 Prescribed Text: Contemporary Asian Australian Poets

‘My Hakka Grandmother’ – Eileen Chong

Pre-reading

* What comes to mind when you think of your grandparents?
* How much of your understanding of your grandparents is based on your first-hand experience and how much is based on what you’ve been told by other people or what you’ve imagined?
* Do you wish you knew more about your grandparents? Explain your answer.
* To what extent does your understanding of your grandparents and/or your relationship with them influence your perception of:
  + Yourself?
  + Your cultural background and identity?

Before you read the poem:

* Research the term ‘Hakka’. Find out where the term comes from, who it refers to and the experiences of the Hakka people with migration. Based on what you have learned from your research, think about how the Hakka people might experience or perceive a sense of cultural identity.
* Find out about Eileen Chong’s cultural background. How does her family fit into the experience of the Hakka people?

The Poem

1. Think about the title of the poem. What ideas are immediately raised through Chong’s choice of the word “Hakka” to identify her grandmother?
2. The poem begins, “If time could unwind for you / yet be still for me”. What is the speaker imagining in these lines? How does beginning with such wishful language affect our understanding of the rest of the poem?
3. Lines 2-5 contain three images of the speaker and her grandmother.
   1. Identify the three images. These links may help:
   * [Foot Binding](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foot_binding): https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foot\_binding
   * [Fujian Tulou](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fujian_Tulou): https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fujian\_Tulou
   1. What sense do they create of the speaker’s imagined experience with her grandmother?
4. The speaker clearly indicates that she knows about the “earth-house” because she “read about it once” (line 5), not because she has seen one herself. Why does Chong choose to mention this? How does her language in the next line reflect this type of knowledge? (Hint: contrast the language here with the imagery from the previous lines).
5. A simile is used to compare the “earth-house” to “wedding rings / stacked up and interlinked” (lines 7-8). Why would Chong choose “wedding rings” for this comparison?
6. How does Chong build a sense of intimacy between the speaker, her grandmother in the third and fourth stanzas?
7. Why does the speaker “wonder where our bloodlines begin” (lines 17-18)? What is the significance of this?
8. The Chinese characters for ‘Hakka’ literally mean ‘guest families’. The speaker refers to this in line 18: “We are guest people”. Why is it ironic to say that they are “without land or name” (line 19)?
9. Explain the effect of the metaphor in the last line. What is significant about “wild birds” in terms of migration? What does this suggest about the speaker’s perception of herself?

Reflecting

* This poem presents the imagined experiences of the speaker. How can imagination influence a person’s sense of identity?
* To what extent is it necessary to experience a culture first hand in order to feel affiliated with it? Are there parts of your cultural identity that are based on something other than your own direct experience?
* How important is it for you to have a sense of your cultural ‘roots’? Explain your answer.