

Writing in English in China: An autobiographical essay

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ABSTRACT: As one of the few Chinese writers in mainland China writing prose in English, Lijia Zhang presents an autobiographical account of her decision to write and publish in the English language. This paper describes how Lijia Zhang first taught herself English, as she perceived the language as offering her an ‘escape’ from working as a factory worker in Nanjing to how she finally established herself as a published author writing in the English language. This paper also presents Lijia Zhang’s personal reflections on the reasons why she writes in English, and also how she ‘weaves’ Chinese expressions and concepts in her use of the English language in her writing. Lijia Zhang’s much-acclaimed memoir on coming of age in China, *Socialism is great: A worker’s memoir of the new China*, was published in 2008, and has been translated into Dutch, Italian, French and Portuguese. The memoir has been also been translated into Korean and her first novel *Lotus* is to be published by Henry Holt in February 2017.

‘Why do you write in English?’ People frequently ask me this question. I am Chinese born, bred and educated – very poorly – in China, yet I write articles for international publications and books in English and I give lectures and public speeches in English.

I began to teach myself English at 21 when I was still a rocket factory girl in my hometown Nanjing, on the banks of the Yangtze River. I had grown up in a residential compound that belonged to the military factory my mother worked for. All my neighbours were factory workers and all my friends were the children of workers. But I had a grand plan for myself: excelling academically at school, I had hoped to go to university and become a writer and a journalist. (Actually I didn’t quite understand the difference between a writer and a journalist as I do now.)

When I was 16, however, my mother dragged me out of the school and put me to work at the same factory. The reason was simple: we were poor. My assigned job was to test pressure gauges, simple and repetitive. A mini Communist empire, the factory provided the workers with accommodation, dining halls and hospitals, it also controlled all aspects of our lives.

As an escape route, I decided to teach myself English, in the hope of obtaining a job as an interpreter with one of the foreign companies that were slowly setting up shop in Nanjing. To start with, I borrowed a radio from my cousin and followed an English-teaching programme called *The New Concept English*. New concept indeed. I became fascinated by this language system so different from our characters. So much so, I would find myself talking English to myself or singing English songs:

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Sing, sing a song
Sing out loud
Sing out strong
Sing of good things not bad
Sing of happy not sad

I heard singing English songs was a good way to learn the language. The Carpenters was my favourite. In the eyes of trendy youngsters like my teenage daughters, the band may not be the coolest in the world. But for us, the Carpenters represented the high culture from the west because it was among one of the first Western albums that were for sale in China.

Slowly my fellow workers looked at me with weary eyes. I earned a reputation as 'the toad that dreams to eat swan's meat'. 'You are a factory worker', they said to me, 'Why would you want to learn English?' They predicted that I would never be able to master the language.

By then, I no longer cared what the others thought about me as the concept of individualism took root in me. Looking back, learning English has changed my life.

The first Roman emperor famously said: 'When you gain a new language, you gain a new soul'. I am not sure if I've gained a new soul but learning English certainly has broadened my horizon. What I've learnt wasn't just the ABCs but the whole cultural package. And I've gained a good 'rice bowl' – something allows me to make a living.

People write in another language for different reasons. Samuel Beckett deliberately wrote *Waiting for Godot* in French so that its style would be different. Polish author Joseph Conrad wrote in English with great felicity rarely seen in native English speakers.

I shall not compare myself with these masters. I chose to write in English because, first of all, it frees me politically. I wouldn't be able to publish articles and books with politically sensitive content in mainland China.

Twenty years ago, I was commissioned by a Chinese publishing company in Ningxia to write a book about the Western image of Chairman Mao. I spent many hours in the Bodleian library at Oxford, researching books on Mao written by Western academics and I interviewed many British people from all walks of life. But the book failed to pass the censor as it was deemed too negative about the 'great helmsman'. Ever since then, I have made a point to write in English so that my works would be free from censorship.

