

**Still Remember the Moments:
When I learned to read and write in Chinese and English**

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A Biographical Note:

I am a second year MA student in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia. My research interests include language and literacy, literature, and literature teaching, discourse and stylistics, cultural literacy and identity. I have taught ESL/EFL students English at West China Teachers University (for two years) and Southwest University of Finance and Economics (for six years), in China.

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Abstract

This paper, which employs a narrative method, draws upon my personal experiences of L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English) literacy acquisition through a particular era – China’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, during which time regular schooling was interrupted. In this paper, I seek to illustrate that the process of acquiring literacy reflects the learner’s interactions situated in family experiences, historical events, and social, cultural, and political contexts. I thus argue that literacy is a social practice and that literacy acquisition and development take many forms, as they involve the practice of “lived through” experiences of the learner.

Prologue

Reading Kubota's (2001) autobiographic narrative essay reminds me of my own experiences of literacy acquisition of Chinese as my mother tongue and English as the second language. Retrospectively, I could not help thinking of those lingering moments that have marked my personal growth with my literacy development in the way that language learning is not merely a process of literacy acquisition, rather, more of immersion in and emergence of lived experiences. Recalling those experiences brings me back to the unforgettable moments of language learning inextricably woven with my family experiences, historical events, and political, social, and cultural encounters.

My Family and My Early Literacy Acquisition

I was born into an intellectual family. My father was a teacher of mathematics and my mother was a gynaecologist and obstetrician. With two elder brothers, I was the baby sister in the family. I remember that our family literacy activities started before my preschool days. My parents would often call upon the three of us children to perform reading while they acted as audience and "contest judges." We would sing songs, recite poems, and read stories out aloud. Activity of this kind was the earliest literacy development of my life. Although my father was adept in mathematics and sciences, he was exceptionally talented in literacy and literature. He read and wrote four languages: Chinese, English, Russian, and Japanese. His handwriting in Chinese character was exquisite both in ink and with brush. Early in our life, we three siblings learnt handwriting using both fountain pen and writing brush and the practice books were all classical Chinese poetry. We used the exercises for practising handwriting, but we did not quite understand the meaning of the poems from the practice books. A model of reading, memorizing, and acting became an indispensable part of our daily lives. I enjoyed reading, even as a toddler. As my mother later described to me, I often held a picture book upside down and pronounced, "Gong Gong..." and other unidentifiable words. I assume that the words I uttered were only sounds I mimicked or created according to the pictures in the book.

When I was three years old, my father was transferred to Sichuan Teachers' University in Chengdu, capital of Sichuan Province, to teach Statistics and Probability in the Department of Mathematics. He only took me along with him, as my mother could not leave her job in the hospital, so my two brothers stayed with my mother and I went with my father. This opportunity provided me with a special environment in close proximity to my father and to intellectual and literary surroundings. We lived on campus; from what I recall, my father was at home most of the time reading at his desk, and I sometimes carried a little stool to the front door of our apartment building where I did my own reading. I don't remember how fluently I read, but I was reading picture books because my father taught me how to read. Although at the age of three, I hadn't acquired the ability to read and write, my father would read one sentence with his finger pointing to the words and I mimicked him repeating the sentence. I enjoyed such reading so much and felt proud acting as if I knew the words. Additionally, our next-door neighbour, Grandpa Wun and his young wife (25-years his junior and former student) often gave me books to read. Very often, I would sit on Grandpa Wun's lap while he was teaching me how to read the books they gave me. They loved to have me with them and I loved to go to their place, especially on weekends when their three grown-up daughters came home from university. There was one thing that puzzled me and I couldn't figure out why I should call Mr. Wun, Grandpa Wun, but his wife Aunt Feng. Their daughters called them father and mother. Then I called them *Da Jie*, *Er Jie*, and *San Jie* ("Big Sister," "Sister Two," "and Sister Three"). Shouldn't I also call Mrs. Wun Grandma Feng instead of Aunt Feng? I never asked my father why, probably because I felt that it was a forbidden question to ask. I became friend with the Wun family and Uncle Chen,

another neighbour and my father's colleague. I don't remember having played a lot with kids of my own age. Reading books then seemed to be my main pastime. I still remember one incident in particular. One day while reading outside our apartment, I happened to lift up my head and saw my mother with a big bag hung on her right shoulder and my two brothers on either side of her, walking toward me. They came to visit us and brought me a lot of picture books. As a consequence, I have never forgotten that moving sight!

