



Carrying the hopes and dreams of your parents isn't easy when you straddle two different worlds. **Vanessa Woods** and **Cindy Pan** on the bittersweet experience of growing up Asian in Australia. »



THE WISHING YEARS



East meets West: (clockwise from above) Cindy Pan in 1977, aged 9, in her family's backyard at Badgerys Creek in Sydney's west, just after a tap-dancing exam; aged 8, in front of the family's first new car; Vanessa Woods in 1979, aged 2; on her first camping trip, to Bundanoon in NSW, aged 5; with her mother, Jacquie Leong.



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PERFECT CHINESE CHILDREN

By Vanessa Woods

IF THERE WAS EVER ANYONE I WANTED TO STAB IN the heart with a chopstick, it was my cousin David.

"What happened to the 4 per cent?" my mother says, looking at my maths exam.

"I got 96. What else do you want?"

"Don't talk back," my mother snaps. "Ninety-six isn't 100. If you want to do well you have to try harder. David just got 99.9 on his HSC."

I dig my nails into my chair and wait for the punchline.

"He asked me to ring up the school board and contest the score. Ha! Imagine that. The lady on the phone laughed."

My mother shakes her head in wonder, as though David is the god of a new religion she's following.

"It really was 100," she says confidentially. "They had to scale it down for the school."

Usually Chinese parents don't have bragging rights over other people's children, but my

mother tutored David through high school, so his HSC score is her crowning victory.

My maths exam, with the scrawled red "96" that I was so proud of, begins to look ratty. Untidy figures rush across the page as if they're about to make a run for it. David's handwriting is famous for looking like it came out of a typewriter.

"He's going to medical school," she sighs. "He's going to be a heart surgeon, just like Victor Chang."

The reason my mother harps on about David so much is probably that her own two children don't warrant much praising over the mahjong table. My sister Bronnie has been expelled from piano lessons twice, and me, well, I am trouble on all fronts. I'm the child who talks back and gives viperous looks to her elders. In all my life I've only learnt two Cantonese phrases: *Kung Hei Fat Choi*, Happy New Year (saying this at the right time earned you *lycee*, red envelopes stuffed with cash), and *gno sat neyko say yun tow*, a phrase I hear often from my Auntie Yee Mah that roughly translates to "I will chop off your dead man's head".

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Jasmine is David's perfect sibling. She is a stockbroker in New York, married to an investment banker. The photographer at her Sydney wedding cost \$12,000.

"Jasmine only got 80 per cent on her HSC." My mother looks hopeful, as though retards like me might have a chance after all. Then she shakes herself out of it. "But no one paid any attention to her until she started making money."

My mother looks around our tiny two-bedroom apartment. The kitchen is fine if you're a troll and enjoy dim, cramped spaces. The carpet is grey and curling around the edges. The furnishings are the type you pick up by the side of the road. There are occasional glimpses of the life we had before. A Ming vase. A black lacquered screen with flourishes of gold. But the priceless antiques give the apartment the ambience of a refugee camp, as though we managed to save a few precious things before catastrophe threw us into squalor.

When I visit my cousins in their two-storey palaces, their kitchens as big as our apartment and their lucky trees with life-sized peaches of jade in the foyer, my secret pleasure is to creep upstairs and press my face into the pale, plush carpet.

WE ARE POOR BECAUSE MY MOTHER'S financial history has been overshadowed by unlucky four – *sie*, which sounds uncomfortably close to *sei*, death. She was the fourth child born in the fourth decade of the century. Her father gave all his money to Chiang Kai-shek, the Chinese leader of the Nationalist Party who lost China to the Communists in 1949. My mother's brothers and sister were also left destitute, but they all married suitable Chinese spouses who helped them earn back the family fortune. My mother, with her silken black hair and face like a doll, could have done better than anyone. But instead, she married my father, a *gweilo*, a ghost person, a white man. In our world, interracial marriages are unheard of. We don't know any other Chinese who married Australians.

"Barbarians," Yee Mah would say. "Chinese

Once upon a time: (above left) Vanessa Woods today; (top, at right) as a 12-year-old, with her mother and younger sister, Bronwyn.

were using chopsticks while *gweilos* were eating with their hands.”

