LEARNING CHINESE:
THREE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES

by
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Abstract

This autobiographical case-study is an arts-informed narrative inquiry into learning (Mandarin) Chinese as an Additional Language (CAL). I have been studying Chinese for over a decade, but in this thesis I focus on the six months (September 2009–February 2010) I spent studying CAL at a high intermediate level in Taipei. I offer three creative non-fiction narratives connected to that experience. The first is a language memoir that mixes languages (English and Chinese), poetry and prose. The second is a reader’s theatre script that re-presents conversations on Chinese with a variety of people (students, teachers and expatriates) from my CAL community in Taipei. The third is a bricolage of image-texts related to CAL selected from internet sources. I conceptualize all three narratives as autobiographical in that they explore various sources – individual, communal, and societal – that are invariably woven together in any story of the self.

By using multiple autobiographical accounts to explore lived experience I am working with an opportunity to explore the elusive, shifting, context-dependent and influential nature of narrative sense-making. This approach also provides an opportunity for tensions, resolutions, dissonances, and resonances to reverberate across the stories in ways that stimulate unity without the expense of uniformity. Further, each narrative serves to triangulate the others, drawing as they do on different source materials and perspectives. Yet all three narratives are also fundamentally individual creations, identity texts (Cummins, 2006) even, and as such work to investigate how the personal is inevitably
professional, the artistic simultaneously academic, and how representation is always also creation.

This investigation of narratives and identities is not peripheral to CAL learning itself. As my understanding of the forces operating on my CAL identity increases, implications for my trajectory as a language learner emerge in significant, liberating ways. This in turn, allows the integration of CAL-related linguistic, sociolinguistic, and cultural habits into my ongoing personal narrative to become more conscious, comfortable and complete.

I offer this study as an invitation to participate in the important, complex, and urgent work of increasing awareness of one’s self-in-context.
Preface

The following research has been approved by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board (certificate number H09-01990). For administrative reasons, I’ve had to publish this thesis under my full name, Pamela Lester; elsewhere I publish under my preferred name, Ella Lester.
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Bibliography
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I am particularly fortunate to have had Dr. Patricia Duff as my graduate advisor; her tireless efforts, keen observations, and continuous encouragement are the hallmarks of a truly wonderful mentor and person. To Dr. Carl Leggo, I am grateful in one of those incommensurable ways, for he is a living example of how education can include heart, spirit, humour, freedom, and of course, poetry. To Dr. Duanduan Li, who taught me Chinese, provided heartfelt guidance and feedback throughout the years, and shown consistent positivity, kindness and grace. I thank all three of these exceptional professors for being on my thesis committee, and for being patient and supportive through the evolution of this research.

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Finally, I am also grateful to the friends, research participants, and teachers who made memories with me both in Taiwan and elsewhere.
Dedication

To Nany,
who never needed school to teach
her how to live her grand,
motherly, loving and outrageous
stories.
Chapter 1 Introduction

This is an autobiographical study about learning Chinese as an additional language (CAL). It is also an arts-informed study about the power of story. I use narrative – both as a process of knowing and to refer to the products of that knowledge – to inquire into, represent, and interpret my lived CAL experience. I do so because I am wholly complicit with Leggo’s (2005) contention that:

We need to compose and tell our stories as creative ways of growing in humanness. We need to question our understanding of who we are in the world. We need opportunities to consider other versions of identity. This is ultimately a pedagogic work, the work of growing in wisdom through education, learning, research, and writing. (p. 115)

To this soul-stirring invocation, I would only add that this is absolutely my life’s work.

Specifically, I have attempted to unpack these twin research questions:

1. How do I perceive, make sense of, and integrate my experiences of learning Chinese into the overall narrative of my life?

2. In the context of my lived CAL experience, how does the way I understand the relationship between narrative and life create opportunities for conscious change?

1 Chinese is a broad term that subsumes many different languages/dialects; throughout this paper I will use it interchangeably with Mandarin, and when used to indicate learning Chinese, I specifically mean CAL.
Clearly, these questions are fundamentally concerned with identity, an issue that has been given increasing attention and validity in second language acquisition (SLA) research since the mid-1990s (Norton, 2000; Block, 2007). Learning a foreign language, especially one as linguistically and culturally different from one’s native language as Chinese is from English, is precisely an opportunity “to consider other versions of identity” (Leggo, 2005, p. 115). How would my thinking, values and behaviour differ had I been initially socialized into (a particular variety of) Chinese language and culture, instead of the conservative values and Canadian English of my European immigrant family? What is going on when this potential Chinese identity encounters the Canadian one that is already strongly rooted – is there flirtation, repulsion, indifference? If, as Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) assert, second language learning is essentially about the (re)construction of selves in order to participate in “the symbolically mediated lifeworld of another culture” (p. 155), then aren’t the ways we understand ourselves, that is, understand our many ‘selves’, intrinsic to how that process unfolds?

I begin by framing the study with a brief personal account that explains my history of learning Chinese and explains my interest in undertaking research of this nature. I subsequently introduce each of the three narratives in turn, and contextualize them in terms of autobiography and Chinese. This is followed by a sketch of how the discussion attempts to unpack the context-dependent nature of narrative sense-making by inquiring into the complexities of race, gender, and (narrative) agency. Finally, statements detailing the arts-informed research
approach I have taken, as well as the scope and limitations of this research, are presented.

As this is a multi-faceted study, relevant literature includes research that covers a wide range of topics: Chinese language and culture, additional language acquisition, study abroad, narrative, autobiography, arts-informed research, the different kinds of creative non-fiction genres I have used in the three narratives (memoir, reader’s theatre, and bricolage), hermeneutic phenomenology, and post-structuralism. In light of this variety, I have chosen to do the work of situating this study within the existing literature throughout the entire paper, by highlighting connections to other research where directly relevant. In general, this means that in each of the narrative chapter introductions (Chapters 2, 3, and 4), literature that is specific to the genre used and content presented in that chapter is reviewed. Scholarship dealing with broader or more abstract issues, for example research around autobiography, CAL, narrative, identity, and the research approach that I have adopted, are bookended in both the Introduction (Chapter 1) and Discussion (Chapter 5).

1.1 A Brief Personal History

1.1.1 On Writing

I have had an on-again off-again, but mostly off-again² relationship with writing for almost as long as I can remember. As a teenager I wrote trite, angst-filled poetry. Traveling in Southeast Asia in my early twenties, I kept journal after

² I say off-again because although writing has been a persistent character in THE STORY OF MY LIFE, it has also been peripheral or even absent for entire chapters.
journal, ostensibly collecting material for the book I would eventually write. As a sojourner in Shanghai in my mid-twenties I wrote freelance articles for several expat-run, English-language magazines, and copyedited English news stories for a major state-run television station. Back in Vancouver during my undergraduate degree, I initially set out to major in creative writing – before rather impulsively changing to Chinese – and spent many hours workshopping the poetry, short stories and creative non-fiction rants that my classmates and I dutifully churned out. Now, as a graduate student in my early thirties, attempting to make sense of research and methodology, I find myself honing straight in on narrative inquiry.

The overwhelming majority of my writing has been autobiographical - never strictly autobiographical because I too see how “fact and fiction have coiled themselves around me like vines, green and seductive, until I no longer know which ‘I’ is me” (Rasberry, 1995, p. 590) – but autobiographical in the sense that the intention is always to seek explanations of, or peace with, lived experience. For me, writing has been like a sculptor’s tool, chiseling away at this mysterious slab of life and trying to shape it into something that one can attempt to know.
1.1.2 Nine Years of Learning Chinese

I have had an on-again off-again, but mostly on-again, relationship with Chinese for over a decade. I have studied it in foreign language contexts,\textsuperscript{3} immersed myself in it in second language contexts, and experimented with how to integrate it into my life on personal, professional, creative and academic levels. As I have previously written a detailed narrative about the evolving role of Chinese in my life as part of a multiple case study (Duff et. al., forthcoming), the account presented here is intentionally brief.

My interest in China started with Kung Fu. As a teenager, I practiced Wing Chun Kung Fu with the intensity and enthusiasm that come from being young and feeling invincible. For five years I fantasized about going to China and practicing with an old master, and in 1999, at age 23 when I wasn’t yet able to speak any Chinese, I finally did. I spent two very hard years living in Shanghai, during which I grappled with culture shock, linguistic incompetence, depression and adulthood. I now see that my time there was a kind of self-imposed exile; it mirrored the feelings of isolation and non-belonging I felt because of the severely strained relationships that existed as a result of religious differences with my nuclear family. Although I had gone to China for Kung Fu, my time there didn’t end up being about Kung Fu. Life in China forced my vision to sharply refocus onto the more immediate tasks at hand, like dealing with the basics of

\textsuperscript{3}Foreign language contexts refer to situations where the target language is not one of the official languages of the country, such as studying Chinese in Canada, while second language contexts are those where the target language is an official language, but is new or unfamiliar for the learner, such as an English or French speaking Canadian studying Chinese in China.
life in a country where I didn’t understand anything, and scrambling to build a foundation for selfhood, as being out of my comfort zone had quickly made me realize how fragmented and inept the one I had was.

Through self-study, sporadic classes, and day-to-day life in Shanghai - an immersion setting – I learned to speak enough Chinese to get by. Among the group of mostly foreign expatriates that I socialized with, I was considered to have fairly good Chinese, which often resulted in my being urged forward as the head interlocutor for the group when something needed to get done in Chinese. Although there was never a shortage of ‘people to party with’, and even though I did make a couple of deep friendships during my time in Shanghai, I never truly stopped feeling restless there. I remained acutely aware of being an outsider, an understanding that was reinforced by Chinese words for foreigner like ‘waiguoren’ and ‘laowai’, which I frequently heard shouted at me by strangers on the street, and was often accompanied by pointing. I felt, like Conceison (2004), that “it does not matter how long I live in China, how fluent my Chinese becomes, or how much I try to adapt to local customs – I will always be an outsider” (p. 5). I wonder how many immigrants around the world - people who typically do not have the luxury of returning ‘home’ if they so desire - live with similar experiences.

At the end of 2001 I returned to Canada and settled in Vancouver to pursue an undergraduate degree. At first, I took Chinese courses merely to fulfill the language requirement, but it wasn’t long before I switched my major from creative writing to Chinese language and culture. I simply enjoyed those classes
better. Mid-way through my studies, in 2004, I returned to China for another immersion experience. This time was quite unlike the first one; I settled in a different, much smaller city, Kunming, and I went together with my boyfriend at the time, who was also studying Chinese. For me the trip was basically a self-constructed study abroad sojourn; I took Canadian university classes by distance education, and studied Chinese privately with a tutor. At the time, job opportunities for foreigners in Kunming were much more limited than in Shanghai, and I ended up with a job teaching English in order to make ends (just barely) meet. This sojourn too, ended because I felt restless living in China; I left Kunming earlier than anticipated, returning to Vancouver to finish my degree and leaving my boyfriend behind. He has essentially been living in China, with the Shanghainese woman he subsequently began dating, ever since.

After completing my degree I tried to find work that would allow me to use, and ideally keep improving, my Chinese. People often said how advantageous it must be for me to speak Chinese, especially in a Pacific Rim city like Vancouver, but I felt the disadvantages much more acutely than any advantages. I was in a city populated with many people who had grown up fully bilingual in Chinese and English – typically the children of first or second generation Chinese immigrants – and who then went to school to study something else, like business or medicine. In comparison, what did I have? A non-native fluency in Chinese, complete with tremendous gaps in cultural and historical knowledge related to China, combined with an inability (and unwillingness) to fully submit to a Chinese value system that, at the time, I rather
stereotypically perceived as requiring perpetually-cheerful employees to 1) work long hours and take few holidays, and 2) be consistently deferential to authority-figures and superiors regardless of the merit of their ideas or decisions. Basically, I thought, in the eyes of most employers who were interested in people who could speak Chinese, I was a bad deal.

I worked at a university bookstore to make ends meet, and began to deeply despair. I was 28 years old, had spent most of my adult life indebting myself to the pursuit of this nebulous, unwieldy thing called Chinese, and yet still had no idea where I was truly going with it. I imagined that the only thing that could make me feel worse than I was already feeling was if I quit now. That would be like admitting that I had done it all for nothing, or that it was all just a meaningless, long-winded mistake. I felt I simply had to try and keep going, to keep digging this well I had started, but I honestly had no idea how to continue. So, I turned my energies back to the academy.

1.1.3 Graduate School

I came to graduate school looking for answers, and initially thought that the relevant questions were: How could I sustain my interest, motivation and progress in Chinese over the long term? How did others do it? What did educators and researchers know about it? And of course, how could I get some of what they had/knew? But the substrate of all these questions, one that took some time to percolate up to my consciousness, was ‘Why had I spent so much time and energy staying involved with Chinese when I had no personal, social, cultural, political, or professional ties to it?’ Struggling to keep Chinese in my life
was so effortful, and often felt very contrived. I had spent three years living and traveling in China, four years studying Chinese at a Canadian university, and two more years seeking out language exchanges, social circles, volunteer opportunities, and jobs that would keep me connected to Chinese. After all that, yes, I could speak decent Chinese, but I had no real Chinese-speaking friends and definitely lacked a clear purpose for having Chinese in my life. Plus, even just keeping the gains I had already made required continued effort, and this was effort I was growing less and less willing to make.

The theories of instrumental and intrinsic motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) that I was soon exposed to in the course of my studies offered little in the way of meaningful answers. No, I didn’t have a specific instrumental goal that Chinese would enable me to fulfill, although I did have a vague hope of putting the language to some sort of professional use. Yes I was drawn to some aesthetic aspects of Chinese (language and culture) – I appreciated the convergence of art and functionality in its orthography, and was intrigued by the subtle, restrained power of Kung Fu. But there are many things I enjoy on an aesthetic, superficial level that don’t end up as a tumultuous, decade-long affair. There was unquestionably something deeper going on, and I needed, critically, to understand it.

In 2009, with the mentorship of my graduate advisor and support of the newly inaugurated Centre for Research in Chinese Language and Literacy Education (CRCLLE), a group of six researchers, including myself, began interrogating our relationships and histories with Chinese from a scholarly
perspective. Five of us have long, complicated histories learning various dialects and orthographies of Chinese to differing levels of literacy and communicative competence, and the sixth is a native-speaking teacher of CAL. Using narrative inquiry, together we celebrated and commiserated, challenged and supported, shared and shied away from one another in the long, nebulous, and complex process of deeply looking at oneself with an eye to publicly presenting (at least some of) what we would come to know (Duff et al., 2010).

In many ways, that study is the seed, soil and sun of this one. The opportunity to engage in that research was a strong hit of external validation from a powerful source – the academy – and it validated not only the activity of learning Chinese, but me individually as a person who had chosen to devote so much time and effort to doing so. As an ongoing project, it has been instrumental in lifting me out of despair over my seemingly haphazard life trajectory, and giving me the ideas and the language needed to narrate a new edition of THE STORY OF MY LIFE. Instead of being a bright but somewhat lost student of Chinese who finds no ongoing place for Chinese in her life, I began imagining a new possibility: becoming an academically-infused language artist who studies, writes, lectures and publishes on a range of topics that all have a common thread, learning Chinese as an additional language. This shift in perspective gave new life to my passion for Chinese because it offered a purpose for it that I found deeply compelling. As a result, when I encountered an opportunity to go to Taiwan to further my CAL studies, I didn’t hesitate to take it, and my trajectory as a CAL learner was significantly altered.
1.1.4 Sojourn in Taiwan

With support from a Taiwanese Ministry of Education scholarship, I spent six months, covering two semesters over September 2009 through February 2010, studying CAL at a university in Taipei. I approached the sojourn both as an unprecedented opportunity to focus almost solely on studying Chinese (I had never previously studied the language in such an intensive format, three hours a day, five days a week, or had any purposeful exposure to traditional characters), and as an ideal setting for me to collect autobiographical data for this MA thesis while learning to read traditional characters. I kept a regular journal, twice a week on average, with detailed notes on my most salient thoughts, feelings, social interactions, and incidents related to studying Chinese and/or living in Taiwan in general. Because I was drawn to narrative inquiry, and was specifically interested in how lived experience gets interpreted, I did not structure my journal into any fixed categories or require entries to be written at any specific time intervals. Instead I allowed the writing to emerge organically and spontaneously, and focused on recording as many details as possible.

As an international student in Taipei, I naturally and easily came into contact with other international students. They were my classmates and flatmates, and many of them, at least ones those who were visually identifiable, were the non-Chinese faces that stood out of the crowd on the streets and neighbourhoods I moved through. We connected over oolong tea and Chinese textbooks, in book groups and meditation halls. I was candid with my curiosity about their stories of CAL learning, and found that people were happy and
willing to talk about their personal histories. We seemed to implicitly share membership in a common group; we were all foreigners, Westerners, sojourners, Chinese-speakers, and sinophiles. It was easy to relate over similar experiences, such as adjusting to daily life in Taiwan, trying to distinguish between cultural and personality differences in navigating a Chinese social world, or the highs and lows of learning this notoriously difficult language.

Learning CAL in a study abroad context has been studied by other scholars, although not, to my knowledge, using an arts-informed research approach. Students have been interviewed about their experiences related to various issues around pragmatic competence (Kasper & Zhang, 1995), and questioned about their beliefs and anxiety related to learning Chinese (Le, 2004). Other studies that focus on the logistics and (apparent) gains in language proficiency of study abroad sojourns have also been conducted (Hayden, 1998; Kubler, 1997; Tseng, 2006). A narrative approach has also been used in research on study abroad (Kinginger, 2008; Polanyi, 1995), but typically in connection to European languages, and not in a CAL context.

