

# A sacrifice shouldered, a loyalty pledged beyond words

September 30, 2007

**Alice Pung believes her mother to be more than worthy of Australian citizenship, although she would not be able to pass tomorrow's test.**

MY MOTHER comes from Cambodia. The Cambodian government closed down all the Chinese schools when Mum was in grade 2. It was the beginning of an ethnic-cleansing campaign that eventually led to the death of many of our family in the killing fields. So my mother has difficulty even reading and writing in her first language.

The Australian citizenship test starts tomorrow, and the citizenship website declares that "it is expected that most people will have the basic English literacy skills necessary to complete the citizenship test without assistance".

There is no doubt that my mother would like to become a citizen if, according to the *Becoming an Australian Citizen* book, "it is the final and most important step in the migration journey". This book, which contains all the answers to pass the test, declares that citizenship "gives you the opportunity to call yourself an Australian", and asserts that a true Australian undertakes a "shared sacrifice for the common good".

I think my parents have a fair idea of what a shared sacrifice for the common good means. They worked all the time when I was growing up. My father started a small watch shop and, as his business grew, he was able to give more jobs to more people. My mother worked from home, Aussie-battler-style, in the back shed.

As an outworker, she spent almost 20 years in the darkness of that shed. Most of the money she earned went into our education, so that I would have the opportunity to become a lawyer, teach at university and write books. Without knowing much English, our parents pledged their loyalty to Australia and its people the only way they knew how — through decades of tunnel-vision hard work, so that we are now doctors, teachers, dentists, speech pathologists, social workers, researchers and Rhodes scholars.

As a lawyer, I know all about what kind of rights people should have. As a society, we are preoccupied with our rights, our entitlements, our demands. But those in my mother's generation were different. They thought of responsibility and lived lives of private service. They worked at home, if they were lucky enough to get such work, even if it was bad work, secretive work, work that was not covered by employment contracts.

It was always lonely for my mother. When she was 40, she took up English classes. But having only a primary education in Cambodia, and being isolated in the shed all those years, she was too shy to speak to anyone. She felt alienated from us because we could read *The Age* and understand the bicameral parliamentary system, but she couldn't even read street signs or have a conversation in English.

People tell me that migrants like myself are successful because we have made it to the outside world. But I am only here because someone invested in my education. Someone spent all their pay on a good school for me. Someone gave me space to write a book even though they would never be able to understand how important that was, because they had never read a book in their lives.

Yet to pass the written citizenship test, my mother would be expected to read a 46-page book. A government officer at the test centre might be able to provide assistance by reading out the questions and possible answers. But this assistance is available to my mother only if she has completed at least 400 hours of tuition under the Adult Migrant English Program. Outworkers don't have 400 hours to spare.

The book stipulates that Australian citizens are expected to know something of Australia's history, heritage, our land and its people, to help them embrace opportunities in Australia.

My dad arrived here from the killing fields. He progressed from being a factory worker to creating more than 40 local jobs. There are hundreds of thousands of migrant women like my mother in this country who are invisible to outside

society because they don't speak English, who are only visible in their own communities, or their own homes. Yet our parents understand, at a deeper level than we could ever hope to realise, how to truly embrace the education, employment and other opportunities here.

The book's chapter about our national history declares that: "The colonists, like most people then, believed that the Chinese were inferior. (They) did not want a society where foreign outcasts worked for low wages and lowered the dignity of all labour." There is a disquieting likelihood that our parents may never be regarded as Australian, because they will not pass the test. They will fail to realise the significance of the golden wattle and Dame Nellie Melba, because they are too busy lowering the dignity of labour so that I can know about these things.

I was lucky enough to be born here. I would be accepted as one of the educated, professional migrant Australians of which the country can be proud, while my mother would be regarded as a foreign outcast. As an Australian, I am not sure I could ever be proud of citizenship on such terms.

Fortunately, both my parents have been Australian citizens since March 1, 1984.

*Alice Pung is a lawyer and writer.*

---

**When you see news happening:** SMS/MMS: 0406 THE AGE (0406 843 243), or [email](#) us. [More](#)

---

[Get The Age home delivered for as little as \\$3.50 a week](#)

Copyright © 2007. The Age Company Ltd.