My father was a charming but troubled Vietnam vet, prone to occasional psychotic episodes and heavy drinking. It wasn't a surprise to anyone except my mother when my father divorced her and left her for a white barbarian when I was five and my sister was two.

My mother almost slit her wrists in shame. We didn't know anyone who was divorced. Chinese spouses had affairs, slept in separate rooms and barely spoke to each other, but no one divorced. It was a matter of saving face.

Her own life in shreds and \$2 in her pocket, we became her only hope. We would be brilliant at school, earn accolades and awards until the day when we were educated, rich and could lavish on her the money and attention she deserved.

Unfortunately, it isn't quite working out that way. As time goes by, it becomes clear to her that we are going the way of Australian children. The ones who don't work as hard, are loud and uncouth and, worst of all, talk back to their parents and hold chopsticks near the pointed ends, like peasants.

Until the divorce, we had barely seen my Chinese relatives. Suddenly, from our big, comfortable house in Turrumurra, we are living in a troll cave in Kingsford near Vietnamese boat people. Instead of a mother who stays home all day cooking delicious and exotic meals, I have a mother who works as a secretary for 14 hours a day. And every day after school, my sister and I get dumped with my Auntie Yee Mah and my three cousins.

It is well known among all my new relatives under the age of 16 that you do not f... with Yee Mah. Yee Mah isn't fat but there is a heaviness to her. The back of her hand feels like a ton of bricks. She once broke a bed just by sitting on it. Besides the famous “I will chop off your dead man's head”, she sometimes pulls out a box of matches, holds one out close to our mouths and hisses, “If you are lying to me I will burn out your tongue.” In a way that convinces us she absolutely is not joking.

Her daughter Erica is 17 and the high-achieving darling. Robert is number one son and therefore immune to any criticism or punishment. However, her other son, Patrick, my sister Bronnie and I, we are all under 10 and therefore under her complete jurisdiction.

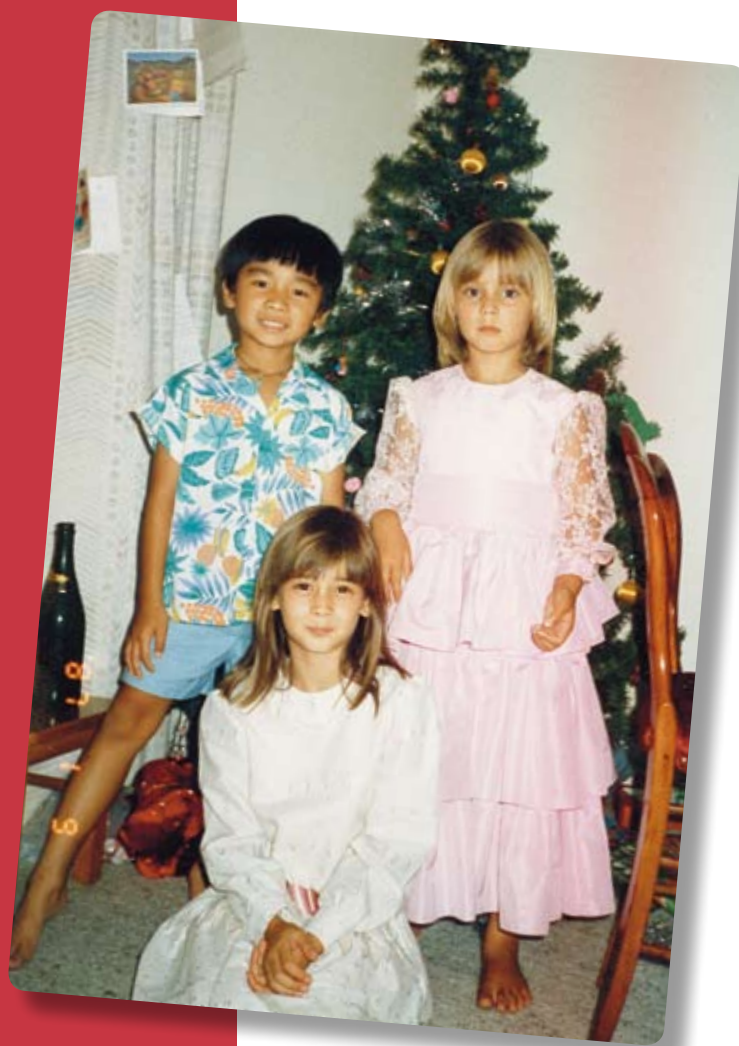
So every day after school, Bronnie, Patrick and I get up to mischief and then try to stop Yee Mah finding out. On the weekends there are more cousins, aunts and uncles to visit, most of whom aren't even related to us. The hope is that some of their Chinese-ness will rub off on us, and Bronnie and I will become bright, smart vessels and alleviate some of my mother's disgrace.

