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How comfy are
you in your own skin?

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MUSING a month ago about Bananas Going Global I wondered what would happen at this Chinese Association conference, the third – and, they say, the last.

In a way it would be a shame if this were the last, though it's easy to understand why the workload which has fallen on the Auckland branch since 2004 prompted them to call a halt. From another perspective one might ask where this was going – three years of interesting, not earth-shattering, speech; little vigorous debate.

As for where it is/was going, cultural consultant and visionary Wong Liu Shueng sees the three conferences as steps on a road to – where? I'm not sure. What did emerge as the conference progressed were two themes – identity and acceptance.

Let's deal with acceptance first. The core of the conference was probably the opening session on the second day, Reshaping Multiculturalism. The introduction in the programme announced: "Monoculturalism is dead" and asked "Is Multiculturalism Established in New Zealand Yet?"

Professor Paul Spoonley of Massey University's College of Humanities and Social Sciences chaired a panel of three academics. Most outspoken was an angry lady, Margaret Mutu, who described herself as half Maori, half English. A professor in the University of Auckland's Department of Maori Studies, she spoke from a Maori perspective and seemed to leave little doubt that in her

view multiculturalism is not established, though a handout she issued stated unequivocally that New Zealand is a multicultural country.

This is not the place to discuss Maori-Pakeha politics, but some Chinese take the view that because of the Poll Tax, a degree of discrimination and lack of acceptance among other things, they have reason to make common cause with Maori grievances. Hence, I presume, Professor Mutu's presence at the conference.

Manying Ip, Associate Professor in Asian Studies at Auckland University, said unequivocally that New Zealand was not multicultural – multi-ethnic, yes, with over 200 ethnic groups, but not multicultural. Without defining either term she asked whether “mainstream New Zealand” was ready for multiculturalism, and gave a perplexing explanation for her query.

She described a cartoon based on a news item about population changes in which a white male observed “we’re being genetically modified”. This, she said, was the response of the people she termed mainstream New Zealanders. It appeared she considered the comment negative. I suggest it was neither negative nor positive. It was simply an observation.

Was she being over-sensitive? I can't say, but I can say not everyone automatically feels bad about genetic modification, especially of this kind. Some of the cultural baggage that goes with it can be problematic, but outside of extremism mutual respect should sort that out, as it does for a young Frenchwoman I met last week at the wedding of a Chinese friend. She's a Buddhist, her partner's not. She'd be pleased if he adopted her belief system, but he'll do what he'll do and she's happy with that.

On this so-called genetic modification, which happens in all but the most closed societies, Professor Spoonley had some interesting statistics. It's projected that by 2016 Auckland's white population (he used the term pakeha but I'm not sure what it means) will grow 40,000 to 860,000; the Maori population will also rise 40,000 to 183,000; the Pacific Island population will increase to 260,000, a rise of 8000; and the category “Asians” will double to 400,000 – near enough to 25 percent of greater Auckland.

Auckland, he'd said earlier, has this year a higher proportion of immigrants than any Australian city. Sounds good to me. Like Australia and Canada,

he added, New Zealand targeted skilled immigrants.

“We do,” I thought – and then “what about the engineers, scientists and surgeons driving cabs? The CVs that are binned because employers can’t see past the Asian name on the first line?” That seems to be where New Zealand falls down – A+ for targeting, F- for acceptance.

There was some discussion of China. Richina CEO Richard Yan noted that in October China will see its greatest-ever change of leadership. The new leaders, he said, would be his age – mid-late 40s, I’d guess. That will be interesting. It brings me to the second principal theme of this well-run conference – identity.

James Ng reported on the affairs of the Poll Tax Heritage Trust and he was followed by Kenda Gee, who plays a similar role in the trust’s Canadian counterpart. Apparently the Canadian government adopted a policy similar to that of the New Zealand government in compensating for what was known in Canada as the Head Tax.

The concept of these compensations, like the larger settlements Maori have been negotiating for years, is interesting.

The settlements being negotiated by Maori are big enough to be useful and the \$5 million accepted by Chinese – they didn’t want money – is a token. But I can’t get away from the feeling that the sins of the fathers are being visited on the sons, which makes no more sense to me than the religious concept of original sin. I don’t oppose the settlements largely because I’ve been too apathetic to analyse the arguments on which they are founded – my fault entirely if I elected David Lange, which I think I might have done. It was a long time ago.

Then when Kenda Gee mentions the word contrition the hairs on my neck start to prickle. He wants me to feel contrite for something someone did six generations back? Not in a million years. I will answer for every deed I’ve done, but asking me to take on the misdeeds of others, past or present, absolves them of responsibility. I am not my brother’s keeper. We’re each responsible for our own salvation, and I don’t use the term in the religious sense.

But I'm getting away from identity. What is it in the 21st century?

Is it being concerned about the remains of 499 corpses which sank with the SS Ventnor off the Hokianga coast in 1902 – bones possibly buried in the sands of Hokianga because a mariner's stupid decision thwarted the intention to send them to China for final rest? I don't disrespect the idea, and if my grandfather were among those 499 I would be interested.

Or is it as Andrew Young said, chairing a session, "being comfortable in our own skins"?

Then there's Richard Yan. Certainly now is now and the future is a gift unopened, but in his eyes "I'm not sure in 20 or 30 years it will be relevant looking or being Chinese"; it's not about being Chinese; we're global citizens.

Then with a curve ball, Singapore blogger mrbrown: "Culture is about stealing from everybody else". Yep; otherwise known by one cartoonist (read commentator) as genetic modification.

Or is it Liu Shueng, discussing her concern for the remains of the Ventnor's cargo: "This is my journey that links my past to my present and my future".

Or Canberra University's Loong Wong: "I'm one of those people who don't know where they belong".

Or Sou Chiam: "We have to be proud to be Chinese New Zealanders".

Or perhaps Jilnaught Wong quoting William Jennings Brian: "Destiny is not a matter of chance; it's a matter of choice".

Or writer/actor Sonia Yee, at the time playing in a professional production a role which could have been played by a white actor: "I want to escape stereotypes with collaboration".

As one with little recognisable past and no concern for the gap, I go along with Andrew Young: "I'm comfortable in my own skin."

How about you?