



Context 4 – Exploring issues of identity and belonging

‘Each person has different identities for different relationships and situations.’

Nominated text: *Growing Up Asian in Australia*

Chinese Pigs in Blankets

I never liked going to restaurants especially with my Chinese family. It wasn't that I disliked the food, infact I like the food, there was nothing like a hot pot of steaming tofu or an oily succulent Peking duck. No. The food was really great. What I hated about going to restaurants was my family who made every visit excruciatingly awkward with their insistence on returning to the old country via the local King Wong Palace as though it was Dr Who's tardis. Even though most of them migrated to Australia more than 10 years ago, their aura still turned the room into a market. David Attenborough would have a field day observing my family. Human migratory birds that flock habitually for Yum Cha every Sunday.

I can hear him now. 'This is a typical Chinese family gathering at the local restaurant. In parties like these, the host arrives early, keen to avoid any early awkward arrivals. Here comes the relatives, the children dash in first, excited to see the sea creatures in the fish tanks waiting to be steamed and served up. Polite greetings are uttered in a show of friendship and kinship. It is clear that for this family, the old ways have not been forgotten.'

That's how I feel sometimes, a human migratory bird nesting in the eastern suburbs Melbourne. Whilst my parents made small talk with the relatives about the obligatory subject of musical instrument and whose child played the most, piano and violin being of course mandatory. I would sit marooned with the other children nibbling on our prawn crackers. Sometimes I would catch a snippet of what they were talking about and it is usually about the academic excellence both real and imagined of their child. In China, success equates to good grades and more importantly, the ability of one's parent to take pride in the achievements of their child. As I grew up in Australia and watched my friend's parents exalt in the graduation of their child from TAFE and become plumber kings, I became increasingly torn. Yes, I wanted to please my parents, of course I did, I wasn't completely removed from my Chinese heritage, but I also want to embrace the Australian way and Oprah's mantra 'follow my bliss'. I felt like a Chinese fraud, outwardly representing a fleet of facading academic excellence whilst inside recoiling at my past, present and potential future failures and what this meant for my parents.

As the stress of these first exchanges were finally behind us, I still couldn't escape the regamorole of my Chinese heritage once we were seated. Strangely, there is only one menu on the table despite the fact there are ten empty stomachs. Everytime we went out, I lived in desperate hopes that for once I'd be able to choose something from the menu but this was no pub where there would be a separate kiddie menu. No, here I'd have to eat whatever the host wanted me to eat and only when my mum gave me the special signal that it was ok for me to eat. I have distinct memories of watching fried pork dumplings shimmering under flickering fluoro lights as they repeatedly passed me going to everyone around the lazy Susan but me. My mouth would water as these Chinese pigs in blankets went inside everyone's mouth and I was left with an empty plate and a few soggy lettuce leaves. I look back now at this culinary angst and marvel at my self control. At that time, I felt stifled, frustratingly held back from a delicious pork snack by the expectations of my parents who would have been mortified even if I attempted to sniff the food before my host did. However, these restaurant lessons of my youth have held me in good stead ever since though; you'll never catch me licking the cake mix off the spoon and that's more than I can say for some of my Australian mates.

My restaurant nightmare didn't end here. All the Chinese relatives are filled with the innate capacity and desire to feed their young with their own chopsticks. Whilst they didn't go as far as to regurgitate the food, they might as well have. I spent most of my Sunday afternoon's popping throat lozenges and gargling saltwater in an attempt to combat that I envisaged from eating the food on my plate. Whilst I have both my arms intact, it was deemed impolite to decline the ever increasing pile. I described this to my friend Danny who always begged me if he can come along to these family gatherings. Danny's weekend was filled with sausages and bread and little in the way of finally and friends. Danny spent alternate weekends with his mum and dad and loved the idea of family gathering with the intensity that I've had. At that time, I would love to switch places with Danny and fill my own plate with my own bread, my own sausage and my own sauce. I know for all my whining, I'm really lucky to have the connection and relationship with my family.

Now, I often think about Danny and David Attenborough and what they would say now. Danny often comes with me together with his own family as we have fallen into the same routine of my Chinese youth. We would make small talk about the academic achievement of our children, though I'm conscience to take pride in my daughter hairdressing certificate IV, knowing that it is her bliss and what she wants. The waiters were puzzled when I asked for an extra menu on the table, I was fulfilling my childhood dream in doing so, it was the only way for me not to shed a tear when my youngest order fried ice cream. Sometimes I feel the urge to place food on my children's plates when they don't have vegies. I know now that my restaurant rebellion has ended.

David Attenborough's voice 'Usually, the traditions for this family has moved on, Yum Cha is no longer just a Chinese Affair but one for the masses. Some habits do die hard though. The children's nose pressed against the fish tank, amazed by the lobsters at every visit whilst the adults made small talk and sipped their tea. It seems like this flock of migratory bird has settled in and assimilated with the local culture and tradition.'