Interestingly, writing in English frees me literally. It frees me from any inhibition I might have if I write in Chinese. Without the constraints I can experiment with the language: I can be bold and I can take risks. Because it's not my native language, I consciously and unconsciously use different words and I structure my sentences differently. Let me give you an example. One early spring day, I took my children to a park. It had been bleak winter only a week ago. Then almost overnight, it became warm and flowers were blossoming everywhere. The word 'bewitch' came to my mind. In my diary, I wanted to use that word to convey a sense of dramatic and sudden change as if being touched by a magic wand. I wrote at first: 'Bewitched by spring, the park came to life and the glorious peonies blossomed everywhere'. Then I decided to use a more active verb: 'Spring had bewitched the park where glorious peonies blossomed everywhere'. Native speakers, please tell me if these sentences work, or which sentence works better.

Using my English as a tool also allows me to play up my advantage in some ways. Writing for an international market is very different ball game from writing for a domestic market. There's always a great deal of presumed knowledge if your target is domestic readers. Having written for international media for years, I feel I know when and how to explain certain terminology. For example, I'd explain *tamade* as a national swearword, which is good for expressing joy or anger in equal measure. I belong to a small yet, growing number of people who have insight into a culture that remains largely unknown internationally, yet who are able to communicate with those on the other side of the world.

I have to admit that I am not gifted with language. After all these years, I still make some basic mistakes. I am never too sure when to use or not use 'the', and I am sometimes confused by little things such as 'in the bed' or 'on the bed'.

On the other hand, I sometimes fear that my English has become too fluent that it has lost its quaintness.

One of the China memoirs I enjoyed very much is a book entitled *Mr China's son, a villager's life* by a little known author call He Liyi, an English teacher and a Bai minority citizen from Yunnan province. In his 'little memoir' as he calls it, he describes his experience of being sent-down to the countryside to be re-educated. Not a very unusual experience. After all, the market has been flooded with bitter tales of suffering from China. What makes *Mr China's son* special is its freshness in language. 'Her feet were seriously pierced by stings', he wrote. 'Every now and then, they were found to be short of this and that'. Such sentences do bring readers the delight of tasting something different or fresh.

The author He Liyi developed a passion for the English language. In order to listen to the BBC, his wife sold her fattest pig to buy him a shortwave radio. He listened to it all the time and improved his English to such a degree that he decided to pen his story in English. Once again, you can see the power of the language.

I have also tried deliberately to borrow Chinese sayings or phrases to give the writing some freshness, quaintness or some Chinese flavour. It does not always work. In my first novel *Lotus*, a book about prostitution set in modern day Shenzhen, I talked about how Lotus, the main character, sent money home so that her family could enjoy a 'Fat New Year'. My agent in London suggested 'splendid' instead of 'fat'. 'People wouldn't understand what is "Fat" New Year!' he said. But 'splendid' simply doesn't sound right for an uneducated villager, while it is natural for an old Oxford educated gentleman such as my agent. In this case, I think I'll leave the fat there.

Chinese is such a vivid and expressive language. Borrowing our dated and rich idioms does not just spice up the language but also evokes a sense of place. In my memoir, I describe how my mother is so stubborn that 'once she makes up her mind, four-horse-cart won't be able to pull her back'. I commented on a young colleague's moustache in this way: 'The moustache on his even-featured face looked as out of place as painted legs on a snake'.

I often don't directly translate the Chinese idiom into English but rather weave the concept into the text. For example, we have a phrase 'angry hair shoots a hat'. When my mother told me that I was to stop my schooling to go to work, I borrowed that phrase to describe my anger. 'If I had been wearing a hat, the force of my rage would have shot it into the air'.

I have a sense that my struggle in writing English shall continue, even if one day I become less confused by 'the', 'in the bed' or 'on the bed'. It's just an ongoing battle for

any writer to gain greater felicity. Having been bewitched by the language – again, I am not sure if that's the right word to use – I also find the challenge in writing in English rewarding and fun.

After all, fighting for something worthwhile keeps us alive.

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