University of Wollongong

Shady Cosgrove and Joshua Lobb

Writing the (othered) self: cultural exchange and Creative Writing pedagogy

Abstract:

This paper explores the impact of cross-cultural interaction in the context of creative writing pedagogy, with a focus on collaboration between Australian and Chinese students. It builds on existing research on the topic – such as *Text* Special Issue 'Creative Writing in the Asia-Pacific Region' and creative writing academics Jerry Kroll and Fan Dai's 'Cultural and Ethical Challenges in Creative Writing: A Comparative Study of Australian and Chinese Classes' (2011), which asked: how can cross-cultural interaction inform student Creative Writing practice? The paper uses as a case study a collaboration between the University of Wollongong in Australia and Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou, China. From 5 December to 15 December 2014, ten students and two academics from UOW travelled to Sun Yat-Sen University. Through this exchange, the Australian students expressed their surprise at how the experience influenced their writing, and how recognising the self as other and the other as self within a travel context affected their writing processes. As part of the trip, the researchers trialled different pedagogical approaches including student-delivered presentations on Australian writers and Creative Writing workshopping processes, readings from Australian and Chinese students of their own work, cross-cultural workshopping, and social and cultural excursions. The paper traces the ways the Australian students gained valuable experience and knowledge about Chinese life and writing through these activities, and how this has changed the way they have written about and understand the world. As Brian Castro puts it, Creative Writing can be 'a practice…of crossing cultures' (Castro 2011, 4).

Biographical notes:

Shady Cosgrove is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong. Her publications include *She Played Elvis* (Allen and Unwin, 2009) and *What the Ground Can't Hold* (Picador, 2013). Her short fiction and journalism has appeared in *Best Australian Stories*, *Southerly*, *Antipodes*, *Overland*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Melbourne Age*.

Joshua Lobb is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong. His stories have appeared in *The Bridport Anthology*, *Best Australian Stories*, *Animal Studies*, *Text* and *Social Alternatives*. His plays have been performed at The Actor's Centre and Belvoir St Theatre. His current project, a novel, *Real Life*,

won the LitLink Unpublished Manuscript Award in 2014, as well as two residential fellowships at Varuna, the Writers' House. Joshua holds a PhD on the novel form from UNSW and has published on Creative Writing pedagogy and narrative theory.

Keywords:

Creative Writing – pedagogy – Asia-Pacific – cross-cultural

Introduction: a Creative Writing study trip to China

In December 2014, ten Creative Writing students and two academics from University of Wollongong undertook a study trip to China, funded by the Australian Federal Government's New Colombo Plan. This program aims to 'deepen Australia's people-to-people and institutional relationships with the [Indo-Pacific] region, through the engagement of students, universities…and other stakeholder networks' (NCP Guidelines 2016: 4). The Australian group was hosted by Sun Yat-Sen University – specifically, by Professor Fan Dai, Head of English in the School of Foreign Languages.[1] Of the cohort, six had never travelled outside Australia or had only undertaken brief overseas tourist stays. The students attended classes at Guangzhou and Zuhai campuses. They gave presentations – on Australian writing, their writing process or readings of their work. They also led writing workshops, providing feedback on drafts of the Chinese students' stories.

This paper reviews the experiences of the Australian students on the trip, with a focus on the ways cross-cultural interaction can benefit students' Creative Writing process and practice. It is clear the act travelling to another country and engaging with another culture changed the students' understandings of the world and will therefore influence the kinds of writing they will produce. We argue that discussions about writing and process, writing workshops and other cultural activities in the context of international travel can allow for students to think beyond their own assumptions about writing. As Owen and Brien proffer, 'the transformational capacity of crossing culture…is profound [and] has a significant impact on an individual's approach to learning' (2014: 363).

