

Overcoming cultural shock through accepting a hybrid identity in Australia

Dilpreet Sambali

I still remember walking out of the airport, when the first gust of cool Australian breeze hit me. I gave out a sigh of relief as I thought about not having to breathe Hong Kong's muggy, humid air for six months. It felt surreal that I was finally here. Only three days before I was still worrying about whether I would receive my visa in time for the first week of the semester. I was oozing with excitement, thinking about the coming six months. I was eager and hopeful. I wanted to make lasting friendships, get out of my comfort zone and try new things.

In the coming week, I joined every activity in the orientation week with the hope of meeting new people. While I didn't mind being alone and traveling by myself, I didn't want to leave Australia without making new friendships. I was also sure that I didn't want to stick to other Hong Kong students which is why I didn't try to find the other two exchange students from CUHK (something I regretted soon).

However, I might have been too optimistic. Making friends wasn't as easy as I had thought. I'm an awkwardly introverted person. I can barely even maintain eye contact while talking. Making friends and socializing certainly is not my strong suit. Being an "innate multicultural" doesn't make it any easier. In fact, it's quite the opposite.

Identity Crisis: the downside of growing up in a multi-cultural environment

I am a third generation Punjabi born and raised in Hong Kong. I acquired Cantonese and Punjabi as my first languages at home, while I learnt Mandarin and English later in school. *My mother taught me the Punjabi alphabet at home*, while my teachers made sure I did my handwriting homework in kindergarten. The enculturation I received was different from my ethnically Chinese classmates and even ethnically Punjabi kids as I went to a local school.

As a kid and even till teenage years, what I wanted most was to be a part of a group. I always had people to hang out with, but our friendship lasted only as long as we were in the same class. In other words, because of my different enculturation I had difficulty relating to and connecting with people. I didn't fit into either friend groups completely. In my ethnically Chinese friend group, they would go to tutorial centres after school and listen to Cantopop, but I went straight home after school to study on my own and listened to English songs. In the Punjabi friend groups, they always talked about Indian TV shows and would judge me whenever I spoke

Cantonese and talked about TVB dramas. I didn't have the same sociolect to speak about the same interests that either of these groups have.

Moreover, while people are usually amazed at how many languages I speak, I feel like I have difficulty expressing myself in either one of the languages, to be completely understood by other people. For example, when it comes to complex expressions such as sociopragmatic competence, I have no clue in either languages. I couldn't express myself completely in either one of the languages which bars me from communicating effectively about my feelings.

I always complain to my brother how we will never find our place in either communities. We need a visa to travel to India. We are mere tourists there. In Hong Kong, because we look different and don't have the same traditions and celebrations, we stand out. We are in-betweens,

clearly, we belong neither here nor there.



Visiting a Sikh Temple in Sydney

Experiencing cultural shock: Difficulty making Australia friends

Apart from not being able to express myself eloquently in Cantonese and Punjabi, communicating in English is another challenge. As my second language, I have little practice with spoken English. So, I feel particularly nervous and self-aware when I speak English. This makes a barrier in communication with people native English speakers, i.e. majority of Australians.

Moreover, I grew up among Asians. I had next to no interaction with white people before coming to Australia. Speaking with them is a little intimidating as although I watch Western movies, I have little first-hand experience with Western culture. I would be lying if I said I didn't get a cultural shock when I reached Australia.

A classmate, Lauryn told me parents here start collecting rent from their children when they turn 18. To me, that was not only unfathomable, but I couldn't understand how a parent could profit off their children. Majority of Caucasian Australians I met in class have part-time jobs, some even spend more time working than studying. Quite a lot of them have moved out and are responsible for rent and tuition themselves. Professors are incredibly casual and expect you to call them by their first names. Calling them by "Professor" is considered weird and will attract stares from other students. Even cultural scripts are different. Hugging among friends is so common in Western culture. This is very odd to me, as in Hong Kong, even if I have friends which I have known for more ten years, I never hug them.

All these things added up and as a result, I wasn't able to make a lot of friends, especially Caucasian Australians.

Reconnecting with my cultural identity in a foreign place

Unable to make friends with white people, I was getting lonely and desperate. Soon, my strategy changed, and I was actively looking for other Hongkongers.

I joined activities organised by the Hong Kong Students Association and finally found other exchange students from Hong Kong. I felt an instant connection with them. The first night we met, we played card games and chatted till late night. Talking with them came with ease, it was effortless. I could speak my mind without formulating a sentence in my head first. We had common topics, I knew what I could say and what response I would get. I could be more playful with my expressions as I knew they would understand. It honestly felt like home. Turns out,

socialisation speaking Cantonese is more deeply embedded into my identity as I had previously thought. Through this experience, I was assured of my identity as a Hongkonger.

I also made a few Indian friends who lived nearby. By communicating with them, I brushed up on my Hindi and could ask them more about Indian culture. I got to know that India as a whole, is home to a multitude of cultures and communities. It is extremely diverse and culturally varied. I cooked with them and tried different Indian cuisines with them. This deepened my understanding and knowledge of my heritage and made me proud of my ethnicity.

Embracing my Hybrid Identity

Australia is a very culturally diverse place. People of different ethnicities coexist together. None of them are seen as the minority. Observing how well people of different ethnicities blend and integrate, I had a realisation. Each individual is infinitely unique and has different traits, such as being a part of the LGBTQ+ community, living in a low-income area or being from a single-parent family. So no one can ever feel like they completely belong.

Thinking of all the ways I'm different from other people isolated myself from others. So, I embraced my hybrid identity and I started paying attention to all the things I have in common with people instead of what made us different. This way, I am both a Hongkonger and an Indian. I was able to relate to both ethnically Chinese Hongkongers and Indians. As noted by sociologist Feng Hou (2017), sense of belonging to a country of origin and sense of belong to the country one lives in are not incompatible. Having a sense of belonging to Hong Kong doesn't reduce my sense of belonging to India or Punjab.

I also want to stress the importance of the effect of language on my identity. Had I gone to an international school in Hong Kong and not learnt Cantonese, I would not have felt so strongly about being a Hongkonger. Similarly, knowing Punjabi grounds me to the Punjabi community. Had my mother not taught me Punjabi, I would have had an even harder time relating to other Punjabis and Indians and an even more confusing identity crisis.

By embracing my multicultural identity, and trying to find similarities between people, I was able to be more empathetic towards people in all parts of the world facing different global issues. This helped me become a global citizen too.

Other than that, seeing accepting and easy-going Australians are and also how many other international students are going through the same issues as me, I soon felt less aware of my

English. It did take some courage to step out of my comfort zone but in the end, I was able to make some white people friends.

What I have gained from the reflective writing process

Going on exchange is a liberating experience. I was given so much freedom, I was accountable to myself only. With the newfound liberty and no one to answer to, a person can become lost and laze around, finding their exchange purposeless.

Writing this reflective essay helped me analyse myself, track how much I have learnt and grown in my exchange so far. Through this, I can identify aspects which I can still improve on, such as being more observant when talking to someone from a different culture. By doing so, I was able to make goals accordingly for the rest of my exchange so that I get the most out of this opportunity.

Being on exchange can also be very overwhelming. This writing process helped to organise my thoughts, giving more meaning to my exchange by making me realise how much I have grown through this journey, how my world view and perspectives have changed since embarking on this journey. Now that I have written about my growth process, this exchange seems more meaningful than it already is.

About the author

Dilpreet Sambali is a third year Geography and Resource Management major, who is currently on a term-long exchange to Macquarie University in Australia. She is a third generation Indian, born and raised in Hong Kong.