My time studying in Taiwan is the core of the lived experience I explore in this research, but those six months are in many ways indissoluble from my longer history with Chinese. The nine years of memories and experiences that precede the sojourn play a foundational and even somewhat determining role in how it unfolds. This is why contextualizing it against the backdrop of my wider experiences is so important. The question I had been grappling with, ‘Why had I spent so much time and energy staying involved with Chinese when I had no
personal, social, cultural, political, or professional ties to it?’ evolved into what is essentially a deeper version of itself, and one that had the expansiveness to address the past as well as the present: ‘How do I perceive, make sense of, and integrate my experiences of learning Chinese into the overall narrative of my life?’ I had come to realize that if I didn’t know the meaning I was assigning to the role of Chinese in my life, my initial question remained not only fundamentally inaccessible but also much less potent.

1.1.5 Integration

Somewhere amid the learning, researching, and soul-searching I was doing at graduate school, in Taiwan, and in my journals, a convergence on the notion of identity occurred. I was drawn to a poststructuralist notion of the self as multiple, shifting, and co-constructed (Norton, 2000) in large part because I was essentially dissatisfied with the options of ‘who I could be’ that I’d encountered so far in my life. I’d been moving from place to place, trying out different versions of myself, only to discover, each time and with great disappointment, that the fit was never quite right. I felt fragmented, and was growing extremely weary from it. It seemed to me that most places and most people would embrace only specific, limited parts of who I was: I felt that as long as I deflected attention away from my non-religious world view, I could enjoy some degree of connection with my family; as long as I maintained a detached, professional voice, I could be privy to academic or career opportunities; as long as I minimized the profound effects of depression in my life, I could enjoy romantic love. I kept returning to a yearning to be able to show
up, in my entirety, in every place and with every person. Perhaps this is an idealistic or unreasonable wish; after all I am aware that what is appropriate in one context is often quite inappropriate in another, and that we take different roles in different relationships and at different times. But that is not really what I’m talking about; I’m talking about having a fundamentally integrated sense of self, an identity that, while being multi-faceted and dynamic, is able to comfortably foreground various aspects of itself without that simultaneously being a repression of other aspects.

The time has come for my on-again, off-again relationships with Chinese and with writing to stabilize into one polyamorous lifestyle. I have begun to understand that in a certain sense these seemingly distinct relationships are actually the same relationship, in that they serve the same purpose in my life, which is to relentlessly urge forward the deep, explicit and conscious knowing of the self. Because how can one have a fundamentally integrated sense of self without being aware of all the parts?

My desire for an integrated identity, and the as yet unresolved nature of this desire, has also, inevitably, infused this study. I am passionately trying to “open up possibilities for revitalizing the place of the personal and the heart in our academic work” (Leggo, 2007, p. 192). I do not want to leave my creative writing self at home while I write in a formal academic register; I do not want my professional life to be disconnected from my personal one; and I do not want to present one version of myself for public consumption and a substantially different one in private. Perhaps people whose identities are already sufficiently
integrated, or people who do not feel as much disparity between the selves that the wider social world deems im/palatable, or that were expected of them in their families, will find it difficult to grasp why this is so important, or at least why it is appropriate in academic research. My reasons, I think, are relatively simple. In choosing to write this thesis in a voice that is simultaneously personal, creative and academic, I have two key intentions.

First, I see it as an act of resistance to the externally-imposed norms that perpetually seek to dictate, typically subtly and insidiously, who and how we are to be in the world. Many of those norms are inherently interested in maintaining the status quo, particularly in terms of power structures like the ones that keep academic writing elite and inaccessible to a great many people. It is my hope that the personal and creative flavour will serve to make this work accessible and relevant to a wider, more diverse audience. If, in the words of a truly freedom-fighting educator, “schools need to be remythologized as places of carnival and extravagance and revelry where people with different voices learn to speak and sing and listen together” (Leggo, 1995, p. 7), then education should encourage writing that is emancipated from oppressive conventions.

Second, I offer it as an invitation; if even one other person feels called into a space of greater authenticity, creativity, or openness as an in/direct result of this work, then I will consider it a success. I believe too many of us live fragmented and disconnected, both from ourselves and from others, and that we do so in part because there are not enough safe spaces that will accept and
embrace us, in all our flawed, work-in-progress, diverse entirety. And so I wonder, is it possible for a thesis to be a safe space?

1.2 Narrative and Language

In this study, I am working with narratives that reflect on, offer particular understandings of, and fundamentally shape both my relationship with Chinese and my identity as a Caucasian speaker of Chinese. I understand narrative much the way Eakin (2008) does, as “not merely something we tell, listen to, read, or invent; [but as] an essential part of our sense of who we are” (p. ix). It is how we create, relate, obliterate and reiterate our identities. It is how we understand ourselves and our histories, because what of any experience do we really have if not the story we tell about it once the moment is gone?

The identity-shaping power of narrative seems that much more salient when the content of the narrative is language. Language, from a Vygotskian sociocultural perspective, is the primary symbolic tool that humans use to mediate their environment and their learning (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Moreover, in the Sapir-Whorf theory of linguistic relativism, language is not simply the way we are able to communicate our thoughts, it plays a critical role in determining what those thoughts are. For example, Chinese makes extensive use of measure words (MW) – words like ‘flock’ in ‘a flock of birds’ or ‘herd’ in ‘a herd of cows’. Unlike English where comparable words are only used occasionally, Chinese requires MWs before all nouns, for example ‘a MW pen’, and ‘a MW person’. Measure words are often connected to the shape of an object, for example thin, flat objects such as a piece of paper or a photograph share a
Does this linguistic structure cause a Chinese speaker to pay more attention to shapes than an English speaker? What effect does paying more attention to shapes have on the way a person relates to their physical world? Or for a more abstract example, if you grew up speaking a language that did not have different words for ‘think’ and ‘feel’, would you experience the confusion about whether to listen to your heart or your head that is so common to English speakers? Based on this dialogic and interdependent understanding of the roles language and narrative in human thought and behaviour, a story about learning another language is not just about discovering a different set of sounds to express an essentially consistent sense of self or view of the world. Rather, as language socialization theory asserts, it is about fundamentally re-shaping one’s sense of self, way of understanding life, and experience of being in the world.

Bruner (2004) speaks to the heart of the matter when he says that “the mimesis between life so-called and narrative is a two way affair….Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative” (p 692). In this conceptualization, the distinction between processes (i.e. living, learning) and products (life, that which has been learned) blurs beyond clarity; praxis, as the embodiment of something abstract, is the axis on which learning, and living, continuously turn. It is never static. Written narrative is like a still image extracted from the continuously moving picture of our lives. As such it provides a unique opportunity, like a little blown glass window into the psyche, to see what results from our minds’ narrative work.
1.2.1. Narrative One: Language Memoir

Narrative One in this thesis is in the form of a language memoir, and out of the three narratives, presents the most individualized perspective on CAL learning. I, Ella Lester the graduate student, am the “I” in the story, more or less. I say more or less because although all three narratives are autobiographical, they are also works of creative non-fiction. This means they are both directly connected to (my) lived experience, and also written with a liberal amount of creative license. That creative license is an instrumental piece in the (narrative) identity puzzle. It is the wiggle room that allows a person to try out a (slightly) modified, reframed, or downright altered version of the story - one that might be a better fit, and move them in a direction they want to go, or in a direction they need to grow. If stories feed our cognitive need for things to make sense, to be connected, and to explain experience, then it is creative license that can feed our psychological need to outgrow the dangling plots and tragedies in our stories.

Out of the three narratives in this study, the autobiographical nature of Narrative One is perhaps the most obvious. It is a language memoir, written in the first person, and it chronologically describes my life in Taiwan. I have expressly and explicitly embedded my self in the words of the story. I mix English and Chinese as a conscious act of surrender to, and acceptance of, the linguistic ‘other’ that I have been cultivating, misunderstanding, and harbouring within my dominant English-speaking self for a full decade now. I incorporate the subcultures of poetry and journal entries into the mainstream prose of the
story, as a way to blur the boundaries between traditional literary genres that is also simultaneously a blurring of the boundaries between identities like poet, CAL student, and woman. And I have written in the present-tense as an effort to make the timbre of the story’s autobiographical “I” voice that much more immediate.

The subject of all three narratives in this study is learning CAL, but I focus on that subject through a different lens for each. Narrative One uses a macro lens.¹ It zooms in for an intimate close-up of myself as a specific individual – a woman - at a specific time in my life, with specific goals and fears and habits and memories, who is learning Chinese. I intentionally leak the rest of my life into my language learning, because a (language) student is also always a person who is shaped by race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, ability and individual history (Norton, 2000; Ogulnick, 1998a; Polanyi, 1995). Yet I also keep the central focus on language study, a genre of writing Pavlenko (2007) calls ‘linguistic autobiography’, and describe my Chinese classes, textbooks, teachers, classmates, study habits, and language-in-use opportunities in considerable detail.

1.2.2. Narrative Two: Reader’s Theatre

Narrative Two is like a communal version of Narrative One. It is an exercise in trying to see what others see, and in opening to the possibility of different interpretations of similar experiences. It is an attempt to become aware

¹ Macro in a photographic sense.
of how one interpretation is situated in relation to possible others. As an example of the psyche’s narrative work, Narrative Two is a story of social connection and social comparison. It is written as a conversation between five people, narrated by a sixth, and takes the form of a reader’s theatre script (a script where the focus is on reading, as opposed to performing, the text). It summarizes and re-presents the stories of four unique students of CAL, highlights an interaction with one of their Chinese teachers, and is framed by commentary from a deliberately self-reflexive narrator.

Narrative Two is autobiographical in three ways. Firstly, I have written myself in - with considerable creative license - as the narrator of the script. This mirrors the role of interviewer in a research context, and narrator of THE STORY OF MY LIFE in a personal one. Secondly, in writing this script I have drawn on my lived experience, specifically and most notably my experiences talking with various members of my CAL community in Taipei. No doubt the ongoing discussions among CRCLLE research group members on similar topics also informed how the script emerged. Pavlenko (2007) argues that “the stories we tell are never fully our own – they are co-constructed for us and with us by our interlocutors, real or imagined, by the time and place in history in which the events portrayed have taken place and the time and place in which they are told, by the language we choose for the telling, and by the cultural conventions of the speech community in which the narrative is located” (p. 180). In writing Narrative Two as an autobiographical reader’s theatre script, I am making the co-constructed nature of autobiography overt and playful. Thirdly, the
characters, just like the real-life counterparts upon which they are based, and just like me, are all white, native-English speaking Westerners. Although people from diverse backgrounds, and with many different ties to Chinese, can be found studying language in Taiwan, I intentionally sought out people with whom I shared strong cultural and linguistic similarities. Much like Ilnyckyj’s (2010) study, where her personal CAL experience inspired her to recruit participants with backgrounds similar to her own, I too hoped to learn something from others’ stories that could not be too easily dismissed as stemming from major cultural differences. In a broader autobiographical sense, therefore, Narrative Two is a small collection of intertextual stories that a certain internationally-minded subculture and particular culturally-adventurous generation are telling, both to and about itself.

Narrative Two focuses on CAL with a wide angle lens. The setting is still quite intimate – if Narrative One occurs in a bedroom during the middle of the week, Narrative Two has moved only as far as the living room on a Saturday night - but the subject has been stretched through a different, group perspective. The stories both support and skew one another, speak to and silence each other. The characters’ experiences learning CAL and the role of Chinese in their lives are the explicit topics of the conversation. The specific, nuanced factors that sparked their interest in Chinese initially, or at least made learning Chinese a real option for each character, are foregrounded.
1.2.3. Narrative Three: Bricolage

Narratives are not only created in words. They can be artistic, musical, numerical and/or multimodal. The look in your eye contains narrative, as does the scar on your friend’s body, the hole in the ozone layer, and the meat in your freezer. If “the world told is a different world to the world shown” (Kress, 2003, p. 1), then as images, how do these narratives differ from text-based ones? When creating visual narratives, how do we select what (images) to focus on, zoom into, or discard? What does a visual narrative communicate that a text-based narrative does not? How does the mode of representation shape the story that is told? How can different modes of narrative complement and detract from each other?

Narrative Three is a visual narrative. It tells a story with images and words that have been chosen and organized in a particular way. To extend the previous metaphor, the group of friends that sat in a living room conversing in Narrative Two have now gone out clubbing in Narrative Three. They are engaging more explicitly in the wider social world, and it is a multi-sensory engagement. Where Narrative One is the most individual, Narrative Two is the most communal, and Narrative Three is the most societal; yet all three narratives are also simultaneously individual, communal and societal.

Bach (2007) defines visual narrative inquiry as “an intentional, reflective, active human process in which researchers and participants explore and make meaning of experience both visually and narratively” (p. 281). For me, the ‘intentional’, ‘reflective’ and ‘active’ parts of that process call attention to the
never-ending need to select materials for inclusion from the infinity of possible options. Every decision to include an image or a phrase is at once a ‘not choosing’ of a myriad of other possibilities. It is with respect to this selection process that I am compelled to call this visual narrative a bricolage. Bricolage is a French word which means ‘that which is created out of whatever is available’; it is connected to the word bricoleur, a person who gets the job done using the tools on hand. So, embedded in the idea of bricolage is recognition of an intrinsically creative process – that of being resourceful in accomplishing a task, and making that which can be found work. Therefore using the name bricolage is intended to emphasize the selective nature of visual narrative, and the piecing together of different forms - text and image - into a cohesive whole.

Of course all narrative, whether based primarily on images or words or another medium altogether, is a function of a creative process of selection and omission. I have chosen to use Narrative Three, the visual narrative, to highlight the selective nature of narrative because it strikes me as more transparent there. Perhaps this is because of the sudden, visceral impact with which we experience images, or perhaps it is because bricolage is a new form of narrative exploration for me (whereas I have been writing text-based stories for many years), or perhaps it is because of the pleasing way it echoes the societal-level focus of Narrative Three. The images in the bricolage all exist ‘out there’, in the collective social realm where anyone with internet can access and be influenced by them. Which images are chosen, especially in the context of an
autobiographical inquiry, has something significant to say about how an individual, I in particular, perceives the world.

“Autobiography is not simply a matter of representing one’s life….but rather a matter of discerning the multiple sources – firsthand and secondhand, personal and extrapersonal, near and far – that give rise to the self” (Freeman, 2007, p. 139). Narrative Three is an autobiographical exercise in actively noticing the secondhand sources that have shaped my relationship with learning Chinese. It is an attempt to give non-linguistic influences space in a text-dominant culture, and it reflects the dialectical nature of my relationship with society. Of all the messages related to learning Chinese that exist out there, which have I been receptive to? How has my sense of self been shaped by the broader images in society, images and ideas about white people who speak Chinese? What stories have I understood about the challenges and opportunities I would face as a Westerner learning Chinese? By working with images I have sought to further open myself to discoveries that may be latent, or even absent, in my text-based understandings.

Narrative Three uses a telephoto lens to capture a particular image of CAL. It draws on that paradoxically surreal yet ubiquitous source of information: the internet. It collects together the messages from those sources that seem furthest away from us - news reports, the websites of universities and government organizations, strangers’ blogs, and advertisements for CAL instruction available on craigslist, online learning sites, or through iPhone apps and podcasts - to piece together a view of Chinese that is invariably linked,
sometimes obviously and sometimes covertly, to the global political and
economic climate of the post-modern era. Ilnyckyj (2010) has highlighted that
the mass media has been “predict[ing] the coming dominance of China with a
mixture of panic, disbelief, and awe” (p. 1). She also acknowledges the widely-
held belief that “knowledge of Chinese is a guarantee of future employment” (p.
6). The way that these nebulous ideas coalesce into a sturdy trend of people
rushing to sign up for Chinese lessons is not something that happens only
individually or collectively. It happens in both ways at the same time. This
personal-societal mirroring is also how a collection of image-texts from the
internet is simultaneously my story of learning Chinese.

1.3 Discussion

The final chapter in this study is where I attempt to unpack the narratives,
digging through the layers of stories in order to more clearly see the personal,
cultural, social, and political forces that shape them. I particularly focus on
agency, and explore how race and gender (two factors out of many) affect it,
and how agency in turn affects narrative. In addition to subheadings, I use five
stages taken from Joseph Campbell’s narrative arc (Ground, Call, Departure,
Encounters (along the journey), and Return) to give structure and direction to the
ideas, framing the discussion as a classic journey. I use a gloss to complement
this, adding short summary-like statements in the margins to explain what is
going on in the body of the text, and highlight our current location in the journey.
1.4 Research Approach

1.4.1 Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Research is a process of discovery (Estrella, 2007). If there truly is any consensus when it comes to perspectives about research, that is probably where it ends. What is being discovered, how it can be discovered, and how we can know what we’ve discovered are issues that scholars and philosophers have debated for centuries. One approach that can be taken, the approach I’ve taken here, is hermeneutic phenomenology, which is primarily concerned with how people make meaning of their lived experience. This tradition sees “an indissoluble unity between a person and the world. Meaning is found as we are constructed by the world while at the same time we are constructing this world from our own background and experiences. There is a transaction between the individual and the world as they constitute and are constituted by each other” (Laverty, 2003, p. 8). This dialectic relationship echoes the understanding of narrative, informed by scholars like Eakin and Bruner, that I presented in section 1.2. Indeed, hermeneutic phenomenology and narrative inquiry frequently operate in tandem.

