

I choose world culture over Home-Kong – the struggle and rewards

By

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“I do not feel like leaving my room.” I eyed the baggage I had packed for our 2 nights trip to Haddenham, a small village next to Oxford. The struggle was between the idea of travelling for the first time without anyone who speaks my mother tongue, and the 45 pounds that I have paid for the train tickets. “Explore whenever there is a chance.” I recalled the text from my mum. “She’s right”, I thought, “and wasting the tickets for a boring weekend buried inside my room makes no sense either.” I carried my packs and locked the doors before I could change my mind, fingers crossed that the trip would be a great trip worth highlighting.

The Choice to Challenge

As Irish playwright Bernard Shaw had said, “I dislike feeling at home when I’m abroad”, I was determined to make as many connections with host nationals and internationals as possible during my year-long sojourn at the University of Sussex while avoid making myself too at home by sticking solely with the 18 HK students who came with me who are in the same programme of studies. Instead of taking the avoidance strategy (Jackson, 2014) and watching movies in the dorm room with co-nationals, I actively threw myself into freshers’ events such as sports club tryouts, society picnics, buddy scheme meetups ... etc. I challenged myself to branch out and took full advantage of opportunities to interact with people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds in the hope that I would return home as a more interculturally competent person.

My effort paid off with rewarding experiences. Much-anticipated scenes such as learning Italian from my flat mates, talking about the intriguing history of Kurdistan and the Middle East with my British-Kurdish buddy, and enjoying free fish-and-chips at a very-British pub quiz event... to name but a few, have come to reality. However, by challenging myself further away from my comfort zones I have also faced weightier culture shock. Feelings of insecurity, loneliness, inadequacy, fear and loss infiltrated my mind at intervals. I can still recount the frustration of the cultural and language barrier when I failed to catch British chic-flicks and slangs, the anxiety I felt as I stepped into the society rooms alone during freshers' week, and the deep longings to be in comfy Home-Kong once again.

The Doorway to Discovery

An invitation to travel with my international friends brought me both excitement and fear. The uncertainty of adventuring with two Africans and a Brit made me anxious. What if I offend their cultural values unintentionally? What if I cannot join their conversations and am left behind? What if any emergencies happen? Or misunderstandings? Or conflicts? Anxious though I was, I convinced myself that such opportunity to step out of my comfort zone was precious and worth the try. Fortunately, this decision proven to be one of the best I have made during my sojourn so far and it illustrates some of the important life lessons that I have been and am still learning in my study abroad year.

After three hours of trains we finally reached Haddenham, where my British friend, Louisa, lives. In our first night I discovered that the key to global-mindedness is sharing. My friends were impressed by my little performance of "Can you feel the love tonight" on Louisa's piano and it was the first time I realized that what I consider a common-skill in Hong Kong (i.e. playing the piano) is treated as a talent in others' eyes, and even a gift that I could offer. I

encountered a light bulb moment when I managed to teach my Dutch-Angolan friend Marleon to play “Joy to the World”.

Be it our skills, our cultures, our languages, or our stories, we all have something to offer. The key to enriching who we are is sharing. The sharing of what makes us “us” is where our paths cross and where doors open for us to discover new perspectives of the world. In a multicultural context, the sharing of home cultures and what “we” regard as “commonsense” makes us a doorway for others to discover an intriguing new world, and this is exactly where global-mindedness can be cultivated. I can still recall the fascinated expression my Italian flat-mate wore on her face when I told her how the 4th, 14th, 24th ... floors are wiped out innocently from most Hong Kong buildings due to their similar pronunciation in Cantonese with the word “death”. While my cluelessness towards British culture does make me feel naïve and inadequate at times (I still think I am insulting British culture whenever I try to make tea), I recognize myself as a cultural ambassador, and it has made me more aware and prouder of my home culture. We are all doorways to discoveries and I could not wait to unlock what treasure has been in store for us.

Fostering Friendship across Fences

The next few days had me chewing on the relationship between global identity (Arnett 2002:777) and intercultural interpersonal relationships. I once fretted that language and cultural barriers would make it hard to foster meaningful connections with host nationals. It is not until this short trip that I realized how much I was over worrying. Despite my occasional inability to pick the appropriate vocabulary to retell me life-story during our late-night talks, my friends were more than willing to listen and respond to me as just as how my HK friends would. Genuine relationships can transcend disparity of skin-tone, accents, and language

competence. The other day my African friend, Trina, was dancing to African music playing on her phone. I knew I could not dance like her, but as I tried to follow her moves and shake my body, I could truly share the fun! I believe these experiences have helped to build up my global identity as they have changed how I see myself. I used to identify myself as a “visitor” or “foreigner” in the UK; however, I soon discovered that drawing such distinctive lines may lead to the unwillingness to embrace new cultures. If I always position myself in exclusion, I will bar myself from converging to the host culture. Therefore, I braved myself to open up to uncertainties and challenged myself to embrace my global identity, by which I found myself undergoing intercultural transformation (Kim 2001: 232–33) and identity expansion. My sense of belonging in the worldwide culture has enhanced, my sense of self is enriched and shifted and expanded from being a Hong Kong student, to an UK exchange student, to that of a global citizen. The imagined fences which distinguish “me” from “you” due to ethnic and cultural variations have been taken down as my intercultural interpersonal relationships have bloomed. I have become more confident in exploring different cultures and more appreciative towards how the pace of globalization has brought friends together from all over the world.

Back to Brighton and Beyond.

On the train trip back to Brighton, I reflected on the discoveries and growth that I have experienced so far during my sojourn. From doubting my choice to mingle more with host-nationals than co-nationals, to realizing the fascinating discoveries that could be found through sharing in a multicultural context, I now rejoice at how the leap of faith has led me to this position of expanded identity and broadened horizons. Our two-night trip came to an end, but I know my exchange story has just started. I opened my dorm room door to see everything looking the same; however, deep inside my heart I knew, that I have been changed for good.

Multimedia Content

(used with consent)



Photo 1 : On the way to Haddenham!

From left: Me, Trina (Ugandan), Marleon (Dutch Angolan),
Louisa (British)

Photo 2: Eating mooncake with my
flat-mates during the Mid-Autumn
Festival. We love talking about
languages and cultures! From left: Me,
Lisa (French), Sara (Italian)



Video 1: Look at how Trina was enjoying herself as she danced on the quiet streets of Haddenham!

References

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About the author

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