FLASH NONFICTION

A Brief Chronology of My English Accent

by Tim Tim Cheng



"To the Future" by Fabrice B. Poussin

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1993 — Wailing inside the NICU was my first language.

1996 — The first word came during kindergarten, a cloudburst of Cantonese breaking the hidden Hokkien bank.

1997 — Migration lends me names: *Tin Tin* in Hokkien, *Tian Tian* in Mandarin, and *Tim Tim* in British Hong Kong. The character for my name, ?, equates ‘being quiet' to 'sweetness', carrying my mother’s humble blessing.

2005-2008 — A history teacher we loved read Croatia as *Co-tee-ah.* Some teachers used more English words when they were angry. Every syllable punched, heavy as a single Chinese character. I do this too to make myself clear.

2009 — A sky full of songs blanketed me. I took South London from *Florence + the Machine* on YouTube and *The Horrors* in NME.

2013 — University poetry courses taught us to dissect our name’s radicals. I found *a heart next to a tongue, a tongue* made of *a thousand mouths.* My name is the sound of *licking* the *sky shamelessly*.

2014 — My name is *Tim Tam* in Australia, *Dim Dim* outside an Estonian bar, *Chin Chin* for drunk French exchange students.

2015 — My accent is a passport full of travel stamps. My accent is the peeling bark of a tree I hugged in Brisbane. My accent snowed Estonian ice crystals in the ears of an American in Vietnam.

2016 — A British teacher I worked with remarked that my accent was beautiful. I didn’t know compliments could hurt.

2017 — My accent is also the way Phoebe sings *Smelly Cat.*

2019 — My accent almost gave me a pay raise. My boss thought I was “almost native”.

2021 — I am longing for a new country to grow on my tongue. The way ‘aspire’ and ‘aspirate’ share the same noun.

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