio-political, psychological and individual differences have evolved from preconceived ideas of what I consider to be a professional and emotionally close relationship. As I have inferred in this and previous chapters, my early understanding of China and my relations with the Chinese were all intimately tied up in my relationship with Chen. Although I had some idea as to how Chen's illness and imminent death would affect my future life in Shanghai, it was not clear to me then how dependent I was on him for maintaining good relations with my Chinese colleagues. In placing my trust in Chen's judgement, I was oblivious to the manner in which our relationship coloured and restricted my perceptions of other Chinese during that time. Haraway writes, '[v]ision is *always* a question of the power to see.... we are not immediately present to ourselves' (1988, 585). My first impressions of China are founded on Chen's construction of Chinese reality, a partial viewpoint of what being Chinese represented for him. This notion of Chen being complicit, innocently or otherwise, in shaping my early perceptions of all things Chinese between 1999 and 2004 illustrates Haraway's (1988, 586) argument, that how we see is multidimensional, and how we understand is always a matter of unfinished business: unique, ever present and always incomplete, we are continually engaged in reworking ourselves in an effort to know more fully our place within the scheme of things, an endeavour that we are never able to complete. It is this lack of completeness, this inability to be totally submerged and all knowing in one position or another is what opens us up to

relationships with others; relationships where we can see through their eyes without professing to be them (Haraway 1988, 586). How I saw Chinese social reality, initially through Chen and later, through other Chinese colleagues and students, formed partial ideas of what it means to be Chinese. In writing about some particulars of my relationships with my Chinese colleagues, especially Chen, I highlight different ways of seeing and being Chinese, and I show how some people's ways of seeing and being have a stronger resonance with us than others. As professionals, we are continually open to and influenced by our relationships with other people in a multitude of ways which shape our professional practice and the ways in which we perceive our reality at any given time.

### **Endings and beginnings**

With Chen quarantined within days of being in the hospital, our only personal communication was a couple of minutes of a morning on our mobile phones. I used these moments as a way to do what I could to normalise Chen's day, to make me feel that I was doing something to help him. Chen and I would chat a little about work or make fun about my holding the fort while he was away; anything to jolly him along and to encourage him to get well. My whole world revolved around those few minutes each day. The mornings that Chen was more animated and could laugh and make small talk were bearable—just; but mostly the pain and the fear of what was to come would smother Chen's voice, stripping away all threads of hope. Those days were bleak.

It was left to Chen's wife and Mr Chu, Chen's closest friend and colleague, to take turns nursing him in the hospital. I felt a little better, knowing that people who cared about him were close by, doing all that they could. I assumed that there were no visitors apart from close family, as no one told me anything to the contrary and I did not know how to ask.<sup>21</sup> Months later, I discovered that quite a few of Chen's colleagues had gone to visit him in the hospital. Just about everyone in the college and foreign affairs office knew that Chen and I were close, yet nobody thought to ask me, or even mention whether Chen wanted me to visit him or not. Mr Chu in his own way did his best to keep me informed about Chen's health and would pass on

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<sup>21</sup> This inability of mine to speak out at times is explained in chapter five

little messages between us, but his English was poor and I was loath to burden him more. I felt I was one of Chen's closest friends, but somehow this seemed to count for little in the college.

Closeness is relational and culturally defined, and may be expressed and interpreted differently in different cultures. Maybe, as a foreigner I was considered too close to Chen by Professor Zhou and my Chinese colleagues. It could also have been my own expectations complicated the issue, caught between some inner struggle to remain professional and aloof and an overwhelming emotional need to visit Chen in the hospital.

I have written about these moments of discomfort and grief to articulate the ways of difference between us rather than an attempt to right a perceived wrong. The recognition that my understanding of events in China is partial and situated, limited by my position, experience and relationships, encourages me to move beyond the dualist dichotomy of insider/outsider positions and reflect on the context of the situation. As Trinh writes:

Words too close to life expose. They share with the readers an intimacy that demands an equal laying bare and commitment on their part. Placing oneself level with the body in writing, is, among other things, putting one's finger on the obvious, on difference, on prohibition, on life. (1991, 130)

Goodbye, for us, was a few hushed words on the phone:

‘No hope Joy. No hope for me.’

I tried to make light of it, told Chen he was being silly and that he would pull through, but this time there was no fooling anyone.

Three days later, around eleven on a Monday morning Chen slipped away whilst no one was looking.

When I entered the college the next morning the first thing I noticed was that all photographic traces of Chen had been removed from the noticeboards. Nobody spoke about him to me or referred to him, apart from Yue Wan and Wei Wei. It was as if Chen had never been. Professor Zhou neither mentioned him to me nor inquired

as to how I was feeling, although it was plainly obvious by our demeanour that we were both taking Chen's death badly.

Where was the grief? Me—I was beyond grief. Angry that no-one had realised just how ill Chen was, or had they? Angry with Professor Zhou for (in my perception) not caring nor doing enough to help Chen. Mad as hell with Chen for keeping his illness from me. How could he leave me like this? How could I continue to live in China without him...

The following Saturday, on the way to the funeral parlour in Xuhui district, Yue Wan, I and my son Adon, who had arrived in Shanghai two nights before, make a small detour to buy flowers. The whole street is crammed from one end to the other with florists all catering exclusively for funerals. I want something special for Chen, something a little understated—maybe a small posy of white roses; but all the floral tributes appear grandiose, not at all to my taste. Feeling overwhelmed by the extravagance of it all, and not knowing how to begin to explain what I want, I let Yue Wan take charge; she pulls me into one of the less busy florists where I purchase a sheath of white and yellow chrysanthemums fastened to a wooden A-frame easel. After making note of the funeral arrangements with the florist, Yue Wan asks if I would like to write a message of sympathy. I feel a little foolish—I am perturbed about making such a public gesture of my emotions. Still, taking the florist's offered calligraphy brush, I write on a metre-long strip of white paper 'Follow the path of the heart'. The sentiment of the words are from a small book of quotes that a friend had bought me the year before as a farewell gift; the words are attributed to the teachings of Don Juan, a Mesoamerican shaman, the main protagonist of Carlos Castaneda's semi auto-biographical novels written in the late sixties and seventies. Three weeks earlier when Chen had first started to feel unwell I had e-mailed these words to him, with the suggestion that he should take more care of himself and to stop putting the wellbeing of others before his own. Little did I know that he would take my advice so literally...

A five minute walk and we find ourselves outside the Longhua Funeral Parlour. The funeral parlour is huge, warren-like, with more than thirty mourning halls scattered across its entirety. But today all I remember is a smallish one-storey building with a low pitched slate roof surrounded by an inner and outer courtyard. Severe pollution tends to age buildings quickly in Shanghai, so that what looks ancient can be less than a decade old. So while my impression is one of an old dwelling, it is probably the blackness of the bricks and a mix of nineteenth century English and French classical architectural styles which clouds my perception, creating a strange allure of faded genteelness with more than a hint of gothic terror. Nonetheless, though the parlour has an unsettling mood, there is a sense of grace—of haunting beauty. Mercifully I am immune to the harsh realities of what would have been over thirty back-to-back funerals all happening in one space, with mourners and funeral staff jostling to get in and out. I see and understand little, such is my grief.

In the outer courtyard people outside the immediate family are milling around. Yue Wan points to this or that person, explaining their relationship to Chen. Present are office staff from the old college, but from the new campus there appear to be very few people I recognise. Wei Wei is not here. Discovering she is pregnant on the day of Chen's death, she believes it to be bad luck for her unborn child to attend the funeral. I look around expecting to see Professor Zhou but he is nowhere to be seen. The Vice Chancellor and Secretary General (the latter had known Chen since he was a young man, and both men had visited Perth with him and stayed in my home) dressed in their business suits, make a point of removing their ties on first entering the courtyard—a gesture that touches me to the heart. Yue Wan places a small gift pack in my hand. It contains a small patch of black cloth with a pin to wear on my sleeve, a white face cloth and the strangest of things—a small bar of chocolate. Mr Chu is close by. For the five years I have known Mr Chu he has been very poor on his feet, but this does not prevent him from hobbling in and out of the courtyard, carrying floral tribute after floral tribute, piling them up along the back wall. The wall is full to overflowing with a mass of yellow and white chrysanthemums quivering under the burden of so many words of emotion, sympathy, friendship, love. And yet, within a split second of an intensely spiritual moment, I see my handwriting in its clumsiness, its lack of grace, as it lies singularly exposed amidst



the fusion of calligraphic curves elegantly formed by Chinese fingers. Even in death, it appears the nature of my grief has no place...

Lost in his own pain, Chen's teenage son from a former marriage stands alone in the inner courtyard at the altar, burning paper money. I am a stranger to him, there is nothing I can say or do. The mourning hall on the left has a door that opens on to a small sitting room where Chen's wife and his brothers are seated. Chen's wife comes out and takes me inside, leaving Adon behind with Yue Wan. Chen's brothers sit opposite Chen's wife. It seems strange that I know so much about them and yet we have never met. There is no eye contact between us, no indication that Chen's brothers know who I am. Chen's wife and I sit quietly holding hands, no words, just seeking some comfort in each other. Outsiders together in our grief, she as Chen's second wife and I as his foreign friend.

*Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi svaha!*

Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond Bodhi, rejoice! (Heart Sutra)<sup>22</sup>

The chanting of Buddhist monks, a monotone hum punctuated by the muted 'ching' of a percussion instrument instils a sombre mood around the open casket, lying in the mourning hall on the right. Such a mournful sound, it soothes my senses but breaks my heart...

One by one, family, friends and colleagues alike approach and bow before the open casket to pay their last respects. Looking beyond the keening veil of mourners gathered around Chen's body, I become transfixed by the somewhat careless arrangement of his favourite brown brogues, so poignant in their disarray. As I move forward to stand at the base of the casket, it is the spectacle of Chen's feet that continues to hold my tear-filled gaze. There is a Buddhist custom whereby the feet of the dead are bound together for fear the body becomes possessed by evil spirits and attempts to re-enter the world of the living. While I am unsure whether Chen's feet were tied together, remembrance of this custom helps explain the impression they made on me. It was as if the last fragile remains of his earthly presence lingered here at this point, effacing any emotional desire to cast my gaze further. Whatever

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<sup>22</sup> Heart Sutra translated by Truc Huy

the reason, in those heart-crushing moments, I draw comfort from those brogue-shod feet; they reach out and embrace my affection, calm my imagination, spare me the pain of having to see Chen's body ravaged beyond recognition by his sudden and final battle with hepatitis.

### **Life without Mr 'Fix It'**

In the weeks leading up to Chen's death, Yue Wan and I had been working on a project-based arts administration unit for the new academic year. As well as this, we were intending to repeat the two units we had successfully taught together. Yet, within days of Chen's demise, Yue Wan telephoned to tell me about a problem with our unit's online enrolments. Students had reported that our units were listed on the university online server under the names of other teachers than Yue Wan and myself. She had checked with the college's administration staff, thinking that it was a technical error, but no, there was no mention of her or me taking any classes officially for the following academic year. Yue Wan was considered as a permanent employee, so it was not going to be a problem for her whether she was officially included in the unit or not; for me, it was a different matter. As my salary was paid by the Foreign Affairs department, my teaching hours needed to be formally documented. Yue Wan suggested that I should go and sort it out with Feng Hong immediately, and arrange for my name to be officially included in the unit.

I was aware that there were far more teachers than classes available in our department. And that this was possibly a paper exercise to ensure everyone was seen as having enough teaching hours, regardless of whether they taught the units or not; but by the time I had stomped down two flights of stairs to the department's office I was more than a little worked up. Not only did I feel overwrought at the loss of Chen, but I was also at my wit's end with Feng Hong's scheming and what I perceived as constant underhanded behaviour. Rightly or wrongly, I felt personally slighted by her latest action. With no Chen or Yue Wan to temper my thinking or intervene on my behalf, I barged into the office. As luck would have it, Feng Hong was not at her desk. The staff member present did not know where she was or when she would be back. Not bothering to disguise my contempt of Feng Hong, uncharacteristically, I left a non-too-polite message with him. I said, with a few

choice expletives, that I had had enough of Feng Hong's games and demanded that my name and Yue Wan's be formally recognised on our unit's documentation immediately or else! Poor man, he did not know where to look; with humble apologies, he promised he would find Feng Hong and get her to rectify the problem straight away; I must not distress myself, he advised. Later in the afternoon Feng Hong telephoned me at home and was most apologetic, of course she would sort it out, it was just a small mistake. Over the following weeks Yue Wan continued to check with the administration staff; they reported no changes were forthcoming from Feng Hong. I was furious, but what could I do? Foreign Affairs were preparing my new contract with an increase in salary. I would just have to work it out later with Professor Zhou, or so I thought...

Whilst teaching I had continued to work with Chen on some of Professor Zhou's international exchanges. With Chen's untimely demise, Professor Zhou and I were plunged into a messy situation, the ramifications of which affected our work and relationship. Neither the college nor Foreign Affairs had any personnel with Chen's experience and knowledge of the college's international relations, nor Chen's connections or skill at negotiating the university's highly complex hierarchical chain of command to make things happen. Chen had seemingly left no paper trail of his work and his computer files were password protected and thus not accessible. So not only was there no replacement for Chen, there was no knowing what stage of planning or execution any of the projects were at.

I understood little of the socio-political system in which Chen worked. Yet I see Chen's actions in protecting his work not as an attempt to make himself indispensable, but as motivated by a lack of trust in his Chinese colleagues. What was (is) apparent to me is that there were considerable differences in the ways he communicated between his colleagues and myself. As I mentioned earlier, Chen did not easily trust people; this is understandable when considering the hardship and social stigma experienced by educated middle class families such as Chen's under Chairman Mao. In such conditions one's survival would depend on learning to keep one's thoughts and feelings to oneself. As Chambers contends '[i]f you lack your own space, you have to get along in the network of already established forces and

representations' (1993, 193). From my limited perspective I can appreciate how Chen's feelings of mistrust may have encouraged him to be restrained in his dealings with the college's staff. The fact that I was not Chinese, did not share the same history, cultural values and socio/cultural restraints could help explain why he was able to express himself more freely with me a non-Chinese; a relationship whereby he appeared to have the confidence to disagree and show his emotion without fear of feeling judged or compromised in some way or other.

Out of a deep sense of loyalty to Chen, I spent a month mapping out a detailed management brief of all the projects we had worked on together for Professor Zhou. I felt that at least this would provide Professor Zhou with a firm grasp of where we were in the planning and implementation stages of the projects. But I knew little of the intricacies of how things are done in the university. I found it near impossible to move our work forward or find anyone to assist me. When Professor Zhou instructed his assistants to do things for me, they did not always do what was required, and when questioned, would deny any knowledge of the work. I was totally frustrated, and within a matter of weeks Professor Zhou and I were at loggerheads with each other.

In hindsight I realise that the way I was behaving was asking for trouble. It is not as if I was unfamiliar with the culturally appropriate way to deal with one's Chinese boss. I had explored differences in leadership styles between the west and China as part of my masters fieldwork, and had a couple of papers published on just that.<sup>23</sup> But these things I had written about were theoretical concepts that worked fine on paper but not in reality. What I failed to consider was the context of such relations in a situation that involved me as a foreigner in a subordinate role. As I was about to discover, armchair theory is not the same as lived experience. I had become overly reliant on Chen to make things happen according to my ideas, so without him I was stuck fast. The reality of the situation was that I had changed little. I had not accommodated myself to the Chinese way of doing things, rather, Chen had

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<sup>23</sup> Scott 2006, 2004.

accommodated me. In the past, if I was displeased, it was Chen who faced my displeasure and Chen who reworked my ideas and requests in a more palatable form for Professor Zhou.

Maybe if I had not been so forceful in my dealings with Professor Zhou things would have turned out differently; if I had not been so zealous in my desire to protect Chen's public image, as if I was bound to him by some debt of honour; if I had been more attuned to Professor Zhou's position as the head of the college, and remembered that as his subordinate I should have been more respectful and deferential, not openly challenging his decisions in front of others—so many ifs. More importantly, I failed to comprehend that I was not the only one grieving. Because I did not understand the Professor's behaviour, could not reconcile it with what I understood as grief, I mistakenly believed he had none. My anger at what I saw as a lack in him only made matters worse. We were both too close to Chen's life and death; too closely interwoven in a relationship that was dependent on Chen to make it work. Having no language to bridge the lack of knowing between us there was nowhere to go—we were as strangers. Six weeks later I was without a job.

Cultural relations are messily complex. How I write about the complexity, contradictions and ambiguity of my relationships with the Chinese says much about how we each understand the different culture and situations we find ourselves in. It is this attention to the specific conceptualisation of difference that shapes the way we write and frame discovered knowledge (Wheatley 1994, 407–408). Memoir has enabled me to highlight my difficulties in understanding Chinese academics such as Professor Zhou and Feng Hong, who see the world differently. It has provided a methodological vehicle through which I have interrogated strands of multiple and overlapping relationships and experiences that surrounded my relations with Chen and other Chinese; relationships that, by their closeness or distance significantly influenced how I saw and related to the people I worked with. I discovered that not everything I experienced in China can be attributed to cultural or racial differences, but rather, my position in the art college was tempered by relationships and the various ways my foreignness was understood.

When auto-ethnographers write about the particulars of everyday life, it is not as a way of extrapolating generalisations from such experiences, but to unravel how global and local influences manifest through the specificities of people's behaviour, the specificities 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 chapter 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 written about personal experiences with Chen and others to foreground inclusion, exclusion, contradiction and the messiness of everyday life, in asking the question: Who is the Chinese other? Who is the foreigner? What are they to teach each other? I have challenged the scholarly pursuit 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.

### **Coda**

Chen's open casket seemed to me such a barbaric practice. A man so proud of his youthful appearance, so private in his character, it felt wrong that his broken body be presented as some kind of public spectacle. I saw no value in such a macabre practice, however plausible an explanation there might have been. More than a year later, before returning to Perth after a second year of teaching, I was asked by a close Chinese friend of Chen's and mine if I would visit her husband in the hospital. In his late fifties, a few years older than Chen, he had been battling Hepatitis C for a year. Visiting him the night before he died, what I saw was a man at his most vulnerable, in the embrace of death—his body emaciated to the point of no return. I shall never forget his voice, so soft, more breath than actual words. The effort it would have taken him to greet me, his wife's friend and yet a stranger! Here I was saying goodbye to a man I had never met before, in his most final and private moments and yet, I had been unable to do the same with Chen. This experience enabled me to feel more at peace with Chen's demise, to be thankful that although he had been in great pain he had not lingered long.

Seven months after Chen's death and a few days before winter solstice (the Chinese believe that the most auspicious time for burying ashes and honouring one's ancestors is just before or on winter solstice) Chen's wife, her sister, his son and I finally put Chen's ashes to rest.

As the cemetery is more than an hour's drive from the city centre, Chen's wife has hired a mini bus and driver to take us. During the journey Chen's son and I sit together making small talk as he keeps his fingers busy making lots of little boats, using origami techniques on golden-yellow funeral money.

'Why are you making so many?' I enquired.

'So that dad will have plenty of money for his needs in the afterlife,' Chen's son replied.

'How much money does he need, are you trying to turn him into a millionaire?' I say, and seeing the funny side of it, we both begin to laugh and start to exchange amusing stories about his father.

When we finally arrive at the cemetery, Chen's sister-in-law goes off to locate Chen's plot amongst what looks like thousands upon thousands of metre-square tombs, each with its grey marble headstone complete with portrait of the deceased. We three go to collect Chen's ashes from the locker room, where all the ashes of the cemetery's occupants are stored before being laid in their final resting place. I have since read in the local newspapers that there are literally thousands upon thousands of uncollected boxes of ashes in cemetery locker rooms across the major cities of China. I find it hard to imagine—thousands of people never laid to rest. Carrying Chen's ashes in a small wooden container not much bigger than my jewellery box, we make our way to Chen's tomb.

