Writing about my Father in Her Father's Daughter

Alice Pung

Anaïs Nin wrote that: 'If you do not breathe through writing, if you do not cry out in writing, or sing in writing, then don't write, because our culture has no use for it.' Writing my second book took a lot out of me. In 2008, I went to Beijing as part of an Asialink residency, to try and write about my cultural roots. Roots of a culture begin with the ground, and so I was hoping for an epiphany of sorts, hoping that when I reached my grandmother's Chinese ancestral town of Jie Yang, ChaoZhou, that I would be able to see the earth as sacred and feel a connection. But when I arrived I saw that a modern developed city - complete with its own MacDonalds store - had grown out of the foreign country that my grandmother had described to me in my childhood. L.P. Hartley wrote that 'the past is a foreign country, they do things differently there.' It felt impossible to write about a place in which I had no immediate connection, and so I returned back to Beijing. Even though I tried to write 'cultural' stories during my stay, they ended up being amusing anecdotes with no substance, like a *qipao* without a body. One or two of the stories ended up being at the very beginning of *Her Father's Daughter*; my editors liked them even though I was embarrassed by them. In retrospect, they

needed to be there to mark my development. They are there to show that progress requires letting go of this idea of perfection. Ironically, they are also the pieces I worked on the longest—I was polishing something that did not have much mettle.

The real heartbeat of the story emerged when I called my father up in the evenings from my small flat in Peking University. He wanted to know that I was warm and safe, and he also wanted to tell me about the bushfires that were raging through Victoria at that time. Even though we lived nowhere near Kinglake, and even though my father had never been there before, he was deeply affected by the government allowing residents to 'stay and defend' their houses. 'How can property matter more than people?' he would lament. That evening when I got off the phone, I thought about my father preparing for bed, and how he would lock every door of the house and close every window. He would make sure all the knives were in their proper place in the drawers. And every knife would have had its tip deliberately filed to a blunt nub. This is when I realised that instead of trying to set my story in an 'exotic' location (which rendered all descriptions two dimensional and florid) the tale was meant to take place in Melbourne, my place of birth and home. And I also realised that the story was going to be completely character-based, about my relationship with my father.

After working out that the story had to firstly be from the perspective of a sixty year old man, I knew that a first-person narrator with my father's 'voice' would not work. Firstly, because I am a thirty-one year old female, it would be presumptuous to think that I could write in the voice of someone with over sixty years of life experience. Second, because my father thinks in a different language than I, I would have had to translate his thoughts, and I could find no way to do this that would not make him sound like he was speaking 'broken' or incomplete English in first-person. I also discovered that the more I wrote in third person, the freer I felt as the narrator. A first-person narrator is not going to be noticing how the streaks of sunset looked like a claw across the sky when they are ploughing the fields as a

Alice Pung's parents soon after their arrival in Australia

slave labourer with an AK47-toting soldier standing next to them. All of a sudden the world of 1975 Cambodia emerged in its technicolour horror because I could use a wider lens.

Since my father's voice was in the third person, and this book is a 'conversation' between a father and a daughter, I could then not put myself, the 'daughter narrator', in the story in first person. To write about myself in first person while leaving my father in third is to try and own a significantly larger portion of the story than I was due: a reader would probably then read the book as me *telling a story about my father*, *from my perspective*. I wanted both voices to have equal weight and gravitas. Interestingly, Dorothy Lessing observed that it is actually the first person narrator that alienates, because the capital 'I' is specific, whereas the third-person voice is general—the reader could be 'she'. I wanted the reader to feel like this could be *any daughter*, and *any father*, if trapped in the particular set of circumstances of this specific father-daughter relationship.

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Many people have assumed that I wrote about the character of myself in the third person as a distancing technique, but this is not true. I saw much more of myself and my flaws in third person than I ever did in first. Unhindered by my previous voice in my first book, which was the voice of a twenty-something-year old armed to the teeth with caustic wit and black humour; I learned to lay down these weapons and be more vulnerable to the reader. As a result, I have not read back over, or even looked at, the 'daughter' parts of the book since it has been published. To me it is almost like reading back on a private diary I thought I had shredded years ago.

