

The Inbetweener

By

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I feel like I am always an inbetweener.

I had never been to the United States. It was definitely not my first choice for studying abroad. The urge to run away from my life in Hong Kong brought me on the plane to San Diego, California, a piece of foreign land I would never have imagined myself staying for a year. I can never forget the perfect weather that welcomed me when I first landed, after nearly 16 hours of flight, albeit having a strong feeling of being lost.

On the shuttle bus from the airport to my dorm, I stared at the scenery that flew rapidly behind me. Everything seemed so unreal. It was not until I wandered in the city on my own without a map for a couple of days, trying to figure out the names of the trolley stations, places to get daily necessities, mobile phone plans and the locations of the classrooms on campus, that I accepted the fact that I was going to spend a year of my life in San Diego.

The first two things I bought were a hairdryer and an electric water kettle, even before looking for phone cards. They made my dormitory more like a home. I was pleased and even proud of myself. The weather, plants and animals that I had never seen before reminded me of what I had learnt in geography lessons. At one moment when I looked at the sunset which seemed to be so everlastingly beautiful, I thought I did not deserve it. I even had the fear of not being able to treasure it as much as I would in the coming year.

Born and raised in Hong Kong, I am not the typical “westernized” girl one may find wearing only American brands, listening only to English songs, watching only American TV dramas, reading only English books and speaking English all the time with friends. I enjoy Chinese literature, Canto Pop, Chinese food and sometimes really cheesy local TV dramas. Still, I have my likings of American culture such as art, food and music. Being an English major also exposes me to a lot of western cultures and ideas. I believed I was quite prepared for American culture. I even thought at least a very small portion of American culture lived inside me. I felt like I was equipped to deal with my life there. “As least I speak English!” I kept telling myself.

“I am Jane. Nice meeting you.” “I am an exchange student from Hong Kong. And you?” “Oh, I am staying here in San Diego for 1 year!” During the orientation, I met, greeted and shook hands with more than 100 people and they did the same thing to me as well but I really only got to know a handful of them. Sometimes I did talk a little bit more about the courses that I took; how I felt about the campus, the weather, or maybe the place where I am from, but those were casual conversations, not the beginning of some new friendships. The never-ending and not-so meaningful self-introduction was tiring. I could almost feel that it was cultural, or maybe racial, that sometimes it was just very hard to bring the conversation forward. I would say it was already comparatively easier to talk to exchange students and Asians as we faced similar situations and often had the same concern about things.

Things were not any better in the student dorms where I lived. My roommates were from France and the US. It did not mean that we had a bad relationship but we were not at all intimate at the beginning. During the first month, we did not talk much and I did

not know much about them. They seemed not very interested in knowing the Asian girl that lived with them.

On a usual Friday night during the first month of my new life in the states, my roommate came back from a party; I had been too tired to go with her after a long Skype chat with my parents. She told me that the house party in the student dorm was crashed by the Community Assistant who managed the facilities in the student residence. All of the students in the party were escaping since some of them were under the legal drinking age. Some of them jumped out of the windows and even broke one of them. My roommate was not drinking and did not want to get involved. Luckily, she managed to “escape” from being caught or reported. Although I was not at the party, this incident caused me to think hard about the balance between cultural immersion and my own habits. I would have never wanted to break the law but I did not want to miss the fun and the very important part of US college culture. I enjoyed parties but I sometimes preferred some quiet quality times with my friends. I wanted to meet new friends but I also needed time to reconnect with my old friends. I can be very outgoing but I also have my introvert moments in which I want my private time and space. “Should I immerse myself into the new culture or should I stay true and honest to my old habits and feelings? Why am I here if I am not experiencing the real culture?” I kept questioning myself and I thought there was no way out. I felt as if I was torn apart in the dilemma and I could not help feeling isolated and alienated.

This hard time of thinking about the cultural and immersion dilemma naturally drew me to a bunch of Chinese girls though it was not at all my intention to stick with people with a similar culture and background during my exchange. I expected to find

resonance and similar experience from this group of new friends. However, I did not find myself fitting into this group either. There was no one that I knew of who came from the same background as me and we did not share the same culture and language even though people may easily find similarities in our skin colour and facial features. My new friends' perspective of looking at things was very different from mine. "To put myself into the others' shoes" did not sound as easy as it seemed to be. It was not easy at all for others to fit into my shoes either especially during decision-making times when we were travelling together. It was a terrible feeling. I felt as if I belonged nowhere. I could hardly find a person who spoke my first language to tell my feelings. I turned on the Canto online radio, listened to Canto pop music, trying to seek a sound of comfort and echoes in the lyrics. I found nothing eventually but myself in tears.