This study uses hermeneutic phenomenology in the way that Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer (1976) have, namely as part of the interpretivist paradigm that suggests there are “multiple realities that are constructed and can be altered by the knower” (Laverty, 2003, p. 13). The very structure of this research - using three narratives, all of them autobiographical - is a testament to this
perspective. Hermeneutic phenomenology also lends itself to arts-informed modes of inquiry, such as the creative non-fiction narratives I use here.

1.4.2 Arts-informed Research

According to Sousa (2008), “we have never discovered a culture on this planet, past or present, that doesn’t have art” (p. 331). In his chapter on the brain and the arts, Sousa argues that the arts are basic to the human experience and that they play a vital role in supporting, informing and even driving scientific innovations forward. I see a parallel with social science and education research, namely great potential for the arts to similarly support, inform and drive this research to new levels of innovation. Freeman (2007) suggests that narrative inquiry in general, and autobiographical narrative inquiry in particular, “might lessen the distance between science and art and thereby open the way toward a more integrated, adequate, and humane vision for studying the human realm” (p. 120).

This study is arts-informed in the sense that it uses creative non-fiction narratives, an art form, as both its primary tool of inquiry and method of representation. It leans on the methodological approaches used in a/r/tography, where “concepts of contiguity, living inquiry, openings, metaphor/metonymy, reverberations, and excess” provide a way in to the research process (Sinner et al., 2006, p. 1224). It also values the “intuitive leap[s]” that researchers/artists make as they navigate the many decisions required at every stage of the research process (Meek, 2003).
Using the arts to inform the research process is a powerful way to open to new discoveries. By facilitating access to knowledge that may be otherwise hidden or inaccessible, it allows research to “explore the marginalized, controversial and disruptive perspectives that have often been lost in more traditional research” (Estrella, 2007, p. 377). By artfully playing with how we understand the world, it can propel us toward a more integrated epistemology, and nudge forward a reconciliation between our desire to capture a definitive understanding of something, and the non-negotiable impermanence of everything. Hedy Bach, a visual narrative inquirer eloquently presents this situation when she says,

I recognize that nothing in life is any more permanent or secure than on ocean wave. I am always riding the crest of a wave. To try to hold on to anything is to pursue an impossible illusion of security. When I accept the truth of this impermanence, I realize that all boundaries are human constructs imposed on the unpredictable, and therefore uncontrollable, process of reality (Bach, 2007, p. 281)

Choosing an arts-informed research approach also provides tacit support for the focus on integration that I discussed in Section 1.1.4. Because arts-informed research is intrinsically concerned with crossing conventional boundaries and creating new definitions of what it encounters, it is inevitably also a work of integration. Even the stage of deconstruction is part of the process of eventual integration. Therefore, the personal work I’m doing on
developing an integrated identity finds an arts-informed research approach intrinsically comfortable and appropriate.

1.4.3 Intentions, Scope, and Limitations

There are two main intentions for this study: 1) to make meaning of my lived experience studying Chinese, and 2) to increase awareness of the processes by which I make meaning out of lived experience. With such broad, multi-dimensional goals, it is impossible to have neat, distinct boundaries describing exactly what falls within the realm of the study and what lies outside. As previously mentioned, I studied Chinese for over nine years before the six month sojourn in Taiwan that is the primary focus for this study. Naturally, my relationship with Chinese in Taiwan was greatly influenced by that history, and as such is evident in the narratives I’ve created. This is particularly true for Narrative Three, which uses images that are connected in various ways to mainland China, and not only Taiwan. Because I am more interested in composing stories “as creative ways of growing in humanness” (Leggo, 2005, p. 115), than I am in ensuring my stories conform to neat categories, I am comfortable with this unrestricted content.

It should be clear from this introductory chapter, but I would also like to explicitly state what this study is not. It is not a traditional science or social science thesis with the conventional literature review, methodology, and findings chapters. It is not a study of additional language acquisition that claims to measure linguistic proficiency gains in a study abroad context, and it is not even
a narrative study that uses thematic analysis to examine the topic under consideration.

All research has limitations, and this study is no exception. One of the main criticisms of narrative inquiry is that researchers fail to “focus on the social and cultural context[s] in which such tales are told” (Atkinson, 2006, p. 165); autobiographical narrative in particular runs the risk of being narcissistic and lacking relevance to others. I explain how I have tried to address these concerns in the discussion, by using self-exploration as an opportunity to realize our profound interconnectivity, and the rewards and responsibilities that come along with that. I have also tried to “treat narratives as ‘accounts’ and as ‘performances’” (Atkinson, 2006, p. 166), and not blindly confound narrative with life, even while exploring how the two do mutually inform one another.

Another limit of this study relates to language. This research is about identity development in CAL, yet with the exception of a few instances of code-mixing in Narrative One, I am looking at this topic entirely through the lens of English; Chinese language is significantly absent from the work. The main reason for this is the institutional requirements that make using languages other than English and French (Canada’s official languages) difficult to impossible, even in departments where the focus is language education. Given the population of Chinese speakers, not just worldwide but specifically in Vancouver and at this university, I believe these institutional restrictions serve to reinforce the hegemony of English as a language of global power. This is particularly disheartening in an academic context where issues like linguistic inequality and
discrimination are frequently topics of discussion. An effect of this restriction is that, paradoxically, writing a thesis about CAL learning has reinforced my English identity as the one that is actually valued in our Western-culture dominated world.

Finally, I believe I am guilty of the mistake that a great many new researchers make, namely failing to choose a research topic that is a manageable size. In using three different creative non-fiction genres I have only been able to give cursory coverage to each of them. My knowledge of the literature dealing with language memoirs, reader’s theatre, and bricolage - to say nothing of hermeneutic phenomenology and post-structuralism - is inchoate, and as a result I have been unable to do justice to the traditions, knowledge-base, and scholars upon whose shoulders I stand in undertaking this research. Yet even this limitation is an apt parallel for the ever-incomplete, always work-in-progress, and ephemerally-elusive narrative understanding into which this study inquires.
Chapter 2 Narrative One: Language Memoir

A language memoir, also known as a linguistic autobiography, is a narrative that focuses on language, typically a person’s experience of acquiring an additional language. In the past fifty years, language memoirs have become increasingly influential in SLA studies, and are associated with the ‘narrative turn’ that research in the humanities and social sciences (particularly fields like history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, education, and literary studies) has been engaged in (Pavlenko, 2007).

I know of only two other autobiographical studies that have learning Chinese as the subject of inquiry. Bell’s (1997) doctoral dissertation, though not a language memoir per se, does focus on her own experience of beginner-level literacy development in Cantonese, but does not provide very in-depth coverage of issues related to identity. Perhaps this is because of the early stage of language learning the research studies. A more detailed inquiry, and one that does include the language memoirs of five long-time learners of Chinese (myself included), is the longitudinal, multiple case-study entitled Learning Chinese as an additional language (CAL): Negotiating identities, communities, and trajectories (Duff et. al., forthcoming) that I previously mentioned. This work uses narrative inquiry to delve into the overlapping and mutually-influencing issues of identity and community. Other authors who have written autobiographically in English about their experiences living in China often touch upon learning Chinese in their accounts (DeWoskin, 2005; Dunlop, 2008; Fallows, 2010;
Hessler, 2001), however their primary focus is not usually on language. For Dunlop, it is food; she describes in detail her experiences studying culinary arts in Sichuan and becoming a food writer known in the West for her knowledge of Chinese cuisine. Fallows’ book is the most explicitly concerned with language; she weaves together anecdotes about living in China and linguistic commentary on learning Chinese. In fact, all of these memoirs are interesting not mainly because of what they say about language, but because of the way that language learning is so naturally positioned as part of a larger lived context.

Autobiographical memoirs that deal with languages other than Chinese (Hoffman, 1989; Kaplan, 1993; Mori, 1997) also offer accounts of language learning that are richly contextualized against the life stories of these individuals. Memoirs like these have been reviewed by SLA scholars conducting research on many different topics, such as affective factors (Besemer, 2004) and post-structural notions of identity (Norton, 2000). Typically, autobiographical data is seen as advantageous for providing “insights into people’s private worlds,…[and] new connections between various learning processes and phenomena” (Pavlenko, 2007, pp. 164-5). This is precisely what I have attempted to do in writing the following language memoir, entitled The Weight of Ink...learning and loving in Taipei. I wrote it in March 2010 immediately after leaving Taipei; my experiences in Taiwan were still fresh in my mind, I was re-adjusting to life in the West, and shifting my attention from Chinese language learning to this thesis. In keeping with the arts-informed intentions of this study, namely to engage in living inquiry, create openings, and follow intuitive leaps, I
have written the personal and, it may even seem, the tangential, into the story.

As both preface and caveat to the story, the following quote seems apt:

The Hmong have a phrase, *hais cuzj txub kaum txub*, which means “to speak of all kinds of things.” It is often used at the beginning of an oral narrative as a way of reminding listeners that the world is full of things that may not seem to be connected but actually are; that no event occurs in isolation; that you can miss a lot by sticking to the point; and that the storyteller is likely to be rather long-winded.

(Fadiman, 1997, p. 13)
2.1 The Weight of Ink ...learning and loving in Taipei

Term 1: Advanced Colloquial Chinese (in search of pillow-talk)

Taipei is my blank journal. I am being very careful what I write on him.

Yes, him. There is something masculine that I am searching for in Taipei. Some essential yang element that will slide into the exact right spot in my puzzle. It will feel like a magic combination of relief and revelation and rapture. It will quiet my hyper-yin mind. I don’t know this yet.

I find an apartment the second day I am in Taipei. I am urgent to escape the hostel. They lost my reservation. They are dismissive. I am hot and sticky and clearly uncomfortable, yet still there is immediate pressure from an attractive but impatient Nigerian man who has been ‘living’ in Taiwan for many years, but happens to be staying at the hostel, his insistence gently aggressive, his English like a foreign language to me, his knowledge of Taipei useful, his transportation convenient. He says he likes my teeth. He tells me a big smile full of straight white teeth is crucial to the African perception of beauty. Apparently, I don’t have to say anything, just smile. I let him take me for dinner. It is not delicious.

In my rooftop apartment, I scrub and sort, sweep and purge. I am moving into a home no one ever moved out of. A whole family’s worth of things, cupboards and closets full, furniture and trinkets cluttering the big beautiful space I rented mainly because of the embedded treasure of an empty inner room with hardwood floors and sliding rice
paper doors. A meditation room. A yoga room. I saw potential. I often do, and then, only too late, I see the quicksand reality of how much energy it takes to understand and blossom potential. That energy is making my hands soft and pink and wrinkly from three-days’ immersion in wash-water; it has already made my heart look like the hard, cracked surface of a remote desert road, probably in Arizona. Can wetness on the hands seep into a dry heart?

I go out into the maze of lanes outside my apartment and immediately, repeatedly, I am lost. I get a local phone number (in five minutes at 7-11). I buy groceries. I use my words, my mainland Chinese words and my mainland Chinese accent, and I watch intently for confirmation that I am understood. There is no time to learn; the next customer is always on top of me, pressing for service, understanding this city faster and better than I can. More intimately than I can.

I am not inspired to see the sights. I am convinced Taipei 101 is the most boring place in the world. I have specific Chinese goals: to learn traditional Chinese characters, to be able to read Chinese novels, and to create a Chinese-speaking social life. I also have specific personal goals: to spend a lot of conscious time with myself practicing yoga and meditation, to be happy and content being 一个人, and to make great strides on a research project that ingeniously merges my academic, personal and creative selves. I have six months. This might be unrealistic.

\[5\text{ Literally ‘one person’}.\]
\[6\text{ September 2009-February 2010}\]
I approach my life here like it is a choose-your-own-adventure novel. Like I have the wherewithal to create my own adventure. I am determined not to fall into the ready option of the foreign community. I decline almost all social options that occur in English. I make an immediate and totalitarian switch to Chinese, which in reality means that everything takes forever, that almost everything is understood only in a fuzzy, ‘it-probably-means-this’, kind of way. It means that I am chronically cognitively exhausted. It means that eventually, I will go democratic.

Every morning, for a fixed amount of time in between the chimes of my digital meditation bell, I watch my mind. Sometimes I can keep watching it, even after the bell, as I move through days filled with other peoples’ lives. I see their six-days-a-week, 9-9 jobs, their markets, their over-stimulating streets, their friends and families. I see a society built on other peoples’ sense of normalcy. I watch my mind watching all of this, and I feel peripheral, even to myself.

I start Chinese class. I am the only Caucasian in a class of six students studying in one of the intermediate level courses at the university. There are two Japanese women who don’t talk much but who do smile a lot. There is one non-descript Korean guy, one Vietnamese guy who consistently tries to hijack the class into a one-man show called ‘Look how awesome I am’, and one Vietnamese-born Buddhist monk who grew up in Germany. He adds a mature, peaceful tempo to the mix and immediately feels like an ally.
I attend an orientation for new students. I meet other Canadian students, including a man I can talk to about my research interests. I am bursting with anticipation. What might I learn from him? What is his story? What will it illuminate about my own? Taipei feels pregnant with possibility. There are almost three million people here; what delicious subset of them will I meet? Will we be able to bond without being fettered by language? Is it possible to connect, essence to essence, while tacitly relegating phonemes to an irrelevant position? Can I find love here, build it out of the blocks available in this culture? What will intimacy in Chinese feel like?

I see that love is conflated with every other aspect of my life; I can’t study Chinese or build a career or travel to a foreign land without love being my horizon. How lucky that I never seem to lose sight of it.

I daydream about love in Chinese while I study textbooks about Chinese New Year customs, single-parent families, and the Olympics. Riveting stuff. I speak more fluently than my classmates but stumble hard over traditional characters. When I can’t read something I don’t know if I can’t read it because it’s a character I don’t know, or if it’s because I don’t recognize the traditional form. Not knowing common characters like 体 and 还 is humbling, but there is also optimism and excitement and challenge. I feel behind, and driven to catch up. I want to avoid faltering when I read aloud in class, especially with characters everyone else seems to know. I study for

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7 Body
8 Still; also
hours every day after class. I take time to work on my handwriting, notice the art and structure of each new 字, and test all the different ink weights (and colours) of pens until I find the perfect one (0.38, deep plum and spruce green are equally acceptable). I seem to improve quickly, and this satisfies me. I notice my competitiveness.

I am introduced to a woman I can talk to about my research; she is older than me, she is West Coast like me, and she has gone in, to this culture and this language, deeper than me. I am inspired. I absorb every word like I can’t write fast enough, process fast enough, agree fast enough. I go home and do what she has done - sign up for an online dating site in Chinese. I watch my mind get excited as I create a profile with traditional characters; I see the shy presence of satisfaction bloom in my psyche as I present myself in this authentically-Chinese venue. It is safe here behind my wireless walls. I have time to consult dictionaries before replying to an email or chat message.

Electronic ink is weightless. And, I am in a familiar role again - a woman evaluating a man. I have criteria: he must be kind, he must be smart, honest, communicative. He must be a native speaker of Chinese. I decide that ‘his English must be worse than my Chinese’, then we will default to the easiest common language, which will be Chinese, and then I will be closer to succeeding in creating a Chinese-speaking social life. I do not answer English queries. I, and my language learning, are empowered. I fantasize about being exposed to an entirely new genre of language – the vocabulary of romance. I dream of learning pillow-talk.
I try to navigate Taipei’s dating culture, but it is so clear, so quickly, that I don’t know the rules. Why do men with English names like ‘Adonis’ and ‘Horace’ use cheesy little emoticons instead of words? How can I reconfigure my brain to take this seriously, or find it attractive? Why do they all want to chat on MSN? I could be anywhere for that, but I am here in Taipei; why don’t they want to meet? Oh, here is a man, like so many I have met in English, who is able to talk about himself (via MSN of course) for two hours straight before thinking to ask anything about me. And there, a fireman who cannot fathom that I am 33 and still single. He decides I am too old to mother his children. Here is a nice one, gentle, with interests like mine, values like mine, willing to meet, and damn it, foul teeth erupting from an unkissable mouth. I find another who wants to meet, apparently so he could immediately thrust glossy ads for expensive cars across the coffee shop table at me – something I don’t know what to do with in any language. I have one date that is so subtle and indirect I’m not sure if it is actually a date. He calls me once every three weeks for the duration of my stay and we have a few more such non-events. I don’t really understand what, if anything, has happened.

**Journal entry (Oct 8)**

Earlier this week, my landlord Wang and his brother-in-law knocked on my door and asked if I had time to hang out on the weekend. It was a bit odd, but in keeping with my criteria to choose as many Chinese-speaking socializing opportunities as possible, I agreed. The brother-in-law, Liuzhi knocked on my door last night and the
three of us went to dinner. Conversation was comfortable enough. At the restaurant, I read a painting with a calligraphy couplet and understood one of them with almost no help! (one character was too stylized for me to recognize, but it was only 能^9 after all, a character I know well). This was exciting, possibly the first time I've ever been able to do that.