The first section of the paper will identify the philosophical and pragmatic obstacles to creating a meaningful interaction between Australian and Chinese Creative Writing students: the difficulties of engaging with a new culture without bringing preconceptions or inauthentic imagined versions of another culture. It will also acknowledge the Western cultural assumptions embedded in Creative Writing as a discipline. In the main section of the paper, we will describe the activities undertaken on the study trip. These include: student-led presentations on reading and writing, workshopping, and social and cultural excursions. We will scrutinise the success of these activities in fostering cross-cultural interaction by presenting reflections from the Australian student participants.[2] The students' interaction with their Chinese counterparts created collaborations in unexpected ways. The final section will consider further strategies to strengthen collaborations between students, with a particular focus on engaging with language and writing.

Context: challenges of cross-cultural interaction for travellers and creative writers

The principal criterion for study trips undertaken under the NCP Mobility Program is that projects should support student travel that 'lift…knowledge of the Indo-Pacific region' (NCP Guidelines 2016: 4). Implementing this objective is a complex process. The act of engaging with an unfamiliar culture can be difficult, particularly for those who have not travelled extensively. The initial contact can cause panic for the new arrival, as the visitor is ‘momentarily disoriented by this encounter with the Other’ (Palumbo-Liu, cited in Center 2005: 225). Collinson and Lozinski (1999) call this the ‘epistemological shudder’, a response which occurs ‘when a person’s preferred representations of their known world prove incapable of immediately making sense’ of their encounter. This has obvious implications for any attempt to use travel as a teaching and learning strategy. Talking about the problems of introducing diverse cultural texts in a classroom environment, Carole Center comments that ‘such a pedagogical approach sets up a reading problem for students, who are asked to encounter strangers and strange experiences in their reading with no help in how to respond’ (2005: 226). The ‘epistemological shudder’ is even more urgent when it comes to ‘real-life’ interaction with a different culture. Certainly, this was the experience of some of the students on the study trip, with participants stating that they felt ‘anxious’ and ‘vulnerable’; ‘swamped by the information’ which led to a ‘daunting experience’.

The concern here is that the visitor-in-shock is unable to move beyond the ‘impact of the unfamiliar’ (Sutherland 2008: np) and therefore cannot engage with the new experience. Edward Said has exposed the ways that the newcomer creates an imagined version of the space and its people, based on his/her own cultural narratives. Said writes: ‘a human being confronts at close quarters something relatively unknown and threatening and previously distant...In such a case one has recourse not only to what in one’s previous experience the novelty resembles but also to what one has read about it’ (1988: 295). The visitor cannot cope with the new culture, so s/he ‘overrides’ the space with a safer version, where s/he is in control. As Said argues, the new representation of the space makes it seem that ‘its foreignness can be translated, its meanings decoded, its hostility tamed’; as such, the ‘overriding’ text ‘acquires a greater authority, and use…than the actuality it describes’ (1988: 304, 295).

The impulse towards ‘overriding’ a culture with a new representation becomes more urgent in the context of a short visit to another country, when the traveller is only given limited exposure to the new culture. As Erlet Cater submits, in this context, ‘it is very difficult to know for sure if the experience is in fact authentic’. This can lead to a ‘violation, or even vulgarization, of the space’ (2001: 48-49). At worst, the cultural engagement can become staged or packaged as what Sau-Ling Wong calls ‘a diverting, exotic sideshow’ (quoted in Center 2005: 227). Stanley Fish refers to this engagement as ‘boutique multiculturalism’: a ‘superficial or cosmetic relationship to the objects’ which ‘cannot take seriously the core values of the cultures [it] tolerates’ (1997: 378-9). In their evaluation of the trip, a recurrent comment from our students centred on the fact that there had been not enough time to authentically experience the culture. As one student put it: ‘our need to move from place to place…meant that we couldn't always go into depth’. Another student wanted to spend longer in one place to learn more about ‘the experiences the people themselves see as important, rather than those that may be readily observed by a visitor’.

