

Parallel

By

Cairo Williams

London is an ever-expanding palette, attracting all sorts of rich and vibrant pigments. In my home country, being a minority has never troubled me. From my first to my final year of school, my relationships have been a swirl of colours, blended together against the canvas of Britishness.

Hong Kong International Arrivals Hall

All airports are like hospitals, a detached clinical thrum to the atmosphere. Muted colours, greys and blues, greet me as I wheel 30 kilograms of my life away from the Immigration counters.

I instantly notice the Cantonese signage, characters sharp and complex. However, like a hospital, help is always near and the accompanying English settles me.

Remembering that I've forgotten to bring toothpaste, I spot a Manning's and decide to browse, a concentrated effort to delay leaving the airport.

The shelves are at first unfamiliar, lines of gold, reds and blues - Tiger balm and Yue Hon Tong.

In just a few isles it seems I'm back at home – I could be in a Boots or a Superdrug as I decide between Oral-B or Colgate and if I really need more deodorant. I buy all three – naively clinging onto these brand names as if they could keep me company.

Lee Woo Sing

I'm an indecisive person. The canteens on campus overwhelm with the options. For peace of mind, I have a standard order in each of them which I repeat carefully as I inch forward in the queue.

I rattle off my order, *BBQ Pork and Rice, please*. My Octopus card is at the ready, but it falters when I'm told my choice is sold out.

Dumbstruck, my eyes scan the menu until I break my standards and ask for baked rice.

It's good.

After this, I find that my lunch-time variety increases, and so does my taste of Hong Kong.

Central

I've been here for a month now, and I've learned Hong Kong can be an exemplary model for all the indecisive people out there.

There is a façade of uniformity. Lines everywhere: the MTR, the shuttle bus, the outlines of skyscrapers blocked carefully into position.

The streets are different, I discover. One moment you can be trapped in the looming reflective valleys of glass and metal, the next a narrow winding path can transport you to a family shrine, incense silently burning.

Hong Kong has perfected the balance of tranquillity and chaos. I want to learn from it, learn how to break away from the hustle and bustle of my mind and retreat into the peace of a garden or a mountain.

I feared my anxiety would make me a bad match for Hong Kong. At first I approached the streets of central Hong Kong like I did Oxford Street or Charring Cross at home – not at all.

I start in Mong Kok, where even off-peak you can expect to brush shoulders with people or be hip-checked by a wayward handbag.

Instead of stress though, I laughed.

Nobody stops to apologise – the flow of the streets doesn't allow for it.

I often find myself, stereotypically English, throwing out apologies to the sleek retreating shapes of Hong Kongers walking fast and staying on schedule.



(Chi Lin Nunnery, my favourite demonstration of Hong Kong's balance between the tranquil and the rush of city life)

Somewhere in Mong Kok

The Kwun Tong line is the lifeline of CU students. The green snake dutifully ferries us to the start of our evenings – allowing us to enter the Central Line, the vena cava that delivers us to the heart of Hong Kong.

Beautiful men and women line the MTR walls, as you ascend to the platforms they gaze down at you, beatific.

I go with my local friend to a popular skincare branch; the variety excites me. The walls are kaleidoscopic, if Roald Dahl had decided to think of skin care rather than sweets I imagine this would be it.

Capsules and tubes, masks and brushes, I try the testers on every shelf, my basket growing heavier with each swatch.

One section stops me for a moment - whitening.

It's not a mystery yet I still beckon my local friend over to explain. A self-awareness that I've never felt then began to bloom. My hands and legs, exposed to the sun, are darker than they were at home, than the people around me.

When I see those women looking down on me in Mong Kok, I think of my parents. My father dark, my mother pale. One the ideal beauty and the other...

In my eyes they're both the ideal of beauty.

And so, I'm left somewhere in between ideals.

The Sun

When I break eye contact with the titan men and women lining the streets on billboards, I see ladies, slim and graceful, wielding umbrellas in defence against the sun and I think of home.

My beloved grandparents are immigrants from the Caribbean – the sun raised them, they raised me.

The sun is in my blood, has coloured my life with culture.

I realise now that what I felt about my skin wasn't sadness or shame. I was defensive of my culture that I'd carried thousands of miles away from home and I wanted to protect it.

