 Prescribed Text: Contemporary Asian Australian Poets

‘The Double Man’ – Ouyang Yu

Pre-reading

All of you were born in another country. The longer that you stay in Australia, the more your identity is likely to change.

Make a list of things that make you feel like part of either your country of origin or your new country (even if you are only visiting Australia).

| Country of Birth: | Australia: |
| --- | --- |
|  | Speak English |
|  | Teacher gets us to talk in class sometimes |
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|  |  |
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The Poem

1. What does “crystallisation” mean (line 2)? Why do you think the poet uses this word here?
2. How does your name connect you to a culture? Have you tried to “translate” your name? What difference does this make to your name?
3. What does “motherland” mean? What is the impact of using “mother” to describe a country (instead of some other word)? Try to think of the importance of this for a person – for example, heritage, culture, sense of connection, and so on.
4. In lines 9-19, how does the poet use irony to help us understand his experience of cultural connection?
5. Like the Yin and Yang in the picture, is it good to have your heart split into “two colours” (line 21)?
6. ‘Traitor’ is never a nice term. Why do the Chinese say that people who leave are traitors? What effect do you think that being called a traitor might have on a person?
7. Language is important to identity. Why is there a word in Chinese for Chinese traitor “han jian” but in Australia there is none (lines 22-23)? What does this suggest about the persona’s experience of cultural identity?
8. In lines 24-27, the persona compares himself to Australians. What does he have in common with Australians?
9. What does the poet mean by the line ‘they’ve both lost M’ (line 27)?
10. Some groups, such as Hong Kong Chinese may choose not to be “Chinese” as they do not want to identify with mainland China. Does this mean that they have “nullified” their home?
11. What does the persona mean when he says, “i shall be the father of the double man” (line 31)?
12. One of the most noticeable things about this poem is the poet’s choice not to use capital letters for words that would normally have them. Why do you think the poet has done this? How does it help to convey the poet’s ideas about his identity?
13. Look at the verbs used throughout the poem:
    * “i translate” (line 5)
    * “i possess” (lines 9 & 11)
    * “i say” (lines 17 & 19)
    * “i write” (line 24)
    * “i have nullified” (line 28)
    * “i have set up” (line 29)

Who is actively doing for most of the poem? Does this suggest anything about the poet’s understanding of how identity is formed?

Reflecting

* Do you feel more connected to your “motherland” or to your new country? Explain what makes you feel this way?
* Most of you did not choose to leave the country of your birth. Does this affect the way that people in your country of birth treat you?
* Is your identity something that you choose or is it developed in response to the way that you are treated? Think about your own experiences. Write one anecdote from your own experiences which shows how you can feel caught between two worlds.