Bronnie and I never quite blend in, but our new playmates are always too polite to mention it until, one day, Erica storms out of the playground.

“Australians are retarded,” she says churlishly. Erica is seven years older than me and I worship her. She is everything a good girl should be: smart, respectful, and her boyfriends buy her large stuffed animals that I secretly covet.

There's a rhyme going around the playground. The kids pull up the corners of their eyes, then pull them down, chanting: “Chinese, Japanese, hope your kids turn Pickenese.” On “Pickenese”, they lift one eye up and one eye down, giving the clear impression of mental retardation. Like all bad jokes that come into fashion, this one is going around like wildfire.

Her own life in shreds, we became my mother's only hope. We would be brilliant at school, earn accolades and awards until we were educated, rich and could lavish on her the money and attention she deserved.



“You would make such a good barrister. You and that slippery tongue of yours”: (above, at front) the author as a nine-year-old with her sister Bronwyn and cousin Patrick, both aged six.

As we wait outside school for Yee Mah, I catch Erica giving me a sideways look, as though she is seeing me for the first time, realising that I look more like one of them than like her.

“Yeah,” I quickly say. “Australians are dog shit. Their babies will all eat dog shit and die.”

Yee Mah's car pulls up and we all climb in. Erica doesn't speak to me for the rest of the day. Without knowing why, I am ashamed.

EVERY SATURDAY, ABOUT 20 OF OUR “INNER circle” go to yum cha. The children are fed *cha siu bao* pork buns to fill us up so we don't eat any of the expensive stuff, while the grown-ups brag about themselves by bragging about their children. My poor mother sits with nothing to say. No awards we have won. No praise from our teachers. No marks high enough for medical or law school.

It is the ultimate aspiration for any Chinese mother to have a child who is a lawyer or a doctor. The best-case scenario would be a lawyer who defends doctors in court. “You would make

such a good barrister,” my mother sometimes tells me. “You and that slippery tongue of yours.”

Even worse, Bronnie wants to be an actress and I want to be a writer. My mother can't think of anything less likely to lead to one of us buying her an apartment.

“You'll end up penniless in an attic,” she tells my sister. As for me, she clips out cuttings from the newspaper to prove that most writers end up dead of starvation in the gutter.

“MUM,” I TUG ON MY MOTHER'S ARM DURING Saturday yum cha as she chews on a prawn dumpling, part of yet another meal she can't pay for. She looks down at me absentmindedly. “Mum!” “Yes, sweetheart?” “Can you buy me that fish?” “What?” There are more than 50 bream stuffed in the tank of the yum cha restaurant. They are squashed so tight together they can

hardly move. In the middle there is a beautiful golden one, with scales that shimmer in the light of the crystal chandeliers. I want my mother to buy it so I can take it to Bondi Beach in a plastic bag and set it free in the ocean. “Don't be stupid,” she says. “They are for eating.”

The eating habits of my sister and me are yet another source of embarrassment. We are very wasteful. We don't eat chicken's feet. We don't suck the jelly out of fish eyeballs and we refuse to eat the creamy filling inside prawn heads.

“Just that one. Pleeeeease.” “No.” “Why?” “We can't afford it,” she hisses. I let go of her hand and catch up with my sister and Patrick, who are playing in the elevators. We like to go into the elevators and push all the buttons. Go all the way up. Go all the way down. Occasionally, we get out on a floor we aren't supposed to be on and run up and down the corridors.

It doesn't bother me that we are poor. I've found a way to combat it – I steal from other children. When I get kicked out of class for misbehaving, which is often, I rifle through the school bags of all the other kids and steal their lunch money, as well as anything else I like. When I finally get caught, my mother sits me down at the dining-room table. She is very quiet. She puts her hand on my hand and says, “What do other children have that you don't?”