In biting cold and wind, Chen's wife places his ashes in one of the two cavities adjacent to each other. In the second cavity that will later be her resting place, we each place a gift, his favourite grey polo-neck jumper, CDs, paper money, some of the origami boats and other little treasures. As we close his tomb, I lay a posy of white roses, Chen's wife and his son make an offering of food, and burn the last of

the money and the boats. We stand there together, son, wife and friend—strangers  
fleetingly joined together by our love and memories of a good man.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Cultural Novice: Teacher and Student Relations and Confusions

#### **An act of re-discovery: Wild mind groping in the gap**

Within temporal gap ensnared I.

Where silence screams

sound but a shadow be.

In darkly death mood linger.

Groping in the gloom

wild mind stirs seeking answer

tearing illusion of veil.

Wild mind touching harmonious surrender.

Head and shoulders bowed.

Eyes—fingers positioned

working ‘*chin wen*’ sewing silence—sound.

Fragile threads—time—shuttle back and forth.

Tenderness deliberate—embroidering voices—flow.

Stitching—needling way forward.

Applying ‘*tuan chen*’ reconnecting voices—old—new.

Piercing—pulling—looping—entwining—close.

Pearly voices glide across silky reach

plumped—vital—shimmering

infinite lustrous minute seed pods.

Intimately embroidered surfaces emerge through gap.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Author’s poetry revised from the original in Scott and Grellier (2012, 59).  
Chinese embroidery terms ‘*Chin wen*’ – short and long stitches,  
‘*Tuan chen*’ – a Peking knot similar to a French knot.

In the previous chapter I drew attention to some of the intimate specificities of my relationship with Chen. In doing so, I illustrated how the professional and the personal are messily entangled and how it is nearly impossible to keep them separate, although we may think otherwise. I have also shown how being relationally close to a colleague shapes one's understanding of reality and the way we communicate with those around us.

In this chapter I explore my professional and personal encounters with some of my Chinese students, foregrounding one relationship in particular, to reveal the intricacies of teacher student relations operating within a transnational setting. I aim here to disrupt the stereotypical representations to be found in much of the transnational literature which frames Chinese students as passive learners.

### **Prelude**

Based on actual events, the main narrative threads running throughout this chapter, though fictionalised, unravel the behaviours of some of my Chinese students caught up in a cheating incident. Transformed from e-mail letters into poetry, the poetic narratives are sewn together from a body of personal correspondence sent to me by my students over a six-day period.<sup>25</sup> The poems in the narrative attributed to the voice of Xu Bu Chan are his words, reworked to capture the experiential moments we shared. My intention in using the poetic form to recreate his voice is to make visible the essence of feeling—Xu Bu Chan's and mine—remembering that although the words are his, the interpretation of the events that transpired between us, and the meaning I take from his words and behaviour can only be mine. The chorus of poetic voices near the end of the chapter represent the voices of my other students; they also are stitched together from their own words; they have been reassembled, edited, and mixed here and there, to convey the complexity and multifarious nature of their emotions. The students' words, emerging from the heart—a gathering of cacophonous, euphonic and empathic voices—speak out about the penalties I attempt to impose on them.

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<sup>25</sup> At one time their teacher and now a researcher, I have a sense of responsibility for these students and have thus changed their names and location to protect their anonymity.

In their third year of an undergraduate business degree at a high-ranking Chinese university, the students who speak in the following pages were enrolled in a twenty-week business communication unit I was teaching in Shanghai, my next teaching position after leaving the art college the previous semester. This was a unit I had to design and coordinate, with no prior knowledge of my students' language abilities or areas of speciality. At the close of the semester it was brought to my attention by one of my students, Xu Bu Chan, that significant numbers of his classmates, from the first of my five classes, had cheated during the final examination. My response was immediate—I threatened to remove his class's participation marks, unless the offending students involved came forward privately to admit their mistake. My students' reactions are heterogeneously voiced, in that some are empathic and understand my distress and vulnerability as a foreigner teacher; others are saddened and angered by the behaviour of their classmates, and the compromising position this puts them all in; more than a few openly challenge the logic of my thinking in dealing with the matter; but one voice cries out louder than the others. It is Xu Bu Chan's words that cut me to the heart. He not only challenged my authority as his teacher, but questioned the legitimacy of my power—my right as a non-Chinese person to question his conduct and attitude to learning.

### **The poetic as a device for problematising how I write the voice of the Chinese other**

*[P]oems are like dreams: in them you put what you don't know you know.*

—Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966- 1978*

In choosing the poetic form to stitch together the voices of my students with my own voice, I reveal how the intercultural classroom can be a site of struggle generated by the desire to reconcile personal and cultural differences. Recognising that the way I word-stitch my students' voices to the page has the potential to create a lasting stereotypical impression of the Chinese learner, I employ poetry, in a similar manner to my use of memoir in the previous two chapters, as a device for problematising the way I write about the Chinese other. Poetry has the power to capture my reader's intellect and emotion and can remind them that what they are reading is a construction. In emphasising the representational power of poetry, Richardson (2000, 12) suggests that '[w]hen we read or hear poetry, we are continually nudged

into recognizing that the text has been constructed.’ I have taken an interventionist approach by taking my students’ words and rearranging them in a poetic form constructed according to my understanding of the situation. In doing so I wish to show how my students and I sometimes communicated easily, but were just as likely to misread each other and get things plain wrong. According to Richardson, to write in the poetic form is to convey the raw power of language:

Settling words together in new configurations lets us hear, see and feel the world in new dimensions. Poetry, thus, is a practical and powerful method for analyzing social worlds. (2000, 12)

Poetry, says Susanne Gannon (2001, 791) is able to work outside the conventions of written narrative; being less structured than other forms of narrative, she suggests the silences, spaces and breaks in the poetic form offer momentary pauses through which the reader is able to introduce their own experiences and understandings and ‘to create embodied knowledges’ (Gannon 2001, 791). Incorporating poetry in my writing allows me to position my students within the situational moment, rather than represent them as part of some complete (objective) case study. It gives me the fluidity I need to move my auto-ethnographic inquiry beyond the theoretical constraints of cultural theory. As highlighted in the previous two chapters, one cannot just rely on culture to explain the differences and similarities that existed between my Chinese protagonists and me; rather it is the complexity and ambiguity of relational contact that lies at the heart of difference. This demands a writing that can interrogate entangled relational spaces—spaces where relational and cultural differences continually intercept and cut across each other. As social scientist Dan Rose writes,

An ethnographic poetics desires more, indeed nothing less than to inhabit a [of] zone contact (by crossing over it again and again) which cannot be defined but must be explored, which can take its shape through ethnography, poetry, fiction, and the other arts.... (1990, 44)

Thus, in using the poetic form I do what cultural theory is not able to do, I introduce the relational—the personal. This chapter, like the previous two, explores the intricate, messy, fragmentary and paradoxical nature of culture and personal identity. I thrust aside the authority of monological narratives, where the narrator-writer’s voice is privileged above all others (Atkinson 1999, 193). My students’ voices,

albeit stage-managed work to tear apart the all-too-common homogenised, fabricated, scholarly construction of the Chinese learner.

### **Theoretical framework**

This chapter opens up the inner, outer and in-between spaces of being. It unravels the entangled threads of anger, sadness, discomfort and vulnerability that arise from behaviours that appear alien, beyond comprehension, for both my students and me, illustrating that there are times when people are ensnared in a between space that cannot be easily understood, and where the ability to reach some form of consensus seems an impossibility (Crapanzano 2004, 61). Through the narrative, I interrogate the fragile positioning of the foreign teacher and Chinese (local) student relationship, to reveal how we are both instruments of and reactors to power, and that the power games we play with each other materialise out of a need to maintain a sense of self and to secure personal needs within an institutional system that is not of our choosing. My purpose is to articulate my understanding of power, resistance and vulnerability, and how this relates to the relationships I and my students have with the discipline of learning in a between space of being. The relational focus of this chapter is on the pedagogical relationship between teacher and students; not just on the one relationship but many. In this relational space I see myself positioned at the intersection of different languages and cultures; that is, I am caught between opposing and at times contradictory pedagogical and ethical traditions.

The theoretical framework that loosely binds this chapter together is embroidered from the following threads taken from the discourse of several cultural theorists. Michel de Certeau and Michel Foucault guide me in an exploration of the between space of the foreign teacher and local Chinese students, and the manner in which power and resistance play across a border-crossing inter-cultural trajectory. De Certeau (1984/1988) reflects on how human beings function in the between spaces; how people utilise what is at hand as a performing art of '*making do*'—a form of tactical resistance enacted to mark one's own space within place, and to fulfil personal desires. As I thread together the voices of my students with my own personal reflections, I use this concept to illustrate the heterogeneous and fragmented reality of our inter-cultural, border-crossing, teacher student relationship,

and reveal how my students and I use what knowledge and opportunities are at hand, ‘making do’ to take advantage of the situation we find ourselves in, from one moment to the next.

Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of *plurality* and creativity. By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation. (de Certeau 1984/1988, 30)

Foucault’s (1976/2008) notion of power is that it is ubiquitous in character. That is, power is inherent in all things.

The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. (Foucault, 1976/2008, 93)

The action of power is dialectical, in that power creates resistance; the two are ensnared within each other.

Marcello Diversi and Claudio Moreira (2009) use the notion of the ‘between-er’ to uncover the flaws in the western academic gaze; a partial gaze that focuses on the vulnerable other and fails to interrogate the lives of the privileged few.

At the end,  
We are all betweeners  
Us, Betweeners  
Them, betweeners  
You, between-er  
Everybody, between-er  
Writing from the flesh  
Exposing the vulnerability and power  
Of our branded bodies  
Making visceral knowledge count

We are  
Not ready to settle  
Willing to struggle for a world without Them  
Where everybody is

And should be

Us. (Diversi and Moreira 2009, 222–223)

Claudio Moreira (2008) employs auto-ethnographic inquiry as a literary device to interrogate his internal struggles in search of his own unique academic voice. Moreira's work challenges the ways that academic scholarship is constrained by its ideology and political positioning. He uses the space between as a site for the embodiment of method, theory and writing to reduce the academic tensions that exist between theory and the legitimacy of visceral experience. Like Moreira I use my own experiences and vulnerability to pull apart some of the traditional academic constructions of what is knowledge in relation to the Chinese learner and the ways they have been subject to othering.

The anthropologist's own experiences and the permeability of the boundaries of the 'field' have been highlighted by Ruth Behar in her influential study of the *Vulnerable Observer*. In revealing her own suffering as the embodiment of vulnerability she creates a space whereby the act of revealing one's vulnerability as the researcher demonstrates a capacity for understanding and having empathy for others. Her use of personal vulnerability, like Moreira's, also dismantles or at the very least reduces the power distance between that of the researcher and the researched subject. It also offers the potential to suspend judgement of others or rather reveals one's own failings as a way of countering failings in others. In a similar manner, my own vulnerability and pain create slippages in the narrative, through which my reader may see how I am intimately positioned and connected to my research, and that by divulging my own struggles and weaknesses a more empathic, heterogeneous and generous interpretation of the Chinese student emerges. An interpretation that resists the generalisation of Chinese student behaviours found in much of the current literature on transnational education.

At least those who radiate toward a "vulnerable observer" like me—are overwhelmingly expressing a strong need to understand deeply their own sense of emotional, ethical, political and historical connection to the intellectual projects they are taking on. (Behar 1999, 478)



### **From one foreign space to another**

My own language—English—is the dialogical tongue with which I negotiate my understanding of self in relation to being inside, outside, and between the geographical, cultural and temporal landscapes of the Chinese university. It is the means by which I communicated with my Chinese students and colleagues; in addition my language positions the academic discourse through which I originally interpreted the somewhat sanitised, generalised notions of Chinese students. This subtle and somewhat disingenuous thread of language artfully unwinds; its filaments split and become messily ensnared with my own experiences—past and present. Difficult to separate from the effects of positioning and power, the experiential, dialogically twisted thread within these now moments requires some sensitivity in its untangling...

Towards the end of my first year of teaching in the art college, I received an excellence of teaching award, and was offered a second year contract, a monetary bonus and an increase in salary. Unfortunately, with Chen's untimely death just prior to the summer vacation, I found myself dismissed with no plausible explanation from Professor Zhou. Two months later at the start of the new academic year, Yue Wan secured for me a position with a British training agency operating in Shanghai, teaching business communication for a high ranking university. Up until then, as discussed in the previous chapters, my experiences of working with Chinese academics and students were to a great extent shaped by my relationship and dependency on Chen and later Yue Wan. There had been little need for me to fully understand the college's administrative or organisational policies and modes of practice, for Chen was always there to step in and negotiate on my behalf. If my pay was late or there was some administration problem, it was Chen who fixed or smoothed out—made invisible—any unpleasantness. Although I frequently challenged Chen's views or decisions, for the most part I was content and only too willing to defer to Chen's authority as the expert on all things Chinese. Similarly, but in a less socially controlling way, my co-teacher Yue Wan was there to guide me if I got things wrong with my students. Always at hand to explain my thinking to our students, she would elaborate on a particular aspect or make plain any theoretical concept that they had difficulty understanding. Having a small class of twenty



students, I bonded closely with them; friendships formed that extended out beyond the classroom reaching into the very present that I am writing in. Although not all of my memories of the college are happy ones, after a difficult beginning with Feng Hong, my first co- teacher, I eventually came to feel valued, appreciated and safe. I felt inexplicably bound to this small, tight-knit community, thus when the time came, my leaving the college was all the more poignant.

In my new surroundings I found myself not at ease with the business undergraduates. Not only was I teaching a subject that was completely new to me, I was discovering that this learning environment was very different from the one I had just left behind. Not being a contracted member of staff, but an agency lecturer with no official contractual ties to the university, I found myself without voice—no Chen to speak on my behalf, no words or position to penetrate the walls of Chineseness. Apart from the classroom, I had no office, no place to meet other colleagues. I began to feel engulfed by this whole new experience of China—different rules, different students, different environment, a different situation.



### **The question is not who is the other but who am I?**

[T]he question ‘Who am I?’ cannot be understood apart from the question ‘What am I allowed to do?’ And the question ‘What am I allowed to do?’ cannot be understood apart from material conditions that structure opportunities. (Norton 2000, 8)

My reader should understand that I am not reflecting in a general sense on my day-to-day experiences, rather I am focusing on those experiences that interrupted my daily existence and forced me to pay attention (Tuan 1977, 131) to how my situation had changed in Shanghai, and with it my sense of belonging and purpose. I was still a foreign teacher working in a Chinese university, but the situational context, my social relations and political positioning had all dramatically shifted. By revealing the similarities and disparities between my life in the college and this new university, I show the unique and heterogeneous nature of human experience and that no two situations we find ourselves in as foreign teachers can ever be exactly

the same. Bonny Norton, a language and literacy specialist in local and global contexts, suggests that the heterogeneous characteristics of any society can only be more fully known when one takes into consideration the unbalanced power relations between aspects such as race, ethnicity and class (2000, 7). Not only do these relations work to marginalise people, but as Norton implies in the passage quoted above, my ability to use power is based on a relational positioning rather than physical ownership. Power, she says, is something that transpires on a social level within a particular situational context (Norton 2000, 7). Although Norton's words are concerned with second language learners, her thinking can be applied to most learners, which include not only my students, but myself as foreign teacher and cultural novice. For in the very act of speaking, I am caught up in a performance of negotiation, one that crosses the borders of geography and temporality, as I define and redefine my notion of self in relation to the social and relational networks that surround me (Norton 2010, 350).

In seeking to interrogate the ways power and performances of resistance show themselves in my relationships with these particular students, I do not intend to lay any blame, but rather I attempt to describe how power both framed and shaped our relationship; how notions of power, theirs and mine, together embroidered a living performance—a between-space reality that was unique to the situation and context we found ourselves in. As Foucault states in *Discipline and Punish*:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors'. It 'abstracts', it masks', it 'conceals'. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (1977, 194)



### **Where am I in relation to the other?**

Only much later did I come to appreciate that my cognisance of self, and independence at the time of teaching the business undergraduate students, was to a large degree shaped by my previous close relations with Chinese others. Thus, interpreting and understanding why my students behaved in the way they did, is strongly under-stitched with my relationships with Chinese people such as Chen and Yue Wan, as well as other relationships that predate my experiences and relationships with the Chinese. I learned about and experienced China not just by what I read about them in scholarly texts written by western scholars, where, as I mentioned earlier, the Chinese subject is frequently misrepresented and/or misunderstood, but more importantly, through my actual lived experiences and intimate relationships with Chinese academics and students. Although I was still in Shanghai, suddenly I was transported to another world, where my professional and personal situations were completely different to what I had known before in the college.

Inside this new, unfamiliar classroom, feeling isolated and cut off from the academic community, a sombre mood began to seep into my bones; the lonesomeness of my situation threatened to devour me. I felt hemmed in, trapped in a between space where there was no escape—no way out—no place to go. Feeling displaced and disempowered, I wept tears of desperation. I felt denied access to my students, not by my inability to speak Mandarin, but because I had no knowledge of the university's organisational culture or how to get things done. There was no one to talk to who understood where I was coming from. As revealed earlier, when I had first arrived in China to take up my first teaching position, I already had a four-year working relationship with the college and Chen. If I was confused or unsure, Chen was there to offer insightful advice and to help me unknot any culturally or subjectively constructed tangles. Now without his or Yue Wan's guidance, I lacked confidence, I did not know how to reach out to my students; I found myself trapped, having to negotiate cultural and personal boundaries, fragmented and tortuous

between spaces in which I could not grasp the rightness of things. At the beginning of each of my classes I felt disconnected, unsure how to approach the sea of silent, unreadable faces. I had the very real sensation of being foreign—alien-like, rather than exotic, special. This was not the China I had known with Chen and Yue Wan in the college. Not only were things different, I was becoming a foreigner even to my self.

During the first semester of teaching the business communication unit, I had more than one hundred-and-seventy undergraduates stretched across five classes. One class had originally consisted of over seventy students, but as I wrote in Chapter One, I had insisted to the agency that the class be split into two. It required some organisational management on my part, to cope with the logistics of managing such a large number of students, as I also had seventy-five MBA students, with little administrative support from the university or the agency. At the commencement of my contract I had repeatedly asked the agency staff for my students' course syllabus, so I could determine how best to accommodate my students' needs. My requests were either dismissed as too difficult, or simply ignored. At the time no explanations were offered, and possibly because I had experienced this kind of behaviour in the art college with Feng Hong, I made the decision not to push my request further. Thus the agency expected me to design and coordinate my own units with no prior knowledge of my students' language abilities or needs. To counter the lack of information, and the logistical nightmare of how to effectively communicate with my students, I approached it by organising them into groups of five or six, with usually the most confident English speaker acting as the main spokesperson. This prevented me from being bombarded with too many e-mails; more importantly it allowed me to nurture relationships with a few students in the hope that I could reach out through them to the many.

Several weeks before the end of semester the agency advised me to arrange a final examination. Later I discovered that most of the other agency lecturers failed to do so, due not only to the volume of work involved, some three weeks, but because there was also no payment for designing or marking the examination papers. I asked the agency to organise for my students to sit their examination during the

university's official exam week. The university refused, informing the agency that my students would take their examination during their final class. So although having one examination for all five classes seemed a little naïve on my part, I really did not have much choice. I was totally dependent on my students' goodwill and sense of rightness, and ignorant of what was at stake for them if they failed.☞ Not until the cheating incident did I discover that my program was a core unit, without which my students could not graduate.



