

## **The story of a budding anthropologist in the U.S.**

**By**

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“Hi, I am from Hong Kong. My pronouns are she, her, hers.” I smiled at other students as I introduced myself and my preferred gender pronouns to them. That was the first day of the orientation week, my group sat in a circle on the grass and shared our expectations and concerns for the coming semester. I was so impressed with how bold and honest my groupmates were. Andrea was very relaxed and told everyone in the group that she is a transgender person. Laurence was eager to share his experience as a drag queen. Throughout the orientation week, the most surprising thing to me was how different the activities are compared to what I experienced as a freshman in CUHK. The most memorable activity for me is “Embracing Differences”. We were asked to discuss some very challenging questions, for example, “what social injustice are we, as a society, currently overlooking or condoning?” I listened attentively to a local student expressing his opinions about immigration in the U.S., and I talked about the issue of asylum seekers in Hong Kong. I could see how open-minded, passionate, and curious the students here are. What an eye-opening orientation week, and that’s how my sojourn experience started.

As an anthropology major, I am always fascinated by the diversities in this world. What sets anthropology apart from other disciplines is the unique research method “participant observation”, that researchers have to be part of the community, spend a long period of time talking and interacting with people there and understand their culture from the inside. This has a profound influence on my decision to go on exchange, as a budding anthropology, I am thrilled

to apply what I have been learning in the past three years and to experience a completely different culture from my own. My best friend is also an anthropology major, his name is Innocent, and he is from Zimbabwe, he has a lot of international exposures. Before I left, he encouraged me, “Don’t just stay in the library, go talk to different people and you will learn a lot from them!” It turns out he is absolutely right.

It is quite thought-provoking to see host nationals and other international students think of my identity. In Hong Kong, I identify as a Hong Konger, no one would question my cultural and regional identities. However, I get many interesting responses from people in the U.S. regarding my identity as a Hong Konger that I have been taking for granted. One international student said to me, “I know this is a very stupid question, but isn’t Hong Kong part of China?” I gently shook my head and said, “No, it’s not a stupid question at all!” Then I went on to explain the British colonial history of Hong Kong and how some young Hong Kong people relate to China nowadays. I think it is completely normal that people do not know about Hong Kong-China relations, I do not know much about politics about many other regions either.

There were other instances that I find quite interesting. As I am in Los Angeles and cannot drive, that means I have to rely on Uber a lot. Conversations with Uber drivers are often intriguing. One time, Miwako, my fellow exchange student from Japan, and I called an Uber to go to a supermarket. When the driver saw us, he asked, “Hey, are you guys from China or Japan?” I thought to myself, why would he think that? There are so many more other Asian countries, and we could have been Americans since there are many Asian Americans. And then he asked, “Are you guys here to learn English?” I shrugged my shoulders and said no and explained that we are college students studying social science. This brief conversation reflects some stereotypes that this particular Uber driver has on Asian people, that he thinks most Asians are from either

China or Japan, and we could not speak good English. I am not offended, it is rather a good learning experience for me to engage with different local people and listen to their impressions on who they think I am.

All these brief and short encounters are a significant part on my sojourn experience. I also manage to make meaningful connections with other students. Andrea, the transgender person I met at the orientation, has been one of my best friends here. We often talk for hours in Green Bean, the coffee shop ran by students on campus, usually about racial issues in the U.S. that we are both interested in and she has been teaching me a lot. To be honest, before meeting her, I have never had a transgender friend. I have a million questions for her but at first I did not have the courage to ask because I was afraid that I would offend her. Fortunately, Andrea explicitly told me, “You can ask me anything”. I’ve learned a lot about her story, how her parents and friends reacted to that, and how she thinks of her life chances being a transgender person. As an anthropology major, I’ve always thought of gender as a social construct and her gendered identities did not shock me very much. But I know some Hong Kong people still have many prejudices about transgender people. Some people think that they are mentally ill. I would attribute that to lack of knowledge about gendered identities and I am always grateful to have met Andrea who teaches me to be proud of who you are even if the world is against you.

