

Friday Afternoon Presentation Script
My alternative story from East to West

Hi my name is Yeemei.

Today I am going to share with you my story from East to West. I was born in Hong Kong. In past, I worked as a school social worker with a focus of teenagers at risk. In October 2012, my husband told me that he was offered a job opportunity in New Zealand. We were so exciting and can't wait to start this adventurous journey!

A few months later, we arrived Auckland of New Zealand. As a new immigrant from an eastern to a western culture, it was a big cultural shock. I got no paid job. I couldn't drive. I failed in driving test repeatedly. I was not a permanent resident there. My English level is not very good. Sometimes, It was really hard for me to understand people's jokes. I found myself reflecting about my identity. I was wondering how many people from a different culture were experiencing the same like me, strange, lost, and frustrated.

In 2014, I engaged in narrative study and did a lot of volunteering. I began to meet many people from different parts of Asia, such as China, Korea, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, etc. I had the privilege of hearing many migration stories.

The following came to my mind: (slide 1)

1. Why would Asian people leave their country and live in this territory?
2. How do they adapt to the language and culture in western contexts?
3. During times of hardship, how do they struggle under this big blue sky?
4. What are their wishes and hopes, and how are they sustaining a better life in a different cultural context?

My own experience inspired me to explore these ideas of identity from East to West through a narrative lens.

Chinese people had a long history of migration to New Zealand and the population was still growing. These migrants may suffer from stress, disconnection from old culture, language barriers and become at risk for mental health issue. In our Chinese culture, there was a strong pathological label for people suffering from mental illness. They may be marginalized and disconnected from the dominant society because some people would consider them as abnormal and unproductive.

For these Chinese migrants who may suffer from mental health issues, I was wondering if there is anything that I can do with my mother language as Cantonese to reconnect people's stories? I was wondering how could we facilitate outsider witness practice integrating the Chinese culture? I was also interested in possibilities of co-creating stories through collective narrative documents. This became my project ideas.

1. The story of Jack

I would like to introduce the story of Jack to you. He is a Chinese born in Vietnam in 1980. He was referred to our Family Service Centre in Auckland as we were running a peer support group for adults with mental health issue at that time. He told me that he and his family came as refugees from Vietnam to New Zealand in 1990. His family was very poor and his father often hit him whenever he failed to complete tasks. He felt hard to adapt to the education system, Jack quit school at age 15. He began to work in a bakery shop but colleagues bullied him because he was not good at communication at all. In the following few years, Jack was very stressed and started to hear hostile voices. Later, he was diagnosed with Schizophrenia. Although his emotions got stable after taking medication, he was unemployed for ten years and felt so burdened by a sense of failure and guilt towards his family.

2. the neglected piece of story

I could feel the overwhelming power of his problem story as a survivor from his mental illness since migration. While I kept listening, I had a question in my mind: how could a man with serious mental issues come to the Centre and join a peer group regularly? I wondered if there were experiences that were "out of phase" with Jack's dominant storyline. I checked with Jack if it was okay for me to ask him a question. He said yes. I asked him, "in spite of your pain during the years of having a mental illness, I am curious about what encouraged you to come to our Centre every two weeks?" He said it may be a motivation. I invited him to explain more details about this motivation and to draw an image of it? He said, "Motivation is like a running magic horse. It was the transportation to my future life." I guessed this was a sparkling moment to Jack's story! In order to making presence of this magic horse, I intended to assist Jack by scaffolding this alternative story.

These (These) are some of the questions I asked:

1. When was this horse born?
2. Where were you when this horse was running?
3. Are there any stories about this magic horse?

4. Who would be familiar with this magic horse? How would they support the horse on its journey? What did the horse learn from these people?
5. What is the wish of this horse- where is it running to?
6. Why does it run so hard towards the sun?
7. What might this horse believe about achieving the land of independence?
8. What was meaning of the healthy heart?

I could feel Jack's excitement when sharing about this magic horse. My intention above was to develop the story of motivation, through landscape of action and landscape of identity questions. However, when I asked him what he meant with the healthy heart, Jack hesitated very much to talk. I was thinking what was the untold story behind this "healthy heart"? At this moment, I chose to sit back and respect him with silence.

3. Finding an audience

After the first session of our conversation, I had a strong feeling that Jack's story did not fit into the profile of a person with a mental illness! I believed what he needed was an audience. I was thinking whether it would be possible to create a platform to share what was precious to him and get responses from the outside world in ways that were highly acknowledging. I asked for Jack's consent for an outsider witness practice and he was enthusiastic about this idea too. Later on I invited two support workers from our Centre as a reflection team. They are from China and Malaysia who know Cantonese as well. I had briefed them before on the four categories of questions on outsider witness. In Chinese culture, people tempted easily to give advice, judgment and praise on others. In order to address to this, I believed it was crucial to prepare the reflection team before the session, to ensure a "resonant" retelling of what Jack gave value to in his life.

4. Rescue in the mother language

At the beginning of the meeting, I handed out a document to the audience. In the document, I had summarized a passage written in Chinese language. The passage was titled as "the Story of Magic horse". I observed the power of story telling when presenting Jack's story through documents. I read aloud part of the document for 10 minutes to the audience in Cantonese to honour Jack. When reading the document, I felt there was a respectful silence in the room; all people were paying attention to the voice of this magic horse.

