

Going Bananas: Multiple Identities Forum 2006

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Be warned, this is not an academic treatment, or even a real review of the 2006 Going Bananas conference: What follows are my musings as I digest what turned out to be an experience of total immersion in a discourse of identity.

I couldn't stop talking about the "Going Bananas: Multiple Identities Forum" for days afterwards. Driving through heavy rain on the way home to Whangarei I regaled my partner with moments of amusement, poignancy, and stories of intelligence and sheer humanity for two hours. Over the following days I wrote emails, gave little overviews to friends and even studied the notes that I'd taken on the little notepad supplied with the pack of goodies that came in my banana-yellow conference shoulder bag.

The Forum was beautifully structured. Incorporating the 3-H theory, it moved from the heart, to the head, and then humour. Individuals made presentations within one of three separate sections (Living with Multiple Identities, Reel Asians and Creative NZ Chinese) which were 'chaired' (so I've been told) by a presenter from the 2005 Bananas Conference. The section called Living with Multiple Identities was the up close and personal reflections of Jenny Lee, Andrew Young, Gia Nghi Phung and David Do. Mua Strickson-Pua chaired the session with hilarious self deprecating humour, sliding back and forth from Samoan to Chinese caricature; telling stories and jokes, illustrating different cultural values and thought processes. Helene Wong chaired the Reel Asians session, a serious reflection on the representation of Chinese in the media. Tze Ming Mok chaired an upbeat session on the Creative NZ Chinese. The likes of Ant Sang, Ted Chen, Kelvin Soh and Vikki Cheng each offered a snapshot of their "cultural-creative voices" with the help of the data projector. Mervin Singham's opening address set the scene. Citing migration trends and the increasingly multi-cultural face of

New Zealand, he pointed to the importance of a sense of personal identity and its connection to New Zealand's development of an emerging new multicultural national identity. He praised the NZ Chinese Association for mobilizing the Chinese community to debate topics of importance, paving the way for other ethnic communities in "self-empowerment". Dr Robyn Dixon's keynote address identified the context of the Forum as the formation personal identity. Later, Dr James Liu advanced this discussion on personal identity, bringing it into New Zealand's cultural landscape. In the background there seemed to be dozens of people working-preparing and presenting food, greeting and taking registrations, and dealing with the technology. And at the borders of the Forum were Kai Luey and Liu Shueng Wong, the elders, holding it all together. But it wasn't just the structure that turned me on.

Maybe it was Andrew Young's thoughtful and deeply personal reflection on his development of identity that led me to reflect on mine. His parents desire that he aspire to better values than the "lazy Say-Yun", their ethic of hard work and judgments of NZers. His adolescence brought with it the questioning of their values and inevitable rejection and distancing as he struggled to forge his own identity. It was a story that could have had an unhappy ending were it not for the opportunity through the NZ Chinese Association's Winter Camp and Young's trip to China to study and visit his father's village. Through this journey he experienced the past, his parent's past, and saw what motivated them to leave China and he came home with an appreciation for their sacrifices and motivations. Peering into past identity provided the link to a

future that could integrate his life. I was listening to Andrew's gentle narrative, and his experience of isolation coming from a family that sits outside the mainstream culture, and thinking of my own father, the child of Jewish refugees from Russia, born to parents who didn't really speak English or know much about their new country. I couldn't help feeling envious of Andrew's experience in China, peering into the past, bringing it into his present, with the gift of cultural pride to pass on to his children. By comparison, my family's past seems like a dim watermark that can't be erased, but nor can it be seen.

Maybe it was Gia Nghi Phung's poignant tale creatively expressed through the lens of her name. From its Chinese origins in Vietnam, to its refugee status in Australia, to the English spelling given to her as her first word in the Australian refugee camp school when she was five, her name holds her story. Having a name that no one in your world can say, spell or pronounce brings your identity into every interaction. I, too, have held on to my 'foreign' sounding name as a remnant of cultural identity, a piece of myself that harks back to the 'old country', and holds a story.

The more academic presentations of Drs James Liu and Robyn Dixon's theoretical framework on identity gave a context within which the rest of the presenters could play. Building on Dr Dixon's presentation of Erikson's theory of identity development- sense of belonging, identity feelings, ideals, thinking, and values- Dr Liu expanded on the questions of migrant identity into New Zealand's discourse on biculturalism. After the Forum, I went straight out and bought Dr Liu's book, *New Zealand Identities*. His eloquent presentation spoke of identity formation as an interactive process that is influenced by how others position you. No kidding! (I was reminded of my early years in New Zealand, constantly trying to reshape the lens through which others saw me.)

Maybe it was the sheer 'in your face' cleverness of Vikki Cheng and her school friend, Helen Luo, exploring stereotypes of Asian and Kiwi identity with their "rice girls" film. Through dance, drama, clever imagery and their song, B.A.D.A.S.S (Be A Dope Asian Super-sassy Stereotype), they capture Vikki's early experience of racism, a rude note left in her letterbox, and mix it with adolescent identity

questions to "puff!" – Take back the power, baby! And, oh by the way 'don't apologise for who you are' even if you are a pearl tea drinking stereotype Asian.

Gutsy David Do unhesitatingly identifies himself as a gay queer Chinese New Zealander. What more simple identity could there be? A committed gay queer activist, sexuality educator, Student Welfare Officer at Auckland Uni., president of the queer student's group, UniQ, and chair of a branch of Labour party, and, oh yeah, a student of politics and history. David Do must never sleep. Maybe because he seemed to be operating in 'real time', sharing his "journey", coming out to the mostly Chinese audience, baring his youthful, vulnerable, honest soul. Do David had the wow factor! Like a rush of air from a window suddenly thrown open, Do had no hesitation in stepping confidently into one of his many roles and doing some educating on queer awareness. While admiring his uncompromising honesty, I ached a bit with protectiveness for his youthful vulnerability. My anguish was relieved when a gay man from the audience offered Do a gift of courage and faith for his personal journey. Maybe it was the acceptance of the audience in making it safe for him; and thereby making me feel safe too that shrunk the room from a large impersonal lecture theatre to a family lounge – all of us on the edge of our cushioned chairs, praying for 'gutsy'.

Maybe it was because it was so unpolished, kind of 'homegrown' and relaxed. Several times we had to wait while someone rushed out to get the technician to fire up the power point presentation. Irritating? No. It was comforting. Real people, even some super intelligent, over achieving New Zealand Chinese have difficulty with data projectors and Powerpoint. This added to the 'something real and intimate going on here' feeling.

It's a tribute to the conference organizers that four generations of Chinese were present. The stories of this Forum took everyone back in historical time and brought us all forward into the hands of the vibrant youth who are energetically confronting New Zealand's racism and forging a creative path to the future.

Identity can be a heavy topic or a light one. To me, it depends on whether you are making an identity or it is being made for you. Some people speak of

identity as emerging from a stew of ingredients. The Multiple Identities Forum made me think about the integration of flavours and textures that emerge with time and various degrees of heat. It provided participants with a pageant of tools and tips for deepening their own identities in ways that nourish the personal and collective spirits.

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