Another good friend of mine is Malcolm. He is from Ghana but moved to New York four years ago, and now he is in Los Angeles. Having such international exposure, I am quite curious about his views on his multicultural identities. We usually meet each other at Marketplace, the cafeteria. One time, I chatted with him about New York, Ghana and our dreams. As I was indulging in my shrimp stir-fry, he told me about how he likes the laidback and carefree style of California. We laughed about how inconvenient the transportation in Los Angeles is, and how I

am always stuck in the campus. I have a habit of throwing random questions, so I suddenly asked, “What is your dream?” Surprisingly, his answer was quite stimulating, “I will definitely return to Ghana, and be a politician.” It seems that he has a very clear sense of where home is, and he shows a strong connection to his national identity despite being in another country. I pondered whether his overseas experience bring him closer to his country because he is away from his people. He elaborated with some recent issues regarding the Chinese influence in Ghana, and how he wishes he could contribute to his country in the future. I am very supportive, I said, “You have to dream very big to have a chance to be very big.” How amazing it is that I am meeting a future leader of Ghana!

I appreciate all these discussions with my lovely friends, but there is one person that could resonate with my situation better than anyone else. She is my Japanese friend Miwako, Although Japan and Hong Kong are quite different, we both speak English as our second language and we are both quite shocked to learn about issues about race and gender in the U.S. I often share with her my frustration of not having the courage to speak up in class because other students are very eloquent and knowledgeable, and it turns out we share the same problem. Both Hong Kong and Japan are not that ethnically diverse compared to the U.S., therefore we are both opened to a world with many differences and conflicts. As my courses here are all about race and ethnicity in the U.S., these classes expose me to the dark side of the U.S. history: slavery, Jim Crow, microaggressions... These academic experiences are transformative to me because I do not have many chances to study race in Hong Kong. In my current CUHK course ‘Intercultural communication and engagement abroad’, I am fortunate to have a supportive online community to explore these ideas with, especially with those who are also in the U.S. Seeing how other

international exchange students also have these realizations and doubts has made me feel that I am not alone on this troubling yet self-discovering journey.

As I am now finishing my essay in Green Bean, listening to some American pop music, drinking my Matcha Latte, I feel that life is good. I am glad that I have the opportunity to sit down and relax, simply focusing and reflecting on my sojourn experience. I realize how lucky I am to have these good friends that I will try my best to keep life-long contact with. They have helped me so much to grow as a person. I like that the writing process allows me to pick up the small pieces in my mind. I didn't realize that these small incidents actually have an insurmountable effect on my self-discovery. Bit by bit, day by day, through communicating with different people, I have been accumulating cultural knowledge about the U.S. In this reflective writing process, I have been making connections between my sojourn experience and my major anthropology. I believe this reflects my strong interest in my major and how I genuinely hope that this experience will enrich my interest. I am now considering pursuing an academic career in anthropology to further study racial issues and ethnic minorities in Hong Kong. Lastly, I realize my whole reflective essay is largely about the various conversations I have been having here, which echoes with what my best friend Innocent told me, "Go talk to people". Through communication, this is how we make authentic connections and have a glimpse of a whole new world. His words have had a profound impact on me. For the remainder of the online course and my sojourn, I will continue pushing myself out of my comfort zone and talk to as many people as possible.



*Figure 1: As an international exchange student of Occidental College, a new adventure awaits. Look how diverse the student body is!*



*Figure 2 My favorite activity in the orientation, Embracing Difference. Different groups sat in circles to discuss some very challenging questions about social issues.*



*Figure 3 My Japanese friend Miwako and I enjoying some delicious Japanese cuisine. I love sharing my experiences with her.*

### **About the author**

Long Yee Cheung (Christy) is a senior anthropology major at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In the first term of the 2018-19 academic year, she participated in a semester-long international exchange programme at Occidental College in the USA. At the host institution, she took courses on race and ethnicity.