

Mani Rao (Hong Kong)

Halloween

(First published in *Dimsum*, Hong Kong (www.dimsum.com.hk) in March 2005 and next in *Nanyang Arts* (Singapore) in June 2005).

The nine major characteristics of a *lung* type dragon include a head like a camel's, horns like a deer's, eyes like a hare's, ears like a bull's, a neck like an iguana's, a belly like a frog's, scales like a carp's, paws like a tiger's, and claws like an eagle's. It has a pair of large canine teeth in its upper jaw.¹

I guess then, that if a dragon tried to crash in to a frogs-only conference, it ought to be admitted.

But that was the classical era. Then came the '50s when many nations formalised their identities and sang patriotic songs like this one in the Raj Kapoor film: "*Mera Joota Hai Japani, Yeh Pataloon inglistani, Sar Pe Lal Topi Roosi, Par bhi dil hai hindustani.*" (Transl: *My shoes are Japanese, and the trousers are English, the cap on my head is Russian, but my heart is Indian.*)²

Soon after that, second generation migrants everywhere extracted their ethnicity and injected it back into their life with the purpose of increasing their immunity. That made them strong enough to produce fiction, poetry, film and art.

It was not that different from Paul Gauguin who made a point about where he was coming from by painting Tahiti. In a letter he wrote to Charles Morice in April 1903, he said: "*I am indeed a savage. And civilized people are aware of the fact, for in my works, there is nothing that surprises or shocks apart from my being 'a savage despite myself'. That is why it is inimitable. A man's work is an explanation of himself.*"³

But he did have to go to Tahiti first, as there was no internet at the time. Thankfully, today everyone has broadband, everyone's wardrobe is from China, and unlike Raj Kapoor who had to get by with just one heart, you can receive several hearts in the mail from Amazon, and if your family tree is not already replete with about eight different races, then what the hell, you can easily adopt them.

Like Angelina Jolie when she adopted a Cambodian baby and all of Cambodia wrote Letters to the Editor saying she should be granted Cambodian citizenship. I immediately wanted to flatter her, adopt an Indian child and quickly ask, "can I be Indian now?" But it was too soon after the news item, even for flattery. I was afraid to be called a tomb-raider; I mean, even a joke can go too far.

Of course these things are only possible because we are all mongrels today and thus able to celebrate Halloween all year by wearing different costumes every day.

Yesyesyes we know Halloween but what's a mongrel?

“From the beginning of the Bronze Age, circa 4500 BC, five distinct types of dog have been identified from fossil remains. Among them were Mastiff, wolf-like dogs, Greyhounds, Pointer-type and Sheepdogs. These basic types proliferated by natural genetic mutation and selective breeding produced the approximately 400 different types of dog breeds we know today. A “pure bred” dog is a group of dogs that look alike and are the product of parents with a similar appearance and which, when mated together, reproduce their kind. A mongrel or Mutt is a dog whose parents are unknown or is not considered to be pure bred.”⁴

This paragraph shows beyond all doubt that we are all mongrels and all mongrels are bastards. Bastards will do anything, even distort history.

As the infallible Sunil Khilnani states in his book *The Idea of India* - “The storehouse of shared narrative structures embodied in epics, myths and folk stories, and the family resemblance in styles of art, architecture and religious motifs – if not ritual practices – testify to a civilizational bond, that in fact extended well beyond the territorial borders of contemporary India: to Persia in the west and Indonesia in the east.”⁵ Wow! Persian literary anthologies, here I come! And Ubud!

I must also remember to follow up on that other opportunity created by that thorough, methodical and authoritative book by German author Holger Kersten called *Jesus Lived in India*.⁶ The Pope could use a poet or two.

We need to be more creative about who we can be these days because the good old values have all eroded like top-soil. Your name does not count. English-language names that many Chinese people choose for themselves, especially in China and Hong Kong are based on a momentary, inexplicable attraction to a character or a place or a century - grossly misleading. Archimedes could be mistaken for a Greek who can bake a spanokopita but only until you notice that his last name is Wong. Even that could be insufficient evidence because it generally only refers to the male parent, the part one is never sure of. Maybe the mother was Greek. Thirdly, because ‘other’ languages always exist as phonemes, people choose names that ‘sound’ nice. For all you know, Archimedes could have been copied from a sound. Music is like that. It gets around.

Oh well, if a name has been devalued then perhaps a face will do as currency, but no. Michael Jackson will tell you that a face is but skin deep. I feel for 18-year-old Yang Yuan of China who, in December 2003, was thrown out of the *Miss International Beauty Contest* on grounds that her beauty was man-made. How did they know the plastic surgeon was a man? If spending US\$13,000 across 11 operations is not legitimate proof of sincerity, then what is? But all’s well that ends well and soon enough someone decided to hold a contest in November this year called *Miss Plastic Surgery*. I am sure everything will be above-board because a spokesman for the organisers, Beijing Tianjiu Weive Culture and Media Co, said contestants would have to produce doctor's certificates confirming their charms were not natural.

For the face to be accepted as a criterion, it also helps if the mouth can stay shut unless it comes with compatible sound effects. A Chinese face can be badly unmasked like in the John Woo film *Face-Off* if the mouth opens wide to reveal a rotten BBC (British-born-Chinese) or worse, an ABC (American-born-Chinese). Hong Kong knows about these things. Locals call someone a ‘banana’ when they are yellow outside but white inside.