My father had many books piled on a huge bamboo bookshelf and many on each side of his burgundy-coloured desk with several drawers on both sides. When he had to teach in the evening, my father would take me with him. I remember the lecturing room was huge, especially in the eyes of a three- and four-year old. I would be sitting on the lap of one of the students reading or drawing while they were listening to my father. Sichuan is a local province where people speak Sichuan dialect, but my father, in lectures and formal conversations, as I recall, would speak common colloquial Chinese – in standard Chinese pronunciation. Three years of living on the university campus with my father shaped my speaking and reading habit, and fostered my awareness of discourse register in speaking and writing. Although it was not until I entered university that I started to speak common colloquial Chinese, I was the only one in my family, except my father, who spoke and read in standard Chinese pronunciation at any time and for any occasions. Much later, when I graduated as an MA in English linguistics and literature, I hosted TV shows and broadcasted in both Chinese and English. People often commended me for speaking eloquently, especially for someone whose dialect has a strong distinctive accent. Reading aloud and memorizing the texts significantly contributed to my oral and written Chinese literacy proficiency. This “read-aloud” habit was reinforced at every stage of my literacy acquisition of Chinese, and later of English as my second language.

Three years after teaching at Sichuan Teachers' University in Chengdu, my father could not bear the unending separation with my mother and brothers, so we came back to reunite with them. By then, the Chinese Cultural Revolution of world renown had already taken place. During the six years of my elementary schooling, classes were often suspended because of the constant political movements. There was a lack of schooling at any level of education. While higher education during the ten-year's Cultural Revolution was completely suspended, elementary and secondary schooling, though existing, was regularly interrupted. Deprived of any hope of pursuing higher education, we were motivated to become skilled and talented in certain specialities, such as sports, dancing, singing, and so forth. Most of my school days were the times for rehearsing and performing of the “Eight Revolutionary Model Operas (including two Chinese ballet operas) advocated by the paramount leader Chairman Mao's wife, Jiang Qing. The “Eight Revolutionary Model Operas” movement, prevalent throughout China, was the main or only source of Chinese literature, art, and music during that time. A slogan that read: “Learn, Sing, and Perform Revolutionary Model Operas!” rang and resounded everywhere and among every single family. A lot of reading and memorizing and reciting of the lines and words became the main part of my language reading practice. Through these intensified experiences, I acquired and fostered my discourse ability in reading and writing by speaking and performing. Countless times, we played drama, performed art, and acted language. Intense experience of this kind did improve my ability to read and write in my secondary education.

My L1 and L2 Learning in High School

I seemed to be advanced in my language skills when I entered junior high. In the first year, we had Chinese language course as well as English as a foreign language. I loved to read and write and I was thirsty for learning foreign languages. I wanted to be like my father, so I

used every means of learning my mother tongue (L1) to learn English (L2): reading out aloud, reciting, memorizing. My English scores were the highest in the class. Very often, Teacher Tuo, our English teacher, called upon me to take the lead in class reading-aloud practice. One day when a schoolmate in the senior high came to ask me about how to study English, I realized that I was already popular in school in my foreign language learning. Her name was You Yong; her mother was working with my mother in the same hospital and she was a singer and actor in our performing arts propaganda team at school. That was very encouraging and I made even greater efforts to study English. There was of course no speaking environment; we only learned to read and understand and we had very little writing in English. I loved my foreign language learning. I read out aloud every day and usually made myself memorize the whole text I was reading. However, without making a conscious attempt to write in English, I was not comfortable in using English in writing of any kind in my entire high school education. Then, all of a sudden, English was suspended in schools. “Without learning A.B.C., we are still waging revolution!” was the slogan sounding over the entire nation. “ABC” indicated the alphabet of English language and English classes were ruled out in schools for quite a while. I was utterly disappointed.