When it comes to the specific interaction between Australia and China, the impulse to ‘override’ the culture with a pre-conceived version is evident, particularly when it comes to the act of cultural exchange. Ming Dong Gu asserts that ‘in spite of repeated calls by Chinese and Western scholars for genuine dialogues between Chinese and

Western literary [traditions]… most such attempts have ended up in pseudo-dialogues, or disguised Western monologues' (2003: 112). Two versions of China emerge. The first is a constructed dichotomy between 'East' and 'West': what Anders Pettersson describes as 'an excessive emphasis on…difference and alterity' (2008: 468). It is claimed that there is an opposition between Chinese and Western ways of thinking, so much so that the different cultures cannot be 'compared', only 'contrasted' (Gu 2003: 112). The apparently incompatible philosophies seem to produce different kinds of students. In her research on teaching Chinese-language students, Donna-Lee Brien cites the stereotypes associated with 'Eastern' students. For instance: the presumption that '[Chinese] students would prefer a conventional hierarchical teacher-oriented approach, and would defer to perceived leaders during group work' (see Brien 2007). Brien points out that, for many teachers, this is presented in contrast to – or as even inferior to – the 'Western' approach of student-centred active learning. This interpretation of the culture leads to a vision of the country which is impossible to engage with in any depth or sophistication. This envisioning can lead to a dismissal of the different culture. One of our students confessed that before the trip: 'I never had the urge to travel to China; it was never a place that really interested me…[it seemed so] vastly different'.

The second, converse, imagining of China sets up a vision of a 'global village', where there are no differences between cultures. This reading of China was also part of our students' assumptions about China. One student stated: 'with so much difference between us, I feel that recognising the…familiarities in terms of the way people socialise, and the feelings they have or things they go through is very beneficial'. This understanding of the relationship between 'East' and 'West' also changes the kinds of interaction possible between cultures. Paul Jay argues that 'global culture, characterized by the rapid circulation of cultural commodities such as books, films, works in electronic media, clothing, and food…seems to overwhelm local cultural forms and practices' (2001: 32). China is seen as a site that is particularly susceptible to globalisation, or, perhaps more accurately, more liable to be assimilated into 'Western' cultural modes. Bonnie McDougall cites the 'increasing assimilation of foreign, especially Western culture' causing a perceived 'approximation of contemporary Chinese urban life to contemporary Western urban life' (1991: 43). This vision can be seen to be just as limiting to an authentic cultural understanding as the East/West dichotomy. Jay declares that 'one of the main complaints about globalization, of course, is that the proliferation of Western styles, products, and tastes may extinguish difference. From this point of view, globalization simply represents the homogenizing of formerly disparate cultures and identities' (2001: 40). Again, this can be seen in some of our students' responses to the culture. One student was surprised when his group started speaking in Mandarin rather than English, and became aware of an impulse to ask the Chinese students to 'make more of an effort to accommodate their outnumbered mentors'.

This statement, presented with the best of intentions, exposes another challenge to the process of 'lifting cultural knowledge' in a teaching and learning context: that pedagogy is not culturally neutral. Jay notes that 'the globalization of literary studies is linked to the export of Western critical categories, terms, theories, and practices, all of which threaten to create a Western critical context for the local literatures studied' (2001,40). The predominant model for teaching Creative Writing in the Western world, and especially in Australia, is the workshop. The 'cultural appropriateness' of the workshop in an Asian context has been questioned by a number of scholars, most notably Kroll and Dai (2011: 4, 2014, 79), and Boey. Boey declares: 'the import of Creative Writing may be regarded as yet another form of Western cultural imperialism, another cultural institution from the metropolitan centre to be imposed on the peripheral areas'(2011: 3). It is interesting to note that some of the students on the study trip became aware of the implicit 'Westernness' of the workshop. One student realised that in Australia 'we have a cultural habit of constructing sentences a certain way'; another reflected on how this affects the kinds of discussions that can take place in the workshop. She wrote:

> In Wollongong, discussions about writing often seem to be colonised by particular personalities/narratives/formulas…There's almost a kind of script and it mostly makes me feel pretty alienated and jaded…In China, the script was…completely absent among the students we 'mentored' in Zhuhai….I think we were meant to workshop with the Zhuhai students in a very Wollongong way, and I expected to do that, but when it came down to it, it ended up not feeling right….the power balance was a bit weird there and I also just didn't feel like the clinical way of isolating certain sentences/sections fit the circumstances.

