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A TOOL OF STRUGGLE: THE CHALLENGE AND CHARM OF WRITING IN ANOTHER LANGUAGE

"Foreign language is a tool of class struggle," said Karl Max. For many years, the English language was my tool of struggle. I was taught the sentence in secondary school when I hardly knew all the letters in English. Yet we stretched our mouths into the alien sound. An alien and strange sound indeed. Our teacher spoke so-called English with a strong Nanjing accent. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year would sound something like this: .

Even that didn't last long. At 16, my education ended abruptly as my mother sent me to work at a rocket factory. As an escape route, I decided to teach myself English, in the hopes of getting a job as an interpreter outside the factory. I became fascinated by this language system that is so different from our characters.

When I left China for England in 1990, I dared to pursue my childhood dream by taking a course in journalism. Now I am a writer as well as a journalist, reporting on Chinese society for international media while based in Beijing. I have to admit that I am not naturally linguistically gifted. I just sent my bio to my Italian publisher, and boasted that I am a frequent speaker on the BBC, CNN and National Public Radio. In the 'Public', I unfortunately missed out an 'l'. If anything, pubic is certainly not public.

People write in another language for different reasons. Samuel Beckett deliberately wrote *Waiting for Godot* in French so that its style would be different. Joseph Conrad wrote in English, not his native tongue, with a felicity rarely seen in native English speakers.

I shall not compare myself to these masters. Why would I choose to write in English? First of all, it frees me politically. I wouldn't otherwise be able to publish books deemed politically sensitive in mainland China. After a book I wrote in Chinese entitled *The Western Image of the Chairman* was banned from publication in China, having failed to meet the censor's criteria, I've made it a point to write in English. Also, it frees me literally. Since it's not my native tongue, I can be bold; I can take an adventure. Let me give you an example. On a balmy spring day, I took my children to a park where flowers suddenly burst into blossom. I wanted to use the word 'bewitched' to convey a sense of dramatic and sudden change. I tried at first: "Bewitched by spring, the park came to life and the glorious peonies blossomed everywhere." Then I decided to use a more active verb: "Spring had bewitched the park where glorious peonies blossomed everywhere." Please do tell me which sentence works better or if they work at all.

The first Roman emperor famously said: "When you gain a new language, you gain a new soul." I am not sure that I've gained a new soul, but I do feel that speaking a different language brings out different sides of my personality. For example, when using Chinese, I speak faster and louder and I don't sound as sophisticated or polished as I sometimes pretend to in English. Writing in English frees me from any inhibitions I may have. If I had written my memoir in English, I think the sex scene would have been less detailed. I am not sure Chinese is the best language to describe emotions or personal relationships. For

example, in Chinese the very word 'romantic' – ruo man ti ke – comes from the transliteration of the English word.

As mentioned I am not gifted with language. But sometimes, I also worry that my English has become so fluent that it has lost is quaintness. One of the Chinese memoirs I much enjoyed for its freshness of language is a book entitled *Mr. China's Son, a Villager's Life during the Cultural Revolution*. "Her feet were seriously pierced by stings," he wrote. Such sentences do bring readers the delight of tasting something different or fresh.

Borrowing our dated and rich idioms can not only spice up the language but also evoke a sense of place. I commented on a young colleague's appearance: "The moustache on his even-featured face looked as out of place as painted legs on a snake." I often don't directly translate the idiom but weave the concept into the text. For example, we have a phrase called 'angry hair shoots a hat'. When my mother told me that I was to stop my schooling to go to work, I wrote: "If I had been wearing a hat, the force of my rage would have shot it into the air."

My experiments don't always work. In my first novel, *Lotus*, a book about prostitution set in modern-day China, I described how Lotus, the main character, sent money home so that her family could enjoy a 'fat New Year'. My agent in London suggested 'splendid'. "People wouldn't understand 'fat New Year'!" he argued. But 'splendid' simply doesn't sound right for an uneducated village girl. I'll have to stay 'fat' in this case.

Having written for international media for years, I feel I know when and how to explain certain terminology. *Tamade*, for instance – to keep it the way it is, I would have to explain that it is a national swear word, good for expressing joy or anger in equal measure. Writing for the domestic market, on the other hand, there's always a great amount of presumed knowledge.

Having been bewitched by the language – again, I am not sure if that's the right word to use – I also find the challenge of writing in English rewarding and fun. And I know it'll be an ongoing battle until the day I am no longer confused by 'in the bed' and 'on the bed'. After all, fighting for something worthwhile keeps us alive.