### **Stitching meaning from experiential threads of difference**

*When we write about other cultures that is itself a political act.*

—Dan Rose, *Living the Ethnographic Life: Qualitative Research Methods*

Faced with the same ethical dilemmas as in the previous two chapters when writing about my relationships with Chen, Feng Hong and other Chinese colleagues, I am challenged to reflect on how I will write about my teaching experiences in China; how am I to work my Chinese students' voices into my own story so that my reader can more fully imagine the students' understandings of our shared experiences? And how do I interrogate the very notion of experience? Tuan (1977, 7) believes the word experience implies a form of passivity, it articulates a past event from which there is an implied sense of learning from what has been before. That is to say '[t]o experience is to learn; it means acting on the given and creating out of the given. The given cannot be known itself' (Tuan, 1977, 7). According to Tuan what is understood as reality is but an interpretation of experience, an interpretation founded on emotion and belief (1977, 7). Joan Scott agrees:

Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political. (1992, 37)

She advises that to offer one's experience as the basic criterion for a truthful account of behaviour, without interrogating one's own assumptions and practices, is somewhat suspect. In claiming experience as the foundational blocks of knowledge, Scott argues, we are failing to take into consideration that the person/s who had the

experience and or the person who retells it are themselves positioned to see and interpret phenomena from a particular perspective, and that this positioning becomes silently smoothed out in their confirming proof. Such actions on the part of the researcher, she says, surrender any opportunity to explore questions that deal with experience as a social construction, the ways notions of difference have evolved over time, and how people's belief systems are shaped, and thus articulate the messiness and unpredictability of everyday life.

The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world. (Scott 1992, 25)

Likewise, my own positioning when writing about my teaching experiences in Shanghai requires some untangling. I must gently tease out my own ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions—assumptions that have the potential to undermine my ability to contemplate difference, particularly as to how my behaviour negates or subverts the behaviours of my Chinese protagonists. I should endeavour to comprehend more fully how our understandings of shared experiential moments, theirs and mine, are perceived differently, yet also converge and overlap. Experience, asserts Scott (1992, 37), is always politically loaded because it is always open to debate; thus how I construct meaning should be understood separately to knowledge that has been experientially constituted. To do so, she suggests, will prevent researchers like me from reproducing histories that generalise and universalise identities (Scott 1992, 37). To fail to heed her warning is to create a generalised portrait of the Chinese learner from my experiences; a mono-cultural, homogenised representation that seeks to normalise difference and present it as fact.

Making visible the experience of a different group exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their inner workings or logics; we know that difference exists, but we don't understand it as constituted relationally. For that we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced. To think about experience in this way is to historicize it as well as to historicize the identities it produces. (Scott 1992, 25/6)

Yet, there must be a way around this? If I become overly reliant on theorising to legitimise every move I or my Chinese protagonists make, where will this take me?

Anthropologist and performance auto-ethnographer Dwight Conquergood (2002, 146), believes the scholarly voice discounts what Foucault (1980) names as ‘subjugated knowledges’, that is, all those voices with experience that are referred to as anecdotal at best (see also Diversi and Moreira 2009). Such voices that speak of lived experience, but are lacking in scholarly tone, are rubbed out, insists Conquergood, because they are perceived by mainstream scholars as being too difficult to interpret and transform into legitimate forms of representation, which can then be transcribed into orderly writing. What we are left with, he believes, are texts that are motionless, sanitised, stripped bare of lived experience and the messiness of everyday life in its contradictions and subjective biases—completely devoid of personal/bodily expression (2002, 146). Thus the ability to stitch together diverse ways of knowing that are fabricated at the grass roots level of society, that speak from personal and intimate experiences, is a political act and cuts at the heart of academia by challenging the narratives of the dominant highly distanced scholarly voice (Conquergood 2002, 145–146). But how can I do both? How can I relieve the tension between Scott’s call for theorised experience and Conquergood’s valorisation of un-theorised experience?

Moreira provides some resolution to this conflict by drawing my attention back to the messiness of everyday life, and how the act of auto-ethnography can destabilise the scholarly pursuit of replicating history and lived experience as whole and complete. Recognising that the only thing about experience that has a sense of wholeness is the physicality of one’s body, Moreira argues that this too is paradoxical because the body cannot perform wholeness, but rather creates a translation of lived experiences as a series of fragments (Moreira 2008, 682). Through fragments of memoir and poetry Moreira interrogates his own life’s journey in its many guises as researcher, student, father, husband and younger self, and demonstrates how ‘both theory and experience are forms of knowledge’ (2008, 665). His writing is provocative and powerful because he shows his vulnerability; he discloses the darker sides of his apathy as a youth to reveal his own inner repression, and the struggle he goes through to dismantle his own ideologically rooted fabrications of the other. His collection of fragments show the reader how Moreira has come to understand the minds of the ones doing the oppression and the damage.

Similarly, this chapter is a sequence of memoir and poetic fragments—strands of experiences and relationships taken from the everyday, between myself and my students. As an assemblage of writing styles, the resultant narrative reveals how the very performance of our intercommunicating bodies creates a mass gathering of intercultural translations. In using poetry and memoir to illustrate fragments of experience I show how such writing is not a passive activity, rather it demands an imagination that can change reality (Rich 1979, 43) and reconstruct it in another form that enables the reader to interpret an assortment of meanings. Rich says that for the imagination to alter experience it must interrogate and look for other possibilities; even to the extent that I re-examine my own life and where the experiences I share here have led me, ‘[for] writing is re-naming’ (Rich 1979, 43).<sup>26</sup>



### **Discovering aspects of self through the Chinese other**

While the university had a significantly longer history, and was of a higher rank than the college, the students’ behaviour was not as I would have expected. Some students invariably arrived late, brought food into class, used their mobiles incessantly, slept with their heads on their arms folded on the desk whenever the mood took them, and openly studied materials for other subjects. However, I also had students who were highly motivated, punctual, contributed much to our learning environment and made a strong effort to befriend and support me in any way they could. Unlike the students in the college, who came from local middle income/professional families, the university students came from low through to high socio-economic communities from across China, as well as from other countries such as Korea, Japan and Africa.

Xu Bu Chan, a young male student, stands out in my memory as the person whose behaviour unsettled me the most. There was something about him that I failed to empathise with. Xu Bu Chan was exceptionally quiet, and although he appeared to go through the motions of being deferential to my position as his teacher, it

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<sup>26</sup> The re-examination of my experiences and relationships in China is discussed in chapter five.



somehow did not feel genuine. I could not reconcile the two sides of his behaviour, the ongoing lateness—sometimes he arrived only fifteen minutes before the end of a two and a half hour class—his lack of engagement with the other students in group discussions, and the irregularity of his written work; such behaviour cut across the seemingly respectful attention he paid to me in class, which struck me as somewhat disingenuous.

From the beginning, like I had learned to do with Yue Wan, I made my feelings clear to my students as to how I expected them to behave, and the value I placed on punctuality and participation.<sup>27</sup> In the college, students always arrived on time, rarely missed class, and usually paid attention; but somehow, Xu Bu Chan and a few others seemed to resist me. I could not find a way to communicate with him, in particular, as easily as I did with the other students, and could not fully grasp his intentions or character. Whereas my relationships with many of my students evolved as we got to know each other, Xu Bu Chan continued to remain an enigma. Initially I felt overwhelmed by the large class sizes of sometimes fifty-five students, compared to twenty in the college. I struggled to capture the student's interest; but as the weeks progressed, we began to gain confidence in each other and to work through our differences and misunderstandings. My students became more openly curious, and began to question my own as well as each others' ideas. By the close of the semester I believed we had established a mutually beneficial relationship based on trust, and acceptance of each other's ways of thinking and behaving.

Near the close of semester I wrote an e-mail to Xu Bu Chan concerning his failure to get his last piece of written work in on time, and how his poor attendance and lack of involvement was not acceptable. I suggested that he would need to make some serious effort with his final assignment, if he was to improve his score, a potential borderline fail. Whilst this was my first written warning, I had spoken to him in class several times about his general attitude and approach to his work. A couple of days later, after the final business communication examinations, Xu Bu Chan, wrote back to me, not to apologise for his behaviour, but to inform me that half of the

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<sup>27</sup> It is the norm in China for all undergraduate students to live on campus, even those students who live locally.

students in the first of my classes had cheated; not only that, but one of the female students in my second class had taken a copy of the exam paper.

*Dear Teacher*

*Nearly time to say goodbye*

*Hard for me*

*You are a good teacher*

*Although—*

*I am a bad student in your eye*

*I hesitate—*

*Finally I decide to tell*

*I feel unfair*

*your students cheat—they pass*

*But me!*

*I get low marks*

*What can I do?*

*Nothing—*

*Wednesday friend take exam*

*Received exam paper from girlfriend*

*A girl in Monday's class*

*Again what can I do?*

*Nothing—*

*Unfair—*

*I do not plan to go to teaching office*

*Do not want to get you into trouble*

*You are leaving now*

*I want to tell you*

*You are the only teacher*

*The only one who thinks me not a good student*

*Feel sad—not your fault*

*I should treat myself—be...more international*

*Then I will be a good student*

*in Eastern eye*

*in Western eye...*

*Your student*

*Xu Bu Chan*

Waves of nausea rushed over me, flooding my being with anxiety and despondency; but along with it came a tidal wave of burning wrath. It was not just about a sense of personal betrayal, or that I interpreted Xu Bu Chan's words as a stinging rebuke, implying that I was culturally biased in my assessment of him. On the contrary, in those first moments of reading Xu Bu Chan's e-mail I was more concerned that he was using the excuse of his peers' behaviour as a way to divert my attention away from his poor performance in class. I wrote back immediately. I thanked Xu Bu Chan for his e-mail, stating that I would deal with the cheating matter appropriately in my own way, emphasising that this did not change anything. I still expected him to pay attention to his own work. His response was fast and in quadruplicate—the power and anger of his words took me by surprise. In the coldness of night, a cord of cold hard fear snaked itself around my heart. I not only felt vulnerable, but that I was somehow knottily entangled in something much deeper...

*Dear Teacher*

*You think my absence or lateness is noticeable.*

*It is really not fair to me.*

*Why do you notice me?*

*Because—*

*You know who I am.*

*I sit in the first row—*

*I am eye catching.*

*Do you know who sits behind?*

*Do you know their names?*

*No*

*You are not aware of*

*Their lateness...their absence...*

*You see a boy who is late*

*he walks to his seat—the back of the class.*

*Do you know who he is?*

*No*

*I made you remember my name—*

*so you always notice my lateness.*

*Try to remember!*

*When there are few students in class—*

*Who is there?*

*I am*

*When no one is listening to you—*

*Who still sits in the front?*

*I am*

*When the exam is over and you are leaving...*

*Who still remember to say goodbye?*

*Me*

*Who spends much time on your  
assignment?*

*Me*

*What happens now?*

*The only thing you remember—*

*Xu Bu Chan is always late.*

*Do you remember other students' lateness?*

*You don't—it is totally unfair—*

*To me*

*I regret—*

*I allow you to know my name.*

*If I had sat in the back row*

*You would not have noticed me.*

*Then you would not remember—Xu Bu Chan is always late!*

*Sitting in the front row shows my attitude to you—*

*You can refer to Chinese way...*

*Those who sit in the front row—pay most attention.*

*Believe it or not!*

*In China it is true.*

*Being late or being absent is my fault.*

*But only if you are me would you understand!*

*If I were in a smaller class—*

*I would behave much better.*

*You divided another class in two.*

*Why not our class!*

*Unfair—*

*I cannot find your letter on cheating problem.*

*I do not know what you will do?*

*Everything in your class is*

*Unfair—*

*I have no word to say to you.*

*I know how much attention—I pay to you*

*More than other students*

*What do I get now?*

*You will never—never understand me!*

*Unfair*

*Unfair*

*Unfair*

*Unfair... ✖*



### **The blurring of boundaries**

As stated earlier, I have taken an interventionist approach and rearranged Xu Bu Chan's words to articulate what I understood his meaning to be. Therefore, the following analysis of Xu Bu Chan's behaviour and thoughts are based solely on my understanding and feelings of what transpired between us.

When I first read Xu Bu Chan's words I thought they indicated an essentialist worldview, particularly in the way he attempted to explain his behaviour in terms of his 'Chinese way':

*Sitting in the front row shows my attitude to you—*

*You can refer to Chinese way...*

It is as if Xu Bu Chan was suggesting that by seating himself in the front row of my class, paying attention to my every word, greeting me politely with due reverence as his teacher, that his behaviour epitomised the traditional Chinese qualities of a good student. This seemingly essentialist thread is further reinforced in his first correspondence, where Xu Bu Chan expresses the opinion that if he had paid more attention to behaving in a more international way,

*I should treat myself—be—more international*

*Then I will be a good student*

*in Eastern eye*

*in Western eye...*

then I as his western teacher would have been in a more knowledgeable position to be able to judge him as a good student, like his Chinese teachers.

Xu Bu Chan's observation appears to reflect essentialist principles in that he sees a close relationship between culturally prescribed student behaviour and academic acceptance according to its Chinese or western characteristics. Whether Xu Bu Chan considers his Chineseness to be an inherent aspect of his cultural identity or not is

less of an issue here, than the possibility that he draws on his cultural heritage as a tactical response to the dilemma he finds himself in. By promoting himself to me as an ideal Chinese student, Xu Bu Chan may actually have sought to deflect my professional and non-Chinese opinion that he is not. If this is so then Xu Bu Chan's thoughts and behaviour could be interpreted as hiding behind the disguise of a universal understanding of Chinese culture and appropriating a stereotypical homogenous representation of the Chinese learner. From this perspective Xu Bu Chan's actions suggests that he does this not only to reaffirm his own sense of identity in response to an external threat, but also as a way of demonstrating that he fits within the parameters of what is considered normal student behaviour in Chinese society.♀ Foucault says:

In a sense, the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another. It is easy to understand how the power of the norm functions within a system of formal equity, since within a homogeneity that is the rule, the norm introduces, as a useful imperative and as a result of measurement, all the sharing of individual differences. (1977, 184)

Thus it could be argued that Xu Bu Chan claims his normality by way of his ancestral heritage, his Chineseness, as his armour and protection of self. That is, Xu Bu Chan emphasises that he is like other Chinese students:

*You can refer to Chinese way...*

*Those who sit in the front row—pay most attention.*

*Believe it or not!*

*In China it is true.*

Following on from this idea of appropriating one's culture to create a sense of normality, Holliday, Hyde and Kullman (2004, 11), claim that people appropriate various aspects of their cultural legacy more closely when they find themselves in alien environments, where there is a perceived threat to their sense of self.

Therefore, rather than proving that Chinese culture is fundamentally essentialist it may be more likely that Xu Bu Chan drew on his cultural heritage, not because he necessarily believed he was representative of all Chinese students past and present, but rather, as a way of 'making do' (de Certeau 1984/1988) with the knowledge he had, as a means of counteracting my foreignness as his teacher—the one who



challenged his own perceptions of himself as a conscientious student. By making visible to Xu Bu Chan that I had the power to fail him, Xu Bu Chan in the weaker position had to use what he had at his disposal at that moment to resist me. Stitching together heterogeneous strands of Chinese heritage, non-Chinese status, western heritage, the topos of the cultural novice and the cheating and other behaviours of his classmates, I believe Xu Bu Chan used his rhetorical skill as a tactical device to challenge my vulnerabilities and play on my insecurity as a foreigner in an alien environment. As de Certeau writes:

The space of the tactic is the space of the other....It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantages of "opportunities" and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids. What it wins it cannot keep. This gives a tactic mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. In short, a tactic is an art of the weak. (1984/1988, 37)

The idea that Asian students are deferential and do not question the authority of their teachers is so commonplace that it is easy to think of it as some kind of reality (Littlewood 2000, 32); but, as Littlewood asks, whose reality are we talking about? Are such ideas founded on the behaviour of students who are naturally inclined to act in such a manner? Or is Chinese students' behaviour constrained by an educational culture and government policies that would make direct, independent and more assertive forms of behaviour produce less favourable outcomes (Littlewood 2000, 32)?<sup>28</sup> For instance, in recent times the massification of higher education in China has meant a substantial increase in class-size and heavier workloads for academics; this is further complicated by Chinese government policy reforms designed to elevate Chinese higher education to an internationally competitive level, as well as raise the quality of academic performance (Jayaram and Altbach 2006, 398–399).<sup>28</sup> Subsequently, the ability to organise such large numbers of students, and the burden of increasing staff performance in terms of pedagogical competence and research outputs, becomes a logistical nightmare for academics and university administrators alike. Jayaram and Altbach (2006, 399) contend that many

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<sup>28</sup> *Ke Jiao Xing Guo* (Promoting Science Technology and Education Policy) Chinese government reform policy as part of their modernisation program. (For further information see Yang 2004).

Chinese academics cope by following what the Chinese call the ‘duck feeding’ method: teachers deliver lectures and students passively make notes. When teaching such large numbers of students, it is essential for those doing the teaching and administering the curriculum to cope with the system. This pragmatic approach can easily translate into implementing passive learning techniques and setting examinations as the main test of competency. This performance of ‘making do’ (de Certeau 1984/1988) allows academics and administrators to cater for the masses. Therefore, any assumptions drawn from so-called typical Chinese teaching and learning environments do not necessarily reflect on how Chinese students think and feel about their learning, but rather are more concerned with how they behave within the environment as a means of survival.

Being one of literally thousands entangled in an education culture that has unrealistic expectations places students under immense physical and emotional pressure. Under the pressure to perform well, it is necessary for students to learn English as a second language, and (from my personal observations) they also learn a third and a fourth language under the impression that they can thus secure a good job. The internal pressures on Chinese students to do well, from the university, political/socio/economic environment and family, positions students like Xu Bu Chan in an untenable situation that is difficult to negotiate. Caught up in such a system, it is no wonder that Xu Bu Chan felt confused and angry with me. I was imposing on him a set of expectations that were, by all accounts, very different from those of his Chinese teachers, who were more likely to have a more pragmatic and therefore more sympathetic understanding of their students’ situation. Xu Bu Chan was trapped within a system that he could not hope to overturn. However, although being controlled by the university and the government makes change difficult, this does not mean that Chinese students such as Xu Bu Chan blindly accept their fate. Although teachers and students do not have ownership of their teaching/learning environment, they are able to take advantage of situations, in that they understand the logic that lies behind the university’s system and government policies. They are able to find ways of working within the university to create their own opportunities because of this knowledge; they play a waiting game, ever ready for the right moment to seize the best advantage. “Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must

constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities’” (de Certeau 1984/1988, xix). Thus I can appreciate that Xu Bu Chan, in a moment of intense vulnerability, may have used the cheating incident as a tactical opportunity to deflect my attention away from what I saw as his bad behaviour, behaviour he might have cultivated as a means to survive his heavy workload. From this interpretation, Xu Bu Chan’s modus operandi could be seen as one of exploiting what he believed was my vulnerable point, my non-Chineseness and lack of Chinese cultural and institutional awareness.

Xu Bu Chan’s behaviour ruptures the stereotypical notion of the Chinese learner as one who is passive and bending always to the authority of the teacher. Rather than feeling dis-empowered by my personal complaints relating to his lateness and poor study attitude, Xu Bu Chan felt sufficiently empowered to speak out at his perceived unfairness of my words. He suggested, rather surreptitiously, that my lack of ‘Chineseness’ prevented me from understanding the reasons that underpinned his Chinese behaviour. In other words, I did not have the right to judge his behaviour, because I did not understand his personal situation, nor did I understand the contextual relationship that exists between teachers and students in China, and never would understand. Xu Bu Chan appeared to believe that our mutual lack of knowing—my inability to understand him and vice versa—actually weakened his position. He remonstrated loudly against me, declaring that not only did he not understand my behaviour, but, far worse, in not knowing how I would deal with the cheating problem, he was denied the possibility of being able to predict it, and thus was powerless to develop tactics to counteract the potential consequences of his peers’ and his teacher’s actions. My behaviour, he claimed, would have a detrimental impact on him, and he questioned the appropriateness of me holding so much power over his person and future. He saw me as a non-Chinese who was not aware of the full implications of her actions on a Chinese person.

