

Fall in Edmonton
Chan Sze Lok Charlotte

I was standing in the middle of the common dining hall, holding a plate of some freshly-baked turkey and a slice of pumpkin pie. I faked a smile when my newly met friend K claimed that she just had the best turkey in her life. To be frank, at that moment, my attention rested not on her. I was like a ghost, detached, wandering all around the hall and looking into the face of all those joyful souls. Everyone was seemingly engaging in extending their global networks. Everyone seemed to enjoy this festive Thanksgiving night a lot. However, I wasn't one of them.

Suddenly, an unfamiliar face popped up in front of me.

“Hey, you are from the fifth floor of International House, right? I thought I've seen you in another i-house activity before. Sorry! what's your name again?”

“I am C. And I remember you are T,” I politely replied. I knew, and I was quite sure, T was going to inquire about my place of origin and my major.

“Where are you from? What do you study here?”

An intense feeling of revulsion surged my heart. No! It was not right.

I made an excuse and dashed straight back to my room, to the shaded corner where the mirror was hung. I looked at my own reflection. — No! It was not right.

I wasn't mad at T, but myself. I should feel happy and satisfied, but I felt neither of them. I felt overwhelmed and empty. Tears streamed ceaselessly down my face. Never had I imagined that going on exchange is not all sunshine and roses.

“You suffer from social exhaustion,” my sister concluded when I Skyped her the next day and shared my emotional breakdown with her. “You know both of us are not extrovert kinda person...meaningless small talk means nothing to you! You are just ‘forcing’ yourself to make new friends...this is not you!”

My Facebook friend grid is now filled with photos of people with all kind of skin colours and names in various languages. My Instagram is full of pictures of gorgeous snowfall in Edmonton (it snows in September!) and smiley selfies with international friends I've just made. My life as an exchange student looks perfect so far. I have “succeeded” in stepping out

of my comfort zone. Yet, is this what I want? A huge sense of disorientation haunts me. What am I doing now? In the past month and a half, I've never felt enough. I deliberately packed my schedules with as many cultural exploration activities as possible. I forced myself to hang out with new people every weekend, partly because I think it's the "duty" of an exchange student, and also because of the online course I am taking (I need examples to support my discussion online). I've had a lot of international exposure, but not necessarily meaningful experiences. Honestly, I have not allowed myself any time to rest and to reflect on my experience; no space to organise and distil the meanings from all the tiny, fragmented pieces of cross-cultural exposure.

This is one thing I really like about my sister. Despite being younger than me, she is insightful and intelligent and never fails to point out my blind spots. And yes, this is not me. Who was I? Who am I now? Who shall I become?

I am an English major, but I am no longer an English major I used to be. Before I came to Canada, English was like a piece of luxurious jewellery to me. English is where my individuality lies. It's a symbol of victory against my parents' expectations, who always want me to follow their footsteps and do science. English is my major source of pride, especially in Hong Kong (and other Asian countries) where people are obsessed with this global lingua franca. Still, English is just a piece of jewellery, which has nothing to do with my day-to-day life. I could survive in Hong Kong without speaking a word in English. However, now, English is a daily necessity, an irreplaceable part of my life. I have never experienced such a close relationship with my major before. Life being an English major in Canada, i.e. English from a native speaker's perspective, is never smooth sailing (I have to read at least one work of fiction a week!). I have gradually internalised English, and it has become my medium of thinking and has shaped my thoughts. It has become a part of me.

"Your English is not bad at all!" a few of my Canadian friends remarked. I realised I'd been too harsh to myself, that it was silly of me not to voice my opinions in lectures just because I was too conscious about my accent, my word choice, my grammar. It was silly of me to turn relentlessly to American and English pop culture to attain a "native accent" and pretend to be a native speaker.

How crazy are Asian education systems — twisting and blurring the fact English is a language. The fundamental objective of a language is not for showing off but for communicating, sharing ideas and making connections. I've met plenty of Japanese, Indian

and South American friends, who, despite their far-from-perfect English, spared no effort to elucidate their ideas. This courage was something I had lost as I learned the language. What matters the most is the culture, the stories, the affection that a language contains. The job of an English Major is to cherish the gems behind the language and seek beauty in all those thoughts.