After dinner we went to Daan park and walked around, pausing at an outdoor stage where there were older ladies singing and performing for a breast cancer fundraiser (the music was terrible to my ears). Wang left to go smoke and Liuzhi started asking me some rather interesting questions, like what I thought of the way the female characters in Sex and the City were portrayed, which got us talking about sexual stereotypes, discrimination etc. The three of us walked most of the way back, and then suddenly Wang had to go do something, leaving Liuzhi to walk me home. It wasn't until that point that I felt more sure that this was some sort of version of a Taiwanese date, where the risk of rejection is shared by having both of them come and ask me to hang out, and only when things were comfortable enough did Wang leave Liuzhi alone with me. I assume Liuzhi may be interested in me, but in what capacity is unclear. We ended up talking on my balcony until about 11:30 (that

^9 To be able to
means, a good 5 hours of speaking Chinese), about surprisingly personal things - philosophies on life, love, marriage, filial piety etc. Very often after I expressed my viewpoint Liuzhi would give me the thumbs up and say something like 'good'. I found this surprising because I was expressing some fairly liberal alternative views, by both Western and Eastern standards, so I wasn't totally expecting him to be so supportive, but it did feel genuine. Anyways, my main point here (ha! have I adopted a traditional Chinese style of writing where I don't get to the point until the very end?!), is that he asked me about my past relationships, and when I talked briefly about X, it felt just as emotionally-charged as when I talk about X in English. Liuzhi noticed it too, and asked me if I was going to cry. I was actually quite far from crying, but I was feeling emotional about it. And then Liuzhi said something that shocked me, in reference to my disclosure of something I had done at the time. He said '你這個行為就表達你在那時候還是孩子，還是小朋友' or something approximating this, but he definitely called me a child because of what they share with you.

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10 Your behaviour shows that you were still a child then, 'a little friend' ('little friend' is the Chinese equivalent for 'child').
11 Child (little friend).
is a bit hard to take. Of course, things that are hard to take are often so because they are true, but still…

Anyway, feeling emotional while speaking Chinese is so different from how it used to be (the detachment from my primary English self I wrote about in my first narrative. It really seems like the Chinese-speaking me and the English-speaking me have come to terms with one another. Speaking terms I guess. Convergence is happening, and I am stoked to be witnessing it.

Dating makes me lonelier. I am in the library, the dumpling shop down the street, the 7-11 cappuccino factory, the yoga studio; I am online. I am everywhere, alone (or beside someone I’m not connecting with, which is even worse). I feel a deep longing for connection, for touch, and for a day-to-day flowing together with others. I feel like I am an entire, uninhabited island, probably smack in the middle of the Pacific, like Hawai‘i, with nothing around for ages. There is only a two-week supply of food in Hawai‘i, so everybody knows if the boats stop coming, there is not much time. How long is my island self-sufficient? I wake and study and sleep to my own silent, private rhythm; every weekday I attend 2 hours of class, the rest of the time is self-structured – 3 hours for additional Chinese study, 2 hours for yoga and meditation, time for meals, for writing and reflecting, for acclimatizing to Taipei. It is all very solitary. I am not focused on Chinese. I am preoccupied with the hunger of my skin. I lack a salve. I find no solace in the bleeding of this perfect weight of ink, column by column, down the pages where I repeatedly write out new characters.
There is nothing warm or tactile about the recorded voice that reads the lesson aloud, in standard, robotic Mandarin. There is no essence-to-essence connecting on MSN. Yet I am getting addicted to Skype, my gateway to English-language comforts and friends and flirtations. I am aware of hypocrisy in this.

**Journal entry (Oct 24)**

I have a pain in my chest cavity, on the left side. My left shoulder blade, whatever it connects to in the front of my body, all the way up to my throat, the whole piece is like a chunk of wrongness. Heavy, crunchy, dense, restrictive. I think it is what loneliness feels like if you observe hard enough. I notice myself hungry for contact. Hungry for company and touch and heart communing and intellectual connecting. It is an English hunger.

**Woman-island**

Poetry
for dinner again
A stanza of sunchokes, metaphoric mushrooms, the repetition of rice – a simple vegetarian poem, but it is not love at first bite. Not.

I choke on each bitter word, long to crush them under tooth, chew every letter beyond legibility, spit the salivating mass out onto this taunting page.

Perhaps
I will even press it like a flower in a book, wait the long hungry days on this woman-island that I am, until it is dead dry.
Meditation on Solitude

In solitude there is so much more to notice: the elasticity of a moment, a thought, a breath. The texture of absence, of the hard-for-your-own-good floor beneath aging sitting bones, of love.

In solitude there is so much less to blame: the leftovers of an experience, a housemate, a narrative. The durability of desire, of the unrequited recycling of a memory, of fear.

In solitude there is so much opportunity-to dive beneath the tick-tocking surface of myself, to surf a capricious heart, to lick the cold wounds of lust, to fumble with the belt buckle of equanimity, to surrender the clothing of illusion, to rest in the hammock of awareness, to sway to the lilt of the universe, and to smell that curious fragrance of a mind blossoming.

Back to the mat. These sorts of dismal emotions are exactly what prompted my personal goal to develop a regular, effective yoga and meditation practice. To be happy existing within the boundary of my skin, in that quintessentially solitary space. I download more meditation bells, timed for 15, 20, 30, 45 and 60 minutes. I no longer have an excuse to open my eyes and peek at the clock, no excuse to resurface before that steady little bell releases me. Sit with it. Sit with all the doubting, questioning, spinning thoughts, especially that big, layered-like-a-Russian-doll one:

- What am I doing with my life?
- What will result from doing it?
- Is it the right thing?
- Am I doing it well?
- Does it make me happy?

…and the big, 30-something-woman, mostly-taboo one:
‘Where is my partner already, (especially when my body is so ripe…)?’

Watch all my thoughts dance on by, watch them come and watch them go, like clouds in a sky. Remember that the sky that doesn’t get its knickers in a knot if clouds are there. Experience fleeting moments of bliss.

I also try language exchange as an avenue to meet people (and for language too, of course). I use a website that lets you search by criteria, so I pick only men in a romantically desirable age range. I contact every one of them listed, all seven the day I browsed, and arrange meetings, one per day for a week.

There is one who talks while eating disgusting (Western) things like hot dogs on white bread slathered in mustard and mayonnaise. Mayonnaise dribbles and spurts and occasionally mustard does too, but he never stops talking, even to lick or wipe it away. I focus intently on suppressing my gag reflex. He also has terrible breath. Even his relatively thorough and insightful explanations of Chinese cannot hope to compensate.

There is another whose entire body could fit into half of mine. He wears a suit and talks of engineering and buys my coffee (because there is a two-for-one special, he explains). One is a lawyer, one a politician, one a government worker. I am bored, bored, bored. Where are the artists? Thinkers? Hippies? Then I meet Joel, an ex-reporter turned entrepreneur who is straightforward and kind. He is wholly invested in the website he created as a learning tool for students of Chinese language, and he is a bit stressed about it. Understandably so. Well, there is potential for a working
partnership anyway, and friendship. This is refreshing. We start meeting twice a week. I give up on other language exchanges.

Journal entry (Nov 6)

I am running into a certain dilemma. I enjoy talking to all these Taiwanese men I've been in touch with, for the language practice and for the exposure to culturally different viewpoints, but so far I haven't met anyone special. I don't feel any ethical concerns about meeting with them once or twice, to get to know them a little and figure out whether I'm interested or not, but it doesn't feel ok to keep hanging out with them for language if I'm not interested in a more holistic way. At the same time, I notice myself feeling more and more smitten with American CM, who I've re-connected with so randomly (thank you facebook, I'm sorry to say) and easily, so naturally. He doesn't speak Chinese, and is not even in Taiwan. I can't help but notice the irony that even when consciously opening myself up to connecting romantically with Taiwanese men, it is not happening. And the flip side, despite trying to be closed to dating an English speaker, it feels like it's starting to happen anyway. Did I mention CM bought his ticket? He is coming to Taiwan to travel with me in three weeks! Despite my criteria, something deep is stirring.
I spend the weekend the same as I spend the week – get out of my hard, single bed, arrange my sit bones on the wooden floor, move my body through the same set of yoga asanas that I did the day before, eat, study Chinese, flounder for connection. I am urgently wakened in the middle of the night by brackish creativity. I spend the wrong hours being alert, writing, thinking, channeling a collection of (English) words from I-don’t-know-where into a Microsoft Word, black-text-on-a-glowing-screen reality. I’m not convinced the words prefer their new home, but I ask them to stay at least until morning. I go back to bed, noticing my inconsistent sleep cycle and suspicious of its significance.

Chinese class is not the soul-nourishing, mind-blowing, heart-opening experience I think education should be. The instructor is a middle-aged woman who frequently seems to be giving the answer to some question, but a different one, never the one I ask. I think she has an inflexible brain. I realize that mine probably is too. I try to study harder, study my mind beyond this inflexibility, transcend the rigidity of my culture, and of my values. But it’s like my brain is consistently looking for something that isn’t supplied, namely a clear, simple answer first, which may or may not be followed by additional contextual information. Yet Chinese teachers, my current one no exception, almost invariably first provide an incredible amount of information that seems to me to be peripheral, supporting, or background. It’s interesting enough but I’m unable to adequately process it because I still don’t know what we’re talking about. It’s like the house isn’t even framed and someone wants me to put up drywall. When I finally get the basic point that I needed up front I wish I could hear all those details again, because I know they were noteworthy and guess that they would make more
sense now. Yes, I must be quite mentally inflexible if I am aware of this different approach to information organization but still can’t get used to it. I feel like I'm constantly one step behind.

I frequently interrupt and ask questions, hoping the teacher will take this rather blunt hint and revise her explanations or her pace. She doesn’t. During the break I ask the other students if my questions are disruptive to them, holding the level of the class back, or just plain annoying. The cute Japanese girl says no, thanks so much for asking, because I don't know all that stuff either but I 不敢問\textsuperscript{12}. I don’t know what she really thinks, but I do find her extraordinarily cute.

I memorize sentences like 女性爬山的時候最怕的是曬太陽\textsuperscript{15}, and notice the eye-rolling flavour that string of words leaves in my mouth. I dutifully study for class, achieve high scores on weekly dictation and bi-weekly chapter tests. I try to initiate discussions on the sexist content of the textbook, like the chapter where a woman gets her purse stolen while traveling and turns into a helpless, hysterical creature who is only calmed once she is taken care of by Mr. Zhang, a man who escorts her to the embassy and arranges for her to rejoin the tour group. It doesn’t fly. There is awkward silence, people avoid eye contact at all costs, and the teacher smiles nervously. I withdraw, and instead offer my critique to my journal. I write with heavier ink.

\textsuperscript{12} Don’t dare to ask

\textsuperscript{15} When hiking, women are most afraid of getting too much sun.
I buy books to compensate for the limp content in my textbooks. I read my first novel in Chinese, an American novel in translation, slowly. There is vocabulary I don’t know to be sure, but there is this most rewarding absence of cultural confusion. What the characters do makes sense to me, I have a visual on the context of the Midwest state in my mind’s eye (even though I’ve never been there), and I know when I don’t understand something why I don’t understand it - language. Not once do I read through all the possible definitions for an unfamiliar word in the dictionary and find none that could possibly make sense. I tell myself this book is a stepping stone (to modern Taiwanese literature, and then to ancient Chinese literature). It may be a skeleton of Chinese language only, not the flesh and blood of its culture too, but it is a full-length novel in Chinese, and I read it cover to cover.

I discover a bilingual copy of Leonard Cohen’s *Book of Longing*. One side of the page has the original English text, the other side a Chinese translation. I find this unreasonably exciting. Len writes of loneliness and meditation too; he writes in a soul-exposed, I-am-an-inukshuk-on-the-side-of-a-cliff-in-a-storm kind of way that I totally get.

The first semester is almost over. I struggle to stay engaged. CM will be here soon. We are already confessing romance, even across the Pacific. I am excited and nervous and hungry with anticipation. I retire my online dating profile. I have surrendered part of my vision, my Chinese social life will not include a romantic partner, at least not now. There is a hard conversation with home. People have been in hospitals, emotions are
acute, minds are fragile. I am still here; I still feel isolated. I also realize I don't know how the hell to write a thesis.

**Journal entry (Nov 18)**

It is feeling clearer to me that my time here in Taipei will be a 6 month sojourn. Not more. Initially I thought that maybe I would like it enough to want to stay, and I do think the possibility of future PhD studies at a Taiwanese University exists, but love and community are much stronger motivating factors for me than career is. Much stronger. I feel myself willing, again, to engage wildly in love - practicing it, making it, reveling in it. Wherever I need to be to do that, I think that's where I'll be.

**Term Break (Taipei to tongue-tied)**

I pick CM up from the airport and bring him directly beyond the boundary of my skin. At first we don't eat, we don't sleep. We barely breathe. There is an instant, deep recognition of one another, as if Hafiz wrote this line for us: ‘Your heart and my heart // Are very, very old // Friends’. I wonder how much of what we recognize sprouts from a familiar seed-culture, or hangs on the common linguistic scaffold that frames our ways of being in the world. This is the essence-to-essence connecting I was looking

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14 From the poem “YOUR MOTHER AND MY MOTHER”, translation by Daniel Ladinsky
for, and we do bypass language, but it is English we bypass. I am too happy to wonder too hard.

We travel down the east coast of Taiwan, stopping first in the port city of Taidong and impulsively taking a nauseating boat trip to Orchid Island, before continuing on to Zhiben hot springs, further down to Kending, and then back up, swinging into Jiaoxi for more hot springs relaxation before returning to Taipei. None of this matters; the real trip is in the distance between two people.

I speak all the Chinese for us, and love it. I negotiate the international driving license bureaucracy at the Motor Vehicle Office in Taipei; I fail to convince any car rental agencies in Taidong to rent to us despite being certain we fulfill all the requirements they told us about in Taipei; I explain our pickle to the kind front desk employee at our hotel whose intervention in the form of supplying her local ID to the car company is the only reason our trip continues somewhat as planned; I talk with betel nut chewing taxi drivers whose teeth have been replaced by oozing red detritus; for the first time ever I notice myself doing real-time interpretation (however poorly), producing grammatically and semantically amusing sentences like “The tea relies on the insect-saliva at a specific time for the fermentation to cultivate the unique flavour”, while sipping 華方美人\textsuperscript{15} tea. I sometimes forget what language I’m speaking and turn to CM with lengthy Chinese interpretations of English conversations. I’m not sure why he doesn’t stop me.

\textsuperscript{15} Oriental beauty tea
We return to Taipei and are not exactly well-rested. We hide in an English-speaking cocoon and recover from the intensity of travel, and from the intensity of zero to a hundred intimacy. CM stays as long as he can be away from his business in Hawai‘i, and then time has corralled us and we are at the airport, crying and clinging and tongue-tied, and terribly reluctant to accept the girth of the Pacific Ocean that will separate us.

**Term 2: Poetry & Calligraphy (tea & community)**

No one thought it would happen, but the introductory class on Tang 詩 and Song 詞¹⁶ is going to run. We are six students, the minimum needed. 黃老師¹⁷ is a fiery, candid, artistic woman. She wears an orange leather jacket, bright pink lipstick and teaches us

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¹⁶ Distinct literary genres that are inadequately expressed by the English word ‘poetry’
¹⁷ Teacher Huang
alternative definitions for words, like using ‘爽’ to mean ‘the sounds made (by a woman) during sex’. She treats us like adults, uses the same material she uses to teach Taiwanese students of literature at a local university (only much, much less of it), and requires us to memorize poetry just like local students in grade school have to. I feel bolstered. I am not being treated ‘like a foreigner’, ‘like I won’t understand’ or ‘like there is no point because I don’t have the right 文化背景\textsuperscript{18}. Well actually I probably still am, just much much less than usual. And this is a shift that makes all the difference. 陳老師 is the best Chinese teacher I’ve ever had.

The monk from last term is in my class. There is a 華裔\textsuperscript{19} American woman I knew superficially from a meditation community I had attempted to participate in before deciding it was too cultish and patriarchal. There is a kind French man with all-but-unintelligible spoken Chinese, though he clearly fits the written level we are working with. There is a bright young European woman, Lana, who has just been studying modern Chinese poetry at Oxford. I take an instant liking to her eccentricity and academic bent. And there is an abrasive middle-aged Caucasian woman who grew up mainly in Hong Kong who, in addition to Cantonese, has linguistic and cultural ties to Macau/Portuguese and Hawai’i/American English.

\textsuperscript{18} Cultural background
\textsuperscript{19} Overseas Chinese
We start with 李白\(^{20}\), learning about his liquid inspiration along with his immortal fame as a poet. We memorize 静夜思\(^{21}\), recite it together as a class, watch animated versions of it being presented by cartoons dubbed with the voices of children and old men. We even listen to sung versions from the internet while 黄老师\(^{22}\) unabashedly sings along. I am still unable to appreciate most Chinese music, but I find my heart warming to the experience of this diverse group of adult students, all savouring the unique confluence of cartoon/song/classical Chinese poetry in a small classroom with no heat. This is not an experience everyone is likely to have, yet I get to have it over and over again for an entire semester. I feel lucky.