The rapid changes in Chinese society over the last decade and a half have brought increased rivalry amongst Chinese graduates to secure work in a highly competitive job market that has too few well-paid opportunities. This, combined with the rising cost and demand for degrees in China and with the ‘one child’ policy, as well as

with those factors mentioned earlier, will have an impact on the character and personal expectations of Chinese students like Xu Bu Chan; it pushes them into behaving in a multitude of ways that circumvent the restraints of social and institutional monopolies, and into operating outside cultural norms, values and expectations—the very norms that, on the surface, Xu Bu Chan draws on to challenge my authority. Therefore, the rationale of why Chinese students behave in particular ways cannot be attributed just to cultural values; the rigidity of the learning system, controlled by the university and the government, makes change difficult but also encourages resistance in a variety of ways. The implications for offshore teachers and researchers like me is that we cannot take our personal observations of people's behaviour for granted without taking into consideration the context and the situation of the world they live in, and in which we co-exist at that particular time. ♪



### **A reflection on a desire to be ethical**

Since I can remember, I have always had a strong desire to be understood as an ethical person. During the period in question, I clung on to my personal ethical code as some form of sanity-saving device. I so desperately wanted my students to see me as an ethical person, as if this would give me a stronger sense of self, and position me more favourably within the Chinese psyche. My thinking was—maybe they could not always understand Joy, but they would be able to respect my ethical struggle to be true to myself. I reflected I would rather they think me a hard task master but true to my word, and therefore trustworthy and approachable, than liked as a nice enough person, but not a person of her word.

It was particularly difficult in that I did not always fully understand, appreciate, or even imagine the reasons that might lie on the underside of my students' ways of thinking and behaving. At that time I was ignorant of the external pressures placed on them by the university and social and family obligations in general. I did not imagine how the political, social, economic and psychological changes taking place

in China, particularly in Shanghai as the gateway to the western world, impacted on them as a group of people in their own right. Having read of the influence of Confucian philosophy on Chinese scholarship, I had assumed that all Chinese students embraced the Confucian ethic; this was based on a fundamental assumption that all human beings are ethical and that it is not merely a question of protecting one's soul, but rather that one behaves ethically, because it is the correct thing to do, no matter the cost to your person (Saul 2001, 93).<sup>9</sup> But as Confucius and a great many other philosophers have pointed out, living an ethical life is never an easy path to travel. I had thought I could appreciate and respect a person for standing by their own ethical conscience, even though it might be different to mine, and might at times inadvertently cause some conflict between us. However, in my new surroundings I did not always understand the thinking that underpinned my business students' responses to ethical problems. I found it personally challenging to communicate with a person or persons who appeared, from my perspective, able, chameleon-like, to change their ethical position to avoid conflict, to be safe, or for personal benefit. I thought that the students in this university were not always true to their word. It disturbed me that I had little sense of what lay underneath my students' behaviour; this cultivated in me strong feelings of distrust, of alienation.

In disentangling the highly elastic and fibrous between spaces in which I knottily engage with Xu Bu Chan and my students, I ask myself—was it through a duty of care as their teacher that I demanded a change in Xu Bu Chan's behaviour and retribution for my student's cheating? Or was it more to do with self protection, a responsibility of care for myself?

Finding myself personally and ethically challenged, far outside my comfort zone, with no support from the agency or university, I reached out and chain-stitched my ethical values around me, anchoring them not only as an appearance of personal re-affirmation, but also as a form of resistance against what I considered a-moral (and immoral?) behaviour from my students. As I see myself now in this narrative I am writing of the foreign teacher, a cultural novice, my impression of a personal ethical code and sense of morality begins to fragment and unravel; it is not as clear-cut as I

once surmised. The way I responded to my students now appears incredibly naïve and too caught up in my own sense of worth as a person.



### **Strands of ethics and morality: Is it just a question of professional practice?**

My responses to Xu Bu Chan and the cheating incident are viscerally, culturally and relationally constituted. Pat Usher (2000, 24) enunciates the feminist position on ethical practice, based on the belief that morality and daily existence are laced together, and that forms of understanding, even moral understanding are positional. This compels me to interrogate whence my understanding of ethics and morality arise and how they are constructed.

My response to Xu Bu Chan and the cheating incident, as I have already mentioned, was motivated to a large degree by my own personal desire for my students to know me as an ethical person, not just as their teacher, but as representing what I believed to be my true character. This positioning was based on a highly personal and cultural understanding of ethics and morality; I did not take into account the rightness or wrongness of my ethical and moral views within a Chinese location or context. Rather, I saw my Chinese protagonists' behaviour as a personal attack on one who, at the time, felt emotionally fragile, powerless and culturally out of her depth. Are not my motives and actions then somewhat similar to Xu Bu Chan's?

Foucault (1980, 98) sees human beings as the vehicle through which power operates.

It seems to me that power is 'always already there', that one is never 'outside' it, that there are no 'margins' for those who break with the system to gambol in. But this does not entail the necessity of accepting an inescapable form of domination or an absolute privilege on the side of the law. To say that one can never be 'outside' power does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what. (Foucault 1980, 141–142).

I understand Foucault as meaning that even when one is between spaces, as I was as a foreign teacher, power is at play whether we consciously know this or not. Maybe we can choose to use or not to use this power but the source of the power remains

present. My students had power over me in that they understood the university system and how to circumvent it; where they had knowledge I had none. And yet, because I stood outside the university system, was ignorant of its regulations and policies, many of the rules that governed the Chinese teachers could not apply to me. My ignorance of the organisational system and how it functioned put me beyond the university's reach. The university as a gigantic sprawling organisational entity had the authority, but its distance from the actual hands on teaching and learning activities gave it little power over how I managed my students, what kinds of programs I delivered. Thus the university was dependent on students' responses to determine if I was a good teacher or not. So the question becomes, what does a good teacher mean to my students? And in their eyes was I a good teacher?



### **A gathering of cacophonous, euphonic and empathic voices speak out**

Because I was contracted through the agency, there was no way for me to voice my concerns to the other teachers within the university or to the administrators. I knew from general conversations with students and friends that anyone caught cheating was threatened with instant dismissal. I tried to talk to the agency staff but it was as if they did not hear me... no advice, nothing... as if they were not interested...there was nothing for it but to deal with it myself.

In frustrated retaliation against the cheating incident, I wrote to my students threatening to withdraw the first classes' fifteen-per cent participation mark unless the offenders come forward personally and make suitable amends.

During the next few days email after email vibrated with students' raw emotions.

Some students took pity on me, and could feel my pain. They were supportive and showed some empathy for my plight and decision...

*Sorry*

*to know that you are so sad*

*—so angry*

*Sad*

*to know someone cheating*

*Hope this does not affect your emotion*

*Sorry*

*we made you so angry...*

*Know it's not right to deceive in the exam*

*do not mean to trouble you*

*Only—*

*people want pretty score*

*Feel ashamed*

*ashamed of Chinese students*

*Apologize to you—*

*Sorry...*

*On seeing your letter all students must feel guilty*

*You treat us nice,*

*You never scream*

*You care about us*

*Want all your students improve day by day*

*Sorry*

With heartfelt humility some apologised for their mistake...

*Sorry...*

*for what we have done*



*Apologise—sincerely*

*We beg your pardon*

*Forgive us—*

*Give us another chance...*

*We take responsibility*

*Will pay—*

*the price for crime committed*

*Sorry we make—*

*bad impression*

*Maybe not polite*

*to explain so much...*

*Mark is not the most important thing...*

*Give us second chance*

*to remedy our fault—*

*to learn something more...*

Others were indignant and angry that I would dare to take marks from those that were innocent...

*Not fair to us*

*Students—*

*who are honest in class*

*Not fair to us*

*Honest students—*

*could be hurt*

*If honest students hurt...*

*complaint raised against you*

*Not reasonable deduct our marks*

*We get no benefits—*

*from the cheating*

*On the contrary—*

*We are the victims*

Some like Xu Bu Chan knew about the cheating incident, but unlike him had felt morally bound to stay silent—not to speak

*I did not cheat—*

*but some did*

*I saw my classmate cheat*

*I did not stop him*

*My fault*

*But not easy for him to study*

*Do not want to compromise him*

*Just wish he never cheat—again*

*We live in different countries—*

*you and I*

*Different backgrounds*

*Different cultures*

*If you would know—*

*mark is everything here for student*

*Then maybe...*

*it would be easy for you*

*to understand*

*the bad thing happened*

*I do not want to damage—  
my personal integrity  
If I do not tell you...  
it would be unfair  
Cause injury to the innocent—  
even myself*

*But...  
they are my friends  
I do not want to break  
our friendship  
just because of—  
exam*

*So only thing I did  
let them cheat  
But...  
keep myself—  
honest.*

And others still could not comprehend my style of logic – could not understand how my punishment was fair to them.

*Just because—  
Monday students cheated...  
This is not...  
a fair way  
We spend time reviewing  
So  
deprived of fifteen-percent*

*Not fair...*

*Business English compulsory course*

*Final score...*

*impact greatly on our graduation*

*Whether we get fifteen-percent*

*really matters much to us*

*Please trust us!...*

*Actually—*

*all your classes share same exam paper*

*Students—Wednesday—Thursdays examination*

*Already know...*

*what will be examined—*

*what will not.*

*They likely get higher marks—*

*less effort*

*Is this fair to students of first examination?*

*Hard for you*

*find out who have cheated—*

*who have not...*

*It really is a problem*

*But...*

*does not mean*

*those who are innocent...*

*should be involved*

*be unfairly—treated.*



### **Is it just a question of professional practice? Continues...**

It is only now that I begin to understand only too well that there are moments in our lives when we become caught up in a between space where we do not understand the game being played out. Xu Bu Chan and some of my students did not understand my personal character and I did not understand their plight, and exactly how much was at stake, if I failed them.

In the twenty-first century it is important not so much to leap across boundaries as to dissolve boundaries, to break down barriers and to reinterpret two-dimensional dichotomies as fictions of the imagination. (Fox 2006, 56)

When I first began this research journey I thought I would be able to describe 'normal' aspects of Chinese student behaviour in my writing. To articulate gracefully and meticulously my life experiences as an embodiment of 'ultimate instinctual truth'. Such thinking I now consider conceited, foolish even. Christina Fox, a senior academic of comparative and international education in Australia, points out that all behaviour is multifaceted and intensely complex, so any attempt to normalise student behaviour is problematic (2006, 54). In communicating with students, the normative discourses that teachers and students draw on to make meaning are, insists Fox, highly questionable. She advises that a teacher's sense of what is normal in relation to her/his students and vice versa is conditional on the relationship they share (Fox 2006, 54). In my situation a sense of normality is conditioned by my perception of self as a foreign teacher, being non-Chinese in juxtaposition to my students as Chinese, and located in their own cultural environment. Fox considers that a person's personal code of morality, in terms of individual worth and value, will colour the way they see and communicate with their students, and as such has political consequences in relation to who holds the power and authority in the classroom (2006, 55). Although as a teacher I appeared to wear a cloak of authority, the power I associated with this position was on my part completely misunderstood. I had little appreciation of how important marks were to my students, and that they considered their degrees as the only possible route to a bright future.

Stephen Brookfield (1987, 16), a scholar of adult and experiential learning, recommends that teachers like myself become familiar with the assumptions that

arrange our belief systems and behaviour, and that the meaning that lies couched beneath them accounts for personal beliefs and the way one acts in a situation or context. He maintains that implied knowledge, acting as a lens and filter for day-to-day experiences, enables people to make sense of the world (in my case the Chinese university classroom); personal assumptions determine what is seen and how experiences are interpreted. Cultural assumptions are woven into the fabric of the established cultural/ideological values of society, and are transmitted into the social domain by its institutions. Such cultural assumptions shape behaviour and ways of thinking, and are to be found threaded through all aspects of life. To undo such assumptions, Brookfield advises, we need to be critically reflective (Brookfield 1987, 44-45).

In Shanghai I adhered to a strong sense of what was morally right for Joy, as a way of creating an inner impression of normality. I was convinced that my duty of care as a teacher was concerned with distilling into my students the significance of professional practice. A practice that was universally prescribed, and in which there was embedded the belief that cheating in any form was a negative behaviour, that would eventually spill over into one's work ethic. My students' cheating behaviour clashed full on with my own moral values, and in my mind undermined both my personal principles and work ethic; personal qualities that I believed I had promoted to my students. I was too concerned with advocating a self-image that my students could supposedly empathise with. From this standpoint it becomes easier to appreciate how my initial response to the cheating behaviour was one of feeling personally violated, with little empathy for why so many students had felt the need to cheat or turn a blind eye to this behaviour. A local Chinese teacher might well have dealt with the situation differently, because they were more intricately connected and caught up in a similar reality to their students; they had a deeper appreciation for what motivated or made their students behave in particular ways. I wonder, too, if in understanding what was at stake for the students, the local teachers would have arranged the exam differently, to avoid the passing on of the paper from one group to the next. Given the circumstances, my students' behaviour might well have been a normal response to the situation at hand, but I was in no position to make such a judgement call.

Fox (2006, 55) challenges the notion that researchers are able to describe people's behaviours and thoughts in ways that infer normality in respect to universal codes of ethical practice. She claims that although in a mono-cultural situation it might be possible to hold fundamental assumptions on ways of conduct, within an inter-cultural learning environment (such as the one I shared with my students in Shanghai), the possibility to have a shared understanding of moral values and ethical behaviour is dependent on the ways it relates to people at an individual level (Fox 2006, 55).

How easily the visual can represent stereotypes in relationships of unequal power. ...Mapping denotes boundaries that are in the real world no more than a fiction. Today, even a mountainous border or a wide river is a physical boundary, not a mental boundary, as new technologies dissolve the geographic barrier. However, it should be stressed that to dissolve boundaries is not to welcome homogeneity, but to find new ways to understand the specific contexts of narrative. (Fox 2006, 57)

The voices of my students in poetic form, although a construction, turn inside out the assumption that Chinese students are passive. Their responses were varied and portrayed not only their own opinions, views and possible suggestions, but also show that they felt sufficiently empowered to speak their own mind. Complacency appeared to be absent; my students believed they could change my thinking in some way. My students understood that they had rights and were prepared to voice them. They held strong beliefs that because they had worked hard for the whole semester, this justified their right to pass and not be punished if they personally had committed no wrong.

### **On being vulnerable**

*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*

Gannon (2007, 2) says '[w]riting is a relational act'. Seeing my own writing as an agent for change, I see my task as one of threading together these strands of experiential moments and emotion in my writing in a way that reflects the relational embodiment of that time, and unravels my own vulnerabilities and short comings, as a way to know myself better and to more fully understand both the Chinese students

that I taught and the challenges of cross-cultural education better. By tracking the journey of my relationships with my students through memoir and poetry, interrogating my position, situation, context and emotional responses I can partially explain the relational movements between my students and me. And, by revealing the processes through which I explore my many selves I can create new understanding and raise professional and personal awareness to destabilise those forms of scholarly literature that label and victimise Chinese students as disempowered and passive learners.

I expose and interrogate my own vulnerability as a way to engage in the between space with Xu Bu Chan and my students on more equal terms. I make the call for vulnerability in my writing of self and my Chinese protagonists—a call that compels me to respond to an unrequited yearning for understanding; to untangle the ways I am related to my research and those I write about. Such a call resonates with the voice of Behar (1999), believing that contemporary and more personalised ethnography respects the legacies of our past, the memories, hearts and feelings of individuals. She implies that such ethnographic writing permits the hearing of voices and emotions that were once silent—locked away (1999, 480). By recreating her own pain for the reader, Behar demonstrates how she has the experience and the legitimate right to empathise with others. In doing so she moves from the positioning of the ethnographer as objective and detached observer to a subjective vulnerable observer. In *The Vulnerable Observer*, Behar uses her grief, and the juxtaposition of physical and psychological suffering as a form of border-crossing, to revisit and interrogate her own ancestral heritage as an ‘in-between’, a Cuban American Jew. Her writing blurs the boundaries and emphasises an in-between space that resides between the observer and the observed. She suggests that it is only through the act of knowing self we discover things about others, and equally in our performance of discovering things about others we discover things about ourselves (Behar 1996, 30).

Reflecting on my students’ letters some years after the event, I find it difficult to reconcile and braid together the feelings and experiences I had then with the more



embodied and multi-faceted understandings I have acquired over time. Auto-ethnographer and writer of memoir Arthur Bochner maintains:

[T]here is always a cleavage between experience and words, between living through and narrating about, between the chaos and fragmentation of living a life and the smoothing orderliness we bring to it when we write, between what we remember now and what we can say took place then...(2007, 197)

In suggesting that writers should pay attention to the relationship between memories of the past and memories that are reconstructed in the present (Bochner 2007, 1999), my gaze is drawn to the significance of the relationship I had with Xu Bu Chan and his classmates; how Xu Bu Chan provocatively challenged my professional and personal values, and sense of self. Not only did his behaviour towards me make me feel uneasy, untrusting and not in control, but I was consumed by a strong sense of loathing. I could not empathise with how he could betray his classmates to save himself. In reflecting on how to write about Xu Bu Chan and my students in the present, I examine how my personal feelings towards him and them and my sense of moral indignation have changed. Where earlier I felt no empathy or compassion for Xu Bu Chan, now I see a young man ensnared in a situation not of his choosing. This new insight compels me to write about what happened between us—our story—in context. My ignorance, lack of empathy and compassion and the fears that surrounded my relationship with Xu Bu Chan in particular need to be made visible to the reader. In describing my feelings and the events that transpired as I experienced them I reveal a temporally ordered positionality, so that the reader can suspend judgement on Xu Bu Chan and his classmates and come to appreciate the complexity of living in Shanghai, for Xu Bu Chan, my students and myself.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### Relational Differences are Embroidered with the Personal

#### **Mental embroidery as the art of becoming**

Untie the knotty entanglement of habit

Loosen thread by thread the binds of pleasing

Gather remnants of past learning

Stitch layer by layer the undergarments of mindfulness

In a never ending story

Embroidering the fabric of life

## **Introduction**

I started writing this body of research as a way of untangling some of the relational tensions, complexities and differences that occurred whilst I was teaching and living in Shanghai. Initially my aim was to interrogate my relationships with the Chinese as a way of explaining differences in our intercultural communications and how we negotiate and create meanings. I also wanted to illustrate for my reader the paradoxical and ambivalent nature of my existence in Shanghai as a non-Chinese teacher and arts manager—a self who felt herself to be culturally and somewhat professionally different to those around her. Yet in pursuing this aim, as I wrote about my experiences and relationships, I also found myself unfastening and reworking my inner notions of selfhood. Such concerns were not just about making transparent my positioning inside the social reality of Chinese academia. I needed to grapple with the realisation that different relationships summoned in me differing aspects of my embodied self, something I had not really considered before.

In chapter four, I introduced the complications of teaching Chinese students in a university environment that one knows little about. To portray a more nuanced conceptualisation of the Chinese learner, I drew attention to my positioning and the voice/s of my Chinese students. My intention here was to dispel the homogenised representations of Chinese students to be found in much of the literature on transnational higher education, specifically on Asia and China. In particular, I revealed my personal feelings and professional relations with Xu Bu Chan as a way of illustrating the ambivalent nature of differences between people, and how the personal is always implicated in such differences. In doing so, I foreground some of the subtleties of power and resistance relations inside an institutional structure; a structure within which neither teacher nor student has any actual sense of power.

