

Over the Dinner Table

By

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It was a casual weekday night at one of the kitchens in my dormitory. Pots and pans were clanging; people were having a chat over some wine. The room was filled with the scents of curry, marinara sauce, kung-pao chicken, salad dressing and herbs because the ventilation fan had been out of order since a few days ago, and the wet and cold winter of Milan was stopping anyone who thought about opening the door for ventilation. Almost everyone I know makes their own dinner, as dining out can be quite costly in the financial hub of Italy.

I was waiting for the water to boil. While scrolling through my Facebook newsfeed, the following title popped up: 'Refugee Chefs Teaching Local How to Cook Their Home Recipe'. It is true that good food and friendship come hand-in-hand; I experience that every night in the dormitory kitchen. You make friends over a pot of pasta or a slice of pizza, opening a conversation by asking 'What are you cooking?' or by saying 'That looks nice! Do you cook often?' before actually introducing yourself.

But not all small talk ends up in friendships. As an exchange student, you meet new people every day, and as someone who struggles to remember names and faces, I find it difficult to keep up with it. That, however, does not stop me from having deep conversations with other students. Occasionally, we become so immersed in the topic that we are discussing, that we forget to ask each other's names, making our next meeting extraordinarily awkward. Nevertheless, there have been meaningful exchanges between other keen learners and me. Some of us have ended up being cooking buddies, while I have yet to be reunited with others. Conversing with them is part of the learning experience, but personally, I view it also as an exercise to reflect on my multiple identities as a learner, a global citizen, a Hong Konger and a son.

Introducing myself to foreigners used to be casual when I was at home, but once I came to Milan, I realized that making a simple and clear introduction is a form of art itself. Let me share this example with you. There was an American exchange student that I had met at the very beginning of my exchange. We met in the dormitory kitchen before the semester started. It was quiet because the majority of students had not yet moved in.

'I am from Hong Kong.' He nodded, signifying that he had heard of such a place in China, but he was not entirely sure of its location. 'So you're from China?', he replied. Unconsciously, my head tilted slightly, and I shrugged my shoulders a little bit before going on to explain the complications of the Hong Kong-China relationship. What bugs me the most is that as a student of politics at both my home and host university, I attempt to make the most accurate explanation I can, which could bore this new friend that I'd just met. He

nodded more vigorously before I asked him which part of the States he was from.

It is understandable that my Hong Kong citizenship would cause a bit of trouble, but what caught me by surprise was how many times foreign students like him were amazed by the fact that I have an English name. 'Is it because English is your mother tongue?' I kindly smiled and replied, 'No. You are mixing up Hong Kong and Singapore, which is a sovereign state, unlike Hong Kong.' He apologized for his ignorance and explained how all the Chinese students he'd met used a Romanized version of their Chinese names. I moved on to explain the cultural differences between Hong Kong and China, which helped him better understand who I am.

I felt lucky to have this conversation at the beginning of my exchange because it helped me understand how irrelevant my identity could be to some foreigners. Although this did not stop me from introducing myself as a Hong Konger, I gradually improved the way I introduce myself. Whenever I get engaged in a conversation with a new friend, I introduce myself as a Hong Konger and explain that it is slightly different from China. Sometimes, I use Catalonia as an example to state how we speak a different language, have a different history, write differently and have our own unique way of life. This example usually works, but it also creates some awkward situations when I introduced myself to a group of Spanish students, reminding myself to always be sensitive when discussing politics in Europe.

One time, a friend asked me why I am so persistent in calling myself a Hong Konger, since it might not make any difference to the person who is listening and it is likely they will forget about it. I was not able to give him a strong enough answer at first, but later on I remembered my encounters with several Italian students. Whenever they introduce themselves, they would also tell you which part of Italy they come from. It might be because Italy is one big melting-pot of small nations and it is only one hundred and fifty years old. Each region or town was a separate kingdom until their unification in the 19th century. Afterwards, the Italian people were given an identity and a language to speak, and in the name of unification, local customs, languages, and traditions were sacrificed. The people of these small towns did not bother to keep their uniqueness either, leading to the doomsday of their own cultures, and ultimately, the loss of their identities. I answered my friend some time later, saying that I do not wish to follow the footsteps of these Italian towns, and therefore I persist on introducing myself as who I am.

As a modern person, we carry multiple identities with us. What I have learnt so far on exchange is the importance of defending these identities and also reminding myself of the responsibilities that come with them.