In addition to 李白, we read poems by 杜甫, 王維, 王之涣, 孟浩然, 张繼, 王勃, 白居易, 崔頌, 李商隱, 孟郊, 辛棄疾, 蘇軾, 李清照, and 李煜\(^{23}\) – 15 poets all in all. One might think studying classical poetry would not be the most sensible language learning choice. But for Chinese, it is surprisingly practical. Classical poetry is alive in modern Chinese cultures and languages in a way that I doubt could be true of Western poetry. When people hear that I speak Chinese, they often show me a scroll or a vase, or like yesterday, a calligraphy brush etched with tiny grass-script characters, and ask me what it says. I can rarely answer. In addition to the illegible stylized writing, the content more often than not is written in classical Chinese, and not infrequently in poetry. It is always a small embarrassment that I can’t read it, even though I know

\(^{20}\) Li Bai, a famous poet
\(^{21}\) Title of (one of) the most famous Chinese poems: Thoughts on a Still Night
\(^{22}\) Teacher Huang
most non Chinese-speakers do not fathom the vast gap between modern, typed Chinese and painted, classical calligraphy. Still, I do secretly hope I am en route to changing this form of illiteracy. Perhaps one day something will be thrust into my hands and I will glance at it casually and say,

"Oh yes, that’s a famous 五言律詩 poem by 杜甫 about the parallel tragedies of experiencing the devastation of the An Shi Rebellion of the mid 8th century, and the poet’s own personal misfortunes of failing the imperial exams and therefore living a lonely, vagabond life of poverty and illness, all of which he metaphorically embodies by the contrasting images of overgrown vegetation in a decimated city, and his own thinning white hair, which was becoming so sparse that he could no longer fix a “笄”- the traditional hairpin men wore during the Tang Dynasty - into it. See, here is a笄, I happen to be wearing one now...

Sure, that’s what I’ll say.

Well, I do manage to memorize each poem for long enough to transcribe it on our weekly tests. It is that upload-download style of memorization, useful as a short-term memory exercise perhaps, but not more. I will likely have to remain content with writing out such affected ideas as the dialogue above, and even then only as long as I have internet access.

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24 Pentasyllabic regulated verse: a type of poem with five characters per line.
25 Du Fu, a famous poet
My classmate Lana invites me to join her book group. A group of four non-native speakers of Chinese (now five with me), started meeting once a week last term to read the recently published novel 燭光盛宴, by the female Taiwanese author 蔡素芬. I read eight chapters as fast as I can to catch up. It is hard. The small sturdy characters that blanket the pages seem to be written with layer upon layer of ink. In addition to language I don’t know, the plot jumps between multiple settings (both time and place), and multiple narrators. There is heaps of complicated (some of it even antiquated) Chinese kinship terminology, some characters aren’t named until many chapters in, and some are given different names at different times or by different people. Initially, without the group I probably would’ve put the book down as beyond my level, but through our collective effort at understanding, and the engaging group discussions which focus on examining the novel’s content in terms of social, cultural and historical factors, I am inspired to keep reading. I am glad I do. It is soon one of the most rewarding activities in my week. I enjoy feeling that the same kind of life I have in English is now happening in Chinese. I am not forcing myself to engage in ‘cultural activities’ that feel unnatural; I am connecting with people I like over activities I truly want to participate in, and it happens to be in Chinese. I have been looking for this for a long time.

26 Book title: Candlelight Banquet.
27 Cai Sufen
I meet other students at university, and there is a snowball effect that leads me to Susan. She becomes my calligraphy teacher and almost as quickly my friend. As soon as I hold the brush in my hand and experience the subtle transmission of energy and intention and skill and state of mind through the fine fluidity of black black ink, I cannot fathom why I never did this earlier. Calligraphy is this ideal combination of language, art, and meditation; I am instantly hooked. Well, a qualifier: Susan is not your average calligraphy teacher. She knows I only have two months left in Taiwan and decides the best approach is to give me a broad, crash course introduction to calligraphy, from 甲骨文 28 to 楷書 29, and from traditional to (post)modern. She spares me from the ‘teacher-doesn’t-say-a-word-but-gives-a-two-minute-calligraphy-demonstration-and-lets-you-work-on-one-stroke-for-the-first-year’ pedagogical approach that she has experienced. But it is more than that. It is more about Susan’s attitude towards life in general. She is frank and funny, independent and open-minded, adventurous and artistic. She’s into backpacking and good tea, self-unemployment and calligraphy. We get on famously.

Our friendship is entirely in Chinese. Calligraphy is an opening to enthusiastic discussions on art appreciation, inspiration, poetry, tea appreciation, spiritual improvement, meditation, what really matters in life, travel, pedagogy, etc. Sometimes her daughter is there too, quietly concentrating on practicing her calligraphy and taking occasional sips of tea – a stark contrast to the energy-vampire children we seem

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28 Oracle bone script: the ancient type of Chinese characters found on animal bones and turtle shells from Bronze Age China
29 Regular script: a type of calligraphy characterized by clear corners and straight strokes
to breed in the West. Susan makes it a personal mission to rectify my lack of sightseeing adventures in and around Taipei. Together with friends of hers from the calligraphy community, we visit 三峽 and 鵝哥, 九份 and 礁溪. We spend hours and hours drinking tea, we soak in public hot springs, we share meals. We are friends in that shared-interests, easy-to-talk-to, mutual-respect kind of way, and it just so happens that the easiest common language for us to speak is Chinese.

Another Taiwanese friend, Ellen, takes me to 龍山寺, where, after years of exposure to the aesthetic and habits of Chinese temples, I am finally shown how to participate. We make an entire round of the temple, lighting incense for the eclectic mix of Buddhist, Taoist, and folk gods that peacefully co-exist in a single place of worship. There is a lightness to this worship that is a blunt contrast to the Christianity I was subjected to as a child. Perhaps it is the open-air design of the building, or the healthy dose of practicality with which many Chinese approach moving through crowds, not being bothered whether people are stopped or talking or eating or worshipping, but simply letting life happen in whatever version it needs to at that moment. Ellen teaches me how to use joss sticks to ask a question, and later helps me find a diviner who will explain how the 八字 of my birthday and the 八字 of CM’s birthday reveal how we are destined to relate. He 順便 points out why Ellen and I are friends through the compatibility of our 八字 too, and advises her to get more cow (丑) in her life.

30 Sanxia, Yingge, Jiufen, and Jiaoxi (scenic destinations near Taipei)
31 Longshan Temple
32 Eight characters (a type of horoscope/fortune telling)
33 Along the way
I still meet with Joel twice a week. We have a working friendship that involves constant teasing and laughter, and it too is all in Chinese. I am becoming more involved in his website, and our language exchanges have morphed into discussions of how to redesign and promote the website. It is exciting to think that this could grow into a job for me one day, a job that uses Chinese, that could be done from anywhere in the world with an internet connection, and that I would be proud of having. Perhaps I would even need to make occasional trips to Taiwan to see my ‘business partner’, where I could also gorge on 蔥油餅 and drink my fill of 玄米奶茶.

Between Susan and Joel, poetry class and my book group, more and more of my life occurs in Chinese. I catch myself laughing at the irony of this – that as I get closer to leaving Taiwan, things seem to finally be taking the linguistic shape I want them to. There are other smaller things too, I am discovering more foods that I like to eat here, more activities I have the option of participating in, more comfort in the familiarity of the busy maze of streets outside my door. I am not feeling so peripheral.

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34 Onion pancakes
35 Brown rice milk tea
Journal entry (Jan 28)

Some things I have learned from studying Chinese:
- what home means (maybe 80% clear now)
- the value of having so many shades of meaning in a language - it is easier to find a shade two people can agree on
- how blurry the categories of language and culture and art and history are
- that your heart is your mind is your consciousness and that it lives in your chest
- that whether two ideas are related or not is relative
- that as language is alive and never static, it can never be completely 'learned', it can merely be engaged with in certain contexts with certain people
- that memorizing thousands of characters is hard
- that memorizing what they mean is harder
- that memorizing what they mean in their infinite combinations is harder still
- there is a threshold where a "foreign" language starts being personally emotive, when previously unfamiliar phonemes make you cringe in disgust or frolic in pleasure, when the tool for making meaning finally becomes transparent enough to let you see through to the meaning itself
that language makes much more sense in the environment it evolved in
that humans have a symbiotic relationship with language
that life and language are great puzzles that can be put together in many different ways

I am excited in a bittersweet way to leave Taipei. The promise of my immediate future, being with CM in Hawai‘i, is the sweet part. The bitter part is leaving a community I genuinely like and feel a comfortable sense of belonging to. I had just never imagined that love and community might not live in the same country.

I have a going-away party on the afternoon of the day before I leave. People drop in and out for nine hours, and for probably seven of those hours the language of least resistance for everyone there is Chinese. It is sweet success. I look around the party and see the community I have created, in six short months here. I talk with Ines from my book group about art and literature, as well as the confluence of Zen and creativity. Susan and Joel meet, and the three of us discuss Susan contributing some calligraphy to the website. CM attends the party by Skype too, and suddenly I hear Susan and Joel having conversations with him in English, and I realize I’ve never ‘met’ them in English before. Susan plans to visit me in Vancouver.
I look around the party and see that the whole dynamic system of people and place and language and love is breathing in sync; I am aware of both the magic and the impermanence of this, a fleeting stroke of water-ink on a Zen tablet.

I fly to Hawai‘i.
Chapter 3 Narrative Two: Reader’s Theatre Script

Reader’s theatre is the meditation on, and celebration of, a text. Where traditional theatre is implicitly more focused on the visual – staging, lighting, props, costumes, acting – reader’s theatre is explicitly focused on the aural. It is a reading of the script, as opposed to a performance of it. It intentionally does not include much beyond the text and the reader(s), perhaps only a stool and basic lighting. Donmoyer and Yennie-Donmoyer (1995) offer a practical definition of reader’s theatre as:

- a staged presentation of a piece of text or selected pieces of different texts which are thematically linked. Selections are sometimes performed by individuals and sometimes read chorally by the ensemble or a subgroup of ensemble members.
- Staging is simple; scenery is normally limited to stools and ladders; props are used sparingly, if at all; and theatrical lighting, although it enhances the dramatic impact of a reader’s theater production, is not required. The performers hold scripts, and any “acting out” of a piece is limited and highly stylized (p. 406).

This stripping away of anything that might divert attention away from the reading itself is a powerful invitation into a simple, yet communal, meditative space. It is an opportunity to gather into an awareness of voiced sound, and a spotlight on the imaginary way we connect words into meaning. The idea is to
make the text come alive in the minds of the audience – it is sometimes called ‘theatre of the mind’ (Coger and White, 1967) for this reason - and therefore everyone’s full attention is necessarily and eagerly on the text. This approach positions audience members in a role that is equally as active as the readers’; they are not passive observers of the stage, but rather participants in a co-created story. Without their mental engagement and three-dimensional imagination, the text might remain locked in the flatness of the page.

3.1 Reader’s Theatre in Pedagogy and Research

Traditionally, reader’s theatre was primarily used in the context of literacy education for young or beginning readers, fluency development (Young and Rasinski, 2009), or among students learning to read in a language that is new to them. As a pedagogical tool, reader’s theatre can be considered the purposeful practice of reading as a craft, where readers are afforded the opportunity to consciously develop their dramatic sensibilities around voice, intonation, rhythm, and emphasis.

More recently, in the mid-1990’s, a small group of education scholars began exploring alternative uses for reader’s theatre. In the context of research methodology, they were wrestling with how to ‘keep’ the experience, or in other words, how to navigate and represent research without a fatal loss of meaning, context, or lived experience (Donmoyer and Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995). Reader’s theatre emerged as a viable option for some types of qualitative data, and one that was appropriate in light of postmodern concerns around shifting meanings,
multiple voices and unequal power relations. An example of this is Goldstein’s (2001) *Hong Kong, Canada: Playwriting as critical ethnography*.

Donmoyer and Yennie-Donmoyer’s (1995) definition (quoted above) was found to be equally suitable for explaining reader’s theatre in a research context—changing ‘text’ to ‘data’, as the authors subsequently (1998) pointed out, is all that is needed. Reader’s theatre then becomes “a staged presentation of a piece of [data] or selected pieces of [data] which are thematically linked”. This is the definition in which I have rooted my own exploration and use of reader’s theatre. I have found that in a research context, as distinct from a pedagogical one, the focus of reader’s theatre shifts from the *practice* of reading, to the *art* of reading. How does one read the data? Who reads the data? What is read into the data? Toward what diverse goals is data read? Who is audience to the reading? How does the way in which the data is read shape the understanding? What are the social, cultural, physical, historical, and political contexts of the reading? How many times is the data read? How are different readings realized, related, repressed, represented, reconciled, reified? How do they rendezvous? This attention to the art of reading is at the core of my decision to use write Narrative Two as a reader’s theatre script; whether on the page or the stage this focus remains consistent.

**3.2 Reader’s Theatre in this Research**

In this study, I have grappled both with how data is read, and with how to ‘keep’ the experience. The piece that follows, *subvoCAL: Understories of learning Chinese*, is a product of that grappling. Modeled after the reader’s
theatre piece *Womentalkin’* (Natalie Adams et. al, 1998). I present a script of five voices – four are students of Chinese, and one is a teacher of Chinese. The characters are inventions, messy composites of many different people with diverse personality traits and personal histories. I have used considerable creative license in writing the script, as an attempt to fit the many diverse issues that face CAL students and teachers in Taiwan into a cast that I hope is small enough to be accessible and memorable, and as a means for keeping the experience as infused with life as possible in its new, inanimate form.

My intentions in using reader’s theatre here are fourfold: 1) to present a rendition of the data that strives to preserve the words and voices of the people whose experiences were the central focus of this portion of the study - the students and teachers themselves, 2) to allow multiple and often contradictory understandings to share the stage (and here, the page), widening both the range of knowledge and the scope of possibility related to the subject, 3) to shift the balance of power ever so slightly in a much-needed direction, that is, out of the hands of the privileged few, such as myself, who have the good fortune and circumstance to become researchers and decision-makers, and into the hands of all those who work, school day after school day, in the milieu created by those research findings and administrative decisions, and 4) to create a small space where the grassroots crafts of teaching and learning and growing, of living and studying and wage-earning, can be witnessed, made meaningful, and applauded.
### 3.3 subvoCAL: Understories of Learning Chinese

**Setting:** A conversation in Taiwan, about life in Taiwan; four long-time students are reflecting on their experiences learning Chinese. After a time, an old teacher happens upon them and briefly joins the conversation.

**Cast of characters:**

*Alena:* Alena is an attractive, white Swedish woman in her late-twenties who came to Taiwan over five years ago because of her husband’s job transfer. After a depressing first year, she began studying Chinese to give some structure to her days, to help adjust to life in Taiwan, and to socialize. She is now studying advanced classical Chinese and intends to pursue graduate studies in Chinese poetry, possibly in Hong Kong.

*James:* Born in the UK in the mid-1970’s James is a charismatic, young white man who has been living in Taipei since 2006. After spending three years in a Buddhist monastery, he is now midway through a graduate degree (MA) in translation studies (one of only two Westerners accepted into this competitive program), and already works as a freelance translator for the most prestigious university in Taiwan (the only Westerner they’ve ever hired in that capacity).

*Helen:* From the west coast of the U.S.A., Helen is a grounded white feminist in her mid-fifties who is in Taiwan for the foreseeable future studying both Chinese and Buddhism. She is deeply involved in those two communities, and spends the vast majority of her life in Chinese-speaking contexts.

*Mrs. Huang:* Born and raised in greater Taipei, Ms. Huang has been teaching Chinese to international students for over ten years. She both teaches and dresses with
a flair, bringing her passion for poetry, literature, music and art to her pedagogical and personal style.

_Noah:_ Noah is a tall, white, gay Australian man in his mid-twenties. He has been living in Taiwan for nearly ten years, having come on exchange during high school and then staying on to complete his undergraduate degree (with Chinese as the language of instruction) at Taiwan’s most prestigious university. He has recently accepted a job teaching English in China’s Sichuan province.

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_Narrator:_ Welcome to _subvoCAL: Understories of Learning_.

_Chenese._ This script weaves together a conversation among five unique characters, an eclectic combination of ‘international misfits’, the likes of which can only be found in that refreshingly absurd social space: the expat community. While these specific characters are fabrications, the essence of their personal histories and perspectives are grounded in the lives of real people - many more than five of them - who I met when I was trying out for the role of _GRADUATE STUDENT, SOJOURNING IN TAIWAN TO STUDY CHINESE_ etc. _smiles fondly_. Ah, well. I doubt the conversations would’ve changed that much, even if they knew I was actually writing _my_ stories, and not really _theirs_ after all…

_James:_ It was traveling that got me interested in Chinese. I got a real buzz from trying to talk to people on trips to India, Kenya, Mexico…I picked up some Spanish, fell in love with Japanese anime; I guess I just always wanted to expand my horizons.
Alena: I came here when my husband’s company transferred him.

Helen: I guess for me it all started after the kids left home and I divorced my husband. Finally, in my late-forties I suddenly had the freedom to pursue what I wanted. And since I was interested in Chinese things like Buddhism and acupuncture, it made sense to take Chinese to fulfill the language requirement.

James: Buddhism hey? Me too. I was the first foreigner to stay at what is now a pretty well-known monastery in central Taiwan. Actually, I wanted to teach the monks there English so they could teach others Buddhism, but they insisted I learn Chinese. I was basically forced to take one-on-one lessons with a nun for three years. I came out having this arcane religious vocabulary that most people didn’t really understand.

Noah: I came here for the hot men.