In previous chapters, in the stories I told, the strands of personal history I pulled on to illustrate my thinking, I uncovered the thoughts, emotions and behaviours of my body—a body that was/is continually ‘shaping my awareness of my embodied self’ (Mair 1998, 471). A body that is always communicating some aspect of me, whether I am consciously aware of it or not, to other bodies; through attitude, movement and

gesture, the manner in which I raise or lower my voice, moods and thought, all these renditions of me, they speak to the world (Dowrick 2000/2012, 650). To unfold the emergent processes of my embodied self and how this influences the different ways I communicate with others and they with me, I will here focus on the four central relationships featured in this thesis. In this chapter I will not revisit the cross-disciplinary theoretical approaches I have used to frame this auto-ethnography. Rather I seek to apply the embodied theories I have been developing in previous chapters to an exploration of relationships and notions of difference in order to draw together the threads of my thinking. In earlier chapters, I discussed the coping mechanisms I used to manage my professional and personal relationships, specifically, with Chen, Yue Wan, Feng Hong and Xu Bu Chan; I disclosed how we conveyed meaning, and how at times we were misled by each other's perceived behaviour. I interrogated some of the specificities of my own performance in these four relationships to illustrate the manner in which relational differences can be played out in a transnational higher education setting. In reflecting further on these relationships in this chapter, I reveal how our bodies contain many selves—selves who have the capacity for sympathy and kindness, are receptive to and caring of the needs of others; selves who are confident and can be vulnerable in their dealings with others. And those other not so virtuous selves—selves who are at times suspicious and condescending; selves who behave in a superior manner because of deep-seated fears that unsettle—stir distant memories which arouse feelings of not knowing the answer.

### **The embodiment of thinking and learning—the beginning**

My writing in this chapter embodies these feelings, perceptions and subsequent behaviours of my many selves—selves that open up...close...open up again and again, in a continuous cycle of change through my body's journey of becoming. In doing so, I reflect on the multifarious nature of my relations with the Chinese, and on how different relationships call on different selves to create and establish meaning between self and other/s. In describing myself in my work as a cultural novice, a woman learning how to live her new life in China, I am also connecting at a profound level with the way in which, from an early age, my body has trained itself to think; how I have become highly reliant on my senses as a way of learning how to live in the world, and how, like all people, I have become who I am by

learning to cope as a child with my parents. Learning to think is by its very nature an embodied process, a way of learning to live in and through one's body. Scientist and psychoanalyst Daniel Stern (1985/2000, xviii) believes the development of the emergent self (primary consciousness) commences in infancy, and that the experiences and processes that the self goes through in learning to live in the world are embodied ones. Likewise, Trinh writes:

we do not have bodies, we *are* our bodies, and we are ourselves while being in the world. ... We—write think and feel—feel (with) our entire bodies rather than only (with) our minds or hearts. (1989, 36)

To contemplate further what might underpin the diverse nature of my embodied self/s and how and why I revealed particular aspects of self/s as opposed to other self/s in each of the four relationships described here, I will begin this final chapter by reflecting on my first relationship with my mother. By introducing partial memories of my embodied experiences as a child I illustrate our uniqueness as individuals, showing how each of us learns to live in the world.

Our art of learning and the unique form it takes commences in our first relationship with the primary carer. I write about my early relationships with my mother not to hurt, blame or label her as a defective parent. I love my mother, and yet somehow I intuited at a young age that I needed to learn how to survive her kind of love. I now realise that the effects of some undiagnosed personality disorder fashioned the way she perceived her own reality, and that this was not her fault. My desire in exploring my relationship with my mother is to show how the relational interplay between us influenced the ways I learned to think and relate to people, thereby demonstrating the root of my own emergent thinking and learning processes and how I have chosen to live my life. Here, I am emphasising that notions of difference and differences between people cannot just be attributed to issues such as race, culture and gender, but that they are also intricately embroidered into the personal. To appreciate the full extent of difference and what it means to be different begins with understanding self, the many selves housed within our one body.

My childhood memories of my mother are confusing, a mixture of pleasurable and discomfoting encounters. A gentle, loving mother who could transform within

moments into a spiteful opponent; the spaces between us were never still, never silent, always filled with her voice—her stories—her pain. If not singing love songs of the 40s and 50s, my mother would revel in telling me tales of her previous life; her school days, the teachers and students she liked, and more specifically those she saw as having done her harm. She could talk for hours about the many boyfriends she had prior to meeting my father; how these young men were more charming and respectful of her than my father had proved himself to be. A never-ending recounting of her past, story after story, around and around, I knew them better than nursery rhymes.

As the first born, I learned that my mother's love came with a price! Absolute submission. My first conscious memories of our relationship were of being her confidante; she told me things of a personal nature between husband and wife that no child should be privy to. My father was blamed for all that was wrong with my mother's life, a nonstop outpouring of inner grief that spilled over into my own psyche. I was twenty-eight and living five years in Australia before I began to consider the possibility that my father was not the violent, unfeeling man I believed him to be. As a child, I learnt to be afraid of my mother's sudden outburst of temper whenever I said or did something not to her liking; I was reduced in confidence by her never-ending tests; testing my obedience, love, loyalty. And, still when I feel unsettled in a vulnerable relational moment I feel her tests crushing my breastbone, the sharpness of her words digging finger-like into my mind, tearing up my thoughts in handfuls, like tufts of hair—tug by tug—tell me the truth now! Tell the truth or... In those moments I feel a mood of disquiet, of not being worthy enter my body.

Smothered by my mother's unquenchable thirst for more than I could give her I sought any opportunity to hide away. Maybe it was due to some kind of internal defence system that I escaped into reading, sewing and drawing, all solitary activities where I could lose myself in a world of my own creation, a world without mother. In learning to protect myself against my mother's illness I became reliant on my senses to intuit her mood and body language, to feel an awkward silence or stillness in the room. I learnt to know when to speak and when to keep my mouth shut. I cultivated the face of someone who appeared to be compliant but underneath

was anything but. My heightened sensitivity to situations and my interest in pursuits of a solitary nature formed a barrier between my siblings and myself; a mental wall reinforced by appearing to be the centre of my mother's attention, an affirmation to my three younger sisters and brother that I was the special one, the favoured child, the perfect child who could do no wrong. I came to feel I did not belong—my little body out of place—not quite one of them.

### **Learning to think—an enigmatic experience**

The manner in which we learn to think can be a frightening and enigmatic experience. Psychologist Guy Claxton (1997/2000, 18) says a child's learning and coming to know their world is shaped by the specificities of their own experiences. Through creating classifications and ideas, the child learns through repeat performance to compare and to negotiate their experiences in order to avoid making future mistakes (Claxton 1997/2000, 18). According to Lorde (1984/2007, 83) most people do not share with you things you need to know, rather, you learn from watching and reading verbal cues. Exploring the relationship I had with my mother has enabled me to see how I have created an art form out of continually surrendering myself into the unknown, of making myself purposefully vulnerable so that I might realise my own sense of belonging, seeking some form of explanation as to why I have chosen to live my life the way I have. I now appreciate the early thoughts this child self would have had in such a psychologically confusing household. I was a child who grew up believing she was different; a child who could not comprehend why she did not appear to feel, think or behave like those around her; a child who, in feeling frequently out of place, not safe, not belonging, developed a strong suspicion that she was not intelligent enough, as if there was some part of her that was missing or lost.

Reflecting on these early childhood memories brings a more nuanced understanding of how I perceived myself in relation to my Chinese colleagues and students, particularly during those times that I felt vulnerable and outside my comfort zone. I now realise why I have a heightened sensitivity to the slightest change in people's mood and body language—a fine-tuned sensory register constructed originally as a survival technique to counter an arrangement of unpredictable behaviours. I

appreciate the complexity of the embodied self and how my many selves have evolved and will continue to evolve as a means of learning to live in the world. I see how this further complicates the manner in which I think and behave in all of my relationships. This growing awareness brings me some sense of comfort and stability, makes me feel more in harmony with the chaotic nature of living a life. I grasp the magnitude of how it matters to know myself better if I am to take responsibility for what occurred between my Chinese colleagues and students and me.

### **The cultural novice and the historied performance of silence**

Using silence as a way of communicating meaning is inter-stitched into all of my relationships with the Chinese. As revealed in earlier chapters, my Chinese colleagues and students would frequently resort to silence to quell my questions, deflect my attention or exclude me from their conversations—even those persons I considered myself close to, like Chen and Yue Wan. Being familiar with the part silence played in my childhood relationship with my mother, and the way the Chinese used silence to articulate meaning and mood, it appeared almost normal for me. Silence in its many guises was something I understood as a form of communication, a series of creative learning performances undertaken to protect oneself. To illustrate my point, in *A performance of becoming: Embroidering self into otherness* (2011) I used memoir to write about my inner thoughts whilst sharing a meal with two Chinese female companions, my friend and former colleague Yue Wan and her friend Li Ping. I reflected on how I had sat in silence through an entire meal, whilst my two companions communicated with each other mainly in Mandarin.

The following paragraph is a revised fragment from that paper which illustrates my relational history with silence and how its embodied history continues to shape my relational responses and notions of difference and being different.





I try to silence my inner voice—the voice that does not comprehend how people can speak in another language that excludes me, when all three of us can speak English. As I continue telling my inner voice not to be so negative, I begin to reflect on my disapproving thoughts. Maybe Yue Wan and Li Ping do not mean to be rude, rather they are taking advantage of the situation to catch up on each other's news. They might be thinking it is perfectly acceptable for Joy to sit here silent, but still appear to be sharing a lovely time with them, that it is not their problem that I do not speak Mandarin. Yet, feel excluded I do, hesitant, not knowing if what I really think is of any real significance to either of them. So I continue to sit, presenting a composed face. It is something I do well, sitting quietly listening to words and watching gestures I cannot always comprehend. Then it dawns on me that this feeling of being still, of not getting up and walking away is not as strange as I first surmised. I have learned to be adept at being still, not speaking, pretending I am self-possessed. I begin to reflect on the time I was three years old sitting on a chair, paying attention to my mother's command, not to move, to be still, to remain silent as all good little English girls must. So anxious am I not to move a tiny finger, a muscle, so fearful am I that I will no longer be considered a good little girl. I have learned well to cultivate a look of composed silence, not to move, not to speak, but vulnerable I am in my stillness, my silence. There is no protection within, no inner sanctuary where I am able to flee. To disrupt silence in this child's mind is not be a good little girl.<sup>29</sup>



Although I continue to struggle with the implicit meanings that underpin what it means for this body of mine to be silent, the good little girl is always close by. A way of being, she stalks me even now in my various manifestations of self. She is that part of me that flows through all my selves—she is my vulnerable self. Can I ever be free of her? Do I want to be? Should I not rejoice in how, by being vulnerable, she opens me wide to other possibilities? One thing remains clear as I

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<sup>29</sup> Refer Scott 2011

move backwards and forwards through time. Reflecting on how my various relational selves affect my relationships with the Chinese, I see how significant pieces of me, although subject to shape shifting, are stitched from my early childhood. Whilst I recognise that no two people can ever think exactly the same, there are times when our differences cause a disconnection—a deeply unsettling feeling... And yet,

[e]ach fragment of lived experience, as I word stitch them together, reveals a seeded pearl of self-knowledge; layer by layer they cluster together, adding to the embodied flesh of ceaseless becoming, celebrating my performance as cultural novice in a foreign land. (Scott 2011, 165)

### **Uncovering our feelings of being out of place**

In taking responsibility for how I behaved in my relationships with the Chinese, I am recognising that each and every relationship we enter is unique. Although I experienced problems and various misunderstandings with some of my Chinese colleagues and students, this was not true of all of them and neither were any two relationships the same. Through interrogating the four central relationships in this thesis, I came to realise that my behaviour was, in each one of them, governed by a series of psychological triggers that initiated in me particular patterns of behaviour and assumptions. Some of these triggers were connected to learned survival mechanisms for mastering my childhood fear of not being considered knowledgeable or intelligent enough. In those relationships where I felt particularly vulnerable and out of place, my thinking gravitated towards constructing behaviours that would attempt to reclaim my tattered confidence, and in doing so, develop an overly protective self that was suspicious of people's motives.

In writing about the incongruous nature of some of my professional relationships in Shanghai, I uncover the selves that lie below the professional identity. Here we see a self-deceiving self; a self not able to feel at ease; a self who, in occupying an ambiguous space in the Chinese academic community, is ignorant of her power as teacher and foreign professional. By exploring those relationships that gave rise to seemingly inconceivable differences, and foregrounding aspects of my own ambivalent nature in particular situations and contexts, I disclose a shadowed side of me, a persona at times not unlike other western voices that inform much of the

literature on offshore transnational higher education communities in Asia. That is, researchers and authors who promote the idea that as western academics we are the experts and we know best, when we do not. As one leading Australian academic in the field wrote:

Australian academics provide a number of benefits to the offshore programme when they teach on location...study benefits from experienced teachers who are experts in the field, and demonstrate high level teaching skills.... These academics also offer strong models to local teachers, who may have limited understanding of pedagogical concerns and content knowledge. As such, they serve as exemplars and mentors for those who wish to learn better models of Western instructional guidance. (Debowksi 2003, 3)

Academics like Debowski seem not to consider how and in what context Australian teachers can be role models; I do not find any appreciation of what local teachers contribute to learning. Through interrogating the incongruous nature of my relationships, first with Feng Hong, my first co-teacher in the art college, in chapters two and three, and later in chapter four with Xu Bu Chan, a third year undergraduate student in one of my business communication units, I now read Debowski's attitude as being somewhat superior in tone. She seems to blame local teachers for pedagogical problems, failing to recognise the complexity of intercultural relationships. She makes the assumption, as unfortunately I did with Xu Bu Chan and some of his peers, that Asian students are not only responsible for their own learning, but also for adapting to a learning environment that is constructed and controlled by foreign teachers. Transnational higher education researchers Egege and Kutieleh contend that offshore local students enrol in international degrees because they believe they will get a good education; they 'expect to learn new things, and they expect to be challenged. They expect difference' (2008, 74). Yet is such thinking not just a little naïve? How is it possible for students such as the Chinese, who are the product of a learning system whose roots are embedded in 'teacher centred' learning principles to imagine how they also need to change? That in demanding and desiring to be exposed to new forms of knowing, they must equally be responsible for how they learn? Although these students want change, how many will understand that change first begins with self? So who is responsible for preparing local students for change?

Both Debowski's (2003) and Egege and Kuieleh's (2008) views foreground the paradox of trying to capture the lived experience of foreign professionals like myself teaching in offshore locations. Tragically, such literature offers only a partial, and thus limited, understanding of what is at stake; it reveals little about the dynamic and diverse nature of intercultural relationships, and says nothing about the uniqueness of life, that no two persons can have the exact same experience or relationship. Research such as Debowski's, though having noble intentions, does much to universalise the identity of Asian and Chinese learners, and offers little in the way of critical reflection on our own professional and personal assumptions and positioning. The danger with making generalisations is that assumptions are formed which frame one person's experience as representative of all people's experiences. This absence of self-reflection in the literature inadvertently encourages a pervasive spirit of universalism throughout the entire internationalised education community, one that is difficult to dismantle. Essentialist writing of this kind highlights the cultural barriers between western teachers and teachers and students of different ethnic persuasions, such as the Chinese, and challenges professionals like me to reflect on my own ethnocentric thinking and professional practice; it makes me question the nature of my relationships with the Chinese. Why did I communicate well with some people and not with others?

Michael Moore (1994, 188-192) considers that western teachers such as me, who have worked or are currently working in offshore locations in Asia, frequently encounter problems and cultural confusion inside the local learning communities. Moore argues that in the areas of pedagogy, technology, administration and cultural values, problems between a student and foreign teacher occur due to a form of intercultural ignorance, a misalignment in their communication (see also Leask 2008). The foreign teacher, having checked out their course outline and teaching plans, may decide there is nothing wrong with their program materials and in doing so, be tempted to blame their students (Moore 1994) or colleagues, just as I did with Feng Hong and Xu Bu Chan. Moore maintains that the main intercultural factors in the border-learning environment are concerned with the 'why of our work practice', and how these factors are linked to how we as offshore (foreign) teachers value the culture of other people (1994, 189). International education in its purest expression,

he suggests, should provide a space for foreign teachers to question their own culturally informed educational epistemologies. Instead, we as a western culture have tended to be arrogantly unreflective and uncritical about the assumptions that underlie what and how we teach and about whether as a society, we are culturally fit to be teaching across borders; we have been unthinking about the effects of our teaching on people in foreign countries (Moore 1994, 189).

Leading Australian researchers in the field, such as: Dunn and Wallace (2006, 2004); Gribble and Ziguras (2003); Leask (2008); Leask et al. (2005, 2004) Wang (2008); Ziguras (2008, 1999), all agree with Moore that there is a need for teaching professionals to understand the culture of the teachers and students they are working with. These scholars echo the sentiments of Dunn and Wallace:

there is a qualitative difference when the academic is 'a stranger teacher in a strange land' (Leask, 2004) and this requires specific knowledge and skills that need to be learnt. (Dunn and Wallace 2006, 368)

Some of my own experiences in Shanghai support what Moore and others are suggesting; however, their explanation of how to fix the problem is too simplistic. The justification of miscommunication being due to cultural differences alone explains only part of the problem.

In writing about my own entangled relationships with Feng Hong, Xu Bu Chan and others, my reader could easily mistake me for having such a voice as Debowski's (2003). I could explain certain aspects of my behaviour with Feng Hong and Xu Bu Chan, as forms of intercultural ignorance. In a manner of speaking this is true but only partially so. In chapter two I disclosed how I blamed Feng Hong for not being sufficiently involved in the preparation and delivery of our first arts administration unit together, making the assumption that she was both unprofessional and untrustworthy. At the time I failed to reflect on my own behaviour and how my closeness to Chen influenced the way I related to her. In the many conversations I had with Chen concerning Feng Hong's behaviour, I frequently stressed the importance of my post-graduate education and international experience as an arts management professional, that I alone was the expert who knew the right way to do things. Nor whilst I was involved with Feng Hong did I reflect on the possibility that

there were elements of my personality and sense of self that were further complicating my understanding of what our relationship represented for me both professionally and personally.

In chapter four I wrote about how I failed to see Xu Bu Chan's behaviour in the classroom as anything other than that of an unreliable, lazy student, lacking in personal responsibility and integrity. At the time, I did not reflect on my own feelings of discomfort at being directly challenged by one of my students. Neither did I question why I felt so personally threatened by Xu Bu Chan's angry e-mails. I remember the pain and frustration I experienced when I read his words glaring up at me from the screen of my lap top—words that spoke of his lack of comprehension—that he did not understand my way of thinking:

*I want to tell you*

*You are the only teacher*

*The only one who thinks me not a good student.*

*...I do not know what you will do?*

*Everything in your class is unfair—*

*...You will never understand me.*

Little did I appreciate then how Xu Bu Chan's words affected me, the manner in which I received his anger, permitting it to cut deep into my body, feeling another reprimand for not thinking like other people; more proof that the way I thought was flawed. Only in hindsight do I realise how my embodied reactions and consequent response to Xu Bu Chan's words were connected to my deep-seated doubt about my intellectual worth, and that at a sensory level I was interpreting Xu Bu Chan's words as saying I was not smart enough. Buttoned up tight in my self-righteousness, I found it difficult to be compassionate in my relationships with Feng Hong and Xu Bu Chan, unable as I was back then to look beyond the obvious as to why my relations with them were so problematic.

