



# CROSSING THE DIVIDE

In our multicultural society, reconciling the traditional expectations of immigrant families with those of their adopted culture can be a heartwrenching tug of war. Sarina Lewis spoke to those who have found a way of balancing both.

**PHOTOGRAPH: ANDREW COWEN**

Yejin Bae is the archetype of cross-cultural surety and glamour. The internationally lauded designer, acclaimed for her distinct blend of subtle sex appeal and chic classicism, is herself the model of elegant poise. Of course, there are the luscious locks and perfect, near make-up-free complexion that speak of Bae's Korean heritage. But there's something more. A quiet confidence. A surface stillness hinting at a creative depth below.

"The one thing that I was always aware of from quite a young age was that I had a definite level of maturity that was perhaps above other kids my age," admits the 36-year-old, chatting openly on the line from her Melbourne home, "and part of it came from having parents who didn't speak English as fluently."

Born in Korea, Bae relocated to Australia as a creatively driven five-year-old whose parents were seeking a better life. The move taught her much, most powerfully, the importance of a strong sense of self as a tool for future success. "My parents knew that I wanted to be a fashion designer and they wanted to encourage that," Bae says, showing pride in parents who allowed her to find her own way to self-determination despite the cultural clash it provoked. "They allowed me to ... go full-time into fashion studies even though there were whispers in the Korean community that I had been allowed to leave high school earlier, which is quite

unheard of. In a sense my parents really rebelled, and had that confidence in me to create my own path."

Of itself, self-identification is as difficult a personal process as many of us are likely to ever experience. But what happens when that rite of passage is clouded further? How much more difficult does self-discovery become growing up against a backdrop of cultural clash? How to reconcile disparate identities when family and society fail to share the same cultural footprint?

As social issues go, it is one that, in Australia, looms large. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 census data (reviewed in 2009) recorded more than one quarter of Australia's population as having been born overseas. Then take into account the number of second-generation children born to immigrant parents and the topic of cross-cultural identity resonates.

Self-labelled Italian-Australian psychologist and lecturer at Deakin University, Dr Josephine Palermo has spent her career in organisational psychology understanding the intricacies of creating balance when it comes to culture and self-identity. Needless to say, she shows little surprise at some of the stories of identity confusion I recount to her as we chat over the phone.

"Culture is very ingrained," explains Palermo. "It's the expression of a set of values, attitudes and behaviours; a set ▶



of shared meanings across a group derived from our upbringing, our socialisation, our tradition and our history." Think of the way in which we eat, our views on religion and our beliefs on how individuals should function within society. It's when our home values are at odds with societal values that the path toward self-determination can become an obstacle course of internal conflict and misunderstandings.

"When we studied people who crossed cultures we actually know ... some people cope with that conflict by deliberately switching from one culture to the other depending on the situation," she recounts, describing this "alternation model" akin to having a foot in each cultural camp. "You often get stories of girls who perhaps feel like they can't share everything with their parents or family members because they are doing things in the mainstream culture that their families wouldn't understand. They don't try to resolve the boundary at all. There is no enmeshment." Palermo says the end result is often emotional distress at maintaining such a sophisticated social charade.

As an academic at the University of Western Sydney's Centre for Cultural Research, Dr James Arvanitakis has seen first-hand the confusion this can cause. "I had a Turkish student who was an awesome, hard-core feminist," Arvanitakis recalls, "but when her dad arrived home from work she would – without even thinking – make him coffee and bring him his slippers." Wrestling with the challenge between her feminist ideals and the cultural doctrine of "being a good daughter is symbolic of what a lot of people experience in that situation".

Those like Bae are fortunate. Although certain traditional attitudes present in her family home could have created conflict ("as we got a bit older the level of discipline that our parents were familiar with definitely came through"), her parents' willingness to allow their daughters to tread their own paths in a mixed cultural landscape meant that, for her, connecting the dots between her Korean traditions and her Australian adaptations was a joyous journey of self-discovery.

But Bae's experience is not everybody's. A friend and I were recently talking food and babies when the conversation veered toward a more personal commonality previously unexplored, that of an upbringing balanced between two cultures. As we took turns painting for the other the small details of our lives it became clear that, while the broad brushstrokes shared little in common, the resulting portraits bore a stunning resemblance.

Certainly my Anglo-Ukrainian girlfriend and I had war stories to share: for her the incredibly high expectations of academic achievement that formed an intrinsic part of the Ukrainian-Australian experience carried over as a result of the persecution suffered by Ukrainians in their homeland. For me, it was the internal struggle as I railed against the heavy tradition of familial duty that is such a part of my father's Indian culture but so foreign within the fabric of the Anglicised society in which we lived. It was a tiring tug-of-war. Attempting to reconcile parental expectations to

consistently put home life first was the spark igniting an enduring internal conflict: the good, obedient girl who was called for by traditional Indian culture locked in argument with the Australian-raised young woman who saw nothing wrong with asserting independence and eking out a separate identity, paying no heed to familial expectations.

Ultimately, the conflict between duty and desire was one worth enduring. Psychologists suggest that, at least in part, our self-identity is defined through the eyes of others. The looking-glass self, where reflected views and opinions of those around us help shape

personal identity through our decisions to either accept or discount what we see and hear. Culture, in a way, is what we bounce off. Like many other children of immigrants, my reflections could be incredibly disjointed.

Smoothing out the craters of contradiction, while a complex process, ultimately creates a greater depth of understanding and resilience.

"Culture and self-identity are all about looking at yourself in relative terms," Arvanitakis agrees. "How you compare. How you see yourself with others and how you think others see you. It's a flexible thing, which makes it really exciting and fantastic but also quite challenging and threatening. You begin to go: 'Well, which of these smorgasbord of cultures really defines who I am?' ... not only an internal perspective but also how do people see me."