(collective laughter)

James: There’s totally that…has anyone else noticed that so many of the Western men who study Chinese seem to be gay?

All (in unison): yellow fever…

Helen: No kidding, well, of course there are always exceptions. I know a guy with really excellent Chinese whose wife is from Columbia, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t notice how quickly so many of my male classmates got Chinese girlfriends…or boyfriends. And not long after that their Chinese started getting really good too. Actually when I saw how that was all working I thought to myself, ‘Well, if that’s what it takes, then that’s what I’m going to do too’. When I was still in the States I dated a man from the north of China for a couple of years, and now I have a Taiwanese
partner. Between my home life, my Buddhist community and four hours a day of Chinese class, I’d say about 95% of my life happens in Chinese.

**Narrator:** Four students of Chinese, four adults, four Westerners. Four voices, speaking over one another like layers of forest-floor life, finding their own routes into the (under)story, and taking root in their own unique microclimates.

**Alena:** It’s been pretty different for me, coming here with my husband and all. He doesn’t speak much Chinese so most of our social life ends up being in English. I guess it’s ok though, I mean I didn’t really start studying Chinese with any clear long-term goals. Of course, I’d long been interested in Chinese poetry, and thought, ‘Surely this can open doors, but right now I’m not going to worry about that’. To be honest, I was pretty depressed the first year we were here, what with my husband gone at work all day, and being away from everything familiar to me back in Europe. Chinese class gave my days some structure, and gave me something to focus on…it’s also how I met most of the friends I have now.

**Noah:** Ditto. I used to blog about it - essentially about the identity crisis I went through while adjusting to living here - but I haven’t written in a long time now. I think that stuff just isn’t an issue for me anymore. It wasn’t right away, but I did eventually find my scene here, and most of those people aren’t monolingual speakers of English or Chinese; they’re people who speak both languages really well, like my friend Anek who just finished writing her MA thesis in Chinese, or Lyle who is doing his undergrad right alongside all the local kids, just like I did. I guess I needed to find really open-minded people, in terms of culture, sexuality, and politics, and that can take a while anywhere, but probably a bit longer here.
Helen: Yeah, it was definitely difficult when I first got here too. It took a while to find my feet. But I didn’t come to Taiwan to live in a foreign bubble. I could’ve stayed home if I wanted an English-speaking life. At first I completely refused to hang out with other Westerners, but eventually realized that I do need some Western friends. I think for me the curiosity is about fundamental human nature - you know there is so much hype about ‘cultural differences’, but sometimes I wonder how much difference there actually is if you go deep enough. Sort of like, if Chinese language was a person, I guess I’m trying to get inside her head, and see if she really thinks so differently than me.

Narrator: All of these voices are speaking, weaving themselves into the tangled understory, and perhaps seeking a space that is uniquely their own.

James: I don’t know if I ever really felt that kind of social tension. For me it was more like I went to live in the movie: THE GREAT DISILLUSIONMENT WITH THE 21ST CENTURY. At some point I realized I had fallen in love with Tang dynasty China, but modern, academic Chinese was utterly unappealing. Where classical, elite Chinese society seemed so elegant, China’s modern history was dark and disturbing.

Noah: Yeah, but this is modern Taiwan, not China. I know I’ve been strongly influenced by Taiwanese attitudes on this, but I do think it’s a real mistake to conflate the two.

Alena: But you can’t exactly ignore the centuries of shared history either...there’s only been divergence in modern times, so when you study literature or poetry – anything classical really - you’re studying China, not Taiwan.
James: What I mean was that there was a time I felt that everything Chinese – China or Taiwan was not the issue - was completely at odds with my personality, and I really struggled to find a part that would resonate with me. Buddhism really helped, in that it didn’t really matter whether it was my English, Spanish or Chinese-speaking self; I was trying not to be particularly attached to any of them. That let me approach Chinese with a kind of ‘fake-it-until-I-wasn’t-faking-it-anymore’ attitude.

Helen: That’s an interesting take on the notion of human or earthly identities: no matter what language they speak, they are always just part of the illusion. Did it work?

James: Sort of, I guess. I mean, non-attachment is a pretty powerful way to move through life. It makes it really hard to take anything too seriously.

Noah: Yet you chose to come back to a more secular life in the end, yeah? Why did you leave the monastery?

James: (pauses) I know it sounds strange, but basically, I got too famous. As the only foreigner, and one who could speak Chinese, everyone wanted to talk to me. I couldn’t get any peace, which is kind of one of the main reasons people tend to go live in monasteries! Plus some of the Buddhist teachings seemed really sexist to me - like understanding the ‘burdens’ of child-bearing and menstruation, or women’s 2nd place status in society as examples of how they need to collectively work off bad karma…

(shaking head)

Helen: Wow, really? Maybe it depends on the kind of Buddhism. The tradition I follow always says that gender is irrelevant on the Buddhist path. Liberation is just so far beyond things like gender or race.
Alena: I don’t know about the Buddhist part so much, but I definitely know what you mean about the appeal of Tang Dynasty China. In Europe I had studied Chinese poetry in translation; when I came here and started actually learning Chinese I struggled to have even simple market and taxi conversations. My ideas were so much more developed than my language; I couldn’t express myself at the level I wanted to and it was really frustrating. Actually, I still can’t. I feel like my reading is much stronger than my speaking, but at this point I’m willing to accept weaker speaking skills. I figure since I’m more interested in literature and poetry than in developing a Chinese-speaking social life, accessing written Chinese has to be the priority.

Narrator: …everything growing in symbiotic tension with the contexts they are exposed to. How much sunlight falls on your patch of forest? How much rain seeps within drinking-reach of your roots?

James: I don’t know, living here I really feel like I need both. After leaving the monastery I kept studying Chinese at university here. Book learning is good, but I also made a lot of effort to have language exchange partners, and well, to be honest, more than one turned into a girlfriend. That was really exciting at first - instead of having to apply myself so much at university, I could hang out with my girlfriend and still be practicing Chinese. I was living this thing instead of looking at books…

Narrator: (sarcastically) Apparently James hasn’t been completely socialized into the classic tenets of a Chinese educational system, where book learning has traditionally been more highly valued.
James: Truth be known, I’m a bit of a slacker. I was always surprised by how much effort it took to learn Chinese – especially written Chinese. I always thought, ‘I shouldn’t have to work that hard for this’.

Noah: Yeah, it really is a lot of work. I guess I’m lucky I came here when I did – I was 17 – because people say that my accent is really quite Taiwanese. Then again, I’ve been living here, and I mean really living here – I lived with a host family, went to a Taiwanese high school and then did university in Chinese - for over nine years now. I think you just really gotta put in the time.

Alena: Is it really just time? I’ve been pretty up and down with Chinese, you know, the challenge of Chinese is so talked up, you always hear ‘Chinese is so hard to learn’ and it’s easy to get sucked into that mindset.

James: I think you have to make language learning fun. When I was bored with my classes and textbooks I got into watching Chinese films and anime. I would stop to look things up in the dictionary, and practice the phrases I liked. I mean, there have been times when I was all ‘nose to the books’ but much more has been me trying to enjoy Chinese and find things that are entertaining.

Alena: It’s not that I ever stopped liking Chinese. I just found it could be quite overwhelming at times. Language learning can be stressful and depressing; I do think you have to be a bit of a sadist to keep studying Chinese.

Helen: Sadist, hey? I wonder if the same can be said for Chinese speakers learning English? I mean, really, why is all the focus on how hard it is for an English-speaker to learn Chinese? Isn’t it just as hard for a Chinese-speaker to learn English? Yet there are certainly a lot more Chinese-speakers who learn English, and to very
high levels, than the other way around. I think the question we need to be asking is \textit{why}. Why do so many Chinese-speakers do the long, hard work of learning English, and why do so few English-speakers do the same?

\textit{(slightly awkward silence, perhaps akin to the feeling that would exist if moss could get angry)}

\textbf{Narrator:} Hear, hear! I love it when people ask those elephant-in-the-room type questions. I’ve thought about this a lot in relation to my interest in ‘language play’ – a Canadian friend and I who have both been studying Chinese for many years have been brainstorming about creating ‘laowhy lit’, creative works written by non-native speakers of Chinese that mixes languages (in our case Chinese and English), uses bilingual puns, and can only be understood by readers who know something of both Chinese and English.\textsuperscript{36} But this idea of treating Chinese as a plaything - as something that I can dissect and alter and re-invent to suit my sensibility - that very idea screams of privilege. It is only possible because I am a white native speaker of English, and English is currently the globally dominant language. The language of power and wealth, business and academia. The language associated with democratic values like individual freedom and human rights, and the language of assumed cultural superiority. Since when do people from the ‘dominant group’\textsuperscript{37}, learn the languages of those they subjugate? I mean really learn them, beyond just picking up a few exotic phrases we can pull out of our top hats like a party trick, ostensibly to show our cultural sensitivity and energetic benevolence. Beyond displaying our scraps

\textsuperscript{36} Laowhy is a transliteration of 老外, which means foreigner in Chinese; while the Romanized version of 外 is written ‘wai’ in standard pinyin, it is pronounced just like ‘why’ in English, so this pun is simultaneously an example of the playfulness of the concept of ‘laowhy lit’.

\textsuperscript{37} A group I belong to because of where I was born, the colour of my skin, and the language I grew up speaking.
of knowledge like a badge of clever, forward-thinking honour. Beyond using it as something that continues to reinforce our power. So my interest in playing in those spaces where English and Chinese intersect, regardless of whatever creative or statement-making intentions I may have, is simultaneously an assertion that I don’t actually need Chinese for anything serious or consequential. I do not have to immigrate to a Chinese-speaking country, get into a Chinese-speaking university, or hold a Chinese-speaking job. And that, while echoing the elitism of literary traditions the world over, gives me the luxury and freedom to amuse myself with it. I’ve yet to reconcile my creative urge for language play with these bigger implications.

(Ms. Huang enters and sees four of her old students sitting together)

Ms. Huang: 嘿！你們都互相認識嗎？你們每個人我都教過，可是都在不同的班，世界真小。還在學中文嗎？

Helen: 還在學，我每天跟家教上課。。。慢慢地讀《三國演義》。

Noah: 我剛從大學中文系畢業，馬上要到大陸去工作了。

James: 目前我做翻譯，同時也在讀翻譯研究所。

Alena: 我好像是唯一還在原來的大學學習中文的人，上張老師的課。

Ms. Huang: 那真好。在我教過的學生中，你們是最聰明的，最努力的。就是說你們對中華文化、社會感興趣，所以積極地學中文，並在課堂以外的生活中養

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38 What - you all know one another? I’ve taught each of you, but all in different classes! What a small world...are you all still studying Chinese?
39 Yes, I’m taking daily private lessons with a tutor...slowly reading Three Kingdoms (a Chinese classic)
40 I just finished my undergrad in Chinese, heading to work in China soon.
41 I’m doing translation now, and working on an MA in translation studies.
42 It looks like I’m the only one that’s still at the university studying. I’m in Mr. Zhang’s class.
Alena: 我們現在常常這麼說，那個「中文那麼難學」的態度真難克服。同時若要學好中文真的得認真努力地學習。

Ms. Huang: (smiling) 加油！

(Ms. Huang exits)

Narrator: Ah, the advice and presence of a teacher in the life of a student. So fleetingly influential. Like gravity. Or water...

Alena: 加油 indeed. I really do think you have to be a bit of a sadist to keep studying Chinese...

James: Basically I just fake it until I’m not faking it anymore...

Noah: It just takes time to find your scene.

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43 Good to hear, you were all some of my brightest students - you know, interested in learning about Chinese culture and society, approached Chinese with a good attitude and strong study habits, and made Chinese a part of your life outside of school. Only accurately using written Chinese always seems to be a bit hard for you foreigners. But remember, it’s counterproductive to trick yourself, or set the bar too low. Many students seem to think, ‘Oh, I’m a foreigner. Of course I’ll always make mistakes in Chinese. It’s impossible to get it right.’ This doesn’t help anything. Instead you should just realize it takes hard work to improve, and maintain a positive attitude.

44 Yes we were just talking about that whole mindset, you know the idea that ‘Chinese is so hard to learn’. At the same time, it really does take a lot of work.

45 Literally ‘refuel’ but commonly used as a phrase of encouragement in the spirit of ‘you can do it, keep trying, try harder!’
**Helen:** If Chinese language was a person, than you could say I’m trying to get inside her head, and see if she really thinks so differently than me.

**Narrator:** Well, I for one, am glad to be finished faking it in my role as NARRATOR. That was hard work. Listening to all of those characters (even though they didn’t even hear me at all!), and trying to interject insightful things (did any of it impress you?)…but really, it’s holding space that is the hardest. White space, physical space, ideological space, safe space- call it what you will. I felt like I had to be both the groundcover and the canopy, narrating these understories from raindrop to root, from seed to fruit. If any of it was successful, then hopefully we are left with something approximating a deliciously-organic

naturally-chaotic

playfully dramatic

vocally-aromatic &

genuinely-dynamic

IMPRESSION.
Chapter 4 Narrative Three: Bricolage

Too many fragments are afloat out there. Shards of memory, the frayed edges of an image, distant whispered words, ideas that repeat themselves like binary, sounds that clip the imagination like a backhand, or perhaps slide into consciousness like honey, and then, unpredictably, decision! Falling into your lap like a raindrop, coalesced from all that cloud.

Bricolage, as an ideology, is concerned with giving value to those fragments. It is alive when entertaining the gestalt creations that come if we allow ourselves to access and channel and select from the eclectic, the available, the salient. Bricolage is the cosmopolitan citizen in the nation-state world. She is living, breathing hybridity, and she is “go on, try it”. Bricolage is the free (not the domme) in freedom, the yes part of yesterday, and the creative culling that crafts, cuts, and collages ‘something’ out of what used to be ‘everything’. Bricolage is the absence of ego, because who can ever pretend to have a complete grasp of ‘everything’, and yet still, one must begin. Bricolage is an opening into the (artistic) unknown.

Here, I am not using bricolage the way Kincheloe (2001) uses it, with his laudable focus on a deep synergy of disciplines and perspectives. My use of bricolage is considerably more inchoate – not unlike my relationship with academia for that matter. I am drawing on the root French meaning of bricoleur, which refers to “a handyman or handywoman who makes use of the tools available to complete a task” (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 680), to focus on the process of using a variety of accessible resources to creatively accomplish something. In
this case, the accomplishment is a short visual narrative or image-text⁴⁶ (W. Mitchell, 1994) entitled *Learn Chinese! selected artifactsictions*. The variety of accessible resources includes both those concretely accessible, as in what could be found searching the internet, and that which is accessible in a more abstract way, as in what cognitive, artistic and emotional tools are available that support (or limit) this task. I cannot be beyond myself at this moment. I cannot be beyond my present culturally, socially, politically and historically situated understanding of what is (im)possible. I can, of course, repeatedly and relentlessly inquire at that edge, and pay attention to the ways that inquiring shifts the very shape and fabric of that edge, and I can consciously experience how that shifting in turn percolates dialogically back through me and my understanding of what is (im)possible. I can, and strive to do just that.

Working with image-texts opens onto a whole new field of scholarship. Barthes (1977) thought that images were too polysemous – had too much capacity for a variety of interpretations - to convey a particular meaning, and that they needed (verbal or written) text to clarify their message. Embedded in this is a positivist notion that a single, true meaning exists; the issue then becomes whether or not, and how, that meaning is accurately conveyed. From a post-structuralist perspective however, reading images becomes a more fluid, nuanced activity. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) suggest that both visual and linguistic structures “realize meanings…and thereby point to different

⁴⁶ A term coined to describe “composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text” (p. 89).
interpretations of experience and different forms of social interaction” (p. 2). To say that meaning is “realized” suggests that meaning-making is not a straightforward process at all, but rather a dynamic, interpretive, plural one.

Visuals have been used in arts-based research to attend to power dynamics in education (Chapman, 2001), transcend binaries and dis/embodiment (Pryer, 2002), and operate beyond the colonial mindset (Toulouse, 2001). Bach’s (2007) visual narrative Concerning curriculum, girls, photography etc. is an exercise in validating girls’ personal, subjective perspectives on what they find important in their own educational experiences. Incorporating image into narratives can be understood as what Rose (2007) highlights to be the modern tendency to conflate seeing and knowing. She draws on Jenks (2005), who points out the way this is embedded in language such as “‘do you see?’ or ‘see what I mean?’…[or] by inquiring after people’s ‘views’” (p. 3). The suggestion is that modernity is fundamentally ocularcentric, and the implication is that we need to pay attention to what we see, how we see it and what the effects of seeing it are. This is what I am attempting to do in Narrative Three.