One day I was halving apples and pears in the kitchen to make soup for the night. The recipe is simple: halve the apples and pears, and boil them with water in a pot for fifteen minutes before putting them into a shuttle cooker for four hours. It's a very convenient drink that was perfect for the autumn. Beside me, a girl was standing alone, unpacking the utensils

and ingredients in her cart. At one point, we both became quiet as we waited for our pots of water to boil.

I recognized her not only because of how short and tiny she is, but also because she wears a turquoise-colored hijab every time I see her. I gave her a smile and initiated small talk, asking her what she was making. 'I'm making Moroccan tea' she said. She showed me the ingredients for a cup of traditional Moroccan tea: tea leaves, sugar, water and dried mint she had brought from her hometown in Emilia-Romagna, a province south of Milan. I later found out that her parents had migrated to Italy many years before her birth and that she has lived in Italy her whole life, paying visits to Morocco only during holidays.

'Then what are you making?' she asked. I told her I was making soup, a Hong Kong recipe for the dry winter weather. 'What are you eating with the soup? Bread or ravioli?' I chuckled a bit and explained the soup I was making was more of a drink than a thick stew eaten with other staple food like marinara soup with bread. She looked puzzled and shocked, as if I had overturned her concept of what soup should be. I invited her to come to the kitchen at night so she could try my home recipe, which she gladly accepted. In return, she gave me a cup of her Moroccan tea, which I believe was authentic as it was exceptionally sweet. We introduced ourselves before we parted. Her name is Aicha.

Aicha and I would bump into each other a few times a month, sometimes at the supermarket next to the residence or at the tram station. But we mostly met in the kitchen as we both like to cook at six o'clock, which is considered to be too early for dinner in Italian culture. The kitchen is very quiet, which allowed us to make small talk while we cooked. I enjoy talking to her because she would tell me a lot about her two homes and the two different cultures she knew from birth. Like me, this was the first time for her to leave home for such a long period, and we both missed our families dearly. At first, I asked all the questions, but as we got to know each other better and she wanted to improve her English, now she sometimes takes the lead.

'You seem like a really good chef. Do you cook at home when you are in Hong Kong?' she asked. 'No,' I replied, 'I have only started cooking since I came here. I am a beginner just like you.' Then she said, 'But you make a lot of different food. I thought you had cooked for your whole life.' I was flattered by her compliment, but I knew the truth that I am still quite far away from being a good cook. I told her, 'You know Aicha, this reminds me of a Cantonese saying: 'When the horse dies, you get on your feet. Since eating out is too expensive and my mom is not here to cook for me, I need to push myself to learn to cook.' She agreed with me, saying how difficult it is to be living by yourself, having to take care of all the details of your personal life. We are both adjusting to this new way of life.

Unlike other students that I've discussed political issues or school work with, Aicha and I like to talk about the small things in our daily lives. 'I am so glad my clothes were dried in one go this time. Last time I had to pay double to dry the clothes twice because the

machine was not working properly. It really ruined my day.' I told her, and warned her not to use a certain washing machine in the laundry room. She shared similar experiences and would tell me how thrilled she was when she found the exact amount of coins for the laundry machine. We both giggled.

We soon came to realize how moving out of home and living independently was having a positive impact on us. This had been unimaginable when we first arrived. Aicha said that I had changed, and had learnt to appreciate the small things in life. 'You are right. I would not have batted an eye about this stuff when I was at home.' I replied. 'Life is full of grateful things but only on days like these, when you are stranded all alone, will you learn to treasure them.' That conversation hit me hard and made me miss my family more than that night. I reflected on myself as the son of my parents and the brother of my sister, who throughout the years took a lot of things for granted when I was at home. As she shared her experiences, Aicha reminded me that life is full of satisfaction and gratefulness but sometimes the way we live and perceive life overshadows these things. 'Just like brewing Moroccan tea, if you add too much sugar, you cannot taste the tea leaves.' said Aicha with a smile.

I would not have thought that cooking could bring me so many memories. My exchange period is far from over and until today I still cook every night and look forward to the new people I will meet at the dinner table. I do enjoy cooking and the food, but maybe it is the conversations that are the most palatable!



A cup of Morrocan Tea prepared by Aicha and a pot of my apple and pear soup.



The stew above is a traditional Italian recipe a friend taught me to make.



Cooking in the kitchen takes a lot of utensils, time and effort but I enjoy the process and the results!

About the author

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