I am also perplexed because, although many western intellectuals speak out against inequality, are dedicated to social justice, oppose the violation of human rights and wholeheartedly sanctify the idea of a free and equal society for all; yet, as Trinh rightly points out, these same people can be unseeing when it comes to negotiating

‘with difference on a one-to-one basis’ (1991, 158). In trying to tease out some of the specificities that underpin my professional relationships with Chinese colleagues and students, it is not just a matter of questioning my culturally inscribed ways of learning and teaching, or understanding Chinese culture. Surely, as ethical professionals we should be more critically reflexive as to how we have learned to think as individuals; we should be interrogating the manner in which the particulars of our journeys of becoming have crafted our own embodied responses to self and other/s. If we were more inclined to explore our embodied selves, might we not more easily recognise the manner in which we each act out our differences according to different situations and contexts; and see that we draw on distinct manifestations of selves in relation to particular thinking patterns that were learned during our primary relationships as our own way of learning to live in the world? This self-awareness will surely help us develop a more informed and empathic understanding of the relational other/s in our research and transnational classrooms, and enable us to imagine how they might perceive us, rather than us perceiving how they are different to us. Krishnamurti advocates the spirit of what I am saying:

To understand life is to understand ourselves, and that is both the beginning and the end of education. Education is not merely acquiring knowledge, gathering and correlating facts; it is to see the significance of life as a whole. (1953, 2)

My professional relationship with my second co-teacher in the art college, Yu Wan, was significantly different to the one I experienced with Feng Hong. This relationship cuts across much of the transnational higher education literature as discussed earlier. Yue Wan’s attitude towards teaching and learning, the manner in which we worked together inside and outside the classroom, as illustrated in chapter two, reflects Krishnamurti’s (1955/1978, 3–4) philosophy on education. Yue Wan’s ability to suspend judgment, to listen, and be open to her students as well as to me, her teaching colleague, affirms Krishnamurti’s belief that the nature of education is not about adopting a rigid method of delivering information to one’s students. Instead, he contends that learning is an integrated process through which the teacher locates their higher self and that such a process removes barriers between people rather than creating them (1955/1978, 3–4). In this context I am interpreting the higher self as more of a spiritually contemplative state where the teacher is able to put aside their own ego and professional/personal agendas in the best interests of

their students. Likewise, Yue Wan took her point of reference as one of mutual collaboration—to pool and share whatever knowledge and experience we had for the benefit of our students. Our numerous conversations at that time and since have left me with no doubt that the needs of her students always take priority with Yue Wan. Thus by acknowledging our differences as to how we understood our roles as teachers and the needs of our students, Yue Wan and I were able to remove many of the socio/cultural barriers between us rather than consolidating them. We respected our differences and placed value on how, together, we were in a stronger position to create something of tangible benefit for our students. Learning to trust and accept each other at an early stage of our relationship helped us move beyond the dualisms of western versus Chinese pedagogy and led us to being able to destabilise rather than emphasise our differences.

In writing about my relationship with Yue Wan, I see in me a gathering of selves who were not resistant to alternative ways of seeing and being. Here I was a collaborator, a woman who, in feeling secure in her relationship became less judgmental. This self was able to listen, understand and appreciate the value of local knowledge and visceral experience and able to incorporate them in her teaching. As a self who was capable of taking risks and was open to alternative ways of teaching and learning, she did not feel the necessity to take centre stage in the classroom but was open to sharing her space and knowledge freely without fear of being compromised. In my relationship with Yue Wan I see myself as a confident woman, adept at managing and reconciling personal differences. As a consequence my writing portrays Yue Wan, my students and my own persona in a generous and compassionate light. A persona so very different to the one I reveal in writing about my professional relations with Feng Hong and later, with Xu Bu Chan. In feeling safe with Yue Wan I became more open to other possibilities, other ways of seeing. There was little in our relationship, apart from the occasional slippages in our communication styles, as illustrated earlier, which prompted me to recall or make connections with negative aspects of my past life. I did not need to draw on learned behaviours to protect myself, as I was intuiting a more welcoming and open space between us. A space where I felt I was being invited in as an equal. A space where I did not have to be anything other than what I was. In this teaching space I shared



with Yue Wan I was not fearful of being vulnerable; I sensed that by surrendering myself to Yue Wan's warmth and advice we would be able to cultivate a more nuanced understanding of each other.

### **The underside of relational closeness**

The heart of this thesis, as explored in chapters two and three, emerged out of untangling the effects, the intricacies and anomalies of my relational ties to Chen. Whilst I was eventually to make other friendships during my three years living and teaching in Shanghai, it is in trying to comprehend the nature of my relationship with Chen and how this influenced the way I related to China and my Chinese colleagues that has proved to be the most challenging. Ours was a relationship that embodied the paradoxical disposition of difference; not in terms of dissimilarities in our cultural and social psyches, but rather in what it meant to be relationally close to someone who was responsible for bringing me into their work community as both foreign expert and personal friend. My relationship with Chen affected my sense of identity in China. That is, our relational history, our closeness influenced the manner in which I perceived my professional and personal selves, and my sense of belonging inside the Chinese academic community.

As I discussed in earlier chapters, I was dependent on Chen to make things work for me in Shanghai. I felt safe in the knowledge that he would ease any tensions of feeling culturally and psychologically isolated in my new life in the college. I placed my trust in our relationship; I felt safe and confident in the knowledge that no matter what the situation, professional or otherwise, Chen would look out for me. In the five years we worked together, we had grown to respect and confide in each other. We grasped the significances of our mutual similarities and differences in our professional careers and networks and learned to use them for our mutual benefit. It was Chen's negotiation skills and diplomacy that I believed were responsible for bringing to fruition my dream of teaching arts management and furthering my consultancy practice in Shanghai. I saw Chen, rather than Professor Zhou, as having the power to advance my career in the college. Whether this was true or not I believed it; I felt our relationship mattered to Chen. From the first time we met he appeared interested in my talents and in me as a person. He actively encouraged and

made possible all of the collaborative arts academic exchanges I initiated and managed between Shanghai and Perth from 1999 until 2004. Although we required Professor Zhou's agreement to develop our projects, it was Chen who had the skill and the know-how; it was he and not Professor Zhou who knew how to work the system and had the right connections to get things done. Without Chen, as I was to discover later, nothing could happen; there were no staff in the college with his knowledge, experience and appropriate connections. Furthermore, there was nobody with whom I had a special relationship, no gatekeeper who had the power to open the right doors for me.

For a woman like me, who had worked hard to find her own sense of belonging and yet still struggled to realise her own potential and self-worth, being courted by a director of Foreign Affairs from an overseas university made her feel important—special. Such feelings produced in me a strong sense of loyalty and indebtedness towards Chen. As I revealed in chapters two and three, Chen protected me from much of the college's internal conflicts and the group and personal rivalries; he smoothed out any irregularities in my dealings with colleagues and senior staff members, and promoted my professional skills and experience to the leaders of the college and the university at every opportunity. Thus my unquestioning loyalty and faith in Chen's professionalism and character encouraged me to be more open and vulnerable with him, something that was unusual in my professional and even some personal relationships. Yet although he went out of his way to make my life in Shanghai comfortable and less stressful, many of his actions inadvertently clouded my perspective and judgment. My feelings of admiration, respect and trust rendered me overly reliant on his opinion. Our closeness and my expectations for him to manage any situation I found problematic inadvertently influenced the way I understood Chinese reality. Combined with my own agendas, my relationship with Chen obscured the manner in which I interpreted the behaviour of colleagues like Feng Hong and Professor Wu, the dean of the art history department. And in many ways it coloured my early impressions of China and the Chinese.

By interrogating some of the specificities of the professional and private features of our relationship I can now grasp the multifarious nature of my position in the

college. Now I appreciate how my initial knowledge and misconceptions of China and Chinese behaviour were entangled in my relationship with Chen. Chen's position was strategically unique in that it straddled the organisational structures of the central university and the college. Being able to negotiate the extraordinarily complicated bureaucracies of the university and the college meant that he was in a strong position to establish for me opportunities, networks and entry into a Chinese world; a world that many other non-Chinese arts professionals and teachers would not have been privy to. Yet, as one of the main gatekeepers to the inner world of this particular Chinese academic community, he both opened and restricted my access. It was Chen's friends and colleagues who became my friends and his enemies mine. Even though I was ignorant of the college's internal politics, it still brought its own share of problems. I saw the world of the college mainly through Chen's eyes. I made decisions based on his interpretation of events. Thus in many ways, though no fault of his own, I became burdened by my closeness and loyalty to Chen, I found it difficult to make sense of my life in the college without him. I was a cultural novice in limbo.

As to those selves that arose to the surface in my relationship with Chen, there was a seemingly self-assured self who believed in her position as the professional international arts management expert. Yet here is not the independent, confident self to be seen in her relationship with Yu Wan. This is a self who had little idea that her power was tenuously held, that without Chen to accommodate her needs or mediate her relations with senior members of staff, such as Professor Zhou, she had little power—no voice. This is a self who believed in the illusion of her expertise. An illusion that was brutally shattered with Chen's demise. It is through reflecting on my five years with Chen, the events leading up to his death and what follows later that has led me to appreciate the significance of relationships. And that the nature of our relationships with others has a powerful effect on how we perceive social reality and our position within it.

In unfolding the various complexities of these four 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 multifarious nature of difference.

### **Writing the storied body as way of coming to know**

To articulate the sensory movements and pressures of living in Chinese society as a socio/cultural other has required a creative and imaginative methodological approach to writing. I have striven to be playfully mischievous, emotionally vulnerable and earnestly dramatic in my writing to encapsulate the subtle and transient textures of one woman's experiences and relationships inside the Chinese academic community in pursuit of creating new knowledge. Hall too sees 'imaginative writing' as a kind of coming into knowing (1991, 60-61); a way of comprehending and appreciating how difference in its many forms is enacted. In this way imaginative writing such as mine can be a conduit for understanding other possibilities and revealing what lies at the heart of differences between people in the transnational higher education community. The art of this creative process is to be found in interrogating one's relationships with self as well as others, as I have done with my Chinese protagonists, in order to ascertain what lies at the core of one's own differences. Lekki Hopkins elaborates on this further when she writes:

[i]f we can fly on the wings of our imaginations, then surely we can bridge the gaps between our own embodied suite of memories, dreams and reflections and those of the other, to glimpse, if only fleetingly, the sensory register which will allow us to empathise without ever claiming to know the experience as our own. (2009, 7)

In this creative performance, my desire to capture some of the complexities of living and working in Shanghai as a university teacher is not something that I have been able to separate from my journey as a cultural novice. It is a performance that has frequently disturbed the foundations of my belief systems and values. Learning how to develop a writing style that could capture the essence of what it was like for me in Shanghai, both professionally and personally, has shown me how creativity is not something that is taught but rather performed through visceral experience, inquiry and interpretation (Bolton 2011, location 84).

In writing about some of the specificities and irregularities of my relationships with Chinese colleagues and students, relationships which were as diverse in temperament as they were in degrees of complexity, I have come to appreciate how

the ‘politics of representation’ work. That is the writing approach I have taken to portray the relational behaviours between the Chinese and myself in adverse and advantageous circumstances matters. Such a writing approach has allowed me to see how we as professionals are continually being shaped by our relationships. In intermingling and stitching together strands of my relational history, mindfulness and lighter and darker shades of my psyche and heart, I have dared in this work to tell my truth; albeit a partial truth that will be different or comparable but never uniquely the same as other transnational teachers in similar local settings to mine.

To counter the potential for misrepresenting my Chinese protagonists’ behaviour, I have, throughout these chapters, accentuated my own emotional responses and vulnerabilities in my relationships with them. The polyphonal and reflexive style of writing I have chosen not only challenges essentialist representations of Chinese academics and teachers and inter-cultural teacher to teacher and teacher to student relationships—it is much more than this; through focusing on the unique and ambiguous nature of these relational histories and our experiences of our storied bodies, it foregrounds a more personal conceptualisation of difference and being different. Accepting difference requires that we take full responsibility for how we relate to others in our professional and private lives. Throughout this work I have touched on aspects of my personal history to demonstrate how I did not always fit in; of being frequently between things, as child, single mother, migrant, expatriate wife and as a professional compromised at times by family obligations. When interlaced with my reflections on my relations with the Chinese, what comes to the surface is the foreigner who has always resided within. My understanding of my own foreignness was as much formed by my own experiential and relational histories as it was by what occurred in China.

Evocative vulnerable writing such as mine can cultivate a greater awareness of how as individuals and professionals we must learn to reconcile or agree to our differences, and that change must first begin with oneself. By writing about those times where I stumbled because of the seemingly incompatible differences between myself and the Chinese, I am acknowledging the effort required to uphold a sense of responsibility in one’s professional practice. This creative performance of mine is an

integral part of my own learning, not only in relation to my position as an early career researcher and writer of life stories and teacher, but also as part of my own embodied journey of learning to live in the world. To write memoir and poetry is to lace reflexive openings into my work—openings through which I pull strands of life’s learned pleasures and sorrows to show how they touch, disturb and affect my behaviour and relationships with others.

## CONCLUSION

As I mention in both the introduction and chapter five, this inquiry came about, amongst other things, as a way of addressing some of the professional and personal experiences and frustrations I experienced whilst teaching in Shanghai. Early in the development of my thesis, I made the decision to use memoir and poetry as a way of writing auto-ethnography. When I chose auto-ethnography, I did not realise that I was taking a critically reflexive position that would change my whole approach to imagining and conducting social science research. Still less did I appreciate that my embodied experiences in China would evolve to become the major focus of this thesis, or that such an awakening would eventually lead to a deeper understanding of the many selves that constitute my embodied self; and that understanding who I am would encourage me to create better research. I read many auto-ethnographies and memoirs during this early period; yet it was not until I opened myself up in my writing to the private spaces of my pain, confusion and misunderstanding in China that I began to realise the power of memoir and poetry in evocative auto-ethnography. It is a form of writing that not only articulates through its aesthetic craft, the essence of real life experiences, but it also provides a social critique of that life and its surroundings. Through the actual process of writing and rewriting day after day, month after month, year after year, I learned the craft of writing memoir and poetry, and began to see their potential as an auto-ethnographic device for creating new forms of knowing about self and cultural others and revealing the interconnected spaces and realities that lie between people. I came to understand that writing such as this is not a static process; it requires evoking and working with selves that are always in a state of motion temporally, psychologically, intellectually, physically and otherwise. It took time to appreciate that what I was really writing about was the multifaceted nature of living a real life, a relational life that involved the participation of multiple selves—my embodied selves.

To begin with, I was not so much focused on untangling my complicated positioning in my research as arts manager, becoming-teacher, professional colleague, personal friend, writer as well as early career researcher trying to make her mark; I was not paying attention to the many agendas pinned to the backs of these various selves. Having not fully absorbed the significance of auto-ethnographic research in the early

stages of planning my research, my imagination of what was possible was limited. In my original research proposal I envisioned that my voice would be subordinate to the voices of my Chinese respondents, that my life experiences would be the understory and not the central script. I saw my life whilst living in Shanghai, at this time, as giving me the right to speak about the Chinese academic community; I did not reflect on the possibility that my experiences had a lot to say about living the life of a cultural other within such a setting. I believed that foregrounding the voices of the Chinese would promote a keener sensitivity towards intercultural teaching and learning communities for academics, institutions and policy makers involved in offshore transnational higher education activities in China. I felt that by giving the Chinese the opportunity to speak for themselves about their own experiences with foreign teachers, this would help dispel some of the stereotypical representations being placed upon them in much of the literature. To this end, I conducted interviews in the form of open-ended conversations, intending to use them as a primary source for collecting information about border-crossing teaching and learning experiences and how meaning is created. My former colleague and friend Yue Wan arranged for me to meet separately with fifteen local Chinese teachers and university students in Shanghai, all of whom spoke English and had either worked with or been taught by a foreign teacher in recent years. From these recorded and transcribed conversations, I had meant to construct a braided narrative, interrupted periodically with fragments of memoir and poetry that spoke about my own experiences in the Chinese classroom. My hope was that by foregrounding the voices of the Chinese, my research would promote a more fluid responsiveness to cultural differences between local teaching staff and their western counterparts. I believed that by writing this way I could raise awareness of the socio/cultural, professional, personal and other challenges that exist between local and foreign teachers, and how differences are negotiated, or not, to create shared meaning.

It was at this point, whilst reading my interviewees' transcripts that I began to comprehend what Clifford Geertz (2001, 311) meant when he inferred that there was no landmass or continent with an over-abundance of meaning awaiting discovery; but rather I would only find meaning by speculating in a multitude of ways as to what occurred in China. Apart from my previous student Shan, who had in the



previous year become a teacher himself, and Yue Wan, I had no shared history with the majority of these people I had interviewed, no common relationship other than the one we each shared independently with Yue Wan.<sup>30</sup> As I continued to read and reread the transcripts, it struck me that not only did I know nothing about these people, I knew nothing about the foreign teachers being portrayed in their conversations. This was further complicated by the fact that I myself had not mixed with other foreign teachers whilst living in Shanghai, as described in chapter three. Like faceless entities, the bodies of foreign teachers were being interpreted, judged, reshaped and generalised in a manner that was not so different to the literature that had a tendency to universalise Chinese academic and students. Was this not something I was trying to avoid—the essentialisation of human behaviour? Obviously, in an hour it was impossible for anyone to convey the complexity and uniqueness of human relationships. So why was I trying to do just that? Such a consideration forced me to reflect on what it was I wanted to say about being a foreign teacher in China. I realised I needed to get much closer to the essence of experience—the uniqueness of what it felt like being immersed inside the Chinese academic community as a non-Chinese. My research was not about generalising representations of foreign teachers constructed through the eyes of their Chinese colleagues and students, and using auto-ethnographic writing techniques to weave such representations together with a few of my own stories and reflections. No! It was the uniqueness of living such a life that was important; it was the telling of my stories and relationships with people I had known in the flesh day-after-day, through the interrogation and reflections of my many interior selves. Yes! This is where true discovery lay for me.

The art of using memoir and poetry to interrogate and speculate about the day-to-day aspects of my previous life in Shanghai, as it unfolds through these chapters, has been an interpretative performance of border-crossing multiple relationships. The words and styles of writing I have played with throughout this work have shaped particular ways of seeing and contemplating the life of a foreign teacher in China. The use of memoir and poetry as a form of auto-ethnographic writing reconciles the process of writing story with the process of boundary crossing. I have created a body

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<sup>30</sup> Some of Shan's (not real name) conversations are included in *Loose Threads*.

of stories and an assortment of poetic forms that construct a research framework on which my story and journey of becoming is made more transparent—more honest. I view the meanings I have generated from this performance of mine on the transnational higher education border in China as both artistic and political. The relationships I have revealed, particularly those with Chen, Yue Wan, Feng Hong and Xu Bu Chan, demonstrate how the art of living is affected by our relationships with others, and that this in turn affects the way we deal with particular situations and persons; it shapes how we tell our stories; it shapes the very character of our research. By focusing specifically on my inner thoughts and responses to these relationships and others I have taken responsibility for my own interpretations. I hope I have illustrated how unworthy it is to write about another human being negatively on the printed page when much of the action being written about is being interpreted from the researcher's/writer's own views and ideas of what they think is going on and what they believe relationships should be.

In writing about some of the specificities of my own professional and personal relationships in Shanghai, I have aspired to portray, for those who might be interested, what it means to live on the border-lands psychologically, socially and culturally. I wanted to show how, by paying attention to one's inner journey of becoming, we are taking responsibility for who we are and our position in the world. I wanted to show how understanding and having empathy for difference and being different can only begin when we are open to finding the answer to the question, who am I?

## **LOOSE THREADS**

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Positioning my voice at the centre of my work**

Page 2

The term ‘Laowei’ is used in China to describe any person considered non-Chinese, a foreigner. Its literal translation means outside country person. ‘Laowei’ is not necessarily a derogatory term nor do the Chinese people usually associate it with negative meanings, although some non-Chinese people might think otherwise.

