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**Invisibility: What we see and don't see**



## FLORA WONG |

There was a moment during the process of submitting my application to undertake a PhD when I felt invisible.

In a section of the online application form, titled "Language and English Proficiency", I was asked if English was my first language. I answered "no"—I was born in Hong Kong and Cantonese is my first language. If, on the other hand, the question had been whether English was my primary language, I would have answered "yes"—I migrated to Meanjin (Brisbane, Australia) with my parents when I was just three, and English is the language in which I completed my primary and secondary schooling, along with my graduate and postgraduate degrees.

As I completed the subsequent questions about English proficiency tests, how recently I had completed tertiary level studies conducted in English, and whether I intended to complete a course to "improve English language skills and achieve the English language level required for successful study", I realised that my experience as a bilingual Australian citizen was completely invisible to the university. According to the form, I did not satisfy the English proficiency requirement.

I wondered how many other prospective students had encountered this roadblock in their application. A phone call to the graduate school confirmed that I would not be required to complete a test or a course, but the form still would not allow me to submit my application without uploading evidence of satisfying the English language proficiency requirements. To this day, I still don't know whether I should have simply answered "yes" to English being my first language, or if the extra administrative hurdles of making that phone call and writing a statement to summarise it was considered par for the course for someone like me.

Assumptions about English proficiency are just one of the many microaggressions culturally diverse individuals living in so-called Australia might encounter in their day-to-day lives. In this case, there was nobody to hold accountable—I could only lodge my feedback to the university and hope that the next applicant with similar circumstances to me might not have to feel the same frustration. The invisible structural barriers faced by culturally diverse people aren't necessarily as rigid as the so-called bamboo ceiling. Sometimes, they are like spider webs—they don't necessarily stop us in our tracks as we navigate society, but you can only walk into so many of them before you throw your hands up in frustration and look for somewhere less densely webbed to spend your time.

I consider the gallery placards I see throughout the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT10) exhibition. They provide the artist's name, their year and place of birth, and where they currently live and work. This system of artist identification is as fallible as the online application form that failed to recognise my English proficiency—the places that we are born, live and work shape us, but they don't define us. They provide the observer with valuable context about the artist and their work, but that context is more limited than we might imagine.

I was born in Hong Kong in 1988, to Hong Kong Chinese parents with roots in Teochew and Guangdong, and migrated to Meanjin with my parents in 1991, and have lived here since. The information on my placard might look no different to that of someone born in Hong Kong who lived, studied, and worked there until moving to Meanjin to work in 2021 at the age of thirty-three, or to that of someone born in Hong Kong to parents of the British diaspora who subsequently migrated to Australia in 2011 – but my life experiences would be vastly different to that of either of those individuals.

Som Supaparinnya's *Collapsing clouds form stars* is just one work at APT10 that actively engages with the idea of what we see and don't see. An "homage to the brave, ordinary, and politically threatened people who have led Thai resistance movements", the work draws the viewer in with a tactile installation of blue ribbons inscribed with phrases from poems, speeches, protest signs, and social media posts relating to the fight for democracy, justice and identity in Thailand. The ribbons both obscure and lead the way to the work's video element; a time-lapse of sites where historical conflicts and uprisings occurred.

Two of the ribbons that catch my eye happen to be translations of lyrics from the Rap Against Dictatorship project, speaking variously to the risks of visibility ("Whatever you do, the leader will see you") and of the people who have become invisible ("The country that close its ear, never hear people in the gap.") They reinforce the idea that visibility or invisibility, whether as an artist or as a citizen, is a political act.

Supaparinnya's work makes us consider not only those whose words have been captured in the installation but those who remain invisible to us. At APT10, we marvel at the variety of artworks from across the Asia Pacific region made visible to us, but we can also consider what remains invisible: the artists' relationships with the land on which they work and the communities around them; the hours of work by translators with specialist knowledge; the power structures at play in the appointment of curators and the selection and presentation of works.

As we reflect on the worlds of the artists made visible to us, we can also consider who remains invisible: the artist who creates work with an intensely local focus; the artist who stopped trying to gain international recognition for their work after years of being overlooked by gatekeepers; the artist who was silenced due to the political nature of their work; the person who was deterred from pursuing a career in art because they'd never seen someone who looked like them represented as a "successful" artist.

If we look at things from the right angle, we might see the glint of light reflecting off the spider webs, and get better at clearing the way for those who come down the same path after us.

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This article forms part of a series of commentary curated to reflect on the **All A Part Symposium** in celebration of the 10th Asia Pacific Triennial (APT10).

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