This was just this was a honorable ceremony and a definitional ceremony. When I spoke for the magic horse in the Chinese language, the language just connected all people together in the room at the moment. Living in a context of White dominated English-speaking western society, the language in Chinese-speaking just tie us together, reaching the heart of our culture.

I asked Jack for his response from this experience.

“It is a very new experience to have people paying attention and respect to my story. This diagnosis of mental illness made me feel so sick for years. I realized my real “problem” came from some thoughts inside my heart since I was small. But not the “mental health problem” diagnosed by doctors and hospitals. That’s why I wanted to find my healthy heart, but not my recovery from a mental issue”.

This first outsider witness practice was fascinating to me. Later, Jack was more eager to share his thought in the following sessions. He mentioned the real problem triggering his life was not about the “mental illness” but was to the found in his heart.

5. Externalizing

I was curious to see if Jack would externalize this problem. So I invited and held the space him to name the problem and he said he called it “the fantasy of outside the God”. This fantasy came from his childhood experience. As his parents seldom took care of him, he always hide at the room to watch films. He watched lots of Chinese films about Chinese mythology such as previous life and “not dying life”. I invited him to tell me more about the effects of the fantasy on him. Jack said that this fantasy had isolated him from reality. He dreamt of living forever with super power like God. The fantasy scared him from telling others about his dream because people would think he must be crazy and abnormal. At this moment, the discourse of mental illness was exposed. Indeed, in the Chinese culture, people suffering from mental issue were easily discriminated by the dominant society. Some people thought they had evil spirits inside their heart and some thought that they were not productive or even dangerous to the community. Through the conversation, I wanted to make sure Jack had an opportunity to give voice to his thought about these traditional beliefs. When he felt respected, he felt courageous to deconstruct the discourse of mental illness.

6. Absent but implicit

Through the externalizing conversation, it was clear that “the fantasy of outside the God” had great impact on Jack’s life. What surprised me was Jack’s connection

with it. He said, “the fantasy brought me hope and saved me from attempting suicide for many times. I cannot live without it.” After taking a breathe, I intended to de-centre myself to have a deeper understanding on him. I asked him if it was okay to let me understand more why he preferred to have a fantasy life. Jack told me that when he was in Vietnam, he saw his father killing the chickens. He saw people murdering other people in the films. He thought the world was so terrible and miserable. He felt disappoint and preferred to live in his dream world.

At this point, I was wondering about what Jack gave value to. I tried to engage in double listening, to listen for small cues that might lead us to the absent but implicit. I asked him a question, “When you feel disappoint and escape from the world as a protest against something, what would you say that something is? What would you treasure in your life?” that is how he replied, “In my heart, Life is valuable. Not only human beings but also animals and plants have a life. We should treasure them.”

We had a heartfelt conversation about the kind of life Jack would be worth living. He told me he joined the tree planting volunteer every week. Tree represented a life. It provided air to support people’s life and it never hurt others. I was so moving because I saw kindness and a pure heart on Jack.

7. Definitional ceremony in a larger community

Four months passed by. We had more than ten sessions and now Jack’s preferred story of the magic horse has been thickened. We co-created a summarized document together. I asked if he would like to share his journey with the whole Asian Family Service Team, with more than ten people including social workers and counselors from different parts of Asia...The purpose was to share his insider knowledge let people understand more about the heart of people who suffered from mental illness, especially for those whose medication may not work. I acknowledged him as a consultant and the survival skills from his life may contribute to a larger community in the world whose suffer from mental health experience. This ceremony was more public and witnesses were from diverse background compared with (to the first ceremony) last time. His story was shared like this way:_____After this ceremony, people created colorful documents for Jack with their creative drawing on it.

The ceremony represented the end of our meetings. Below is the response from Jack the last time we met:

“You are respectful when listening to my story. Other people usually intervene or make judgment to me before I finish sharing. You give me room to share the whole story but you also stay with me and through your questions I can find my own solutions.”

8. Final chapter

After Jack’s story, I noticed there was some linkage between migration and mental health issues. I noticed there were many possibilities to co-create a double story by using collective documents. I noticed the importance to honor the history, culture and language of immigrants. I notice the power of definitional ceremony, which can build a sense of solidarity and resonate with the Chinese culture.

Everyone has a choice to interpret his story. In the past, Jack’s story is was about migration, mental illness, unemployment, suicide, guilt towards family and imaging himself as God. But during these four months, we discovered more than that. It was a story about obedience to family, kindness to humans animals and plants, skills to live step by step every day and chase of a healthy heart in future. This is the story of the horse, a magic horse.

The story of magic horse did not stop here. In October 2014, I returned to my city HK and here I share Jack’s story with all of you online. I believe there is always a magic connection between stories, language and culture in a life journey. We are all migrants who collect the treasures on the journey. My hope is that you could find transportation and pack the narrative documents on the way. What is most important is to hold the key of curiosity and unlock the luggage with your heart.

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I love you all!

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