Thus, if the study trip was to create a meaningful and authentic interaction between Australian and Chinese Creative Writing students, we needed not only to understand our preconceived visions of the culture, but also be aware of the cultural assumptions embedded in our teaching practices.

Part of the planning of the trip was to think through how we might allow for genuine 'multidirectional' interaction – although, as the student's statement above reveals, many of our discoveries about the challenges of cross-cultural interaction were made on the trip. However, perhaps this strengthened our experience: the solutions we devised were made in collaboration between Australian and Chinese teachers and students. In his discussion of cross-cultural Creative Writing, Boey cites James Clifford's understanding of cultural interaction as 'self-making': 'Clifford proposes the idea of travelling cultures, envisaging them not as complete and stable wholes, but as mobile, evolving entities engaged in interactions and contacts with other cultures and histories' (2011: 6). Educational activities are not fixed, but change according to cultural interaction and, in this way, work against the homogenization of globalization. Under these circumstances, the Western visiting teacher can 'defuse suspicions of any imperialist agenda by fostering interactions' (Boey 2011: 5). While acknowledging the culturally specific origins of the workshop, conceived in this way, Creative Writing can be a place to allow for cross-cultural interaction. Tay and Leung recognise 'creative writing as not just a solitary activity, but as an activity that is socially embedded' (2011: 110). And, in fact, the notion of Creative Writing as a socially engaged collaboration is central to the program at Sun Yat-Sen University. Dai recounts that 'although the original rationale for establishing the creative writing program was to enhance students' abilities in using English as a second language, an important and unexpected lesson for me was that such a writing course could also help students to learn about themselves and those around them.' (2011: 12). She calls this 'the experience-sharing aspect of the Creative Writing program' (2011: 11). Roberts and Smith expound that discussions on creative practice allow for students to 'examin[e] both the social forces that give meaning to cultural difference and the consequences of those meanings (intended and unintended)' (2002: 292). Indeed, it may even overcome the colonising tendency of the 'epistemological shudder'. As one of the students hypothesised:

> (I)t is easy to mistake the bubble of your own world/experience as the norm. Travel breaks down these barriers, forces us outside our comfort zone and pushes us to see beyond a one-way and narrow field of vision and experience. I think any time you are taken out of what is familiar, your surroundings and experiences become intensified, if only because they are firsts. Experiencing this…ignites creativity.

The aim of the study trip was to create frameworks for this kind of cross-cultural creativity to be 'ignited'. We trialled a range of pedagogical and social activities to allow for students to understand each other's writing and lives in an authentic, collaborative way. In the next section of this paper we discuss three activities: student-led presentations on reading and writing; workshopping with Chinese students and social and cultural excursions. We describe the activities and present responses from the Australian participants in the trip.

Application: student activities in China

Student-Led Presentations on Reading and Writing

As part of the program of study, the Australian students were required to present once on one of three different topics: Australian writing, students' own writing (with a reading of their work) and students' writing process. We asked five of our students to present on their favourite Australian writers, contextualising the work within a broader framework while keeping the Chinese audience in mind. This provided students with a practical challenge to consider the cultural knowledges embedded in texts, and how this affects reading and writing. Students mentioned having difficulty with the presentations because they hadn't foreseen their context nor understood how much 'set up' they would need for the Chinese audience. One student pondered:

> [M]y presentation topic (favourite Australian novel) gave me an opportunity to think practically about things I have been studying in Creative Writing and English Literature subjects. As I was preparing my presentation on Gillian Mears's *Foal's Bread*, I recognised from studying post-colonial theories of literature (in particular *The Empire Writes Back*, also Bakhtin's heteroglossia) that the distinct voice adopted by this novel represents a regional Australian English dialect that at the time would have been seen as a corruption of 'correct' English.