If I were smarter, I would hear her heart breaking.

“Erasers with Snow White on them,” I say without hesitating.

“All right,” says my mother. “Go to your room.”

As I leave, I see her bow her head, as if she's carrying a great burden. It's shame. And she's not ashamed of me, she's ashamed of herself. For failing to teach me the difference between right and wrong. For failing to make me feel like I am warm and safe and don't need to steal from other kids to make up for everything I don't have.

The next day, the Snow White erasers are on the dining-room table. I don't even want them.

WHEN I FINALLY RING MY MOTHER TO tell her my HSC score, she sounds delighted. “You got 88.8? Very lucky number. You will be rich for sure.” There is an odd note in her voice, one of momentary regret. That this isn't the moment when I exceed all her expectations. “Very rich,” she says again, as if to comfort herself with an ancient Confucian wisdom: just think how it could have been worse.

As for me, I've given up hoping she will tell me she is proud. I no longer begrudge my friends their mothers who overflow with constant affirmation and nurturing encouragement. When she criticises me with all the sensitivity of a Japanese scientist harpooning a whale, and I feel the slow-burning resentment building to rage, I bite my slippery tongue. Instead, I fossick through my memory for one of my earliest recollections. My mother is in the kitchen. Steam rises from the wok and oil spatters over her hands. There is a delicious smell of soy sauce, garlic and chicken. She tips the contents of the wok into a dish, then spoons out chicken wings onto beds of rice. Chicken wings are the cheapest part of a chicken. She has bought all her salary can afford.

On my sister's plate there are two. On mine there are two. On hers, there is only one.

And in her sacrifice, I see love.

Vanessa Woods is an award-winning journalist and author. She has written three children's books and is the author of the travel memoir *It's Every Monkey for Themselves* (2007). She currently lives in North Carolina.



DANCING LESSONS

By Cindy Pan

DADDY TOOK MY HAND IN HIS FIRM CAPACIOUS one and we walked the cows' trail towards the dam. The water lilies were still open. Vibrant cerises and melting lemon yellows merged with the snowiest of whites in their crisp, sharp petals. The sun was going down and the breeze was cool.

"Yes, Liang Liang. You will be the first."

"Do you think so, Daddy? Really?"

"Yes. No one has ever do that before. Many

people can winning Nobels prizes, but no one has ever winning Nobels prize in every single categories before. No one!"

"How will I do that?"

"You are genius! For you, you will have to working very hard but if you trying very hard, you can do it. I know you."

"I will try hard, Daddy. I always try hard, but I don't know if..."

"No, Liang Liang, I know you," he paused and considered, adding suddenly, "I've known you all your life!"

"Well ... I've known you all my life too," I countered. I had hardly realised I had known him for so long.

What was my life going to be? I had wanted to be an artist, because I loved drawing, then an author, because I loved stories, then a teacher, because I loved my kindergarten teacher, Miss Yapp. Then Daddy told me that a schoolteacher was a stupid thing to want to be, because most teachers were stupid, that's why they became teachers. So I kept this shamefully modest aspiration to myself.

Then I wanted to be a ballerina. Preferably prima ballerina assoluta, like Dame Margot. I was shrewd enough to realise that even prima ballerina assoluta was likely to get just as cold a reception as schoolteacher, so I held my tongue.

"Cindy, what do you want to be when you grow up?" Aunty Joan asked.

"A doctor. Or a scientist, like Daddy!"

This always got a good response.

In the library at lunchtimes I mooned over ballet books. Margot Fonteyn, Natalia Makarova, Gelsey Kirkland. They were my best friends. Natalia "plays the piano and always makes a point

of procuring the piano scores for all the ballets in which she dances so as to be able to acquaint herself thoroughly with the music”, wrote A.H. Franks in *The Girls’ Book of Ballet*. Wondrous Natalia, “her friends call her by the charming diminutive Natasha”.

I decided I would call my second daughter by the charming diminutive Natasha. There was little question as to the name of the first. “One can talk and talk about Fonteyn and still not begin to describe or even indicate the reasons for her greatness.” So wrote A.H. Franks. I thoroughly concurred.

