

Seeing Yourself

By Cathy Bao Bean



Is it a rabbit? A duck? A duck-billed platypus? A plucked daisy? If you concentrate, one or the other comes into view. Or something no one else has seen. But no matter how many you perceive, no matter how quickly you can switch from the “duck” to the “rabbit” and back again, the drawing can only be one thing at a time.

This is what it’s like to be at least bi-cultural. For immigrants to a new country or new school or new job, the idea is to become faster and more proficient, not to end up in a “meltdown pot.”

Carol Gilligan, Professor of Education at Harvard University, once likened this phenomenon to what (most) women and (some) men may experience when, for example, they render a verdict. They may first decide in terms of “the law,” according to objective and impersonal standards and then, almost, but not quite, instantaneously view the same set of circumstances “in a different voice,” in terms of the more subjective, personal and/or individual considerations like knowing the thief stole the food to feed his hungry children.

The same kind of “cultural” or “identity” double-take occurs when you go to the doctor’s office: first seeing yourself as an “object,” an anatomical specimen that is “examined,” not touched; then seeing yourself as a subject, a person with history and worries, for whom the touching can be medical or sexual.

Background-foreground cartoons are often found in children’s books. They can be more than a moment’s entertainment. They can be a lesson in how to review our lives and our many cultures—as double visions, twice removed, by time and understanding. They can train us to admire the variety before deciding which, if any, is “better.” For example, a person may like steak better than wonton soup but this preference is a private matter. Publicly, the ability to be comfortable at either a “fork” or “chopsticks” style dinner means he or she can concentrate on what is being said and what to say (to people who don’t have to love you).

Background-foreground cartoons can remind us of what John Gillis has written, “We all have two families, one that we live with and another we live by.” For example, a haphazard sister could be considered a great second cousin.

Background-foreground cartoons can empower us by multiplying our capacity to laugh, control, and expand our emotional and cultural world. For example, when my (Chinese-Caucasian) son left California to work in Taipei, there was only two weeks between his being hired and his first day on the job. His (Chinese) wife, remained in California to pack up the household and follow. Three months later, she had packed but not followed.

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Startled by the suddenness of the move and her love of being in San Francisco, she was in no hurry. One day, however, she called.

I said, “Lisa, you sound so down.”

“I just talked with my father, my mother and my grandmother. They keep telling me I’m not being a good wife because I’m not in Taipei.”

“Don’t worry about it. William is my son – he can cook, clean, sew and iron. And he’s gotten you a great apartment near his office.”

“Yes, but they still make me feel so guilty.”

“Lisa, you call your father, and your mother, and your grandmother and remind each of them that I’m your Chinese mother-in-law. So I own you. And I’ve declared that you can’t leave San Francisco until I say so.”



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