I still remember that horrible moment in the documentary film *Song of The Exile: Chinese restaurants* directed by Cheuk C Kwan, the film that traces the history of Chinese-restaurant owners in South Africa, Israel and Turkey. The restaurateur confesses that when he arrived in Israel, he didn't know how to cook Chinese cuisine. His Israeli friends say, "*never mind it's easy, we'll show you how – but you cook, you've got the right face*". I hope it wasn't his restaurant you ate at when you went to Israel.⁷

Name delete. Face delete. What about that telling item on immigration forms - the address? No one bothers filling that box any more because one does not stay immobile after birth, presumably one eventually walks; however, unlike other mammals a newborn human baby cannot immediately get up and about to the extent that it can absorb the local culture – therefore, a place of birth has very little meaning. Place delete.

Sorting is much easier if the writer arrives tagged with genealogical information. Most of them have several versions of bios in their laptops or handhelds and all the bios are true.

Take me for example.

If I did not tell you who I am, you would think I was Indian. My parents come from rival towns situated on opposite sides of the same Indian river. I wish my mother had slept with someone more uncommon, but in those days all the "foreigners" were hanging out in Goa and being hippies. We are from the South. And I do love my Dad. He doesn't like Goa. So I am like that Heinz TV commercial which says all the ingredients here are – hold your breath – tomatoes.

But the monotony vanishes when you get closer to me. I used to be a samurai and a geisha in previous lives, and I still dream in Japanese. I can't prove it, but it's not my fault that dream-recording technology has not been invented yet. I have also been married to a man and a lesbian at the same time so I can do justice to both anthologies when called upon. Everyone knows that married people don't have sex and infidelity is heterosexual. A writer is like a prism, able to separate into several colors and quite feasibly be at two, three or several places at the same time.

Listen to *ratio quality* from *Scared Texts* written by the poet Jam Ismail who is a Canadian national in four parts - one quarter Indian, one quarter Hong Kong-Indian and two quarters Hong Kong-Chinese."

"young ban yen had been thought italian in kathmandu, filipina in hongkong, eurasian in kyoto, japanese in anchorage, dismal in london england, hindu in edmonton, generic oriental in calgary, western canadian in ottawa, anglophone in montreal, metis in jasper, eskimo at hudson's bay department store, vietnamese in chinatown, tibetan in vancouver, commie at the u.s. border.

*on the whole, very asian."*⁸

She got away with all that? Is she a chameleon? Isn't a dragon a chameleon?

Those are profound questions. One needs to turn to biology, or botany, which is the same thing. (Plants are animals. I think this way because I am a vegetarian, which means vegetarians can buy my books.) Says Michael Pollan in *Botany of Desire* - "... *plant species will go so far as to impersonate other creatures or things in order to secure pollination or, in the case of carnivorous plants, a meal. To entice flies into its inner sanctum (there to be digested by waiting enzymes), the pitcher plant has developed a weirdly striated maroon-and-white flower that is not at all attractive unless you happen to be attracted to decaying meat. (The flower's rancid scent re-inforces this effect).*"⁹

Identity is a strategy for survival and propagation, a tactic borrowed from life. It is all about the favoring of traits that increase one's attractiveness. While trafficking in a metaphor, writers will also recruit other writers and the resulting multifariousness has the potential to be a bogus trend, a symptom of a new culture virus.

At the same time as you morph into the clue that can be picked up by culture detectives, you will also get a little careless and forget that there is no teabreak in Halloween, and begin depositing cheques to several names into the same bank account. Banks will have read the latest magazines, got to know that identity is no more than a simulation and no less than the ghost of a disappeared species, and report you to the dog-police. Even banks can be ethical.

The dog police will pick you up and throw you into a catchment where all mongrels go. It will remind you of Dante's interminable journey.

None of this is personal. This sort of thing is starting to happen everywhere. World music is one such home for lost music mongrels, confirming that Einstein was right. In India, the world music section contains African music and in Australia, Indian music.

These catchments are being temporarily called 'international' and 'multi-cultural' and functioning like rehab centres. You may not even care to get out on bail if you are one of those variants - too Chinese to be Indian and too Indian to be Chinese.

When I was postulating my theories at the Melbourne Writers Festival recently, I stumbled upon a slogan at the National Gallery - *International like never before*.¹⁰ I studied the art on offer and understood that an overseas voyage had been involved which made it international. I quietly rejoiced for my Australian writer friends who had to cross the sea to go just about anywhere, even Tasmania. It was then that I decided to drop all plans to adopt an Indian child and to go beg for the international collar. I was sure it would come with a long leash.

If Beijing objected that I had traveled by train from Hong Kong, I could always count on the dragon to pull me out of the difficult situation.

Copyright 2005 Mani Rao

¹ Well known legend about dragons.

² Hindi film 'Shri 420', Raj Kapoor, 1955.

³ Paul Gauguin *The Search For Paradise, Letters from Brittany and the South Seas*, Collins & Brown. Page 150.

⁴ www.dogbreedinfo.com

⁵ *The Idea of India*, Sunil Khilnani. Penguin Books 1998.

⁶ *Jesus Was An Indian*, Holger Kersten, Element Books

⁷ *Song of The Exile: Chinese restaurants* directed by Cheuk C Kwan, 2003.

⁸ *From Scared Texts*, Jamila Ismail. *Many-Mouthed Birds, Contemporary Writing by Chinese Canadians* edited by Bennett Lee and Jim Wong-Chu. 1992. Page 128.

⁹ *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan. Bloomsbury 2002.

¹⁰ Exhibition in August 2004, National gallery of Victoria, Melbourne