- This is an upper mid-range script.
 - Shows a strong link to the text and draws clearly from the issues raised by several writers.
 - The image of the migratory birds is both amusing and shows an understanding of the text and the context, but the link to the prompt is not clearly made. The use of detail is effective in developing imagery that serves the student's purpose.
 - The writer is aware of feeling isolated, of looking on as an outsider, but conforms and comes to adopt the described behaviours and values.
 - Expression is occasionally awkward and flawed, but a personal voice emerges that gives an honesty and immediacy to the work.
 - An authentic, interesting and entertaining piece of writing.
- Assessors comments

David Z is a short story writer. Chinese Pigs in Blankets is an edited extract from his third installment 'Asian Youth', celebrating his life growing Asian in Australia. Multi-cultural week runs from 1st Nov to 7th Nov.

2012 Assessment Report

Section B – Writing in Context

Student response – Example 1

This upper-range response demonstrates how the Section B task draws on very different writing skills from those required for Section A. It is characterised by consideration of the wider implications of ideas from the Context, draws on a range of resources, includes a brief personal anecdote as well as adequate use of the selected text. It uses the prompt effectively as a springboard for a piece of analytical writing enhanced by sophisticated vocabulary.

'Each person has different identities for different relationships and situations.'

Humans are complex entities whose identities are formed through multitudes of experience and relationships. Owing to their multi-faceted nature, many people accept the idea that each person has different identities for different relationships and situations in order to belong. While this can be believed to be true, there are also others whose perception of self is so strong that they refuse to 'role-play' in different circumstances. Moreover despite the different 'roles' people have in their life, there are factors that form a part of one's innate, 'true' persona including sexual orientation and genetic inheritance.

Indeed, people may feel that the roles they play at different times of their life form the individual faces of their identity. For instance, my own father, who used to work as a high school teacher for 25 years, strongly believes that a large part of his identity is defined by his experience as a Geography teacher. At the same time, he is a husband, a father and a neighbour, all of which is part of who he feels he is. Likewise, a person can be a friend, a mother, an author and an employer in different situations. A strong example is the FBI, or anyone who works in an organisation that is highly confidential and important. A recent interview with a retired man who used to work in a secret government organisation in South Korea revealed that his life was divided by two, where he had to live as two completely different people at his workplace and his home, despite both of which being his identity. Clearly, he segregated his work and outside life in order to hide his identity and fulfil government responsibility but also protect himself and his family, as well as belong to the normal community. Meanwhile, in a highly multicultural society such as Australia, people with more than one culture may take different roles at different times. Blossom Beeby from 'Growing up Asian in Australia' is an adopted Korean child whose 'family was white, friends were white and world was white.' However, as she visits Korea and experience the Korean culture, she 'feels' Korean, and builds relationships as part of her 'Korean' identity while maintaining her Australian belonging. Therefore, these examples clearly show that one can have different identities for different relationships and situations as part of one's sense of self and belonging.

On the other hand, it is also possible that people refuse to play their roles in a given relationship or situation in order to pursue the ideas of their own interest. This can be seen by existentialists such as Nietzsche and Satre, who believed that 'man is nothing else but what he makes of himself.' In other words they prefer to 'be who they are' in any situations rather than role-playing in order to belong and value their own experiences over anything else. Moreover, a strong cultural upbringing can result in a strong identity that one believes it is one's 'true' self. The Vietnamese father from 'Water Buffalo' depicts through the metaphysical image of the buffalo, that his 'real' identity remains to be rural-Vietnamese, while he resides in Australia and is able to integrate himself with the culture. This is supported by his description as a 'stranger in a new land.' In addition, when the family expectations and one's career conflict, one may choose to reject one's family rather than wearing a mask to hide oneself. This is shown by Diana Nguyen from 'Five ways to disappoint your Vietnamese mother' where she chooses her acting career their 'supposed roles' or be someone else when their ideas do not correspond to that of their groups and relationships.

Furthermore there are aspects of oneself that determine one's 'innate' identity that is consistent in any situations or relationships one has. One of those aspects is one's sexual orientation. Through Benjamin Law's struggles in his 'Towards Manhood' to be part of his mainstream community it can be understood that there are certain situation such as being a homosexual, that one cannot hide and pretend to be somebody else. As consequence, Benjamin Law openly accepts he is gay and maintains his 'true' identity from then on. This is contrasted by a gay Chinese actor, Leslie Cheung who suicided because he could not stand the disparity between his innate sense of self and the norm of his mainstream, heterosexual society. Nonetheless, the result is still the same in the sense that both people refused to be someone else and hide their real identities. Additionally, there is also genetic influence that influences one's intrinsic perception of self that do not change in different relationships or situations. According to the research on identical twins separated at birth by the University of Minnesota in 1979, the twins has shown to be remarkably alike in their social values and attitudes as well as behaviour. Thus it is strongly supported that there are factors that enable one's individuality to be consistent under any circumstances in one's life.

Saint Brigit quoted that 'we become that which we love.' Indeed, according to our multi-layered nature of identity and belonging, people can have different roles, that is, identities in different situations or relationships. However, there are also cases where one refuses to have different identities due to their strong sense of self and intrinsic qualities over her mother's expectations on her to become a doctor. Therefore, it is clearly shown that at times one may decide not to play.