In the tears I saw myself standing in the middle of nowhere. I no longer felt that any of the English words would suit the real meaning anymore even if I know the dictionary translation of the word in English. I found myself lost in translation. I felt tired all the time. I was reluctant to see my friends. I stayed at home, declined parties and gathering invitations and eventually fell into a well of desolation and devastation. I refused to call my parents and cry since I did not want to worry them. I kept these feelings to myself. It was like dragging myself even further into the dark.

The light in the dark emerged with the passing of time and with the adjustment of attitudes towards things. It was when the new exchange students came during the second semester that I realized how familiar I was with the place I had been living for more than five months. I was able to show them around to supermarkets, touristic spots and give them useful advice about living in San Diego from my experience. When they started

complaining and talking about things that they were not used to, I realized I no longer made such complaints, instead, I started to love the things as the way they were. Instead of complaining the not-so-convenient transportation, I started to look at the trolley schedule and managed my time really well in order to catch the trolley without wasting a single minute waiting. Instead of complaining how little interaction there was between my roommates and me, I realized my roommates and I hung out a lot and we enjoyed the time with each other. I managed to visit to a lot of places not only in California but also outside of it on my own as well as with friends from different origins and cultures. My social circle enlarged and I found myself busy having fun experiencing new things and meeting new people. I fell in love with the beauty of San Diego and the way it bloomed with life. I fell in love with the everlastingly magnificent views that came into my eyes every time I looked out of my window. I started to appreciate things in a new way. I was brave and open to new things and at the same time I did not feel like I gave up the belief and core values that I held tight onto in the past. I no longer felt lonely as I realized I did not need to fit myself into either of the cultures but to be myself and stay true to my heart and feelings. I found out that it was not merely a thin line that separates two huge cultures and allows no space for one to survive between them. Instead, I found my own land living and being an inbetweenener. "Wherever I am, I am who I am." From that moment onwards, I could smell freedom in the air.

To me, to go on exchange was not to become an American in one year's time, it was to find my true self in a different culture and be able to learn and live in the new culture as well as to reflect upon mine. It was not to crush my core values, but to refine and reaffirm them. I found growth in myself whenever my bottom lines were challenged.

I gained friendship, knowledge as well as new experience that broaden my views and increased my cultural acceptance.

The time when I gained the most was also the time when I realized I did not have a lot of time left before I had to pack my things and head back home. I could not imagine myself leaving this place as I felt as if San Diego is part of me and I am part of San Diego. It became my second home and home forever.

The hard time saying goodbye marked the end of my academic exchange in California. However, my American adventure did not just stop there. The tear shedding day was followed by some intense self-introductions in the office of the New York City Council where I worked as an intern. The hectic Big Apple reminded me of Hong Kong where I am from. The two places are very similar in a way that both of them are very different from where I spent a year studying in the West coast; they are both big cities with the fastest pace on earth; there are a lot of people everywhere around the clock; people and cultures are very diverse and I was able to get back in touch with some people from my culture and even speak my first language in Chinatown!

Having living in the States for a year and going through cultural shock, I thought it ought to be much easier for me to adapt to the new life in New York. However, the transition was not as easy as I thought it might be. Surprisingly, it did take me some time to adjust to the life there. While a part of me was left in California, the New York part started to develop. I had a strange feeling of being “home” and having “homesickness” for my second “home”. I was once again torn apart between the two places. “What is home? What do I really miss and what is missing at the moment?” I decided to find these solutions before these questions led me again to the dark world of devastation.

In New York where people find their dreams, I found my answers to these questions. My work in the City Council exposed me to people from different walks of life. They had the most diverse backgrounds, needs, aims and visions. These people made the city of New York complete and competitive. Working there made me realize that diversity allows an individual to find his or her own place to live and at the same time not be isolated.

To me, the true meaning of home is not only where I reside, but also the place I treat as home and where I find comfort and love and am accepted as who I am as an individual. I learnt so much from the people and cultures that I encountered during my stay in the United States. They shaped and built a more global-minded, cultural-accepting person, and, all in all, a better me. Perhaps I do not have a multi-cultural background, but I find myself being able to live in diversity. I improved myself after the fulfilling and life-changing year in the United States. Today, I still often find myself falling between different mindsets, languages and cultures, but I am excited to learn from them so I can become a better person.



Last Modern Dance Class Group picture time!



Receiving Citation of Honor from New York City Councilman Peter Ko

About the author

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