In tandem with the way Narrative Two draws attention to the reading of a text, the visual format of Narrative Three calls for similarly critical questions to be asked. How do you ‘read’ a visual narrative? What are the stories? Whose stories are they? Where are they? How do you decide where to begin? Where to go next? Where and when to end? How do you experience that which is non-linear? Is it frustrating? Frightening? Freeing?
My intention in creating this bricolage is to visually explore the ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ of what learning CAL really offers. Learn Chinese! selected artifactsfictions is a kaleidoscope of fragments of the things (I think) I have made sense of, things I am struggling to make sense of, and things I am not yet aware that I need to make sense of. I am afloat in the fragments of these parallel, criss-crossing, circular, spiraling, oscillating, obfuscating, and enigmatically illuminating narratives.
Learn Chinese!
selected artifacts fictions
Chapter 5 Discussion: CAL Across the Narratives

5.1 Reflections

As I sit to write this discussion, I am aware that seasons have passed since I wrote Narrative One, months since Narrative Two, and weeks since Narrative Three. Scholars have long grappled with the way autobiographical writing can never truly be current, with the heartbreak and wisdom in how each sentence is outdated even as it lands on the page. The sentences here, in the narratives and rest of the thesis, are no different. Taking Narrative One as an example, it’s easy to see how elements of that snapshot are less relevant to the now of my narrative life. It ended rather optimistically, looking forward to Hawai’i and to love. At the time, I felt pleasantly caught up in the flow of life; perhaps I was even “riding the crest of a wave” (Bach, 2007, p. 281). But, like every wave does eventually, that one has since broken, giving me one of those invaluable opportunities to surrender and accept what exists when you are pummeled in powerful surf. The romance with CM ended; my conversations with Joel have stretched from a weekly occurrence into a monthly one; Susan did come to visit Vancouver for the summer, but since then we have both been sidetracked from our friendship by the lives we live in separate countries. Or, in other words, things have changed.
If I return to my research questions now, I realize that I do have something to say about them – something that is both new and not new at the same time. I had asked, ‘How do I perceive, make sense of, and integrate my experiences of learning Chinese into the overall narrative of my life?’ What I see is that Chinese is one of the ways, perhaps the key way, that I have relentlessly urged forward the deep, explicit and conscious knowing of myself. Chinese has provided a wholly different linguistic, cultural and geographic backdrop from which to experience myself. If language has some degree of power to shape thought, and if thought has some degree of power to shape reality, then it follows that learning a new language has the potential to involve someone in a new reality.

Could learning a new language essentially be a comparative exercise? Kramsch (2009) asserts that “the acquisition of a foreign language can reveal unexpected meanings, alternative truths that broaden the scope of the sayable and the imaginable” (p. 15). Perhaps in my case, learning a new language as been an exploration of 1) what I sound, behave, and feel like in English, in relation to 2) what I sound, behave, and feel like in Chinese? What conclusions could be drawn on account of the similarities and differences apparent? Could commonalities that are evident in both
contexts be considered more stable, or to comprise core elements of my identity? And conversely, should those that are readily malleable be seen as more superficial? As deceptively appealing as this line of inquiry is, I am not unaware that it is rooted in binary thinking. I see how it juxtaposes ideas such as ‘Chinese’ and ‘English’, ‘deep’ verses ‘superficial’, and ‘that which is stable’ compared to ‘that which can change’. I am aware of this even as I am attempting a poststructuralist approach to research “that questions fixed categories or structures, oppositional binaries, closed systems, and stable “truths” and embraces seeming contradictions (Duff, in press).

But this is so much easier said than done (oh what cruel comfort can be found in the illusion of certainty!).

The reader’s theatre character Helen has a very zen, very poststructuralist perspective when she says ‘If Chinese language was a person, than you could say I’m trying to get insider her head, and see if she really thinks so differently than me.” She is suggesting that beyond the world of dichotomies and polarities, perhaps there is actually profound unity. In his own way James, the character who spent three years living in a Buddhist monastery, is also looking for cohesion of his linguistic selves; “basically I just fake it until I’m not faking it anymore”. What he is faking is a new identity as a Chinese speaker, and
when he isn’t faking it anymore, it has been integrated (to a
degree and for the moment). Perhaps instead of looking at
details that can tend to seem contradictory, the focus could be
on seeing and accepting the innate sameness of apparent
opposites. Perhaps we need to grow into a hybrid or ‘third
space’ – a realm that is neither this nor that, neither ‘here’ nor
‘there’, but rather some place altogether new (Kramsch, 2009).
Maybe these are the kinds of efforts that can ultimately bring us
closer to experiencing a deep sense of unity and integration.

5.2 Unpacking Narrative Perception

There are hints that a key part of the narrative work I am
doing is about transcending binaries, for example in Narrative
One when I write of my two linguistic selves converging: “It
really seems like the Chinese-speaking me and the English-
speaking me have come to terms with one another. Speaking
terms I guess”. It is also evident at the end of the story, when “I
look around the party and see that the whole dynamic system of
people and place and language and love is breathing in sync”.

Do these sentences reveal the story’s underlying ethos of
peaceful acceptance\textsuperscript{47}, or are they the minority moments of
enlightenment in a darker majority? After all, “long hungry days”

\textsuperscript{47} Or perhaps they are merely symptomatic of having internalized the Hollywood logic that requires a feel-good, protagonist-reaches-their-goal storyline.
as a “woman-island”, the “texture of absence”, feeling “like I’m constantly one step behind” and trying to “study my mind beyond this inflexibility” are tempered only with “fleeting moments of bliss”. Yet couldn’t it be equally justifiable to say that the predominant sense of “optimism and excitement and challenge”, the “satisfaction bloom[ing] in my psyche”, along with feeling “bolstered” and “lucky”, demonstrate the fundamental brightness of the story, and are dampened only by occasional moments of feeling “like I am an entire uninhabited island”?

Such an exercise brings us back to looking the complex hermeneutic task of autobiographical sense-making, with all its transience and relativity, squarely in the eye. Indeed, the question truly is, ‘How do I perceive, make sense of, and integrate my experiences of learning Chinese into the overall narrative of my life?’ How do we tell our stories? How do we hear the stories that are told? What factors determine how we tell, and how we hear stories?

Jardine (1990) facilitated a simple but profound pedagogical activity. He gave his students a blank piece of paper and asked them to think of any and every way that it could be used. After the likely answers, such as to write on, to read from, to fold into an airplane etc., the group made a
cognitive leap to ideas involving trees as the source of the paper, and from there another leap to the life cycle of the tree with all the factors that promote or inhibit its growth, and then to the entire ecosystem that the tree was a part of. etc. The blank piece of paper became a tool to realize the interconnectedness of, well, everything. Perhaps the most powerful reflection to come of the exercise was that “any object could have been drawn into the center in a way that all other things organize themselves around this center” (p. 108). In the context of narrative and autobiography, what is chosen as the centerpiece, indeed the very act of choosing a centrepiece, is a very powerful part of how we shape lived experience into narrative.

What does it mean when we consciously choose the ‘self’ as the centerpiece? Leggo’s (2007) eloquent list of self words: “self-awareness, self-realization, self-actualization, self-narration, selfishness, self-centeredness, self-understanding, self-knowing, self-consciousness, self-determination, self-familiarity, self-construction, self-conceptualization, self-contradiction, self-generation, self-representation” (p. 196), along with self-revelation, self-interest, and self-indulgence sound like they are stampeding towards the question, ‘Is it possible to prioritize knowing thyself without narcissism and egocentricity?’ I struggle with this question, but as the ebb of
each moment of struggle flows past, I keep concluding that yes, it is possible. I believe my journey into the self is leading me to a deep and abiding awareness of interconnectedness, from which follows an expansive and electrifying appreciation of all the people and places and circumstances that have sheltered, shaped and supported me, which in turn catalyzes the realization that I too must be cognizant of the butterfly-effects my thoughts, words and actions have on the world. Knowing oneself is enriching, in the best possible connotation of that word, in the sense than an enriched person has something of value to offer to the world.

5.3 Agency

Johnson (2005) explains that “the human self is highly relational in the sense that who we think we are and how we experience ourselves can’t be separated from how other people mirror and treat us” (p. 201). I believe one of the key factors that shapes this ongoing dialectic process of identity development, is agency. Agency has recently been taken up by many SLA scholars in their investigations of language learners’ experiences and trajectories, and it often emerges as a salient theme in narrative studies of autobiographical data (Kinginger, 2008; Ogulnick, 1998; Pavlenko, 1998). Duff (in press) asserts that agency “refers to people's ability to make choices, take control,
self-regulate, and thereby pursue their goals as individuals
leading, potentially, to personal or social transformation” (p. 6).
And Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) see agency as being “crucial at
the point where the individuals must not just start memorizing a
dozen new words and expressions but have to decide on
whether to initiate a long, painful, inexhaustive and, for some,
ever-ending process of self-translation” (pp. 169-170).

If agency is a key factor in how we narrate our stories,
then we need to consider what factors influence an individual’s
agency. This can be a truly empowering activity, one that is
ultimately not about lamenting victimhood or wallowing in self-
blame, but rather about “locat[ing our] “personal” narratives in
the broader social and historical forces that forged them and
begin[ning] to understand [our] experiences in new, more critical
ways” (Schnee, 2009, p. 45). Such new understandings can, in
turn, allow us to move towards a greater sense of personal
agency with which to forge new present and future narratives in
the social worlds we inhabit.

A complex web of factors can support and/or detract
from an individual’s agency in a given context. Race, gender,
culture, class, religion, sexual orientation, ability, level of
education, and personal history are often-cited factors which are
simultaneously individual and social. The colour of my skin is
something that I cannot significantly alter, but the perceptions around what my particular skin colour signifies - meanings which are always politically, culturally, and historically situated, and that have very real consequences in terms of life opportunities and trajectories - are played out in the social realm. Even when just beginning to tease apart the complex construct of agency, it quickly becomes easy to see how “a personal voice, if creatively used, can lead the reader, not into miniature bubbles of navel gazing, but into the enormous sea of social issues” (Behar, 1996, p. 14).

How is agency expressed across the three narratives in this study? I believe that the very act of writing a personal, arts-informed MA thesis is an act of resistance against those research traditions, still the default today, that require an objective voice. On the one hand this demonstrates the marginalized position that anyone who yearns to take action based on non-mainstream values (values which are inexorably linked to aspects of identity like race, culture, gender, etc.) finds themselves in, and, on the other hand, it shows the power that they also posses – power to question, to consciously transgress, and to refuse to swallow the dominant discourse.

Perhaps this is the best way to frame an understanding of agency, that it is inevitably a paradox. The multiple aspects of
one's identity are in constant, dynamic intersection, both with each other and with the social, cultural, political and historical contexts of the moment. Invariably, some of these aspects contribute to an augmented sense of agency, and some diminish it. Where the fulcrum between empowerment and disempowerment lies, at any given moment, can be nothing more than a shifting, elusive, hermeneutic idea. Or, to move away from such a dichotomy, people continuously exist within a web of forces that are both empowering and disempowering. Among the many factors that influence cross-cultural interactions, I have chosen to focus primarily on race and gender.

5.3.1 Agency and Race

The influence of race on CAL learning, specifically in relation to issues around identity and community, is a key aspect of the current research being conducted at the Centre for Research in Chinese Language and Literacy Education, or CRCLLE (Duff et. al., forthcoming). Working on that study has been instrumental in developing my awareness regarding race in general, and whiteness specifically. I have come to realize that being white, I constantly, and often subliminally, enjoy the privilege of that whiteness at every juncture of my life story. Living in Canada, I highly doubt that I have ever been refused a
job, scholarship, place to live, credit application or romantic partner because of my race. I am not the one who is seen as a likely instigator of public unrest or intentional perpetrator of an accident if I happen to be in a certain place at a certain time. If I have been racially profiled when crossing international borders, my skin colour is more likely to give me the green light than any other colour. And in the context of living in China and Taiwan, experiences of ‘privileged marginalization’ (Ilnyckyj, 2010), based largely on race, often comprise the invisible, and therefore unquestioned, norms of many expatriate lifestyles. Conceison (2004) writes about such experiences in her book *Significant Other*, explaining that “when a White American or European is ‘Othered’ in China, it is as likely to be in the form of being pushed to the front of the line as to the back, or that one’s blond hair is repeatedly touched and praised out of admiration and wonder rather than disdain” (p. 3).

White privilege is evident in small yet significant ways throughout the narratives. I am able to rent an ideal apartment the day after arriving in a country I’ve never been to before, and have no credit history or personal connections. There is no shortage of language exchange options when I am inclined towards them, and one even leads to a potential job opportunity for the future. I have a strong voice in Chinese class – one that
asks critical questions and finds no difficulty taking the floor. It is praised by my classmates, and tolerated by my teachers, attitudes that feel impossible to disentangle from stereotypical expectations that position Westerners as ‘confident’ and ‘outspoken’, in contrast to Asians who are expected, and indeed often fulfill those expectations, to be students who ‘不敢問’.\textsuperscript{48} I can flirt with the idea of doing doctoral studies in Taiwan, or I can choose to return to Canada if I prefer; my geographical movement is unrestricted. I am shown exceptional kindness by many locals, behaviour that, while likely connected to notions of face that certainly operate among Taiwanese, also seems to be linked to a certain national desire to give foreigners in particular a good impression of Taiwan and Taiwanese people. The kind receptionist at our hotel who takes a personal risk in order to rescue us - strangers she has just met - from an inconvenient situation, and the calligraphy teacher who not only gives me tailored lessons and befriends me, but also goes very much out of her way to ensure that my time in Taiwan is fulfilling in precisely the ways that interest me, are two examples.

It is important to stress that race is only one of the many factors that affect one’s identity and agency. Each of the

\textsuperscript{48} Don’t dare to ask
examples I am providing are intended to highlight subtle experiences of privilege that often go unnoticed, or tend to be seen as ‘the way everyone is treated’ despite this not being so. In all cases, various additional factors that I do not have the space to explore in detail, such as sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and ability status, also profoundly influence how people experience the moment-to-moment agency that contributes to their sense of self.

The experiences of the white characters in Narrative Two, the reader’s theatre script, are also laced with racial privilege. James is ‘famous’ in the Buddhist monastery he lives in because he is white. His attitude that he ‘shouldn’t have to work that hard for this’ also shows a sense of entitlement that is bound up with racial experience. In Helen’s case, by declining to socialize in English and instead choosing to participate in readily-available Chinese-speaking communities, she has the luxury and (will)power to orchestrate her life so that 95% of it occurs in Chinese. Noah enjoyed the rare opportunity of completing high school and university in Chinese-speaking institutions, programs which, not insignificantly, do not require foreign students to meet the linguistic standards of their local classmates. For example they can submit papers written in English, and often obtain English versions of required course readings, situations
which do not normally find their parallel for ESL students enrolled in Western schools. Alena uses Chinese to pull herself out of depression and forge social connections for her and her husband. All of these are agentive acts that are encouraged and even facilitated by the welcoming climate Taiwan offers to white, (English-speaking) Westerners. They stand in sharp contrast to the experiences of the majority of the world’s border crossers, such as the immigrants in Norton Peirce’s (1995) study whose limited access to target language speakers restricted both their linguistic and professional opportunities.

In Narrative Three, the impact of race is blunt, salient, and visual. Of the seven images of people selected, five are Asian (presumably Chinese) women, one is an Asian man, and one is a white man. This mirrors the experience of white foreigners being a minority in Taiwan and China, and it also reflects the way Asian men are frequently considered emasculated (from a Western, hetero-normative perspective) and therefore largely invisible to these foreigners. The one white man who does appear in the bricolage is presented as part of a BBC news article that hinges solely on racial privilege, where white Westerners are hired as “fake foreign executives” to attend public business events “so that when the camera scans the audience there are foreigners there” (Ahmed, 2010). Here,
‘foreign’ actually means ‘white’; it is not defined by the country of birth or life, language(s) spoken, or culture(s) of an individual, but rather by the colour of their skin.

5.3.2 Agency and Gender

Of course, race does not inform agency in isolation from other factors; gender also stands out as a particularly salient and influential element in all three of the narratives, and is also a key issue under investigation in the CRCLLE research (Duff et. al., forthcoming). Pavlenko (2007), noticing that women’s language memoirs frequently connect their language learning trajectories to gender, but that this is largely absent from men’s accounts, suggests that “membership in a privileged or unmarked category may make the category transparent” (p.175). Living, and therefore inevitably participating in, a patriarchal society where deeply-rooted gender-based oppression exists on a systemic level (Johnson, 2005) has undeniably shaped my sense of self as a woman. Specifically, my understanding of what it means to be a good, successful woman seems to be strongly influenced by a sexist value system where women are appreciated so long as they fulfill nurturing, supportive roles, and so long as they exist on the periphery, being careful not to interfere with androcentric norms. Taking up such supportive roles often leads to a disproportional interest in, and therefore
effort invested in interpersonal relationships, particularly the facilitative type of linguistic and energetic work that goes into growing and maintaining them.

That my sense of self is deeply embedded in socially constructed notions of gender is evident, in part, through the amount of space taken up in all three narratives by concerns over romantic relationships. Tauchert (2008) would agree; she asserts that “women’s insistently romantic desires, and their desire for romance, remain a sticking point after 200 years of feminist analysis of the false consciousness of romantic love” (p. 145). In Narrative One, before the relationship with CM starts, there is not a single page where I don’t write about dating or loneliness. I join an online dating site, “dream of learning pillow-talk”, and purposefully seek out Taiwanese men as potential romantic partners; it is only in Term 2, when my romantic hunger has been (temporarily) satiated, that I am able to turn my attention more productively to the (apparently) primary reason I went to Taiwan: language study. Besides my dating experiences simply occupying narrative space, I also explicitly talk about being preoccupied with romantic love, saying how “I see that love is conflated with every other aspect of my life; I can’t study Chinese or build a career or travel to a foreign land without love being my horizon”. Subsequently I even admit that love is the
trump card in deciding whether to stay in Taiwan longer than the study terms require: “I do think the possibility of future PhD studies at a Taiwanese University exists, but love and community are much stronger motivating factors for me than career is. Much stronger. I feel myself willing, again, to engage wildly in love – practicing it, making it, reveling in it. Wherever I need to be to do that, I think that’s where I’ll be”.

