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Don't Take Yourself for a Shallot

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"Don't take yourself for a shallot" is Chinese slang, meaning "Don't take yourself too seriously." But why a shallot? I have no idea. I imagine it is because the shallot is the most versatile ingredient in Chinese cuisine, and hence important or rather self-important. But in the Australian setting, ginger is more valuable than shallots, with a much higher price tag. Ginger sells for up to $40 per kilo. So by way of localisation, this piece of Chinese slang should be translated as "Don't take yourself for a piece of ginger." And that's how my journey of life started.

In 1977, when Deng Xiaoping restored the Gao Kao, or Chinese university entrance exams, I was 15 and in high school, dreaming of becoming a textile factory worker. My dream was disrupted by my mum who insisted that I go to university to study English. My mum had gone to a missionary school in Qingdao and loved English but didn't get the chance to continue studying it after she joined the revolutionary workforce. So, like all other Chinese parents, my mum transplanted her unfulfilled dream onto me. Incidentally, her dream was compatible with mine and I showed no symptoms of rejection. So I went all the way up to Beijing Foreign Studies University, and then further, to Australia.

When I studied English in China, our learning materials were limited to 19th-century English novels and two films on tape: The Sound of Music and Jane Eyre, which we watched millions of time until every girl in our class including myself fell in love with Mr Rochester. So my knowledge of the English world was very much constructed around these 19thcentury novels and those two films. In 1988, when I took my seat in a plane and left China on my own, both for the first time in my life, to pursue my PhD studies at Sydney University, I had no fear. There is a Chinese saying: "When you know nothing, you fear nothing." I didn't even know what to bring with me to Australia. Someone who had been to America recommended that I should bring laundry powder, loads he said,

to save money. I took his advice faithfully and brought five packs of laundry power in my suitcase. The laundry powder turned out to be a waste of my energy and took me forever to finish.

I arrived at Sydney airport on a Saturday morning, assuming it was a working day in Australia, as it was in China back then. It didn't even occur to me that I should tell someone I was coming, assuming instead that Sydney University would have buses waiting at the airport with a brightly coloured banner saying "Welcome New Students", as would happen in China. I felt stupefied when I saw no buses or people from Sydney University at the airport. Somehow I found my way to a hotel in the city and survived on my $70 for two nights.

I didn't spot a Mr Rochester in Sydney, but I found Professor Leonie Kramer, who changed my life for good. I grew up in socialism. All I had needed to do was to study hard, and everything else, for good or bad, was taken care of by the state, universities, teachers and parents. Prof. Kramer taught me that freedom of choice came first and foremost from independence – independence as an ability, as well as a way of thinking. During my PhD studies, she gave me a lot of freedom to explore what I wanted to do for my thesis and I learnt how to value and benefit from such freedom. I started with modern Australian fiction and ended in 20th century modernism. Prof. Kramer guided me and encouraged me to become an independent thinker and independent critic. Most importantly, Prof. Kramer got me the scholarship which covered my tuition fees. In those days, getting a scholarship for an international student to study literature was virtually beyond a dream. Without the scholarship, I wouldn't have been able to complete my PhD and I wouldn't be standing here today speaking to you. Later on, Prof. Kramer became the Chancellor of Sydney University. So, very interestingly, she received me as my supervisor when I first arrived at Sydney University and she also sent me off by presenting me with the PhD certificate at my graduation ceremony. When she was shaking my hand, she said, "We made it." I owe my successes and achievements to Prof. Kramer and I feel eternally grateful for her guidance and teaching.

I started university when I was 16. After spending the next 16 years of my life on a string of degrees at various universities, I had an irresistible urge to leave the small academic world behind and go out into the big real world. The first job I got was in the Federal Veterans' Affairs Department, doing data entry. I had never worked in an office, so I

enjoyed the novelty. The best thing was, we could listen to the radio while entering data. So I became hooked on the John Laws Show and learnt so much about Australian politics, everyday life and ordinary people's interests and views. I also had my share of office life.

My supervisor was a serious-talking and serious-looking lady who originally came from the Philippines and enjoyed playing favourites, not that the two things were related. I soon got into her bad books, because I inadvertently challenged her rules. By occupational health regulations, we were allowed a 10-minute break after an hour of work. I started at 8:30, so I went to have my break at 9:30. She saw me having a cup of tea and told me that the break started at one hour, and if I missed it, I had to wait for the next hour. I said that wasn't fair and not what the regulations intended. After that, she took a dislike to me and made sure that I never ran out of unwanted tasks. So I thought I should do something to improve our relationship. One day I saw my opportunity and grabbed it. She and I were alone in the kitchen. With a big smile on my face, I said "When is the baby due?" She gave me a dirty look and left. I had just had my own baby and I knew what pregnancy looked like. So I was puzzled until a team member whispered to me, "There is no baby, it's fat." How I wanted to pinch myself! After that she became meaner and harsher to me, until one day a phone call came in. She picked up the phone and I heard her say "Doctor? There is no doctor here" and was about to hang up. I went over and said "It could be for me", and it was. She then asked me "Are you a doctor? What sort of doctor are you?" So I told her I had a PhD in English literature. She happened to be a person who worshipped people with higher education. She became my instant best friend, followed me everywhere and introduced me to everyone. She organised a big farewell party when I left for greener pastures.

When I applied for a job at the Victims' Compensation Tribunal in the NSW Attorney General's Department, the HR manager, Therese, interviewed me and said, "I notice you have a PhD. Do you mind working as a base level clerk?" I said "Not at all, I need to start somewhere." Therese said, "You are obviously an intelligent person. You will go up quickly." She was right. In two years I was promoted three times and became the compensation manager, in charge of the largest section of the tribunal. I worked at the tribunal for ten years, and during those years I learnt about the Australian political and legal systems and how a piece of legislation was created and administered. Having learnt to argue with solicitors and to communicate with highly traumatised victims of violent crimes, my interpersonal communication skills went up to another level. Most of all, I learnt to be compassionate and not to be judgemental.

On the day I received the offer of a job at the Attorney General's Department, I was also offered a part-time job as a Mandarin subtitler at SBS TV. I read through police briefs of violent crimes during the day and immersed myself in subtitling arthouse films at night. The double act provided me with an incredible balance. In 2006 I was offered the Chief Subtitler's position at SBS, so I tearfully quit my job at the Attorney General's Department. Before I had a chance to draw my breath, Western Sydney University recruited me to teach translation studies. The rest is history, as people say. I've lived a second double life ever since.

If you ask me what the highest level of intercultural competence is, I'd say it's the sense of humour. To truly know and understand a culture, you need to learn and appreciate its sense of humour. When I first watched American sitcoms, I couldn't follow the jokes, even though I understood what was being said. It has taken me a while to get there. My all-time favourites are the British series Yes, Minister and Yes, Prime Minister. Australian people in general have a very good sense of humour, often tongue-in cheek. When I was studying at Sydney University, I worked as a cashier in a supermarket. One day a customer coming through the checkout asked me, "Do you speak another language?" I said, "Yes, I speak Mandarin." He said, "Oh, I speak Orange."

At SBS I don't tell people I have a PhD. When my colleague Jeremy with whom I have worked for about ten years found out I had a PhD, I heard him say to other colleagues, "You know, Jing has a PhD, but she's very nice."

I'd like to end my speech by saying that to live is to learn, to learn is to enjoy. Don't take yourself for a piece of ginger.

Thank you very much.