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## Egads, Translators! Making a Film in China Is Tricky

How to make a film about Chinese Taoist traditions when your Mandarin is terrible

By Vanessa Leigh (<http://www.pyragraph.com/author/vanessaleigh/>) | March 31, 2015 | Comments: 0 (<http://www.pyragraph.com/2015/03/egads-translators-making-a-film-in-china-is-tricky/#respond>)[FILM/STAGE](http://www.pyragraph.com/film-stage/) ([HTTP://WWW.PYRAGRAPH.COM/FILM-STAGE/](http://www.pyragraph.com/film-stage/))(<http://www.pyragraph.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Vtolino-Master.jpg>)Master Qin, a Chinese shadow puppet master, performing in Yunmeng, China. *Photo by Darcy Holdorf.*

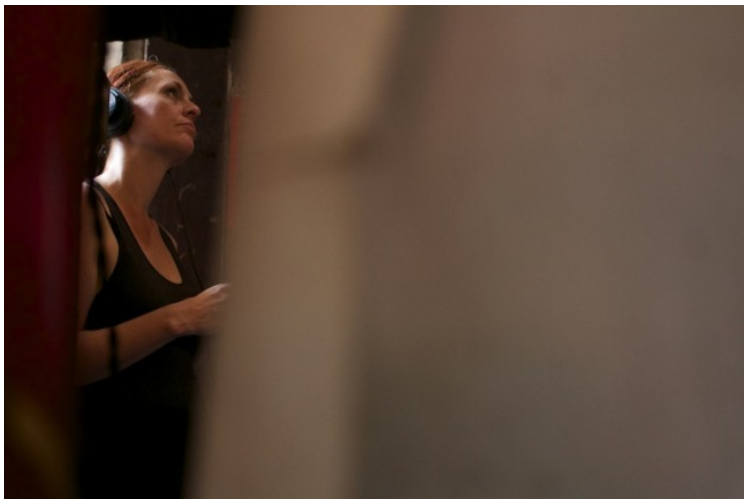
I'm in a town called Yunmeng, China, making a short documentary about a Chinese shadow puppeteer, Master Qin. This is my first experience using a translator for film work. And it's been quite a learning curve. I don't understand how to communicate subtle questions to the subject of the film using a translator. Yep, I am lost in translation (and Bill Murray is nowhere in sight).

I've been in the middle of *The Middle Kingdom* for a month now, surrounded by the Chinese language, and believe you me it's not suddenly sounding like English. Occasionally I recognize the numbers, and a few odd words, but mostly it's just noise. Some days everyone's mouths glitterify and those noises gently caress my ears like an audial French version of *Dancing With the Stars*—but those days are rare.

But well here I am. There's nothing I want to do more than make a film about Chinese Taoist traditions—seriously this is the dream—but who knew that a month into the affair I'd be hiding in my room, scared to venture outside into Mandarin land?

(<http://www.pyragraph.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Vtolino-Puppets.jpg>)

For all I knew these puppets were saying, "Yo Leigh take some Mandarin classes for chrissake!" *Photo by Darcy Holdorf.*



(<http://www.pyragraph.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Qin-listening.jpg>)

*Photo by Darcy Holdorf.*

Our translator is a graduate student in English, and she's got a great sense of humor which makes the whole situation so much more bearable. Her English is very solid, I'm so thrilled she's working with us, but culturally we are divided. My expression is so distinctly American, and her understanding is so distinctly Chinese. These two cultures are just, well, very different. I've been living in China for two years, but my Mandarin is terrible, but at least I have a vague working knowledge of some of these barriers. Well. Or so I thought before launching into this project, now I'm not so sure what I understand.

When I'm trying to converse about thematic ideas with this amazing translator it's nearly impossible to understand what she understands. Her English is strong, but since she's young and eager to do a good job, I worry that she's not asking questions when she doesn't understand what the hell I mean.



(<http://www.pyragraph.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/VTolinoTranslating.jpg>)

Our translator, Ivy. My hand gestures were obviously not working. *Photo by Darcy Holdorf.*

That said, the big discovery is that my use of English is a great big entendre. Not sure it's even possible to clear that dynamic without a big ole ice-pick (reference to lobotomy people, you know Francis Farmer ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis\\_Farmer#Lobotomy\\_claims](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Farmer#Lobotomy_claims))—seeeee). My consciousness is built upon complex structure of cultural references, so it's stupid to assume she is following my rattling references to uhm say—Werner Herzog. Occasionally I bust a thick German accent and say something preposterous. She just laughs politely.

But I'm actually doing it—so that's fascinating. I've slowed down, and worked harder to understand the basics of my questions, and broken them down into smaller more manageable pieces. Maybe even more interesting than the film subject itself is figuring out my own internal dialogue—and figuring how to communicate in a whole new way in my own language. Whew. But hey okay it's happening! And things have been a lot better since I let go of my previously unknown infatuation with fast-witted references, and allowed myself to listen more carefully—to myself and to everything around me.

But it still doesn't sound like English!

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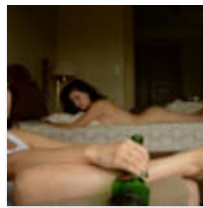
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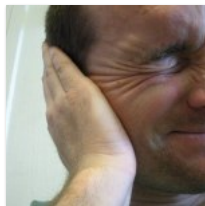
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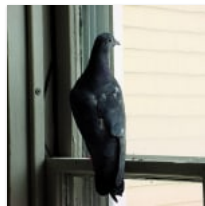
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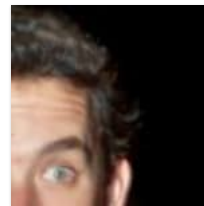
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## About Vanessa Leigh



Vanessa (<http://www.lydialeighmedia.com/>) is a writer, documentary filmmaker, theater teacher and part-time digital nomad. At the moment she is based in Thailand, but that will change soon. She's also lived in China, Ecuador, New Orleans, Brooklyn, San Francisco, Seattle and Pittsburgh. Her Kindle is filled with books about goddesses, Taoism and rock 'n roll bios.

And. Vanessa has intense Radiolab (<http://www.radiolab.org>) love—blissful true love.

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