Lastly, the most confronting chapters of the book, the chapters that have given writers like Alex Miller nightmares and disturbed reviewers no matter how kind the review, seem so jarring to a reader because I did not follow a conventional, chronological structure. Year Zero in Democratic Kampuchea (April 17, 1975, a date etched forever

in my parents' memories) does not happen at the start of the book but only two thirds of the way in. In fact, this is the inverse migrant-success story: it begins with the fulfilment of the Great Australian Dream, about a man who is so comfortable in life that he lives in a mansion on top of a hill in one of the safest suburbs in Melbourne and runs a thriving electronics business. His children can travel the world and he can Skype them. Yet everything he does is permeated by inordinate levels of anxiety.

This story is about a paring back to the bare bones of the narratives that shape a man's life. You find out that he lived for four years without modern technology, running water, medicine, and often, without food. Yes it is a story about privation, but the privation chapters could not *come first*. This is because no writing ever exists in isolation of the social and political context in which it was written. I do not set out to write 'refugee' stories, mainly because a refugee is 'one who seeks refuge' from both a Buddhist perspective, and an international law perspective ('owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted', Article 1, *United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*). Yet the 'refugee-turned-success' narrative works

Alice Pung's sister Alison and father on their return journey to Cambodia

because it garners people's sympathy and affection, particularly when humour is used to enhance the poignancy of the narrative. I know how to tell this story—I have been doing it for over seven years in my talks to rural groups and inner-city book clubs and schools. When I do tell it I am entirely sincere, but I am also aware of my audience: I know that tacitly certain audiences do not want to hear tales of hardship. In fact, my father's concern and his only comment about the book, during all the chapters I emailed him, was, 'do you think there is too much suffering in this part? White people don't want to hear about too much suffering. It depresses them.'

Yet I had to take risks with this book. I wanted to counter this narrative that the only migrant or refugee story worth telling is one that leads to worldly 'success' and assimilation at the end. Chaim Potok wrote beautiful, intensely deep stories about the Hasidic Jewish community in the United States who were distinctly 'un-assimilated', yet his books opened our worlds to a richly developed and nuanced culture. It is deeply disappointing to me that we are a nation of immigrants and yet we need to keep our complex and multifaceted true selves *apart*, in order to be *a part* of this national narrative.

If I placed the more shocking 'Killing Fields' chapters of the book first, the book would inevitably and simply follow the migrant trajectory of 'success', but my father would always be seen as an eternal 'refugee' because our current mainstream discourse about 'those who've come across the seas' is polarising and unsophisticated. And I am well aware that no one will take literary non-fiction seriously in this political climate if it is about a contentious political issue. One of my favourite poets, Robert Cording, says this very useful passage about writing poetry, which I believe to be equally applicable to writing creative non-fiction:

> If the poem feels like it has sifted and arranged received ideas, then it will fail. The person has to feel, I think, as if there's a real person struggling with real experiences that will not yield some

handy lesson, but nevertheless is not entirely without meaning. The voice that convinces will always be the voice of an individual, not as a spokesperson for this or that idea.

So this is not a story culminating in grand triumph over adversity—if anything, it is about very ordinary things beneath which lie the true character tales: a father who does not believe in post-traumatic stress yet who files the tips of every knife in the house to a blunt nub, and a daughter who goes to an inner-city dating agency because her parents are setting her up before she is 'on the shelf' at twenty-five. I wanted to combine the everyday Anne-Tyler-type events of my father's current life in suburban Australia with the blinding flashes of unimaginable apocalyptic hell, to create a new kind of art that says quietly but clearly—this is how survivors live and love: slowly, patiently, and doggedly.

To write a grandiose heroic tale about my dad would be true but annoying as most people think their fathers are heroes: how could any of them compare to a man who survived genocide? Yet to write a book that is *more* true, I had to write about the parts of my dad in which a reader would find *every dad*. You don't need to survive trauma to fear for your kid's safety. You don't have to be cut off from modern civilisation to be in childlike awe over emerging new technologies. And you don't have to be a hero to be able to love wholeheartedly.