

My England

By

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Celebration of a flatmate's birthday in the UK

Before coming to England, I had never been to a foreign country before, let alone live in one. Movies and novels created many English fantasies for me. Only when I set foot on this mysterious land did I truly understand the culture of England and what it has to offer.

The first challenge, of course, was the language barrier. Unlike movies, there were no subtitles or a rewind button even though you had no idea what the natives were saying. Even worse, you were expected to give appropriate responses

immediately. However, I was not alone. Before long, I met some exchange students from other European countries who shared the same anxiety. I came to the UK to study linguistics mainly because I wanted to be in a linguistic environment, in addition to that, I wanted to see how the British taught grammar. To my greatest surprise, and with all due respect, my morphology professor was from Japan. How fascinating it was to see him arguing with local native students about which sentence was grammatically correct and which one was not. After some vigorous discussion, the natives gave up. After all, he would be the one to set the examination questions.

Secondly? Well, it was still the language barrier. English was not about idioms or grammar but slangs and accents. The more grammatically incorrect and faster you spoke, the more English you became. The genuine British accent could only be found in overseas advertisements (at least I thought they all went for that career). What was he talking about? Turn right and “fullnote the sex”? How ridiculous was this Scottish accent! Oh! Now, I know! He meant “follow the sign”! Okay, that finally made sense. How could he possibly be working in the train station facing tourists everyday with that accent! But I should not go too far into this. He was by all means a native speaker. Listening to people with different accents had always upset me. I remember once the preacher at my church in Hong Kong was from Ireland. Oh! That one nearly killed me! He was telling jokes but I understood nothing while every

British person around me was laughing. It wasn't until I came to the UK that I realized there are so many different accents in this very land. I am just the same as other non-native English learners: care so much about accents and grammar. I am so glad that I went to the UK. The reality there relaxed me. Chinese accent, Singaporean accent, German accent, French accent, Spanish accent... they didn't matter! Now I know one's accent just tells you where he comes from. Just breathe in the air of diversity, it keeps you alive.

The third on the list is the way the English dress. I remembered the very first day of my arrival. It was 15 degree Celsius and I looked like a little watermelon, huge and round. But look at the English! Miniskirts and sleeveless? You must be kidding me. I guess that must be a famous example of British toughness: their survival kit for unexpected weather and independence from social conventions. But I noticed that the older the crowd, surprisingly, the more similar their outfits were. Another tip related to the dress code was the concept of having themed parties. Unlike the Chinese, the British love parties. Not only do they celebrate birthdays, house warmings, Christmas and summer, but also weekdays! You've heard it right! They have a different party theme for every day of the week. For example, Monday is Old School when they all switch to their high school uniform; Tuesday is Vintage when they all borrow their parents' clothes; Wednesday is Superpower when they all dress up as Supermen, etc.

In one freezing night when I returned from library, I saw someone wearing a shining pink outfit outside my dormitory, probably waiting for my flat mates. It was snowing so I thought maybe I had some problems with my eyesight. But I was right. "He" was wearing a very tight ballet suit with spongy skirt and white socking. What a great discovery: English dress sense has nothing to do with weather but age.

The next runner-up goes to English meals. To be honest, I really enjoyed English breakfast consisting of bacon, eggs, sausages, grilled tomatoes, fried mushroom, fried bread, baked beans, black pudding and porridge. On the first day of my catering, I thought I was in heaven and I wonder what lunch and dinner will be. But soon I realized there were reasons why the breakfast was so ample: they had nothing to offer for lunch and dinner except cold sandwiches. I can never imagine eating the sandwich from the fridge directly without heating it first. Dinner was usually made of either not-fully-cooked or over-cooked potatoes, chips or mashed potatoes. So, one full English breakfast was assumed to keep you full for the whole day. Now I finally understand why Hong Kong is known as the food paradise, you can try all kinds of cuisines in here, no matter it is from Asian or European. But it was just the beginning of my exchange. I needed to adjust to the life in UK for survival. Hence, I learnt to cook more often. Shopping in the supermarket became the usual activity on the weekend. The supermarkets in the UK are huge: each one can make up the whole

shopping mall in Hong Kong. Sometimes, I even make some Chinese food to cure my homesickness and introduce Chinese culture to my flat mates. After all, limited English ready meals do some good to my cooking skills.

My favorite of this very land was the unique sense of British humor. In the Chinese culture, we usually only make fun of people if we know them well. But the British enjoy a greater pleasure to lead the “strangers” to their funny traps. One day I went to the school post office to pack up my mails as usual. Mark, who was the friendliest and most humorous gentleman I have even met in my life, pulled his long face and said seriously, “Oh oh no. Not today”. Then I frowned and started wondering what was wrong. But of course I didn’t get the joke and he burst out laughing, “Got you! You should have seen your face! Hahaha! Alright. Here you go.” He later shared with me his good news of his new born grandson and how wonderful this gift was. We have been friends since then. British humor does not end here. I will always remember that time when I forgot to put down my reference number of the train ticket. The train was going to depart in ten minutes so I hastily went to the ticket counter for help. I thought it was not a big deal till the receptionist sadly said, “Oh, that is very bad. To be honest with you, that is the worst thing that ever happens!” My heart sank, “But I bought the ticket indeed! Is there any chance...” “You really believe that? Are you? Hahahaha! No problem at all! Please give me your credit card for confirmation.”

I could not believe that I fell for it. She laughed as if I were the 100th person did similar thing that day. It relaxed me immediately and a smile appeared in my face before I knew it. Why haste and worry? What is the British motto again? “Keep calm and carry on”. If you are on a new land, you should learn the new rules.

If there were enough space and time, I would tell you about the English accommodation, pubs, politeness, pets, shopping, to name by few. You must excuse me now, my dear friend. Sitting in front of me are loads of application forms for course registrations and college application which I need to hand in in person from department to department. I have heard that the British do not like fancy computers but the smell of paper and ink. But to my comfort, fragrant earl grey tea and a peaceful lake view ease my nerves. I have the confidence to complete them with British calmness.

About the author

YU Yuk Shan (Kanthleen) is a third-year English major. In 2011-12, she took part in a year-long academic exchange programme at the University of York in the U.K.