It's a minefield Amanda Nguyen knows well. Born

in Vietnam to Vietnamese parents, the now 28-year-old relocated to Australia at eight months old. Despite having ostensibly grown up on local shores, Nguyen found her traditional home life lead to years of personal struggle as she attempted to reconcile the seemingly hopeless disparity of the two worlds in which she lived. There was confusion as that teenage desire to embrace pop culture butted heads against Vietnamese tradition: open dialogue versus respect for elders; the right of self-expression of the individual clashing with the sanctity of family.

"It was really being in this crossfire between these traditional values that your parents held and this incredibly different and contradicting culture that you were exposed to at school and on TV and in magazines," recounts Nguyen, admitting she went through a stage in high school of dyeing her hair blonde, wearing light-coloured contact lenses and even attempting skin whitening to nullify the obvious difference in appearance that existed between herself and the Anglo-Australian faces around her.

Of course, a cross-cultural upbringing isn't all soul-tearing darkness: together Nguyen and I laugh about the small stuff, such

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Amanda Nguyen



as covering a casserole at a friend's home as an "exotic" meal away from the nightly dose of spice; brushing over family traditions that could appear too "ethnic" to Aussie friends. Palermo gets it. Her young self was prone to cringing when her mother attempted conversations in Italian with her while out in public ("I was scared that someone would hear and know that I wasn't Australian"). Palermo explains the conflict as arising out of strong messages of assimilation sent out by the dominant culture.

"The message we get from society's reference points is that the only way to solve this cultural conflict is by assimilating," Palermo says, explaining that this model leaves no room for nuance. "You either stick to your traditional culture or you become quite like 'an Australian'. People can become quite distraught because in the long term this is not a workable solution for them." There is little ease to be found in operating outside the dominant culture in which one lives. Just as forfeiting traditional cultural birthrights often results in feelings of emptiness further down the track.

Yet Arvanitakis is quick to point out that the challenges in creating a self-determined cultural blend are exacerbated by the fluid nature of Australia's dominant cultural landscape. "We have this official policy of multiculturalism and I think the problem is that multiculturalism is easy to define on paper but it's actually quite difficult to live," he ventures. "Because it's still so alive and so fresh there are no clear guidelines as to what that means."

Born to Lebanese Christian parents, Sarah Christie well understands the conundrum. Her family's strict traditional upbringing within an "ethnic enclave" meant the opportunity to merge the cultures of her home and her country was never presented. "Everyone I associated with was a Lebanese Catholic like me," she laments, citing her education in a Lebanese Catholic school, her attendance at the family's traditional church and the absence of association with any other ethnically diverse friends. It wasn't until meeting her future husband, an Anglo-Australian, at 17 that the impetus to reset her boundaries was found.

It was a turbulent time. Her determination to create a more elastic cultural framework captured her family's attention: frightened by her friendship with a man outside her community, Christie's parents were shocked into allowing her more freedom. "They started letting me go out a little bit more even though for them that wasn't proper ladylike behaviour," she recalls, recounting how her parents hoped that this new independence would discourage her budding relationship.

"That was the real crux of change," says Christie, noting her parents had always expected her to marry and remain cloistered within the Australian Lebanese community. "They said if I married this guy it would be poison. It was a massive deal for my parents." As it was for her; her then-boyfriend (now husband) was the spark that sent the 25-year-old on her current path, one that attempts to

merge the best of both her cultural worlds. It is a point at which most of us ultimately arrive: after years spent battling to compute the diverse (and often opposing) cultural messages received from all quarters, the recognition occurs that it is only in blending the two that contentment will be found. "The way that the conflict is resolved is called acculturation," Palermo explains, referencing a term that refers to the merging of two distinct cultures.

"It means you can absolutely still feel a part of your own culture, adopt some of those values, but you're doing it from a more critical space. So you might adopt some of those values that work for you in your new situation, in other words, in your second-generation situation," she emphasises, "but some of those values you might decide aren't working for you are not used to form part of your self-identity. Instead you adopt some of the Australian-based shared meanings as part of yourself as well."

For Nguyen, it has meant holding on to the traditional Vietnamese focus on respect for marriage and the family and merging it with Western culture's encouragement of making our own individual voices heard ("there is not a lot of outward expression of emotion or feelings in Vietnamese culture").

Similarly Christie expresses her pleasure at "finding a place in the middle", just as I have: the heavy emphasis on respect for elders is one I understand and now try to pass on to my own children, even as I vow to lift the cloisters on family life that I railed against as I was growing up. For many like Christie, it is a fraught process.

"The challenge is just learning to find that perfect balance and it's a challenge that is constant," Christie argues, noting that consistent exposure to her desire for change has allowed her parents to lose some of their fear and embrace a new version of their daughter, who has reshaped the family's cultural mould. "First I challenged it being a uni graduate who just wanted to go out or wanted to travel. Then I challenged it by marrying someone who was not the same culture." Now she says that challenge continues as the prospect



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of children enters the picture and now she and her husband negotiate just what balance of Lebanese-Australian culture their own household will settle on.

For her part, Bae is taking it one step further. Married to a Frenchman, the Korean-born, Australian-bred fashion leader is looking forward to an altogether different creation. "I think how exciting it's going to be to have someone out there - my children - who can appreciate the beauty of the Asian culture and the history and joyfulness of the European culture with the laidback kind of attitude here in Australia," she muses, emphasising the value to society in raising open-minded individuals with flexible cultural understandings. "I think: 'Wow, we're kind of in for a treat.'" ■