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On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West

Ien Ang

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On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West Ien Ang
In this major new book, leading cultural thinker Ien Ang engages with urgent questions of identity in an age of globalisation and diaspora. The starting point for Ang's discussion is the experience of visiting Taiwan. Ang, a person of Chinese descent, born in Indonesia and raised in the Netherlands, found herself "faced with an almost insurmountable difficulty" - surrounded by people who expected her to speak to them in Chinese. She writes: "It was the beginning of an almost decade-long engagement with the predicaments of `Chineseness' in diaspora. In Taiwan I was different because I couldn't speak Chinese; in the West I was different because I looked Chinese". From this autobiographical beginning, Ang goes on to reflect upon tensions between `Asia' and `the West' at a national and global level, and to consider the disparate meanings of `Chineseness' in the contemporary world. She offers a critique of the increasingly aggressive construction of a global Chineseness, and challenges Western tendencies to equate `Chinese' with `Asian' identity. Ang then turns to `the West', exploring the paradox of Australia's identity as a `Western' country in the Asian region, and tracing Australia's uneasy relationship with its Asian neighbours, from the White Australia policy to contemporary multicultural society. Finally, Ang draws together her discussion of `Asia' and `the West' to consider the social and intellectual space of the `in-between', arguing for a theorising not of `difference' but of `togetherness' in contemporary societies.

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