This revelation did not only change her understanding of published texts; it also informed the way the student read the workshop material submitted by her Chinese counterparts. The student elaborated:

> While I recognised that the students are probably aiming for grammatically standard American or British English in spoken and formal written communication, given that these were creative pieces I felt uncomfortably simply 'correcting' the workshopping stories to conform to standard English grammar. This is especially true as much of my own creative writing practice adopts non-standard grammar and syntax to represent distinct speaking voices, and it is possible that the work may represent a local way of speaking English.

This reflection is striking for the complex thought that has gone into the consideration of the reader/advisor in relation to the non-Western text as well as the way that the reading of Mears's text has affected the way the student gives feedback to Chinese writers. The student is able to heed Canagarajah's request to 'think of English as a plural language that embodies multiple norms and standards. English should be treated as a multinational language, one that belongs to diverse communities and not owned only by the metropolitan communities' (2006: 589) and acknowledge the complex terrain of being a fluent English-speaker who is offering feedback to students who are writing in a second language. This allowed for perhaps a more authentic engagement with the culture, and, as such, makes manifest Boey's thesis that 'reading [can be] an act of border-crossing, moving or being moved across from one world into another' (2011: 2).

The cultural knowledges implicit in all texts became central to the second presentation topic, as selected students, and the two academics, presented excerpts of their own work to Chinese audiences. The act of reading their own work exposed their position specifically as *Australian* writers. One of the academics found himself editing the text as he read, trying to avoid the references to events that were 'too Australian' for his Chinese audience. He became aware in a very pragmatic way the way 'the cultural background of both reader and text become central to the forming and shaping of every individual act of interpretation' (McCaw 2011: 31). This led to a productive conversation with the Australian students and Fan Dai. Dai cited her argument in a recent article that 'awareness of cultural differences serves as a reminder to students that they need to consider the cultural aspects of their stories for their target readers when they write Chinese stories in English.' (Kroll and Dai 2014: 82). The Australian academic observed that this approach would be useful in the Australian Writing classroom as well.

The final group of students presented on their own writing process, under the topic title 'What I Write, How I Write, Why I Write'. This triggered student reflection on the practice of Creative Writing in the Australian and Chinese university contexts. One student stated:

> Perhaps the greatest impact this trip has had on me in regards to my own writing is the inspiration that comes from the Chinese students' enthusiasm. In my conversations with the students they would often mention that they did their creative writing because they had to, but as we talked and started to work together I could actually see them begin to consider how much more it could mean to them, and this stemmed from my own thoughts on writing…Too often I would dismiss the question 'Why do you write?' as simplistic, or not particularly interesting, but I realised on the

> trip that I am very privileged to be able to take so much joy from my creative practice.

The idea of ‘why I write’ as a naïve question was interrogated by other students on the trip. One student ruminated:

> I’m not entirely sure why I write – I don’t have a kind of consolidated narrative about why/how I came to write. I’ve been prompted to think about that now, not just so I’ll have an answer next time someone asks me, but because for some people their answer nourishes them a lot and I might be missing out on that reserve of self-support…I think the language I use to talk about writing has been affected by this trip.

Her interrogation of the question ‘why I write’ was linked to interactions with the Chinese students but, interestingly, it was also linked to getting to know her fellow Australian travellers better and this translated into an optimism about writing communities. She went on to say:

> The sincerity and frankness in the work of the Chinese students pushed me away from the defence mechanism of cynicism/pessimism. The wonderful interactions we had among the Australian contingent and the fantastic people involved also made me feel respected/encouraged and hopeful/heartened/sustained.

For another student, the presentations proved to be a watershed moment. In front of forty Chinese students and staff members from Sun Yat-Sen University, as well as her eleven fellow Australians, she spoke for the first time publicly about a traumatic moment in her family’s history and her motivation to write as a way of making sense of this catastrophe. She was not alone in feeling the trip was a safe space to explore the deeper motivations of writing. As one student said: ‘everyone (or certainly everyone I spoke to) reported feeling really cracked open and vulnerable and supported’. In all of these comments, the mediation on the notion of ‘why we write’ was made more urgent by the cross-cultural context: in the act of presenting themselves as writers to another culture, they gained an insight in their cultural/social position as writers in Australia.