Page 3

Political historian Benjamin Schwartz discusses the ethical implications of conducting research on intellectuals from developing countries like China:

To the extent that it [research] has attempted to structure the whole experience of these intellectuals in terms of the conventional triad—tradition/development/modernity—without a deeper investigation of the range of meaning of these terms, to the extent that it [research] has been unduly preoccupied with proclaiming supposed universal laws or models of how intellectuals behave or ought to behave in developing societies, it may have actually impeded deeper inquiry. (1972, 71)

Although Schwartz wrote this over forty years ago, as I argue in chapter five, the western world is still framing the teaching pedagogies of developing countries as victims and in need of remedial action. That is, western academics have a homogenising tendency to write about the behaviours of non-western academics without critically reflecting on their own positions and their culture’s pedagogies. Those cultures possessing more sophisticated technology and knowledge systems tend to come from the west. Likewise, education markets have a tendency to prefer western educational institutions and practices (Evans 1997; Knight and Altbach 2006; Yang 2003). As a consequence, the Chinese academic becomes entangled in an externally constructed pedagogy that defines the model of what scholarship is and is not. Inadvertently such behaviour encourages a pervasive spirit of universalism throughout the internationalised education community that is difficult to overcome. This is a contentious state of affairs, when one considers that there are no Australian agencies in the public or private sector that provides information or advice to local universities teaching staff on the pedagogical practices of different countries

(Gribble and Ziguras 2003, 214), and yet offshore education is one of Australia's biggest exports.

In 2010-11 education was Australia's third biggest export, accounting for 16.3 billion dollars in exports (AEI 2012). Australian teachers working in non-western countries are constrained not only by the ethnocentric behaviours at play in such situations, but also are further disadvantaged by their ignorance of other countries' teaching and learning practices. Such a lack of understanding and knowledge actively discourages the cultivation of strong teacher to-teacher-and teacher-student relationships; and this diminishes the potential for appreciating the cultural diversity that exists within such relationships and directly undermines the acquisition of transferable knowledge. It is critical that the internationalisation of education, and the literature that is produced from such enterprises, are grounded in processes that are both collaborative and reflective, and not based solely on the adoption of the pedagogy and practices of a singular culture (Hanna and Latchem 2006).

### **Background relational threads**

Page 8

Chen's role as the director of Foreign Affairs would be comparable to a public relations officer in the west. His main duties consisted of looking after all aspects of the college's relations with its international partners. Such duties involved: project managing the various international academic/arts exchanges; arranging/escorting incoming national and international delegations as well as outgoing overseas delegations; attending to the professional and personal needs of visiting academics and senior university personnel in relation to arranging meetings with university leaders and senior academics from the college, accommodation, entertainment and so forth.

Page 9

A 'Mr Fix It' in China is a person who excels in diplomacy; they have the know-how to negotiate highly vertical, bureaucratic chains of organisational governance to secure consensus and bring things to fruition quickly and efficiently. As in other

Chinese organisations there are multiple levels of power within Chinese universities. Such organisational systems make reaching agreements complicated, and once reached, such agreements can be difficult to change. In organisational cultures such as these, professional and personal agendas run high, therefore personnel who have extensive knowledge of the system and are skilled in diplomacy are highly sought after. Chen referred to his art as the mixing of glue, 'glue making', to make things stick.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Creating the Writing Space

#### **Silence and laughter speak louder than words**

Page 19

During my three years teaching in Shanghai I taught at three universities and two technical colleges. All of these tertiary institutions had very different arrangements for the length of semesters and the number of contract teaching hours I was expected to complete. The differences in the length of a semester in the universities suggest that there were no centrally fixed regulations across the local university sector. The art college's academic year was organised into three and a half semesters. The first three semesters consisted of eight weeks of classes; the fourth half semester was for elective units only, some of which were taught by international arts practitioners. The other two universities had two semesters, which consisted of twenty and fourteen weeks of classes respectively.

#### **Embroidery as a metaphor for a way of writing and an embodiment of the research performance**

- *The art of embroidery and discourse*

Page 35

*What's On* was a local weekly entertainment magazine specifically written for the expatriate community in Shanghai. The magazine, written mainly in English, was advertised as telling you all you need to know about living and working in Shanghai.

Throughout Chinese history there appears to be a strong link between higher education and financial security. My experiences with Chinese academics and students did not appear to contradict this traditional notion until I met Qiao Yi, who had given up a reasonably lucrative career (by local standards) in contract law to become a professional embroiderer and teacher of the craft.

The concept that all people have the ability to be educated and are capable of achieving sage-hood and perfection forms the pedagogical footprint for learning in China (Lee 1996, 30). Seemingly, an inherent skill for learning does not necessarily correspond to achievement or failure in education (Hu 2002, 98); rather it is a Confucian ideal that saturates the epistemological framework of Chinese teaching and learning, and foregrounds education as an opportunity for self-improvement and liberation from poverty. The holistic motivation behind Confucianism is linked to what the Confucian Analects refer to as the 'Joy of Learning', social and individual improvement. The Confucian notion that man's character is cultivated through self-effort, education and reflective practice could explain why learning and education is held in such high regard in China (Lee 1996; Miyazaki 1976; Wang 2004;).

Pertaining to my mention of Qiao Yi's mental health issues in this section; according to Tardif and Miao (2000) people who suffer from depression are usually shunned by Chinese society. Traditionally the Chinese do not acknowledge psychological problems as being of a biological nature but rather a flaw of one's character so there appears to be a lot of stigma attached. Psychology as a profession was banned during the Cultural Revolution (1966 -1976), thus there still appears to be a lack of qualified psychologists.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Ambivalent Foreigner

#### **Anchoring my position: A beginning of sorts**

Page 51

In 2003 the only other tertiary institution offering some form of arts administration training was the Shanghai Theatre Academy, a university which, for more than fifty years, had been delivering a comprehensive performing arts syllabus.

#### **Not living up to expectations: Life as a site of struggle**

Page 61

It is common practice in Chinese universities for postgraduate students and final year undergraduate students to accompany visiting international academics and take care of their personal needs. In the art college it was considered good experience for the students, giving them not only an opportunity to practice their English, but also exposing them to international ways of thinking and behaving. Chen arranged for Wei Wei, a fine art painting masters student, to become my personal assistant during one of my early visits to the art college. Wei Wei continued to assist me working on international arts projects even after she had graduated and had commenced working in the college's administration office.

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To illustrate further how foreign and local teachers both contribute to and disrupt each other's lives I draw here on a conversation I had with Shan, a young teacher working in a design technical college, during an interview in October 2009.

“My thinking” says Shan “is more and more Chinese college leaders are interested in foreign teachers coming to Shanghai, but they are traditional leaders—no academic background. They think if they have foreign teachers in their college or university it will look good. The leader's view and expectation of education is totally different. Just recently I worked for two semesters with a German teacher but she had to resign. She always complained and said NO to the leaders.”

“Why do you think she said no to the leaders Shan?”

“In the beginning they had a cooperation between the two countries – Chinese students can go to Germany for one year and receive a certificate in design. But the question for me is why this cooperation between the two parties? Why the exchange. The contract is too loose with the foreign teachers. The German teacher loses her tempers and the Chinese leaders cannot stand this behaviour, so when the contract is terminated the German teacher cannot understand this. Why—she says, when I have done a good job for everyone—why do they resign me? I think my view may be of no use for her. She must get this result because she does not understand the Chinese way. I think she always thinks from the students’ perspective she never thinks from the leaders. You know she always say the students should go to the exhibitions to do some new things, do some new products with the designers to do full cooperation’s with the Germany Council but! It is trouble for the leader.”

“Because her focus is always on the students?” I suggest.”

“Yes.” Shan’s voice suddenly cracks open, raw with—frustration. “Sometimes I feel for her problem. I try to translate her idea to the leader. Sometimes I feel embarrassed to say what she says to the Chinese leader, because she is very straight.”

“Did you suggest to the German teacher she should change her thinking slightly?”

“I think she thinks she knows everything; but maybe from the personality she cannot change. I think she do the good job, maybe the German style is little stiff but it is a good way. Sometimes I think it is very strange—she wants to organize an exhibition on the campus, but the leader is not willing to assist. So she just use her money to print everything. Ask people to deliver paintings. Everything do her self—to put the painting on the wall. But—from the Chinese way is very strange.”

“Do you feel Shan that her actions are undermining your leader?”

Shan gently nods.

“So how to solve this problem. Looking at both sides how could the situation be improved, what can be done?”

“First every foreign teacher should know what is China. In the college ninety-percent of teachers is good people but in a bad system. So maybe in some



foreign teachers' eyes everybody is a bad guy—so lazy they haven't any responsibility. But! As a Chinese teacher and colleague to the German teacher, she should know that I cannot do some things for her. She should know that she cannot say Shan talk to your leaders I require something. Maybe one time is ok but I cannot do every week the leader is busy.”

*October 2009. Starbucks Nanjing Road, next to the Shanghai Art Museum.*

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A further example of how my western legacy frames me in Shanghai as a British subject would be the eighty-year-old myth that surrounds the signage on the gates of Shanghai's Huangpu Park, a triangular grassed public area established in 1886 at the northern end of the Bund, which supposedly read 'Dogs and Chinese not admitted'. Though it was proved not to be true, the underlying symbolism demonstrates the humiliation the Chinese suffered at the hands of the foreigners (British) during the last time they opened the gates to the western world. For a more detailed discussion see: Bickers and Wasserstrom (1995, 444–466).

### CHAPTER THREE

The Ambivalent Foreigner continued: Underlying Relational Threads

**Insiders as relational outsiders—the foreigner resides within us all**

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There are several works by Chinese authors that give an intimate and nuanced account of life during Mao's rehabilitation program during the sixties and seventies. Chinese writer Dai Sijie's semi-autobiographical novel *Balzac and the little Chinese seamstress* delivers a powerful insight into life as the teenage son of a middle class family being re-educated in a remote rural area of China during 1971–1974. For family life in the city during the rise of Communism until the fall of Mao, see Jung Chang's memoir *Wild swans: Three daughters of China*. See also Gao Xingjian's fictionalised memoir *One man's bible* which explores the daily life of a young man of Chen's generation under the Chinese Communist Party leading up to, during and after the cultural revolution.

## **The relational eye—the art of seeing**

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During the mid-nineties, the Chinese Ministry of Education developed a set of strategic policies known as the 211 project, to raise the standard of universities to world class levels and meet the socio-economic demands of the twenty-first century. During phase one, from 1996 to 2000, USD 2.2 billion was distributed amongst the programs of one hundred or so participating universities; around six per cent of the total universities in China. The term 211 represents the twenty-first century and the hundred universities involved in the project. According to the University of Edinburgh (2009) 112 universities are involved.

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Chen was diagnosed with Hepatitis C early in his university career; a disease not uncommon in China. Due to widespread misunderstanding of the virus, people who are known to have it are still stigmatised in China. Current medical research suggests that the origins of the two commonest strands of the Hepatitis virus can be traced back to the Chinese Cultural Revolution (See Nakano et al., 2006).

## CHAPTER FOUR

The Cultural Novice: Teacher and Student Relations and Confusions

### **Where am I in relation to the other?**

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I had learned from experience that information never seemed to be forthcoming in my exchanges with Chinese colleagues about the needs of my students; as a result I made generalised assumptions as to why my questions were not answered. It was only much later during my visit to Shanghai in the autumn of 2009 that Yue Wan offered me some kind of explanation:

‘Foreign teachers normally want to know the big picture—the directions, all arrangements, all the students’ feedback, but the school does not provide all the information. Sometimes the university just provides a corner of the information and not the western way which should know the whole way.’

So I ask Yu Wan ‘would a Chinese teacher know the whole picture or would their experience be similar to mine?’

‘Chinese teacher usually knows better than the foreigners because we get used to the way of the program. What the schedule will be. What the students will be, or what evaluation could be. All the information needed for students is learned because of the Chinese teacher’s own experiences as students—as students they get used to the way.’

‘So this is something that evolves over time—it is not something that you get told? I ask.

Yue Wan nods in agreement. ‘Yeah, lots of teachers—how to say—learn what they do now as teachers in their students’ time. They get used to the way.’

*Personal communication, Shanghai October 2009*

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The Chinese education system is built on a history of examinations. Its roots can be traced back to the early part of the Han dynasty at the close of the second century BC (Franke 1960; Gernet 1996; Teng 1943). Overthrowing the Ch’in dynasty, Emperor Lao-tsu, in 196 BC made a request to the officials of the regional principalities to nominate potential candidates for positions within the civil service examination. Fifty years later, Emperor Wu-ti, by official decree, called for scholar officials to be appointed to take care of Confucian texts. According to Franke (1960, 2-3) this is the earliest model of what later became known as the ‘regular’ civil service.

Not only did the Chinese examination system cultivate a respect for learning in Chinese society, and provide a tangible means through which man could ideally improve his situation; it also came to restrict the content and approach to learning, to the study of specific traditional texts (Miyazaki 1976, 7-8) a system that lasted some two thousand years. Through the ages, China’s ancient texts have inspired the subject matter of scholarly writing—writings that in turn shaped the country’s education, philosophical and political ideas and moral code (Gernet 1996, 83). The application of Confucian classics is significant in that they were the core subject matter of the traditional Chinese examination centre for its duration, and supplied a moral code of behaviour that consolidated the political power and leadership of the Chinese literati within Chinese society until recent times (Cressey 1929; Franke

1960; Miyazaki 1976; Mungello 1989). According to Franke (1960, 5) the examinations came to be managed by the Board of Rites, which was also responsible for the observance of public Confucian ritual practices at state level. He claims that this further strengthened the position of Confucian ideology within the examination system and signified the coalition of a spiritual and secular relationship, which underpins traditional Chinese culture (Franke 1960, 5).

Although historical accounts vary as to the specific moment, somewhere between the Sui (581-618 AD) and Tang (618-906 AD) dynasties, the examination system underwent a radical change as part of a political ploy by the Emperor to undermine the power of the ruling aristocratic elite. Prior to this, the elites inherited their right to rule through their ancestral line; hired as government officials more for their status than their abilities, the elites curtailed the power of the Emperor to select his own government officials (Franke 1960; Miyazaki 1976). Miyazaki (1976, 111-112) indicates that the Sui Emperor enacted the examination system on the condition that the successful candidates were employed as government officials. Carried forward into the Tang Dynasty, he claims that although some aristocratic families adapted to the new examination system, others failed to see its growing significance and eventually undermined their own power base (Miyazaki 1976, 111-112). On the other hand Gernet (1996, 257-7) intimates that it was China's first and only female Emperor Wu Hao Chao (624-705 AD), the sole ruler of the Zhou Dynasty, who reorganised the Han civil service examination as a political strategy to undermine the power of the ruling classes in the north-west of the country, by making the examinations the main gateway for entering the civil service. Either way, the examination system came to reinforce the ontological and epistemological bedrock of the political and social aspects of Chinese life by selecting leaders on intellectual rather than aristocratic merit (Miyazaki 1976, 8).

During the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD) the examination system was reformed yet again, culminating in a tri-level model that remained more or less the same until it was abolished by royal edict in 1905. There were several reasons why this reform occurred. As already noted, the government was keen to increase recruitment into the civil service via the examination (Gernet 1996, 305). Franke suggests that this

was because during the previous dynasty (Tang), the aristocracy still inherited positions of power and the automatic right to nominate their heirs for high positions in the government without taking the examination; furthermore he contends that admission to the exam was not possible without the patronage of a high ranking sponsor (1960, 5). Thus the Tang government had been weakened by the struggle between two factions, those who had undertaken the examination and those who inherited their positions (Franke 1960, 5; Mirazaki 1976, 113). During the Tang Dynasty the number of successful candidates was quite small, with little evidence of printed texts in mainstream society; however, this changed in the Song Dynasty, when, through an increase in production, there emerged a middle class, who had both wealth and the time to negotiate the long, arduous and time consuming endeavour of a three-tier examination system (Miyazaki 1976, 113-119). With this new class came an increase in demand for reading materials thus fostering the right climate for an increase in publishing houses, which meant that texts became readily available to the public, a necessity for the creation of an administration class—the literati (Franke 1960, 6; Miyazaki 1976, 113-115). An interest in learning greatly increased during this period with the government in an ideal position to pick the very best of intellectual talents from across the country (Miyazaki, 113-115). From this time on China was governed by a scholarly elite, answerable to and under the protection of the emperor, for over a thousand years. The development of the public service during this time and the rise of the mandarin officials had more power over the whole of China than at any other time in China's entire history (Gernet 1996, 305).

### **Discovering aspects of self through the Chinese other**

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The historical legacy that is reflected in Xu Bu Chan's words is the concept that all people have the ability to be educated and are capable of achieving sage-hood and perfection; this is the footprint for learning in China (Lee 1996, 30). Seemingly, an inherent skill for learning does not necessarily correspond to achievement or failure in education (Hu 2002, 98), rather, it is a Confucian ideal that saturates the epistemological framework of Chinese teaching and learning, and foregrounds education as an opportunity for self-improvement and liberation from poverty. The Confucian notion that man's character is cultivated through self-effort, education

and reflective practice, helps explain the optimistic and dynamic spirit of the Chinese people and their respect for learning and education (Lee 1996; Miyazaki 1976; Wang 2004). This utilitarian aspect of education is present even amongst those who have not received an education and thus nurtures a powerful incentive to be educated (Hu 2002, 97). Interestingly, there is no recognition in the literature reviewed here that overtly suggests that the traditional Chinese education system was asymmetrical and hierarchical in character by its exclusion of women and the poor. Technically the Chinese examination system was open to all males; however, the time and effort required to study for these examinations would have automatically excluded any families who were not financially independent.

Historian Jacques Gernet (1996, 87) advises that Confucianism, a term invented by the west, articulates more than the philosophy and teachings of the man himself. Confucian teachings and philosophies, written during a time when Confucius and other traditional scholars of the time were shocked by the deterioration of daily ritual practice in public life and the rising power of the Chinese aristocracy, can be interpreted as highly political. Gernet sees Confucianism as a reactionary endeavour to define what makes a good man '*Chun-tzu*'. He believes that Confucian principles project the ideal of how the Chinese individual is situated in the world and provide a way of knowing how to behave and be accepted by others, both in the private and public domains of daily life. Confucian principles, expanded upon further by Mencius and Hsün-tzu within a different historical context, helped to establish a philosophical tradition that would last well beyond the life of Confucius—a tradition that would inspire the main source of classical texts from which Chinese education, philosophy, political thinking and moral reflection have evolved (Gernet 1996, 83-88).

### **The blurring of boundaries**

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British curriculum consultant Trevor Grimshaw argues that there is a substantial body of research literature wherein the nature of Chinese learning and associated behaviour patterns are explained in relation to ethnicity and or national traits (2007, 299). Much of this literature, he states, positions the Chinese student as belonging to an homogenous grouping, a so called embodiment of Chinese culture that is

constructed from the notion of historical legacy rather than a dynamic process of evolution and emergence. It is a construction, he argues that locates the Chinese student within an inflexible set of parameters that presents them as: without independence; unable to think critically; unresponsive to stimuli within the classroom; predisposed towards a reproductive style of learning, and highly dependent on a particularised arrangement of learning styles. Generalisations such as this create the impression that Chinese students are passive. The expression 'Chinese learner' has a tendency to be portrayed loosely in much of the literature pertaining to those cultures that have a Chinese ancestral legacy, and in doing so nurtures a set of stereo-typical presumptions that link particular cultural legacies to particular sets of thinking and behaviour patterns that are culturally determined and prescribed, thus promoting an essentialist perspective of cultural identity and behaviour (Grimshaw 2007, 300-302).

Singapore and Hong Kong are the two most common regions used to explain the learning behaviour of Chinese students (see Bodycott and Walker 2000; Gribble and Ziguras 2003; Leaske et. al 2005, 2004) both of which also share a legacy of British colonial rule, with an education system rooted in British and Confucian values, although the social historical and educational cultures of these two regions are very different (Wang 2004; Watkins, Reghi and Astilla 1991). See also Clark and Gieve (2006) who claim that within linguistic literature, the Chinese learner is portrayed within a 'culturist' discourse as a product of their historical legacy and thus belonging to a homogenous grouping. They argue that such literature shows an inability to establish distinct differences between students from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Mainland Chinese and overseas Western Chinese.

