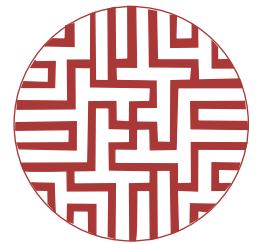


Bridging Worlds: A Journey of Cultural Identity in Australia

"Bridging Worlds: A Journey of Cultural Identity in Multicultural Australia" is a creative writing piece about my personal journey as an Asian Australian, navigating the complexities of my dual cultural identity. The story explores my experiences growing up in a multicultural society, facing moments of isolation and racism, and ultimately finding acceptance and pride in embracing my heritage. It highlights the challenges of fitting into societal expectations while reconciling with personal cultural values and the importance of embracing diversity in shaping one's sense of self. Ultimately, it celebrates the power of cultural exchange and the beauty of a multicultural Australia.



Ava 區佩恩

My grandad who I called “Gong Gong” came from Hong Kong, used his money that he won from bingo, and came to Australia to start a new life. He opened Canberra’s second oldest Chinese restaurant and it has been in our family ever since. My parents worked long hours; the work was hard and they would always come home tired. I was only in year 4 at the time, but I rarely saw them at home. I used to go to family friends’ houses during the night and would wait for one of my parents to pick me up after work. I could tell at a young age that my parents felt bad about how much they left me. We weren’t like your typical Aussie family. We rarely had dinner together every night like most families did, instead I would spend my nights with other families. However, Mondays were the best days because my parents would not have to work. We would all play board games and eat dinner together like a “normal” family, laughter and smiles always filled the room. This all changed when my mum got cancer. She passed away so suddenly, and it was like my whole world just collapsed in front of my eyes. My dad is now a single father, still going to work every night to support me, I usually just stay home by myself now as I’m old enough. Mondays aren’t the same anymore. Despite the difficulties of being a single father, my dad continues to work hard making just enough to make a living. He always cares for me no matter what. Our family, over the 50+ years the restaurant has been opened, have built many long-lasting friendships and loyal customers, who all have different nationalities and stories to tell. It’s great to see people coming and enjoying my dad’s Chinese cooking, it makes me proud of my culture. Dad can almost cook anything, and he is always researching new ways to perfect his bao and dumpling recipes. I remember at my mum’s funeral there were so many people, and there were so many customers from the restaurant to support us. Looking around, it made me realise that Australia is a nation where we strive to bring people together, especially in the face of adversity.



My grandad making steamed dumplings

However, everyone has their own opinions and different levels of education. In primary school, a Caucasian classmate came in my face and said, "Hey, did you eat dog for dinner last night". Shocked, I paused, and walked away. I will never forget this moment, as it was the first time, I had received a racist comment from someone that had made me feel worthless, and ashamed. I remember coming home crying to my mum and telling her what happened. She gave me a piece of advice that I will forever hold with me. She said, "We have a choice not to take these ignorant comments to heart, and a choice to embrace and be proud of your culture." Thinking back, it is easier said than done to embrace your culture to people. For me it was confusing, lonely and in some cases embarrassing to be an Asian Australian. Australia is still a nation defined by a white face. At the beginning of year 5 I remember trying to avoid eating aromatic fried noodles for lunch with my non-white mates, choosing pizza instead. At that time, I had wished to "be whiter" and to do so I had to socialise with Caucasian Australians. I was naïve and a racist against my own race. Growing up in a predominately white Catholic primary school added to the mix of not understanding what it means to be Australian or Chinese. My non-Asian friends would often ask "Where are you actually from?" a bit too often. In primary school I was one out of three Asians in my grade, and at home I would get the guilt of not being the stereotypical 'Asian' who loves maths and whose dream is to become a doctor. The truth is my favourite subjects are art and English. As an Asian Australian with a mixed background of European, I often ask myself: Where do I fit in? Where do I belong? I used to worry about being in a group with only "blonde" girls because I was worried about whether I'd fit in. Explaining my ethnicity would often result in many unwanted questions and comments:

"Wow, but you're so tan!"