Workshopping with Chinese students

All of the Australian students participated in writing workshops with the Chinese students. One month before the trip, each Australian student was allocated five pieces from Chinese students for which to provide feedback. When surveyed afterwards the Australian students consistently listed the workshopping as one of the top aspects of the trip. For one student, the workshopping was important not only because of the cross-cultural connections that it fostered but also because it changed her understanding of and relationship to the English language:

> What I found was actually most interesting for me in terms of writing was how people who write in English as a second language use English words in a way that we don't. Just because we have a cultural habit of constructing sentences a certain way, and making words mean certain things, it felt really cool to hear someone from another culture doing it differently. It felt like they’d exploded the language and put it

> back together again. So what I took away from that was a goal to make my writing sound like the words were new, and to try to eschew a lot of the connotations that hang around words and sentence structures as a result of having used only them, for all my life.

Another student found this language barrier to be liberating because it necessitated 'a kind of frankness that complex English maybe would have disturbed. Directness was prioritised in the interests of communication and this led to some really interesting stuff'. Of particular interest was how the Chinese similes and metaphors didn't translate easily into English. She concluded:

> It made me think more about how place affects a person's work, which is something that I'm super interested in anyway but hadn't had the chance to really see evidence of (because all the Asian-Australian writers I've read were published precisely *because* they did English in a way that passed as a first language).

This same student said she found the workshopping experience to be very different from workshopping in Australia and that because of the context she felt unable to follow the usual protocols. So instead of 'workshopping', she wrote each of her Chinese counterparts a letter stating what she had gained from their work, what sections or sentences she didn't understand and what the work left her 'wanting more of'. This had a dramatic impact on their exchanges:

> After they read that, what had up until then been quite a reserved interaction seemed to unlock. They opened up on a different level and expressed some of their anxieties about their work, their course, their next writing assignment. They suddenly asked me a bunch of questions. We also spoke about writing in general and the students told me that all of them basically wrote about/from their own lives and wanted to give voice to and own their own experiences.

Workshopping led to a deeper understanding of how cultural knowledge can play out with regards to language and the student's role as reader. Another student recounts:

> [At first] I commented particularly upon grammar when it made the meaning unclear, but there were problems with this as it was based on whether the meaning was unclear *to me*. At times, such as in one students' vague references to an earthquake, the meaning was unclear despite good grammar, as I simply didn't have the cultural context to understand that the characters were in the story's setting following evacuation due to a risk of aftershocks from a well-known earthquake in China. During the discussion, we established that the reader probably needs to know what is actually happening in the story before they can access any thematic/emotional layer of meaning or affect. Learning the backstory about the earthquake added to my understanding of the student's story, as I realised that not only was the event in the story (a father expressing his love) unexpected, but it was set within multiple layers of unexpected happenings, not all of which had been clear to me, which developed the story's idea that such moments are themselves fragile and could easily have not happened at all.

This anecdote provides a solution to a key problem for Creative Writing programs: we want to 'expose students to multiple cultural perspectives' (Kroll and Dai 2014: 82), but these texts can sometimes baffle our students. Center argues: 'such a pedagogical approach sets up a reading problem for students, who are asked to encounter strangers and strange experiences in their reading with no help in how to respond' (2005: 226). However, in the context of a study trip to the site where the work was written, students can explore and even experience the different cultural perspectives and come to an understanding through discussion and collaboration.

Social and Cultural Excursions

Like many courses that combine Creative Writing with travel, the cultural exchange was a critical part of the trip, as important as any pre-meditated pedagogical activities that the facilitators designed. In their excursions into Zuhai and Guangzhou, the Australian students were paired with SYSU students. Through the act of showing off their city, the Chinese students were able to consider what is important about their culture, and Australian students were able to see a personalised perspective on that. As one Australian student said:

> It's easy to read history or politics books and feel swamped by information or not fully understand how everything fits together. But hanging out with the students at their local hang out spot was a much more interesting and unique way to make friends and begin to understand the Chinese culture.