Then, there was a time when Chinese higher education was partly resumed, however only children of “families with good background” were admitted to the university through recommendation. These students were known as “Worker-Peasant-Soldier Students.” As time moved on, my future life was still at stake even though I excelled in my academic studies at school as well as in personal conduct. It was unspeakably clear that anyone who came from “problem family” would have no future, not even finding a job. The only chance he or she had was to be skilled in a particular specialization. My family had been classified counterrevolutionary, simply because my father was an intellectual. Children of such families were labelled “whelps” of “The Black Five.” (1) If I ever wished to obtain a job after I graduated from high school, I had to have a specialization that was in demand in lieu of the support of good family background. I would have little chance of becoming an urban worker, or joining the army, or to be recommended for admission to the university – those were the most desirable positions anyone from the good family background would be able to hold. The future for me, as I saw it, was to be sent to the countryside to become a “re-educated youth” - a ‘permanent peasant’ like my brother, or to stay in the city jobless. For vocational and surviving purposes, I continued to strengthen my stage talents.

When the Cultural Revolution headed toward its last stage, I entered senior high. We had more regular classes than in the first few years of the cultural movement. Language learning and teaching became more regular. However, the textbooks were usually compiled from the *Sayings of Chairman Mao* and some stories of revolutionary literature of that time. Rich classical Chinese poetry and literature were banned from the textbooks during the Cultural Revolution. Nevertheless, it was during my junior and senior high that my writing ability in Chinese was enhanced, because we wrote many reports on our behaviour and thoughts almost every week in the courses of Chinese Language and Political Studies. We wrote personal reports, group reports, and class reports, from which we learned to write expository prose. We were also trained to think with self-judgement and self-criticism. We practiced writing essays of criticising others and ourselves. There was little emphasis on narrative writing in and out of school.

Because of our “Black Five” social status, my parents were made to constantly write self-criticism. To try to help them with the endless writing, day and night, I drafted and copied those writings on wall posters with a writing brush. I taught myself Chinese brush calligraphy when I was fourteen at which time I was sent away to my grandparents in Kunmin, Yunnan Province. It was for my safety that my parents sent me far away when their political persecution became

ominously terrifying and perilous. While staying with my grandparents, I started to miss my family in Sichuan. I began to read some of the old literary books kept by my grandfather and started to keep diaries. The writing then was narrative and expressive of emotions and feelings. I also started to practice Chinese brush calligraphy, although I did practice a bit when I was little, and became very good with one style called *Lishu*, one of the fairly old calligraphic styles. Half a year later in Yunnan, I missed my parents so much that my brother took the train to Kunmin to bring me home. He used one third of his entire income (about 70 *Yuan*) of the whole year labouring as a “rusticated youth” (*zhiquing*) to pay our train fares. Happily, I joined my parents and the calligraphic skill I obtained in Kunmin became very practical and impressive. I employed it in my mother’s self-criticism writings and in school for the “Big-Character Posters” (*dazibao*) displayed on the walls. These pragmatic values motivated me to learn more in writing. My reading skills through speaking, performing, and acting developed in parallel with my writing.

In the third year of my senior high, there was a story-telling movement, one of “revolutionary stories”, I was chosen to represent the school and competed to perform story telling in the district. I wanted to continue to be in competition until I became a provincial and national story-telling actor, but my complex family background no doubt deprived me of any dream of that kind to come true. Although it was already at the later stage of the ten-year’s Cultural Revolution, my family situation was no better than before. My father was still constantly kept in “*niupeng*” (cowshed) or under surveillance, but he had never lost hope for the day when he could be able to teach again. He never ceased in appealing against being wronged, but those letters of appeal were as futile as if a stone were dropped into the sea.

To everyone’s surprise, our situation became even worse upon the end of the Cultural Revolution. My father was imprisoned once more in a far-away town and was unable to send any more letters out. The long silence was unbearable for us. The hopeless and devastating situation compelled me to plead for my father. I wrote a narrative letter in the first-person voice, the voice of a daughter about her father, addressed directly to the People’s Daily (*Renminribao*), the newspaper of the Central Party Committee of China. Miraculously, we got a reply! The order of inquiry and investigation, was issued from the Central Party Committee to the Provincial Party Committee, and passed over to the District Public Security Bureau where we lived. My father was released immediately from prison. My parents heard people say, that it was Huang Yongfeng’s daughter, who wrote a letter that touched the superiors... We were so happy and I cried for joy! My parents were so proud of me that they praised me for knowing how to speak and write. It was at that moment that I realized how powerful writing could be - the choice of words, the style, the register, and the way of narrating – all these embody and express thoughts and ideas. I was sixteen that year.

