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Bilingualism Interview
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Draw Snake, Fill in Legs

> Rachel Xiao (1), age 21 (2), was born in Hong Kong, where she lived until she moved to Beijing at 6 years old. She moved again when she was 16 to attend boarding school in the States, and now spends most of her time at Haverford, though her family is still based in Beijing (3). She learned Chinese at home and both Chinese and English at school from an early age (4)(5). She considers herself a native English speaker, and passively native in Chinese (6)(7). She uses English at school and with friends, while she speaks Chinese with family and sometimes with Chinese friends (8). Within her family, she speaks Chinese more with her parents, while using mostly English with her siblings (9), and says she spoke more Chinese as a child (10).

Do you know how to make the vowel sounds? How to really make them? Do you know how to hear the tones—how to hear the rising from the falling, from the falling-rising, from the first one? Rachel's earliest memories of learning language, Chinese and English, consist of these lessons in phonetics—lessons in how to shape the noise from your throat to your lips to be borne into the world with the correct sound. (12) Rachel's parents, intent on giving their children the most of the world, enrolled them in phonetics classes. (11)

"I remember spending a long time on vowels. Making the sounds of vowels. I don't know what my parents were doing." But not just that—unlike their family friends, Rachel and her siblings, Terrence and Janet, started at the Chinese International School in Hong Kong rather than enrolling in a local school. "The first school that I went to in Hong Kong [was] called CIS, which stands for Chinese International School, so classes were majority English but also emphasized Chinese. Split between the two. My academic career was largely English but I also was speaking a lot of Chinese at home." Moving to Beijing, her current family base, at 6 years old, she and her siblings continued their international education. (5)

"But I guess I also grew up in the States, cause I went to Boarding school in 10th grade." This move to the States meant a shift in languages, too. "[I am] significantly more comfortable with English, especially since boarding school and college. […] I'm a lot more comfortable speaking in English than speaking in Chinese." Even upon returning to China, Rachel finds Chinese difficult to slip back into. "After a couple of days I get back into the flow […] but that's

largely in terms of speaking and listening." Reading and writing, in contrast, are much harder to recover in a language with more than 10,000 characters. "In middle school and high school I had to write a lot more formal essays for Chinese class--I don't think I could do that anymore. Reading a newspaper, or anything with more formal language, would be difficult for me to parse. […] If you asked me this while I was still in Beijing, I would be like for sure [I'm a native speaker]. But right now, I'm at a point where my Chinese is so shaky that I think I know that I am a native speaker, but I don't really feel like one. I think it's native in that if I practiced more I would be able to." (13)

When Rachel was younger, Chinese was more of a presence. Her grandparents, who helped take care of her and her siblings, only spoke Chinese. The catalyst for the switch came in the form of attending school in the US—Rachel began her studies in Massachusetts at 16, her younger brother Terrance at age 15, and her older sister Janet waited until college. The difference in age doesn't necessarily account for the difference in facility with Chinese. (10) "Janet's Chinese is a lot better, but Terrance's is also, because he took more classes." Rachel's parents would appreciate her practicing Chinese more, but support her pursing an English major. Finding a newfound appreciation for Chinese literature has stemmed from her studies of English prose, although Rachel doubts her abilities to create in the language. (7) "I know I can write well and make beautiful sounding sentences in English, but I don't think I can do that--I don't think I can write a beautiful sentence in Chinese. I can recognize one, but I don't think that I could make one."

The style of Chinese prose and poetry, however, has affected Rachel's English expression. Ancient Tang dynasty poems, common for children and teenagers to read and memorize in school in China, feature clipped phrases that convey a certain universal quality. These have led Rachel to an interest in brevity. "I'm really fascinated with how phrases can be shortened to words and people can still understand what that word is trying to do."

Rachel also associates Chinese with different aspects of her life than those associated with English. "For me, Chinese is super linked with notions of home, family, tradition, a slew of Chinese values. Things like filial piety, and not in the sense that Confucius used it, but in the sense of respect for parents and elders that is more heavily emphasized in China than the States." Chinese values also tend to be more conservative, and are linked in Rachel's mind with Beijing and memories of Beijing. English, on the other hand, carries associations with education and

creativity, and Americanism (20). The two languages together, and the experience of being Bilingual, create the sense of belonging to both cultures, while simultaneously belonging to neither (19).

"I'm not American, in terms of passport or nationality. I have zero connection with America, but my English…being so comfortable in English opened me up to American culture. Chinese is a more tangible form of Chinese culture that I can hold onto or point to in terms of cultural identity. Something I think about the more that I'm away from home. Having access to two cultures and being able to lay claim on them, but also not, is sometimes really great but can also be confusing or lonely." (19). Part of this loneliness may stem from the reactions Rachel gets from native speakers of both languages, and the political complexity of living in either country. Native speakers of English view Rachel as a native English speaker. In fact, in the context of education in China, Rachel's accent-less English often garners comments (29).

"It was a deliberate decision to start us off at international school, and I don't know if it's upsetting to [my parents], but it's strange that English became my dominant language." With Chinese, however, Rachel feels that most Chinese speakers would not grant her fluency in the language. Hearing things like, "You go to school in America, so you're not really Chinese," or, "You were born in Hong Kong, so you're not really from Beijing" are not uncommon (29). "I think [this] is a whole different thing between Hong Kong and the mainland. Because when I'm in Beijing I tell people I'm from Hong Kong, and when I'm in Hong Kong I tell people I'm from Beijing. In China, they're way more willing to give foreigners who speak Chinese a pass than Chinese people" (32). In the US, also, Rachel is constantly reminded that she is not a citizen, especially with the new administration and the way that student visas function. "So I'm very aware of that fact that I'm not Chinese American, but I identify with a lot of Chinese American issues. [It] makes the cultural slippage more difficult to parse."

Thus, the two cultures may push and pull in different directions. The languages themselves, however, lend themselves more readily to fusion and understanding. Mixing languages comes naturally to Rachel, especially in conversation with herself (30). In the US, a higher degree of consciousness is required, as not everyone speaks Chinese, but at home, the opposite is true. (17). "I know that everyone can understand both languages, so it's way more natural for me to slip in and out of both." English may remain the dominant language, but certain phrases in Chinese are a constant presence in Rachel's mental lexicon.

"I find myself imitating phrases that my mom says a lot. If I get frustrated, I say *ai ya*. If something is loud, I say *yi le wa le jiao*." *Yi le wa le jiao* doesn't have an exact translation—perhaps the reason it always occurs in Chinese—but means something close to wailing and noise, like onomatopoeia." *Hua4 she2 tian1 zu2* is another good example of a phrase always thought and spoken in Chinese, literally translating to "draw snake fill in legs" (26). "There's a whole story behind it. There was a snake drawing competition. If you drew the best snake or you finished first, you won a prize. So this dude finished first and he was like wow, I finished first and I had the best snake. I'm gonna win this prize for sure. But then, because he was waiting for everyone else to finish, he added legs onto his snakes and was disqualified because… snakes don't have legs." The phrase is used to mean "you overdid it." An English translation, such as going too far, might convey the same meaning, but lacks the context and accompanying story (26).

"There are so many stories like these behind these random phrases. I would say the same goes for English idioms. 'Out of the blue'--how do you translate that into a different language?" The answer, for Rachel, a bilingual speaker of English and Chinese, is that you don't have to.