A focus on romance and relationships in connection with language learning is not unusual in memoirs written by women. For example, Hoffman (1989) writes “When I fall in love, I am seduced by language” (p. 219), and Kaplan (1993), speaking of her French boyfriend says “what I really wanted from André was language” (p. 86). Beyond seeking target language romance, Pavlenko (2001) highlights that “in cases when intimate relationships fail to provide the entry into the desired speech community, many women rely on friendship” (p. 228). This is precisely the case in my language memoir, as I gradually shift the focus away from dating Taiwanese men to cultivating friendships with Taiwanese people like Susan, Joel, and Ellen, as well as with the women who have advanced Chinese proficiency in my book group. It is hard to overstate the way my language learning could have been impacted if I had begun dating a Taiwanese man. Perhaps I would have decided to keep
living in Taiwan, significantly expanded my network of Chinese-speaking friends, or even prioritized pursuing future graduate studies or finding work in Taiwan so I could stay in the relationship. Because, “language learning is never exclusively about the acquisition of grammatical and lexical knowledge, but is inevitably also about how a learner’s proficiency in a language impacts their relationship with the target language community, and how that in turn impacts their identities as learners or users of that language” (Ilnyckyj, 2010, p. 22).

The focus on romantic love is also evident in Narrative Two. With the exception of Ms. Huang and the narrator, the love lives of all four characters are an indispensable feature of the conversation. It seems impossible to do justice to their stories of Chinese learning without including the romantic ties in their lives, ties that, in all cases, have direct implications for their language learning. Alena finds herself in Taiwan and able to enroll in Chinese classes because of her husband’s job transfer. Helen consciously chooses to date native-speakers of Chinese as part of her linguistic and cultural immersion. Noah suggests that his romantic attraction to Chinese men is a key reason he came to Taiwan. And James speaks about how having a Chinese language exchange partner turn into a girlfriend directly impacts his language when he says, “instead of having to apply myself so
much at university, I could hang out with my girlfriend and still be practicing Chinese. I was living this thing instead of looking at books”.

The theme of romantic love is also present in the bricolage - ten of the twenty-four selections are explicitly suggestive of romance, dating, or sex-appeal. These choices draw attention to my skewed perceptions of the social space where Westerners and Chinese people connect. Six are images of attractive Chinese women, some of which are blatantly sexualized, such as the advertisement for ‘Popup Chinese’ where the woman pictured appears to be topless but holding a piece of fabric that just covers her nipples. She has ‘blow-job’ lips, ‘freshly-fucked’ hair, and an inviting – if rather empty - look in her eyes. Paired with a tag line that reads “stylish and modern mandarin [sic] instruction straight from Beijing”, this image-text seems to suggest not so much language instruction straight from Beijing, but sexually available women waiting for the bell to ring and let the foreigners out of Chinese class. Perhaps the most distasteful example of the sexualisation of Chinese women in Narrative Three is the image of a bikini-clad woman who is kneeling in front of the desk of a man studying Chinese. She is ostensibly helping him with his studies, but in a posture and with a degree of exposure that embodies feminine willingness and Sex sells: ‘cum’ and learn Chinese
sexual subservience. Even the relatively innocuous headshots of
clothed women that are the mainstay of advertisements for CAL
learning, all depict women who conform to Western beauty
ideals that favour young, thin, attractive, ‘exotic’ Asian women.
There are no schoolmarms here.

5.4 Racism and Sexism

Race and gender, as factors that profoundly inform a
person’s agency, are critically important concepts to use in
unpacking storied lives. Upon reading the first draft of Narrative
One, my graduate advisor prompted me to consider what kind
of response a similar story, one that discusses dating locals and
includes speaking Chinese as part of what one looks for in a
partner, might receive if it was written by a white man instead of
a white woman. There is a good chance it would be considered
a sexist, racist account that serves as an example of the way the
colonial, patriarchal powerful take advantage of infantilized,
female ‘Others’ – the dominant white man taking his pick from a
willing selection of submissive Asian women. Does it follow then
that charges of sexism and racism are equally applicable to the
account I’ve written? This is a complicated question, and the
answer, if in fact there is an answer, is probably both yes and
no.
There is the basic fact that I consciously used language, which, in the case of Chinese is still almost directly correlated with race, as part of my criteria for who would be included and excluded from a group, namely the group, ‘men I was interested in dating’. Including or excluding people from a group based on race is, in some senses, a classic example of racism. Early white immigrants to Canada forcibly restricted local First Nations people from living their cultures and speaking their languages because of their race. The white ruling class in the United States controlled black people as slaves because they were black. Powerful white politicians required Chinese people in BC to pay a head tax because they were Chinese. The list goes on. Using race as an excuse to oppress people is unambiguously wrong. But anytime we choose one person over another for a particular position we are also consciously or unconsciously making judgement calls on a variety of things which are always tangled up with race, if only because of the socially-constructed importance we give to race. Black athletic dominance in professional sports is one still-controversial example of how selecting for certain characteristics can have a racial edge (Harpalani, 1996). Auditioning for any role in the performing arts industry where people are cast as characters from specific places (countries, cultures) at specific times (eras, life stages) is
another. What distinguishes the common task of separating people into groups for a particular position from a *racist* way of separating people into groups, is whether or not it is “rooted in hierarchies of power and oppression” (Conceison, 2004, p. 3). Because if we call excluding someone from the group, ‘men I was interested in dating’ based (indirectly) on race a racist act, then do we also have to call any one, homo or heterosexual, who chooses to be intimately involved with one gender, and exclude the other(s), sexist?49 Dating, like many other areas of life, involves selecting people on the basis of certain attributes, many of which come down to personal preferences. It is certainly important to realize and interrogate the way that our personal preferences are shaped by the soup of forces, including racist and sexist ones, that comprise individual and social life. To be sure, the slope between preference and discrimination is a slippery one, and it gets even more treacherous when the complex web of factors that influence power dynamics, both between individuals and among groups, is involved.

It is not as simple as saying that, in the context of dating in Taiwan, being white tends to privilege me and being a woman

49 *Vive la bisexualité.*
tends to disadvantage me, however that is not a bad place to start. As a white, native-English speaking foreigner, I do have the advantage of often being perceived as desirable, primarily for my cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977). Individually, I am desirable because I symbolize access to a powerful social group, the West, which is currently at the top of the political and economic food chain. But in the dating market, it is my desirability as a woman that holds more sway than my desirability as a Westerner. Further, the very traits that may be desirably connected to my being Western, such as economic power and personal freedom, may actually lower my desirability as a woman. For example, my freedom to choose, nature permitting, when and if to have children, contributed to being dismissed by a potential suitor as “too old to mother his children”.

Another key piece of the dating puzzle is the sexist nature of gender stereotypes, and these are only more complicated in cross-cultural contexts. Owing to a long history of skewed perceptions in the West, “the “Orient” is often depicted with fantasy-fueled feminine adjectives” (Prasso, 2005, p. xii). In Narrative One, when I find it hard to be attracted to Taiwanese men who use “cheesy little emoticons” or “whose entire body could fit into half of mine”, it is easy to wonder how much these
opinions are informed by patriarchal ideas of masculinity that require ‘real men’ to be physically large and strong, and emotionally cold? And in Narrative Three, how much of the hyper-sexualisation of Chinese women is a function of stereotypical ideas of femininity that are transfixed on ideas of petite, beautiful, and submissive women?

Even though I failed to find a Taiwanese boyfriend, the experience of dating in Taiwan was still advantageous for my CAL learning. Using Chinese in online chat forums, hours of face-to-face conversations, and communicating through language that was being used in a specific way, namely getting to know someone for the potential purpose of dating, were all a result of seeking out romantic liaisons in Taiwan. Further, dating a non-Chinese speaker in Taiwan, for the brief time that CM came to visit, positioned me as the sole communicator, interpreter and navigator of Taiwan not only linguistically, but culturally and geographically as well. Ironically, this was both empowering, in the sense that I was the one who possessed the relevant cultural capital, and disempowering because I had to do all the ‘work’ of travel and life for both of us, essentially whether I wanted to or not.

The paradox of agency surfaces repeatedly. I had the freedom to choose to study Chinese, in Taiwan, and I was
supported in that choice by my academic community, even awarded a scholarship to help fund the sojourn. This situation surrounded me with opportunities to use Chinese in a significant portion of my day-to-day life, and while I did this to some degree, I was also eventually pulled away from continuing to do so in part by the internalized patriarchal values that tell me my priorities as a woman should be on playing supportive roles in love and family more than on linguistic or professional success. This does not mean I would prefer to be able to prioritize professional success over family life, but I would very much like to live in a society that doesn’t systematically dismiss the work that goes into making family life good, as work that is undervalued, unskilled, and unpaid. I would like it not to feel like an either-or choice.

In Chinese class I had the power to speak out against the sexist content of the textbook, but when this was not well-received by my classmates or the instructor, “I withdrew, and instead offered my critique to my journal”. In Narrative Three, from the infinite of possible image-texts I could have selected, I chose those that tell a particular kind of story - a story created primarily for the white, heterosexual, male audience and whose basic thrust is that power, wealth, and women are yours for the taking, if only you study Chinese.
There are always constructive (or perhaps self-serving) ways to work with the set of circumstances in which a person finds themselves. For example, when Helen sees the linguistic advantage her (mostly male) classmates obtain by dating Chinese-speakers, she tells herself, “Well, if that’s what it takes, then that’s what I’m going to do too”. While she consciously chooses to find a Chinese-speaking boyfriend, she also displays a high degree of awareness of how race and gender affect an individual’s power to choose - their agency. She asks a very pointed question when she says, “Why do so many Chinese-speakers do the long, hard work of learning English, and why do so few English-speakers do the same?” (p. 71).

Kelly (2008) urges researchers to consider the broader social and historical factors in making sense of cross-cultural interactions by “connect[ing] communication at the interpersonal level with the larger international context” (p. 263). As white foreigners, the characters in the narratives are members of the world’s leading cultural and economic powerhouse, the West. Whether an individual is conscious of that privilege or not, they benefit from it and assume it in the way they move through their individual and social spheres. There are complex ways that the very act of learning Chinese can be understood to be both exploiting, and working to unlearn white privilege. In one sense,
for a white Westerner, learning a foreign language can be a way to value the knowledge of another, non-dominant culture. Of course, this only tends to happen when that culture is perceived as valuable, or when there is some ‘cultural capital’ to be had by doing so (there isn’t much demand for studying Uighur, nor for many of the other numerous languages spoken by China’s non-Han minorities, for example). Notwithstanding this clear bias, we white foreigners who spend time in Taiwan or China are freely choosing to put ourselves in a context where we are a minority and are unlikely to fully understand all that is happening around us, something that tends to be an uncomfortable and destabilizing experience. On the other hand, the opportunity to sojourn abroad, and to choose how much effort we are willing to put in towards proficiency and/or accuracy, as well as having access to a social and economic climate that make all of this relatively easy for us, are possible only because of our privileged place in the world’s current pecking order.

5.5 Relating Narrative and Life

In the sense that modern society is predominantly patriarchal, and as patriarchy is a system of human organization founded on hierarchy, oppression and control (Johnson, 2005), it is impossible to claim that racism and sexism, two types of oppression, are absent from the narratives that are created in a
patriarchal ethos. It is simultaneously depressing and empowering to realize that the way I perceive, make sense of, and integrate my experiences of learning Chinese into the overall narrative of my life is profoundly shaped by patriarchal values, opinions, and norms. It is depressing because to be shaped by patriarchy means, in part and to a variable degree, to have internalized misogyny, and to unconsciously consider a male-dominant, male-identified, male-centered way of life to be normal, natural and right. But it is also empowering, because a problem can only be changed once it is recognized as a problem. Awareness is critical.

This brings us to the realm of my second research question, which is ‘In the context of my lived CAL experience, how does the way I understand the relationship between narrative and life create opportunities for conscious change?’

Essentially, I understand the relationship between narrative and life the way many scholars in the humanities and social sciences do, as a co-constructed one. Pavlenko (2002) asserts that “research convincingly demonstrates that narratives are not purely individual productions – they are powerfully shaped by social, cultural and historical conventions as well as by the relationship between storyteller and the interlocutor (whether an interviewer, a researcher, a friend, or an imaginary reader)” (p. 112).
In my case, and this would be true for the overwhelming majority of the world’s current population, those social, cultural and historical conventions are deeply rooted in patriarchy.

Narrative does not only make sense of the past; it also informs how we understand the present. To begin with, the boundary between the present and the past is an extremely tenuous one. Even as we are experiencing a moment, it is already slipping into the past. Reflecting on the impermanent nature of time, please consider the following:

Imagine you happen upon a scene where you see an angry man in a violent rage, cursing and beating a woman who has blood streaming down her face. It is probable that you would be alarmed, perhaps think that you were witnessing a dangerous, illegal situation, and immediately go to get help.\textsuperscript{50} Now imagine that you happen upon the same scene but this time you also notice that there is a camera filming the man and the woman, a make-up artist off to the side with fake blood at the ready, and several other people standing around without any sense of alarm. In this scenario, it is probable that the story you would be telling yourself about what is happening is different than the one above. You would likely think that a movie was

\textsuperscript{50} This is only one of the ways this scene could be interpreted; I am not suggesting that everyone would react in a uniform way, but merely putting forward one likely, reasonable response.
being filmed, that the woman wasn’t really being hurt and therefore nothing illegal or dangerous was happening after all. These thoughts – the way you interpret and narrate experience as you are living it – in addition to reflecting your perceptions and attitudes about the situation, also directly influence your actions. They determine how the immediately upcoming present moments of your life play out; you could find yourself urgently seeking help from the police, or passively standing by watching an intriguing scene, or compelled to speak out against violence in the media or violence against women in general, or interested in a new career in the movie industry, or something else entirely.

The message in the above example is not a new one, but how often do we remember to be aware of it? As we narrate our lives, day-to-day and moment-to-moment, do we pay attention to how much of a given scene we are able to see? Are we aware of how we interpret what we see? Can we see what others see? How much do we understand their interpretations? Do we evaluate how well the various interpretations are able to serve us as individuals? As communities? As countries? Can we imagine different interpretations? What is standing in the way of interpreting our lives as the best, most blissful state of existence possible? What can be done about those obstructions? How can shifting the narratives we tell ourselves about them begin
the process of change? How can covering new narrative ground alter our linguistic, and indeed our very life trajectories?

5.6 Conclusion: Opening to Narrative Living

I am not intending to oversimplify the complex web of very real, external factors that people must deal with as they make sense of their lives (deeply-rooted systems of privilege and oppression being a key example); I do not wish to put the onus solely and squarely on individuals to change, which would actually subtly work to shift the focus away from the root systemic causes of privilege and oppression, and allow them to remain unexamined. I do, however, want to draw attention to the narrative power that we do have in that process of living autobiographically, for “autobiography is not merely something we read in a book; rather, as a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in and day out, autobiography structures our living” (Eakin, 2008, p. 4).

Non-patriarchal ways of being and narrating one’s life are possible, they are just not the default option, or ‘path of least resistance’ (Johnson, 2005). Anytime one opts for an alternative path, it is simultaneously an individual, social, and systemic challenge - multi-dimensionality that I have tried to reflect by creating the three autobiographical narratives in this research which allow for foci to be concentrated at personal, communal,
and societal levels respectively. In order to choose different paths from the superficially friction-free, but actually deeply harmful ones offered by patriarchy, we need agency. And to more substantially and substantively connect with and activate our sense of agency, we need to understand those factors - internally, externally and dialectically - that augment or diminish it. We need to seek out those people and contexts that augment it, and challenge those that diminish it, all the while questioning how and to what ends we are using our agency.

In this research I have tried to explore some specific ways that agency is bound up with race and gender in particular, and how agency in turn shapes the stories we live and the narratives we tell. I have not done an exhaustive job of this, in fact quite far from it, but rather I feel that I have begun the work of creating openings into what is an important, complex, and urgent matter. I have tried to let the art of this arts-informed inquiry take me where I’ve needed to go. I have tried to respect academic traditions while also tenaciously pushing for new traditions that celebrate the personal and the creative as legitimate research approaches. I have also tried to remain aware that my intentions in writing are not only to contribute to scholarship, play in creativity, and relax into catharsis, but also to invite you, the reader, into a safe space that may compel you to find your own
artistic openings, to discover different, more bliss-inducing ways of narrating your unique lives, and to heliotropically incline your deep, dark places towards the light.

And do it now, please.

Do it while remembering that every thought is a narrative thought, and every narrative is a decision. By choosing this thought we are also not choosing that thought, not choosing all other possible thoughts. As we narrate our lives, we can consciously choose to spend more energy on recognizing systems of privilege and oppression, and on recognizing how we are currently participating in them. Then we can begin to participate in ways that constructively move us – both individually and collectively - towards greater equality, greater peace, and greater love. As we narrate our lives, amidst the swirling mix of forces operating on us, we can begin to recognize our own power. We can learn more efficient ways to swim, and how to avoid getting caught up in eddies. We can create waves, and we can surf each new ocean swell without losing sight of the totality, impermanence, and raw power of the experience.\(^5\)

This wave too, will break.

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\(^5\) We can even (take all our friends and) move to a totally different beach.
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