Margot lived in Shanghai as a child. Her original name was Peggy Hookham. She must have had it changed by deed poll, I nodded to myself. In her autobiography she described how Dame Ninette de Valois, artistic director and founder of the Royal Ballet Company, initially mistook her for a Chinese girl. Margot wondered if her time in Shanghai had made her look just a little Chinese. I vehemently hoped so.

I pored over each precious image. Most of the ballets I had never seen. They existed in my mind as a composite of all the photos and all the tidbits I had gleaned from innumerable ballet books from various libraries and classrooms. I didn’t have any ballet books of my own but I started tracing and colouring in the pictures until I had my own lurid miniature photo library. My bedroom walls became a shrine. A shrine to Margot and her princely consort, Rudolf Nureyev. Her hair was as black as mine. She did look a little Chinese.

“Who’s the best dancer in the world?” I asked my dad.

“Margot Fonteyn.”

“What, you mean you never see *Singing in the Rain* – I sing it in the rain! That Gene Kelly, dancing like a wild bastard, jump in puddles. Wah! He really good can dance that little short bastard.”

“I mean man dancer.”

“Well, depends what kind of dancing. Ballet, best one is Rudolf Nureyev. Oh he really can dance that one, jumping, wah, really good. Tap dancing ... be Fred Astaire, or Gene Kelly. You don’t know Gene Kelly? ‘I’m singing in the rain ...’ – that one, you know – ‘Singing in the rain ...’” Daddy improvised some odd-looking steps.

“Nuh. Never heard of it.”

“What, you mean you never see *Singing in the Rain* – I sing it in the rain! That Gene Kelly, dancing like a wild bastard, jump in puddles. Wah! He really good can dance that little short bastard. Fred Astaire, I like that one better. Not so stumpy one. He more graceful, like you. He dance Ginger Roger. Yeah, that one I must say, very good, that one.”

Dad waltzed around in a jerky fashion, seemingly trying to imitate both Fred and Ginger simultaneously.

“Can you ballroom dance, Daddy?” I asked cautiously, hoping to catch him out. Of course I already knew. He was a brilliant dancer. In secret, with my mum.

“I am quite good at one time, but not my best ... When I am young, dancing, all the girls wanting to dancing with Pan! ‘Oh,’ they say, ‘Pan, you good dancer.’ I am not bad.”

“Show me!”

“Tsk, ah! We got work to do, Liang Liang, got no time to be Foxy Trot!”

“Please, Daddyyyyyyy ...” I bent over double, pleading.

“Okay. Okay you twisting my arms. I show you. Okay? You holding on like this. You stepping on top my feet I dance with you. Showing you.”

I placed my two small rubber-booted feet on

top of Daddy’s big rubber-booted feet. Dad took off his thick leather fencing gloves and placed my right hand in his left. I put my left hand on his *pigou*, his buttock, and held on expectantly.

Slow, slow, quick quick slow. Slow, slow, quick quick slow ...

*We siiinging in the rain, we siiing it in the rain!
What a glooorious feeeling, we haaappy again.
We waalk-ing the lane, with a haaappy refrain,
The song in our heart and all reeady for love,
Let stormy cloud chain everyoone, to the plain,
Come on little rain, got a smiiile on my chin!
We laugh at the cloud, so daark up above,
We singing and dancing in the rain!*

Daddy whirled me around the sloping paddock and my ponytail fluttered in the dusk light. The rubber boots made a squelchy, whooshy percussive accompaniment. I held my breath and dared not blink; I didn’t want to miss a thing.

The cows lifted their heads and chewed their cud, bemused, while the horses hung their heads over the fence and raised their upper lips, entranced.

Humans did funny things. **GW**

Cindy Pan is best known for her appearances on *The Glass House*, *Sunrise*, *The Panel* and *Sex/Life*. As a doctor, she has more than a decade of general practice experience. She is the author of the bestselling *Pandora’s Box* (2001) as well as *Playing Hard to Get* (2007), co-authored with Bianca Dye.

These are edited extracts from *Growing Up Asian in Australia*, edited by Alice Pung (Black Inc., \$27.95), which will be launched at the Sydney Writers’ Festival today at 5.30pm and available nationally on June 2.