

On Multi-lingual identity, by Minfong Ho

author of *Rice Without Rain*

The voices of my earliest childhood speak to me in Chinese. My father, in his deep quiet monotone, would tell me wonderful bedtime stories in Cantonese that he made up, about giants and turtles and emperors. My grandmother, my aunts, my amah spoke *in* Cantonese, teasing or scolding me, or laughing and whispering among themselves, in an easy conspiracy. My mother's voice was cooler, more aloof, as she taught us T'ang Dynasty poems in Mandarin, evoking through them images of an exquisite but remote China. With her own friends and relatives she would speak in rapid-fire Hunanese or sibilant Shanghaiese, as I eavesdropped to pick up the latest gossip. As naturally and unquestioningly as I absorbed the basic feelings of love and anger, praise and blame that my family poured over me, so I also absorbed these four Chinese dialects. As my first language, Chinese is the language with the deepest emotional resonance for me. Throughout my childhood, it was the only language that mattered. I heard it, spoke it, whispered it, screamed it, dreamed in it and cried in it. Even now, when I cry, I cry in Chinese. Perhaps that's why I think Chinese. Perhaps that's why I think of language of my heart.

If Chinese is the language of my heart, then Thai is the language of my hands, a functional language which connected me to the wide world outside my family. Growing up the outskirts of Bangkok in Thailand, I absorbed the simple Thai spoken by peddlers of fried bananas or pickled mangoes as they walked down our their baskets of fruit from their shoulder poles. It was in Thai that I would ask for a ripe guava or rose-apple, mixed with sugar or salt or chili sauce. At the Sunday market at Sanam Luang, it was Thai that I bargained in, picking out a potted orchid or a caged rabbit. And within the gleaming Emerald Buddha Temple, it was Thai that the saffron-robed monks chanted, their faces hidden behind the stiff each held.

Our house was an airy wooden building on stilts over a "klong", or small pond. I could lie on my on my stomach in our dining room, and push rice through the crack of the floorboards down to the fish below. We seeded the pond with tiny fish, and once a year the water from the "klong" would be drained, and we would be thigh-deep in mud next to fisherman to net the fish wallowing in the mud. This busy beautiful world, of fruits and fish, of monks and marketwomen, swirled with the light, nuanced sounds of Thai, and I had only to reach out to touch it, connect with it. I taste and touch in Thai, so that I think of Thai as the language of my hands.

English came only much later, when I started learning it in school, in about the third or fourth grade. For a long time it remained a school language, separate from the Chinese or Thai of my immediate world. Learning English was a form of intellectual exercise, crammed with rules and regulations which were rigidly enforced by strict teachers. Thus I might knew the difference between the present and past participle, yet be unable to jump-rope or play hopscotch in English. English was confined to the stark, alien world of textbooks and examinations, devoid of feelings or sense of

taste and touch. No wonder then that English is for me a language of the head.

What happens when you have a different language for your heart, your hands, your head? When your head cannot express what your heart feels, or what your hands touch?

Fragmentation.

I felt a strange split, a kind of linguistic schizophrenia.

In school, I was made to recite Wordsworth's poem on the daffodils, without ever having laid `eyes on that flower. Yet I did not know the English names of the common flowers growing all around me. (Years later, I discovered that the little purple blossom that grew wild everywhere in Thailand was called, "Madagascar periwinkle," which made it sound impossibly exotic.) Or, conversely, Thai words for everyday things, once I translated them into English-like my favorite foods "pomelo" or "minced fish patty"- sounded odd and unfamiliar.

Growing up is hard enough to do, without having to feel that one's head can't communicate with one's heart or hands. In an effort to piece together the bits and pieces of my life, I tried to write-strictly for myself, and at first in an awkward jumble of Chinese, Thai, English. Gradually, because English-through all those years of formal education-has become the language that I am most adept in, I wrote more and more in English. Despite the frustrations involved, I kept on writing, because writing was becoming a way to integrate the different experiences and languages of my head, my hands and my heart.

It is ironic that the language that I've become most proficient in, is the one which means the least in me, evoking very little feeling or memories. I have no easy English words for them, these Chinese voices lodged in my heart, or the Thai things I touched with my hands. And when, through some tedious processing of translation in my head, the Chinese and Thai comes out in English, the original experience becomes distorted.

Yes, it was frustrating for me to write in English. How do I, for instance, write convincing dialogue when my characters don't even speak English? How do I translate local idioms without making them sound quaint? How can I portray complex traditions? It wasn't easy. It doesn't help, either, that sometimes I am made to feel like a kind of cultural Frankenstein, when those who speak only English look upon my fluency in 'their' language as freakish, an interesting but somewhat grotesque mimicry of their own language which they had somehow bequeathed me.

It was in the depth of my first winter in America that I really started to write. As a freshman at Cornell University, when it was snowing and bleak outside, I used to go to the campus conservatory and just stand next to a potted banana tree growing inside. I missed the tropical sun, and the green leaves and naked brown babies splashing in the ponds. By standing near that banana tree. I felt a little more connected with home. But one day some biology class must have chopped up my banana tree for an experiment, because only its spongy trunk was left. That

afternoon, I went back to my dorm room and started writing what would become my first book, about a village girl in Thailand.

In a way, I still write for the same reason: to bring back what is gone, to relive what is lost, to make a mosaic out of fragments. And to feel-head, hands and heart-whole again.

Minfong Ho's novels have been published in Singapore and England, and have also been translated and published in Thailand, France, Japan, and the Philippines. She won First Prize from the National Book Development Council of - Singapore for ***Rice Without Rain*** in 1988.

Her first book, ***Sing to the Dawn***, won first prize from the Council of Interracial Books for Children. ***Rice Without Rain*** was named a Best Book of the Year for Young Adults by the American Library Association. ***The Clay Marble*** was named a Notable Children's Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies by a joint committee of the Children's Book Council and the International Reading Association.