My English Literacy in Universities

The unprecedented Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of China finally ended in 1976. A year later I graduated from high school. The admission for post-secondary education resumed in 1977. It was a monumental landmark in the history of Chinese higher education after the disastrous Cultural Revolution. The first batch of perspective students selected from the severe competitiveness of entrance examinations started their exciting life at university in March 1978. I was one of them. I studied at Nanchong Teachers’ College, majoring in English. We studied so hard to make up for every minute we had lost during the past ten years. I was the youngest. My peers later described me as “the youngest university student in our school!” The zest and diligence among the students were unimaginable. However, I was astounded to find myself lost in class

when our Chinese teacher of English lectured in English. I could read (and write a little bit), but I couldn't speak or understand spoken English. Most of my classmates could at least understand what teachers were saying in class, for some of them had learned solid English in their secondary schools before the Cultural Revolution. They were much older than I was. I then made a resolution to succeed in my studies. I challenged myself in the environment where English was not commonly spoken or heard. English was mostly spoken only in class, and we had no native-speaking English teachers. I applied the old methods of acquiring my L1 to L2 learning: reading out aloud and memorizing, imagining myself unable to speak Chinese. I spoke English all day, every day. In addition, I seemed not to tell day from night when my classmates asked me "Did you sleep? Did you eat?" Two months later, we had mid-term; I soared up to one of the top four in the whole department; I got 100 marks for our intensive reading and "A" for my oral English. Since then, I always maintained top marks in the English Department. Some students from the Chinese Language Department once curiously asked my classmates "Could Chen Hong speak Chinese? We never hear her utter a Chinese word!"

In the third year, French was the compulsory course for the students of English. My French learning was also commendable. Four years of study, however, did not significantly enhance our writing skill in English although we did take an English composition course. Our study of English was mostly grammar-based, and Chomsky's theory had a heavy impact on English teaching in China. It was generally agreed at the time that if you read a lot you would automatically write well. It was not the case with me. I assigned myself many great literary works to read during my summer and winter vocations, but I didn't do reading logs. Although I did keep a journal in English, it was very limited. After four years, I graduated and remained to teach in the English Department. I taught students of English intensive reading and oral English. During the two years of teaching, I religiously used the same methods of my own studies to teach my students. I focused on their pronunciation, articulation, and communicative skills and encouraged them to read out aloud and memorize. Although the course did not involve writing, their writing practice, if at all, was limited to their story- (re) telling (in written form). The test assessment of writing ability then was not a focus in the early years after the higher education was restored in 1977.

Two years later after being an assistant teacher of English, I attended a three-year's graduate program at Sichuan Foreign Languages Institute, studying English linguistics and literature. We then had native-speaking professors from Canada, the U.S. and Australia as well as Chinese professors who returned from their studies in English speaking countries. We did a lot of reading literature and book report writing. My reading and writing abilities improved quickly. I did a great deal of bilingual interpretation and translation that undeniably helped me with my reading comprehension and writing ability. I completed my thesis in my first MA. However, it seems to me that it is only now, when I am studying for my MA at the University of British Columbia, that I am more comfortable and confident in engaging myself with academic writing.

Final Remarks

Literacy is a social practice (Rogers, 1999). My experiences of L1 and L2 literacy acquisition have marked out a path embedded deeply in social, cultural, and political permeable soil. Literacy acquisition and development take many forms, as they involve the practice of "lived through" experiences of the learner. As Vygotsky's (1962, 1987) work shows such practice focuses on the role of social interaction in the development of language and thought. According to Vygotsky, the internal development processes that are necessary for learning are only able to develop when children are interacting with people in their environment. Experiences of literacy acquisition and development in my mother tongue, English as L2, and French as L3 have indeed reflected the interactions situated in

the social, cultural, and political ambience and occurrences of a particular moment in history. Thus, a person's literacy development, in this very sense, unfolds the path of his or her growth derived from the richest sources of life. Whenever I look in retrospect of my path of literacy, I feel proud of and gratified with the experiences that my quest for literacy and life has given me.

Notes

1. The Black Five (*hei wulei*) were landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, bad elements, and rightists.

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