I soon learned that I am my culture, just as much as Hong Kongers are theirs.

I relish in finding new ways in which we differ and delight in the rare situations where our cultures converge.

I even have an umbrella now, it keeps me cooler when hiking to class under the watch of the morning sun.

Close to home

On Sundays, we head to Tai Po market for food.

Only a short stop from our home at CU, the demographic changes. Patches of grass are occupied with blankets, Tupperware's of food and flasks of tea scattered around. The languages that reach my ears couldn't be further from Cantonese and I stare amazed at the groups of women leaning close to chat, children clambering around them.

A friend mentions a peculiar dish he'd found, the nine bellied fish. We're intrigued and with nothing but the English name and a YouTube video, we ascend into the food hall – the air textured with scents of cultures. We wade through Thailand, Malaysia and China, the scents and calls of the waiters tempting us from every angle.

As we dine on a medley of dishes, the infamous fish the highlight, a local student teaches me about Foreign Workers in Hong Kong.

In an Economics lecture, I later learn how much they contribute to the employment rate of Hong Kong. As we discuss their role in academic terms and turn them to statistics on graphs, I think of their faces, language and smiles warming in the sun, far away from home.

I begin to meet more local students and the diversity among Hong Konger's astounding. Different tones and highlights but all against the same canvas.

It reminds me of home.



(On a teaching trip in Zengcheng with local students, Ron and Cindy, as our guides)

Outside

I leave Hong Kong for the first time. I'm in Ishigaki, a tiny island in Okinawa, Japan. Travelling alone, a minority again.

I've trekked through a jungle with five other perfect strangers. We sit under a waterfall, trying to look composed for pictures with our blurred glasses and soaking clothes.

We banter as if we've been friends for years, as if we're all headed to the pub for a Sunday roast and not ankle deep in mud and lizards.

As an exchange student, I cross paths with new people and I've learned how to make all my interactions count, how to get the most out of a fleeting moment.

Most of my friendship's here start with that – exchange students have an arsenal of generic opening questions loaded for every situation.

What hostel do you live in? Oh, is that the one up the mountain?

What's your major?

Are you full time or exchange? One semester or two?

Have you tried the curry at the Medical Building canteen?

It's amazing what one question in a lift ride can spawn.

One man in our group gasps when I say I study at CU. His eyes light up with fondness and pride as he tells me he was in United College, graduated many years ago and still visits CU.

He asks if I take Cantonese, and I answer with my usual bashfulness that *English is so monotonous, I think eight tones may have been too much for me.*

He recounts his time at CU wistfully, and despite having only entered Hong Kong two months prior, I feel a twinge of sadness that I'll soon look back on my time at CU, that it'll no longer be the present.

As we kayak back to our starting point, gasping for barley tea and a towel, the conversation doesn't stall. Our mini-van is a market place, bustling as we hunch together and trade Facebook's and emails, staunch promises to share all the pictures and videos we took together.

I experience the rushing joy of being an exchange student here, with these new-found friend's. I may have arrived in Hong Kong alone, but I won't leave it that way.

I can follow along the parallel lines of home and Hong Kong – the Western stores and restaurants offering to bring me home, if only for an hour.

Lately I find where those lines diverge is most exciting, that I'm hungry to travel further and find home in new places.

Parallels

To begin, the group of travellers slowly came together at a windy Ishigaki port. The six of them sat in relative silence as the tour guide drives to the start of the trekking route.

Before they don life jackets and paddles, the guide asks them to introduce themselves.

As each person says where they've come from, laughter fills the spaces between them and the circle grows tighter.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong

Hong Kong

Hong Kong

Hong Kong

The sixth person, me, laughs too.

Well, England...but also Hong Kong.

At first, I felt like a swathe of black against the carefully layered painting that is Hong Kong—obvious and different. Now, I feel more at home...



(My trekking team in Ishigaki)

About the author

Cairo Williams is a third-year LLB Law student from the University of Sussex in the U.K.

For the 2018-19 academic year, she is enrolled in the IASP (International Asian Studies) programme at CUHK, where she is taking Putonghua, Economics and Law courses.