

Good evening everyone! My name is Bree.

So, last week, I was sitting in my bed with an empty Google doc open on my laptop, thinking about what to write for my speech at this dinner, and my mind was coming up completely blank. I often struggle to find things to say about my own cultural identity. For example, for a Term 1 English essay this year in which we were asked to write about our personal experiences with Australian identity, I just made a bunch of stuff up and submitted 1000 words of pure waffle to my teacher. I think this very specific difficulty might just stem from the fact that Chinese and Australian cultures alike are so completely ingrained within my life. For instance, suppose an alien came up to you and said, "Wow! That's so cool how you're eating with a spoon!" How are you even supposed to react to that? That's just your way of life - I think sometimes it's forgotten that culture is simply that, a way of life. For most, it's not anything too novel or interesting, and so I've found that while you can be proud of your own culture, it's harder to be fervently interested in a culture unless you're somewhat distanced from it.

I've dipped my toes in diaspora fiction + diaspora writing before, and I get the feeling that the stories which are the most highly praised and the cultures which are most widely celebrated are the rare, unique ones. This does not bode very well for me, since my parents immigrated from China, a country with a population of 1.4 billion. More unremarkable still, my surname, Wang, is the most common surname in the whole country, and I share it with literally hundreds of millions of other people.

Then I thought, well, since my life is so run-of-the-mill, how about I share the stories of my grandparents? So, that's what I'm going to do now.

Just to give you guys some context, I brought a map of China here with me today. So if you imagine China as a big rooster, my parents are from the rooster's head and neck. My maternal grandmother is from Harbin, and my mum, who's sitting over there, grew up in the Heilongjiang area, which is China's northernmost province. My dad, who's also here tonight, is from Fushun, a city in a nearby northern province called Liaoning. Oddly, immigrants from southern China far outnumber those from the north - at least, that's a pattern I've noticed here in Melbourne. I digress.

A bit of a history lesson for anyone who doesn't know - in the 40s and 50s, China went through the land reform movement, which was essentially a confiscation of all private land and a systematic persecution of landlords. This was pretty bad news for my great-grandfather, who was a landlord at the time. By landlord, I don't mean he owned a couple thousand square metres of land - it was more like a suburb-sized plot of land, a Monash-sized plot. In other words, the movement was AFTER people like him.

Fortunately for my grandfather, he was saved by his own good deeds, and survived the movement despite being a landlord. In China, there was a tradition of paying off any rent before the new year to mark a fresh start. However, many of my great-grandfather's tenants were poor and unable to pay rent, with barely enough food to get by. He met this crisis with generosity, and not only did he not push to collect rent, he also distributed food to these households on New Year's Eve so his tenants could celebrate the festival with their families. This was extremely atypical among landlords of the time, as many landlords would beat or even kill tenants if they were unable to pay rent on time, hence their persecution during the land reform movement. Eventually, he had to relinquish his land, but miraculously, none of his former tenants reported him to the government. So, he was written off as a farmer on his identification documents and allowed to live.

Fast forward to today, and I'm sitting in the car on the way home from school as my mum drops this absolute lore bomb on me, and tells me all about these stories, these experiences of people that I never knew, but that I share DNA with, and were loved by people I love.

I only found out about these stories last year, and they helped me connect with my cultural heritage in a way which I had never experienced before. Although I can speak and listen, I'm not great at Chinese, but these stories truly transcend language. It feels almost surreal to connect people so close to me, separated only by time, living through events from history textbooks so sanitised that they feel borderline fictional. For example, the other day I was watching movie bloopers from the early 1900s, and even though I logically knew I shouldn't have, I felt a sense of surprise upon seeing the black-and-white actors and actresses, who usually appear so solemn, bursting into laughter when they forgot their lines. I'm going on a tangent - but my point is, the key to connecting with our pasts and our cultures is by remembering that no matter how far back in history you go, tears have always been salty, laughter has always sounded the same, and people have always been people.

That's all I have to say for today. Thank you everyone for listening!