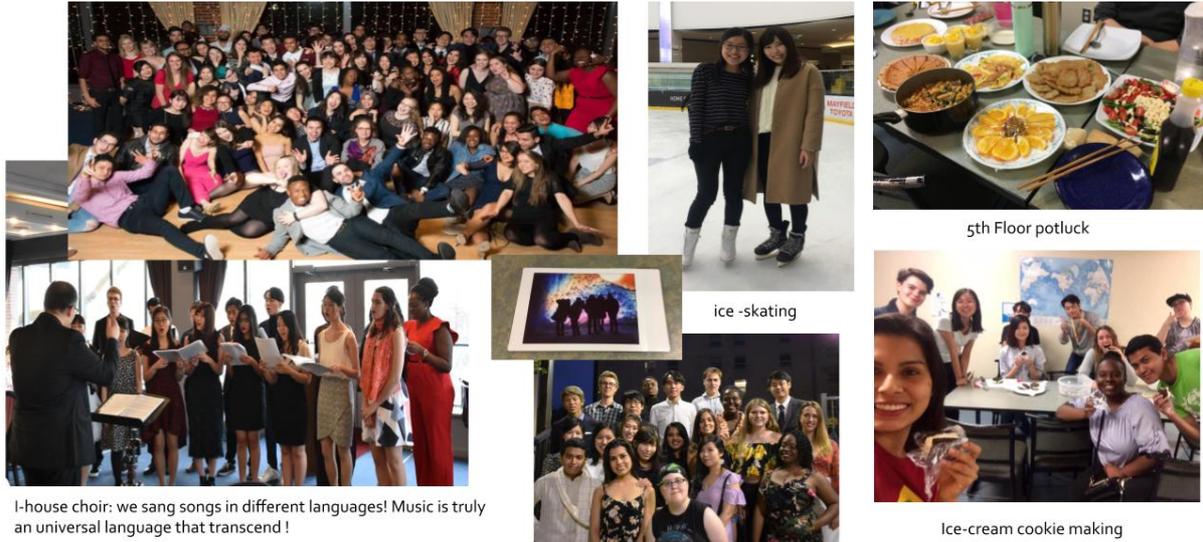
I am from a troubled land where East meets West. This city has offered me three identities, Hongkonger, Chinese and global citizen. It is so often for me to take the first two for granted. Starting from a young age, I have been fascinated by the world outside. Listening to English pop music and absorbing myself in European-American pop culture have long been my favourite pastimes. Seldom do I reflect on my Chinese and Hong Kong identity before my exchange. I can recall the first day I move into my residence, I saw a China flag sticking below the name tag on my room door. The name tag indicated I was from China. "It would be better if I can get a Hong Kong flag instead," I told my residence assistance, G, a business student from Peru. We ended up having a long discussion on the difference between Hong Kong and China in terms of the education system, food and identity. To avoid unnecessary arguments, I tended to recognise myself as Chinese Hong Kong people (politically correct!) when I was in Hong Kong. This was until I've arrived here that I realise Hong Kong identity means so much to me. If I, a 100% Hongkonger, don't care about my identity, who in the world will value and defend this identity? Besides, it was until I've arrived here that I realised how little I know about my traditions, my Chinese identity. Together with other Chinese friends in the international house, we held a mid-autumn festival gathering. That night, I was asked to make a short speech about the origin of the mooncakes. Shame was on me who have celebrated the festival for 20 years and didn't know about the origin of it (p.s. it's about an uprising in the Yuan Dynasty). Never had I ever in my life that I feel so strongly about my origin, my past, my identity.

Edmonton, or Canada in general, is a cultural melting pot, a mini United Nations. I truly love a quote from S, an economics student in UofA who originates from Kazakhstan. "It would be boring if everyone speaks the same language [...] Behind each language there're lots of stories, history, culture..." Extending her idea to a cultural level, every single soul comes to Canada with their own stories. We are so diverse. Our histories, our past, is what constructs us, makes us unique and stand out. By no means should we be demeaning to our languages, our past, our culture (I feel so shameful for seeing English as superior to my mother tongue for such a long time.) Going on exchange means exchanging your gems, *ton histoire* with others. We look into the gems others have given us (to reflect), and our treasure box will get fuller and

fuller as the time goes by. Canada, or broadly speaking the world, is like an orchestra. It is only when everyone plays their instruments wholeheartedly that a harmonious symphony can be composed. I guess, this is what we called a global identity – being receptive to and respecting other cultures and your own.

I am imperfect. This is the toughest revelation I gathered my exchange experience. Growing up in a traditional, authoritative family, I was brought up to be a quiet, docile and obedient girl. But I hated to be labelled and stereotyped as an introvert. Joining the art field and studying English, going on exchange and forcing myself to socialize every weekend are nothing but acts of rebellion, self-denial, attempting to create the “perfect self”—a sociable girl who has countless friends with an Instagram profile full of amazing travel photos. This is not me. Socializing won’t make me feel delighted, nor would travelling around. I am just putting ticks on an exchange bucket list drafted by people around me. Stepping out of one’s comfort zone means neither leaving all your past behind nor becoming a completely new person. It’s all those imperfections which define who I am. It’s at this moment that I realize and recognize that I am a tranquil introvert whose major source of happiness comes from having a meaningful conversation with others or embarking on an intellectual journey through reading and self-reflection. (A strong sense of achievement surges through my heart as I complete this essay :P)

True, humans didn’t learn by experience but by reflection. After Skyping with my sister, I take out my schedule planner and cross out all those unnecessary socialising which have occupied my whole weekend. I leave one uncrossed. It’s not throwing a party with a bunch of strangers but enjoying a great Sunday afternoon, strolling around the North Saskatchewan River Valley, having an insightful conversation with two close friends. I know it’s right. It’s right.



I-house choir: we sang songs in different languages! Music is truly an universal language that transcend !

5th Floor potluck

ice -skating

Ice-cream cookie making

" IT TAKES HANDS TO BUILD A HOUSE, BUT ONLY HEARTS CAN BUILD A HOME. "
MY STAY IN INTERNATIONAL HOUSE, UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

About the author

Chan Sze Lok Charlotte is currently a final year English major who is also pursuing a minor in French. She spent her third year (2018-2019) at the University of Alberta, Canada, where she took courses on films, languages, literature and politics.