Contemporary researchers are now beginning to challenge the homogenous notion of the Chinese learner (Gieve and Clark 2005; Holliday, Hyde and Kullman 2004; Littlewood 2000; Watkins 2000). 'By essentialist we mean presuming that there is a universal essence, homogeneity and unity in a particular culture' (Holliday, Hyde and Kullman 2004, 3). Gieve and Clark do not support the essentialist perspective of culture that positions students as products of Chinese cultural characteristics, without taking into consideration the social contexts of the learning environment in question (2005, 264). They insist that the notion of what defines the Chinese learner is messily complicated; it would be incomprehensible and possibly negligent to make general assumptions about what it means to be Chinese, in relation to geographical and ancestral landscapes. They suggest a more conditional understanding of culture and the relationship it plays within a situational context is justified (Gieve and Clark 2005, 264).

To say that culture alone is responsible for any differences in pedagogy and learning behaviour is to suggest that such practices are less likely to differ than if they were recognised as operating within a situational context (Gieve and Clark 2005, 264). Such thinking foregrounds an assumption that culture is a fixed entity capable of being transported across geographical and cultural borders, and bears no relation to the many different contexts (Gieve and Clark 2005, 274).

Culture is seen as a set of more or less deeply rooted normative practices, a way of doing things for certain purposes: so a 'Chinese culture of learning' would be not so much the way they do things in China, as the way learning takes place in contexts found in China (Gieve and Clark 2005, 274).

Watkins (2000, 167) believes that a Chinese view of teaching is not just concerned with delivering knowledge to the student, but that it is a relational intercommunicative process situated within a social context that is approved by both teacher and student. Grimshaw (2007, 304) contends that the Confucian philosophical legacy has evolved over the centuries according to the demands of the period in question, so the researcher needs to interrogate the perceived homogenous character of Confucian principles and believes this could help explain some of the so-called paradoxes within Chinese education. He suggests that there is a need to see



the complexity of Chinese agency and to reject a one-dimensional representation of the Chinese student (Grimshaw 2007, 304).

One such paradox as noted by western educationalists is how Chinese students are able to achieve higher scores through memorisation in the sciences and mathematics than their western counterparts. Swedish educational psychologist and phenomenologist Ference Marton (1996) contends that memorisation to deepen students understanding appears to be the key to unlock the paradoxical nature of the Chinese learner. His research highlights how the western world's understanding of memorisation as a tool for learning is quite different to that of the Chinese. In the past, Marton suggests, western researchers have tended to link the concept of memorisation with mechanical rote learning but that this does not adequately explain how Chinese students use memorisation as a way to deep learning as opposed to surface learning. Marton questions how memorisation facilitates understanding in the Chinese sense. He discovered that the use of repetition to memorise material was not considered by Chinese teachers as mechanical. Conducting a series of phenomenographic field studies in China, Marton found that Chinese students appeared to read/repeat their material over and over, stopping here and there and reading more where the text seemed unclear. Through the performance of rereading the student begins to perceive the structure of the text and where any gaps may occur between sentences. Marton suggests that the use of repetition is a means to break down the text into bite size pieces, working things through until the meaning becomes clear, with the implication that each new reading brings new layers of meaning. Marton hoped his research into the "conception of learning" would persuade western teachers not to make personal assumptions about students' learning and to view learning activities with an open mindset (1996).

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Reflecting on the Chinese tertiary education system from a local teacher's perspective, the following is a narrative worked from an interview transcript between myself and Shan, a young teacher working in a design technical college, during October 2009. Shan's experiences highlight the plight of the modern Chinese higher education sector burdened by a huge number of students, many of whom

have diverse needs as well as cultural differences. Reflecting on how his professional practice is hindered by the historical legacies of the past, namely the examination system, Shan at the same time proclaims the benefits of a classical education. My aim here is not to portray an homogenised portrait of a Chinese teacher but rather to show the complexities and anomalies of a higher education system in transformation. And that Shan's voice is but one among many.

“The problem is that we cannot enter their world—it is a joke but it is not a joke,” exclaims Shan. “The dilemma for us both as teachers, foreign or Chinese is the same, these students have different ideas to us, different realities.”

I nod. “It's true Shan but surely you can bridge that gap, imagine the space they are in and make a connection, you have youth, language, a shared history, I do not.”

Shan looks me straight in the eye, his voice strong and confident—he is the essence of youth, vitality, intellectual curiosity and passion. He pauses whether to think further, or to gather around him the English words he needs to translate his meaning—in a way that I can appreciate. Either way when Shan speaks it comes—fast—straight to the heart of the matter.

“Joy, you should know the students' idea about study—this is a BIG problem in China. I feel as a teacher this is a BIG problem. In less than a generation the students have changed, it is no longer a generation gap—they are different to me and yet I am only a few years older. In Shanghai people come from dissimilar places, both local, and remote areas, so their ideas are totally different.”

“You mean they have a different approach to learning?” I suggest.

“Yes. Different approach to study, learning—life—job. Sometimes,” Shan says in a serious tone. “It's like I feel I am in a very traditional space, that it's possible I can get some happiness from teaching these students. But most times the students just want to study the skill for a job. They are very realistic about life. To be honest some students come from newly rich families, they only enjoy their social life not their studies, so is difficult for Chinese as well as foreign teachers to solve the different problems of life.”

I smile remembering our long conversations when he was my student in 2003/4. His strong desire to improve a learning system that he felt had lost its way, and failed its students. He felt that the massification of higher education in recent years had cultivated a factory conveyor belt mentality that eroded the quality of the learning experience for Chinese university students and therefore undermined opportunities for graduates to secure good jobs. Shan was fearless and outspoken—he appeared different from many of his classmates, in that he was more challenging and demanding of himself, quite vocal in his thinking. A gifted orator, Shan could at times be highly confrontational if I did not agree with his point of view; yet with a rapier wit that was both charismatic and playful, he never undermined my position as his teacher. However, Shan could be highly critical and damning of any teachers he considered contributed little to his education. It appeared to me that he lacked respect for those teachers who were not actively involved in nurturing and cultivating the minds of their students. He made no pretence about it. On more than one occasion Shan made his criticisms known to the senior administrators in the art college, but as to whether his actions impacted upon him in some way, I do not know.

Shan saw value in a classical education; believing in its strong roots, he was eager to master it as part of his craft; not just the application of intense memorisation but also through rigorous reflection and critical debate. Shan at times appeared suspicious of my ideas and teaching style, but paradoxically he seemed to enjoy our heated discussions and was never at a loss for words. Over the years we had maintained contact with each other through Yue Wan, meeting from time to time for a coffee or dinner. I feel that this is Shan's way of showing respect and friendship for his teacher, no matter whether I am foreign or not. I reflect that Shan has changed little even now as a teacher, he still believes in the same things, from a different position.

“So your thinking has changed from when you were a student, now you see both sides of the teaching/learning relationship?” I respond laughingly.

Shan grins back, amused I suspect by the irony of what he is saying. It is both funny and not. “Shanghai is a very special place, it is a real commercial society. From the students' view I want to tell them that they can get a better job in the future—but I think it is very boring advice.”

“So how do you nurture your passion for teaching?” I ask him. “How do you keep yourself involved?”

“To be honest I have lots of passion—as a teacher you can imagine that when giving lectures you feel the mood of the students.”

“Ah, you need to feel their energy,” I suggest.

“NO.” Shan shouts as his hands fumble in his pocket for a packet of Double Happiness, only to remember that we are in Starbucks, one of the few public places in Shanghai where one cannot smoke.<sup>31</sup> “Students are not interested in your subject, sometimes I am like a lion—you are not interested in my speech, so ok—we will do the ‘homeworks’. I will say—I will give you a score. Suddenly the classroom becomes silence everybody does their job, maybe it is a terrible job the students are thinking. I feel sad at the end. They give you their works. They see their score is enough and they leave. For me I know the homework is meaningless—wastes time. It just makes it easy to do my job. But the students think it’s good, the leaders think it’s good. Always when the leader walks past the classroom—if silent thinks I am doing a good job.”

He shrugs. I feel his frustration. I know what it’s like trying to motivate students that are too many and not enough of them interested or able to see the benefit.

“One week ago,” Shan says, “two students came into my class. They know nothing about contemporary art, but I opened their books and saw their drawings, copies of beautiful classical paintings—they were good. They think this is art. For me this is very interesting. Why do you think this is art? I ask. They told me that for the national exam, every day for two or three years they should spend ten or twenty hours practising.”

“Per week?” I ask him.

“Yes per week, as they need a high score to enter university.”

Shan pauses for a couple of seconds and then proceeds. “I think—this begins to shape the mind. So now I have the job of changing their minds, but I do not have the time and maybe the passion, and they have a different goal—the goal of the

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<sup>31</sup> Double Happiness is a popular brand of cigarettes in mainland China.

exam. I also meet good students—who take notice but the problem is their experience of what is study has shaped them in high school. The teachers have told them what to say and decided for them. Even when you enter for the university examinations in the graphic digital school, many of the exams are still based on classical training.”

October 2009. Starbucks Nanjing Road, next to the Shanghai Art Museum.

### **A reflection on a desire to be ethical**

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The Confucian notion of ethical conduct is bound up in the relational interplay between benevolence and obligation. Relationships are a recurrent motif throughout China’s historical and philosophical texts, the notion of self always existing in relation to other/s. This unity arises from an ontological positioning in traditional Chinese culture that builds on the premise of humans as agents involved in the ritualistic pursuit of learning (sage-hood), the art of becoming, as opposed to one of being. It is not that the Chinese necessarily perceive their history as capable of providing a unified, monolithic heritage; on the contrary, China’s many traditional schools of thought had diverse and often conflicting points of view. It is more the case that Chinese history provides the Chinese people with a source of knowledge that articulates the complexity and diversity of lived experience (Schwartz 1972, 76). Huang contends that the Chinese self (male) is firmly located in history; to read the history of how evil sometimes triumphs over good leads man to understand the significance of Chinese sage-hood and the way human beings should be (2007, 184). Chinese history in this light can be understood as fatalistic. It is concerned with the cultivation of moral character and correct behaviour, providing a handbook for understanding how the fates play a part in daily life (Huang 2007, 182). From this positioning Chinese history in its various guises shows how important it is to maintain correct relationships in order to live a good and meaningful life.

To understand others is to have knowledge;

To understand oneself is to be illumined.

To conquer others needs strength;

To conquer oneself is hard still.

(Lao Tzu, trans. Waley 1997, 33/69)

The Master said, In the presence of a good man,  
think all the time how you may learn to equal him.  
In the presence of a bad man, turn your gaze within!  
(Confucius, trans. Waley 1996, 4/17)

According to Newman (2003, 12) the Chinese way of seeing has been shaped by the ancient philosophical teachings of Taoism—The Way, Confucianism and significantly later Chan Buddhism. All of these offered diverse philosophical trajectories to the meaning of life. Yet, at the heart of traditional Chinese ontology is a belief in a holistic cosmic order in which all humans share a similar nature (Schwartz 1968; Stuurman 2008). Whether it be good or evil—man is perceived in traditional Chinese thinking as being eternally ensnared in a cycle of change and interconnected relationships. To make sense of such a world, unlike the ancient Greek philosophers who saw man as separate to and independent of nature with the power to control all objects and events within it, the Chinese emphasised a dialectical relationship between self and other. Here I am discussing dialectical thinking from a Chinese perception. Whereas traditional western dialectical thought is not comfortable with the idea of paradox, the space that lies between dualistic opposites: it attempts to create a synthesis between the two opposites to reconcile and or bring closure. Eastern dialectic thought takes a non-dualist approach in that it does not attempt to reconcile opposites but rather holds that two opposing/conflicting ideas and or things can reside comfortably with the one space with no need of further explanation.

Within Taoism, the metaphysical embodiment of yin and yang symbolises the dialectical nature of the cosmos, in that the roots of all things must also be contained in their opposite ‘...yin requires yang, and “self” requires “other”’ (Ames 1993a, 160). Under such conditions, there is not so much a concept of the self as independent and separate to the other but rather the self and the other flow back and forth to create a holistic self, a self which is co-dependent on its relationships with others. This idea of a unified self can be found in Confucian texts, where there is evidence to suggest that the Confucian view of self also includes a necessary relationship with the other. Confucius observes:

...As for goodness-you desire rank and standing;  
Then help others to get rank and standing.  
You want to turn your merits to account;  
Then help others to turn theirs to account.  
In fact, the ability to take one's feelings as a guide—  
That is the sort of thing that lies in the direction of the Goodness.  
(Confucius, trans. Waley 1996, 6/28).

The positionality of the traditional Chinese self in this passage of *Analects* emphasises the importance of relationships. It suggests that to perceive oneself as separate and not interconnected with other/s has no meaning or value in its own right. Ames (1993b) advises that the core aspect of Confucius's teachings asserts the true character of man as being inherently social. The Confucian self, he suggests, is realised through relationships with others, and community is understood as a product of aesthetic experience—an experience that is dependent upon particular elements and the appropriate muse. Similar to a work of art, Ames believes a Confucian sense of community as aesthetic experience is not just concerned with technical ability but is a creative process, in which, although the character of some things remain immutable over time, human beings are different. Ames' thinking implies that although one's cultural and psychological legacies have a tendency to constrain personal development, this is countered by one's humanity and desire to overcome such constraints in order to elevate spiritually (1993b, 152-154).

[F]or Confucius, human being is not a sort of being at all but first and foremost a human being doing or making, and only derivatively and retrospectively, something done. (Ames 1993b, 154)

Chinese historian and philosopher Tu Wei-ming's interpretation of *Analects* 6/28 foregrounds an arterial thread of Confucius's teachings—the awareness and acceptance of the other as part of one's self-development. He proposes that the Confucian traditional self sees life as part of a spiritual sojourn in which the attainment of sage-hood is the ultimate achievement (1985, 231). This way of thinking articulates the Chinese traditional concept of self as residing at the centre of all relationships with others, and is part of a continuous learning endeavour that embraces spiritual discovery and enlightenment (Tu 1985, 231). Confucian learning concerns itself not only with scholarly pursuits in the form of writing, but also stresses a necessity for ritual performance; mind and body are unified through the art

of discipline to create a person who is ready for living in the everyday world, complete with obligations and responsibilities to one's immediate family and the universe as a whole (Tu 1985, 232). Cultural activity theorists Jianzhong Hong and Yrjö Engeström (2004, 554), note in general terms, that the traditional Chinese mind was keenly aware of her/his position in society. All behaviour they suggest was orchestrated to promote and secure the positionality of the self's role within the social order of things, in respect to hierarchy and associated behaviours and obligations attributed to that role (Hong and Engeström 2004, 554). People that were closest in kinship tended to take up most of a Chinese person's time. Outside the intimacy of close relationships, the Chinese were not as likely to be involved in relationships with people who had no impact on their world (Hsu 1985, 35).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Relational Differences are Embroidered with the Personal

#### **The cultural novice and the historied performance of silence**

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Yanfang (1999, 7) believes one of the main reasons why the western world is afraid of silence is because as an experiential construct it has not yet developed; whereas from a Chinese philosophical perspective silence is accepted as part of everyday language. Yanfang points out that silence and speech as philosophical constructs share a dialectical relationship, they are mutually dependent on each other. It is the ambient quality of the silence, he suggests, the manner in which it envelops our words that offer our voice(s) its richest meanings, and ironically, for some of us, provokes our most intense fears. In China, language, he stresses, is not so much a tool for expressing thoughts and emotions but rather places the focus on the situation and context and the relation in which things are communicated. The absence of silence as an experientially situated construct in western epistemology might be one of the key reasons as to why westerners' are deeply suspicious of silence (Yanfang 1999, 7-20).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Note this paragraph has been revised from its original source (Scott 2011, 161).



## **Uncovering our feelings of being out of place**

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Unfortunately, what one can infer from the literature about transnational higher education teaching and learning experiences in China are limited. It is particularly telling that those western teachers who now publish reflective accounts of their experiences inside Chinese classrooms are usually contracted by local Chinese agencies and tertiary institutions. Interestingly, such experiential research seems to be dismissed in the international academic community, or considered anecdotal at best. Such thinking reflects methodological ignorance.

Higher education conferences in the 'exporting' countries now regularly include papers written by academics who teach overseas, providing useful anecdotal accounts of particular programs (Bodycott and Walker, 2000; Clark and Clark, 2000). However, these isolated accounts of transnational education do not in themselves reveal patterns of experience, and usually lack sufficient critical distance from the teaching and learning experiences being described. (Gribble and Ziguras 2003, 207)

Research conducted at various Australian universities suggests it is common practice for Australian offshore teachers to condense coursework material into a few tightly packed, seven or eight hour lectures (usually held over a weekend), to meet curriculum objectives. Offshore visits occur two or three times annually, with each trip lasting no more than ten days (Dobowski 2005, 2003; Gribble and Ziguras, 2003). Of the twenty staff involved in offshore activities interviewed by Gribble and Ziguras, most indicated that fulfilling curriculum objectives left little time to interact meaningfully with local teachers and students. Many reported that communication with local teachers was shallow; intriguingly they also felt that a lack of critical feedback from local co-teachers signalled there were no serious problems to be addressed (2003). For the majority of these teachers working in Singapore, Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur, the general consensus was that there was no significant need to modify their teaching when offshore. They assumed that local students have similar goals to their western counterparts and that such students had a good understanding of western culture, concepts and professional practice. It is interesting to note that only one account mentioned a dissatisfied Chinese partner who was not happy with the Australian teachers' ability to understand Chinese culture and student needs (Gribble and Ziguras 2003, 211). This illustrates a notable gap in the literature, concerning a failure to recognise what occurs when teachers move from

one learning environment to another, and a lack of recognition of the effect that differences in learning attitudes and academic cultures have on the local learning environment (Ryan 2003, 1).

In juxtaposition to the above considerations, there are those western teachers who live and work permanently offshore, and have a somewhat different perception of events. A large proportion of offshore higher education programs depend on teaching staff directly employed by the program provider, working alongside staff contracted by the local partner (Evans 1995; Evans and Tregenza 2002; Leaske et al., 2005). Locally contracted staff are often a combination of indigenous and western teachers. Although the research of Bodycott and Walker (2000) is considered anecdotal by Gribble and Ziguras (2003), this type of research reveals a keen insight into offshore teaching and learning experiences. Before leaving Australia to teach overseas, Bodycott and Walker believed it was not their responsibility, but the responsibility of the students to adapt to the teaching/learning environment; working permanently in Hong Kong changed their perception. Bodycott and Walker now argue that 'development of inter-cultural understandings and related teaching practices must begin with the teacher's attitude and the scaffolds created to support student learning' (2000, 81). They believe that a deeper insight into the experiences of western teachers working in foreign countries will provide meaningful understanding for those universities involved in transnational education (Bodycott and Walker 2000, 81).

These research studies illustrate that professional experience is relative to individual situations and cannot readily be judged solely on scholarly academic merit, but must be balanced with insightful knowledge, lived experience, and understanding of the offshore learning context in its entirety. Teaching is a very complex holistic enterprise. The teaching framework is constructed from the teachers, students, associated administrators, policy makers, learning activities and the situational context in which the learning takes place (Stigler and Hiebert 1999, 134). Research, such as that undertaken by Debowski (2005, 2003) and Gribble and Zeguras (2003), highlights not only a strong positivist or post positivist orientation to transnational educational research (Biggs and Watkins 2001), but also indicates a failure to

recognise that locally employed indigenous and western teachers are the backbone of the transnational higher education industry.

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