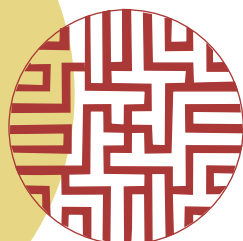
"No offence, but I thought Asians supposed to be paler?"

"You're lying, there is no way you can be Chinese, you're too tan."

"Tell me something in Chinese!"

"Why are you so tan, you don't look European at all."

However, as I went from a small primary school community to high school where there were nearly a thousand students, I was no longer one of the only Asians in my grade, I felt like I finally found a place where I belonged. I no longer hated myself for being "Too tanned to be Asian and too Asian to be Australian". Living in multicultural Canberra, I realised there are signs telling us it is okay not to fit in because we're all different.



I found friends with all different backgrounds and realised that we all struggle to fit in. Whether it's worrying about embracing your culture, or if you don't have the latest craze, fitting in is something we all struggle with. We all have different stories based upon our experiences. Culture is a shared experience but over time stories can change, and we are always learning about culture. So, it's not a bad thing to not fit in the stereotypes to be fully "Asian" or fully



Me performing Chinese Lion Dance for Lunar New Year

"Australian", which a matter of fact are two very broad terms. After my mum passed away, I isolated myself from people I cared about, and I stopped doing the things I loved. As I started getting help, my psychologist told me to "Take spontaneous adventures, and to live life to the fullest!" So, I took her advice and I decided to join the Canberra lion dance team as my Auntie knew the owner. Spending time with them and doing performances especially during Lunar New year celebrations I was able to embrace my Chinese heritage. They welcomed me with open arms, and I felt accepted. Even just watching people from different backgrounds coming to see us perform is a great thing to witness. I always smile, eyes drifting over to the more-non-Asian-faces that I can see watching us perform. I realised that my tan skin colour doesn't make me less Chinese, less European, or less Australian. It's about how we embrace and share our culture.

In high school I became friends with a typical Aussie girl, a Vietnamese girl, and an African girl. During a time when I was grieving, my classmates comforted me, sending me kind messages, and flowers. I felt loved, and I finally found a place where I fit in. I was finally proud of my culture. I remember bringing dumplings to school and all my friends wanted some. It made me realise that the only way that I was going to gain respect was if I embraced and stood up for my heritage. Maybe I would have been able to educate that primary school classmate if I stood up for myself rather than shy away, too scared to face the racist remarks. But that's what Australian identity is, it's a learning process, and it can change through experiences.

There is not just one Australian identity. We hold many different identities. Some may feel closer to their typical cultural values, some may identify with more Western values, in my case I found myself caught in the middle. Some people may be ok with this, but for some Asian Australians like me, we feel conflicted. Many Australians are shy about openly discussing their culture. Talking about my Asian ethnicity out in the open was difficult. Maybe I was afraid of racist comments. Maybe I was scared that certain races that I affiliated with would think less of me. Carving our egos and identities is difficult. From birth to our dying breath, we are always trying to carve who we are as a human. But from my experiences there is no real necessity to define labels as identities. The truth is, I enjoy going to yum cha, making mooncakes with dad for Lunar New Year, but I also love having a barbeque and a good old Bunnings snag. So, whether I identify as an Aussie or Chinese person, I haven't really decided... but from reflection, I believe it is imperative to be proud of both.



More photos of me Lion Dancing

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Another woman rang on the afternoon of the final service to order takeaway, and then drove up from Moruya on the South Coast to pick it up.



Peter Ching at the Mee Sing in 1965. Picture Facebook

Loyal customers from all over Canberra, some who had been coming to the restaurant since it opened in 1965, sat alongside friends of the Ching family, who had run the suburban restaurant for close

canberratimes.com.au

My family's Chinese restaurant, Mee Sing, featured in the Canberra Times.