This exchange was important as it fostered dialogue between the Australian and Chinese cultures. Another student mused:

> My favourite parts of the trip were being shown around by the Sun Yat-Sen students. For example, on the day we went to the French Quarter, we saw several couples having wedding photos, so at lunch I got into a discussion with a student…about marriage and family in China. It was really interesting because he talked not only about the traditional family relationships (the conversation started when he mentioned that for a week after the wedding, the married couple could treat their parents as equals rather than elders), but how they have changed over time and in response to things like texting…The whole trip opened up cultural experiences and discussions on a level I've never had before, and that is only really possible with this university-based travel that links you up with local students.

This kind of interaction embodies Boey's 'dialogic dynamism' (2011: 5) and allows for an authentic understanding of a culture to be gained. As Pattersson asserts, it is important 'to see the so-called Other as another subject – not just as an exemplification of his or her culture but as a person similar enough to ourselves to be drawn into a dialogue about things that matter to us both' (Pettersson 2008: 468).

Again, the cross-cultural interactions also allowed the Australians to gain a more complex understanding of their own culture. One student considered the ways the trip as a whole made her reconceptualise her ideas about boundaries, both interpersonal and geographical:

> The most confronting thing for me about urban China was the endlessness of its built environment. Looking out the window on the internal flights, the city went on and on

> and people kept living. This made me realise how important Wollongong's geographical borders have been in shaping my ideas about boundaries, control, and space (narrative as well as otherwise).

Another student concurred:

> [the trip] was an amazing cultural experience for me, but also an interesting experience as a writer, as it reminded me on a very clear level that perceptions of one's own culture and experiences are very different from what may be perceived by outsiders.

It is this deeper understanding of the two cultures – created by a space of interaction and collaboration – that has allowed the students move beyond their preconceptions of Chinese culture. It is not 'East' versus 'West', nor is it a 'global village': rather, it is a conversation about the complexities of both cultures, and how this might be explored through writing.

Conclusion and Reflection: further study trips to China

While the trip was deemed a transformative and invigorating experience by students and staff from both universities, upon reflection there were a few things we (as organisers and teachers) would handle differently if we were to undertake the experience again. The most important change we will make is with regard to the local language. Indeed, this imperative was emphasised in the student evaluations of the trip, with one student recommending everyone involved take a six-week Mandarin language course before departure, and another student wishing he'd learned more Mandarin so he could impress his Chinese counterparts. He stated: 'I really feel that being able to have conversations with the other students and Dai Fan about how they are, where they are from, what they like to do on weekends, etc. in Mandarin would have shocked them into applause!'. This is not just a matter of pragmatics or graciousness. Boey tenders that 'authentic communications between cultural groups will only happen with the fostering interactions with the national and vernacular languages' (2011: 5); while Castro cites Catherine Porter's observation that monolinguists 'risk violating social taboos, tend to miss subtle verbal and non-verbal cues, cannot follow side conversations and in general are far less equipped than their bilingual or multi-lingual interlocutors to put themselves in the other person's place, to figure out where the other is coming from' (2011: 5).

However, despite the language barrier, we believe that the Australian students were able to gain valuable insights into Chinese culture and to learn more about their own cultural assumptions in the process. As one student wrote:

> In many ways, travel and writing are synonyms. Both are about trying to understand. Both give us better insight into human nature and cultures…I think great writing is two-part. The first is craft. The second is content. While craft may be learned in armchair, I'm not so sure experience and understanding can.

Endnotes

[1] Professor Dai introduced Creative Writing at SYSU in 2009 as part of the English language program (see Dai 2010;2011). Professor Dai's contribution towards our cultural exchange was integral to its success.

[2] For the sake of confidentiality, these accounts have been deidentified. The students have given their consent for us to present their reflections in this paper.

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