

Becoming a writer – Cool Creative Chinese session- Renee Liang

Chinglish

*Yesterday
a shop lady smiled at me
and said,
“Your English is very good,”*

*her eyes crinkled
in a let’s-be-nice-to-aliens way.*

I wanted to say

*-of course it bloody is,
-I was born here,
-how about you?*

*But of course I said nothing.
hardly her fault
we Asians all look the same
anyway.*

*Maybe I should have
I AM KIWI
tattooed on my forehead
except then
I’d be told off by my mother.*

My mother.

*When I was born
I slept in Chinese
I fed in Chinese
I cried in Chinese*

pooed in Chinese even.

*Mother and father
left their English
lying around the house
like lollies*

*they knew I wouldn’t touch
I was good then.*

*We kids built houses
with wooden blocks
painted with Chinese characters.
We fought over
longer characters
on bigger blocks,*

better for building walls.

*My mother used to say,
“No talking English at home!”*

*I'd brought it home like a disease
from kindy
and infected my sisters.*

*By the time we were teenagers
my mother was getting tired
from yelling
“No English!”*

*Once my sister and I decided to start speaking French.
We thought we were being smart.
Even though we weren't too good at French.*

*English was my camouflage.
As long as I wore it
talked in English
dreamt in English
ate in English
yes,
even shit in English
I couldn't be too Chinese
could I?*

*In Hong Kong
I am swept along the pavement
by a torrent of Cantonese
and shop ladies crinkle their eyes
in a let's-be-nice-to-aliens way.*

*“Your Chinese is good,”
they say,
“for a foreigner”.*

I am a writer. I always have been. I write poetry, plays, fiction and non-fiction – anything with a story which hooks me. I write a lot about identity, and many of my characters are, like me, Kiwi Chinese. But I've also written about love and heartbreak...I've written angry ranting poems about politicians and internet trolls...I've written about just sitting on a beach and eating pizza. Most of all, I've written about family.

It was my family that made me into a writer. Growing up I had always been 'the writer of the family.' From a young age I was encouraged to write. My writing was praised, and being Chinese I entered competitions – which of course I won. I was something of a performer and my mum enrolled us in speech and drama lessons to combat stage fright (it worked).

But my father was a doctor and I was adamant that I would grow up to be one too. A paediatrician, no less. Contrary to what you might think, my parents told me to be careful with my decision – hard as medicine was to get into, it was an even harder life. I ignored them. I wanted to be the best, to push myself as hard as I could.

Three years into Medical school, my mother told me that my grandfather, my Yeh Yeh, had carefully chosen my name to mean 'literary blossom'. His reason? There were too many doctors in my family. "How come you didn't tell me this earlier?" I remember yelling.

Not much changed with this revelation. I went on to complete medical school; I studied for specialist exams to become a paediatrician, in line with my dreams. My writing dried up. Even though I'd told myself that I would still write, that it was in my blood, I was too caught up with study and work. Medicine takes over your life if you let it. I should have realised that from watching my dad, who during our childhood years, came home every night around 10 pm. That was when we'd have our family dinner, although of course my mum had fed us kids 'a snack' hours before.

Then, a number of things happened to me. My non-Chinese boyfriend, the one my parents wished I wasn't dating, died suddenly. We were both thirty. We'd been together for eight years and not once had my parents said hello to him. I came home to NZ and got my dream job at Starship Hospital, doing a subspeciality I thought I wanted to do for the rest of my life. But I was badly bullied, by a professor who should have had better things to do. These things pushed me down, and when I got up, I saw the world differently.

I saw that medicine was chipping away at me and I was starting to hate it for keeping me from the things I loved. One of those things was writing. So I enrolled in a master of creative writing degree at Auckland university. One of the first things I wrote was a poem about how my grandfather named me. It was only afterwards that I realised that in writing it, I'd fulfilled his wish.

I wrote and performed poetry – one of my scariest moments was performing my poem 'Chinglish' to 5,000 people at WOMAD. I put together my own poetry book and launched it at a dumpling shop on Dominion Rd. The launch was packed out (it was the free dumplings) so I made more books, and they sold too. I started writing plays and amazingly, people came.

Mask is the most autobiographical of my plays, about the relationship between me and my father over the forbidden relationship with a non Chinese.

Lantern drew strongly on my parent's photos of their life when they first came to NZ in the 1970s, my childhood memories and the stories of my friends who had grown up in NZ. It also re-imagined my father's wartime memories, fleeing through China from the Japanese at the close of the Sino-Japanese war. I was lucky enough to work with some experienced actors who encouraged me to produce the play (a very steep learning curve) and to tour it to Wellington.

The First Asian AB grew out of a flippant conversation with a friend about why Asians weren't selected to be All Blacks but grew to be a coming of age tale about two boys, one a Chinese Malaysian immigrant, the other a Samoan New Zealander. This play has also toured NZ.

And *The Bone Feeder* – whose inspiration came from the Banana conference 2008 when I heard Nigel Sew Hoy speak about his great great grandfather and the wreck of the SS Ventnor.

Looking back, I see that these plays were an attempt to construct my identity as a Chinese New Zealander. Now, after 40 years or so of changing allegiances and confusion, I'm pretty comfortable with the fact that my identity will always shift depending on who I'm with and where I am. I also realise that writing is my way of taking power. Writing gives me the power to tell my own story rather than waiting for someone else to tell it.

I've mostly had positive feedback for my work, but there have also been people who have asked me 'who do I think I am, trying to represent Chinese (or Asians)'. My answer is that I'm not trying to represent anyone – I'm only telling my story, and if they want representation, they should write their own story. But not everyone was given a writer's name by their grandfather, and encouraged to blossom by their family. So I started helping people tell their story, through community projects.

Back in 2009 when I produced *Lantern* for the first time, I also included an element of community participation when I invited audience to write their own poems on a paper lantern for display in the foyer. Also around the same time, I started *Funky Oriental Beats* (FOB) with David Tsai, a Taiwanese-born bilingual rapper. Our aim was to provide a stage, quite literally, for performances by Kiwi Asians – poets, musicians, dancers, anyone in the performing arts who was Asian. We produced three shows in all with our final show being at the Aotea Centre.

Recently, I've been working on theatre shows, collaborating with actors and dancers to tell their own stories. *Culture Clash*, in 2012, featured a multicultural cast telling the often true stories of displacement from their homes. And my current project is *Paper Boats*, working with Chinese Kiwi actresses to tell stories collected through diaries and oral histories.

I've also been working with other writers. In 2011, I was approached by Auckland Council to design and deliver a writing workshop for migrant women. The result, *New Kiwi Women Write Their Stories*, has fostered over 100 writers, produced four anthologies of writing which is a unique addition to NZ's literary canon; and best of all, grown a community of writers who continue to meet and support each other.

What's next? Right now, *Asian Invasion* is touring schools around the country. The title is deliberately provocative. It's a theatre show with an all-Asian cast performing scenes from ten plays, including *The First Asian AB*. All the plays are either by Kiwi Asian playwrights or contain Asian characters, and high school students have the chance to engage with the issues, the plays and the actors after the show. If you want to catch it (plug) there are performances in Auckland at Q theatre on June 13 and 14 – tickets through Q theatre, and there are performances in other centres too.

Coming full circle – here's an updated picture of my family. Since having kids my reasons for writing have changed yet again. Now I want to tell stories, not to find out who I am, but to open up the world for my children. I'm starting to explore writing for kids, and later this year I have a poem coming out in a new treasury of NZ children's poetry. It's my first poem for children and it's based on the Cantonese finger rhyme 'deem, chong chong' (touch, little worm).