

Be the soil of the giant tree of life

Kwok Ka Po Jojo

“Sigh...Is applying this semester exchange a wrong decision? If I had not come here, I would have been working for the Chinese Medicine volunteer service in Kazakhstan right now...”, I murmured to myself. Looking at this photo on their Facebook page, a tear fell down my cheek. And I know, it was filled with regret. Helping children with cerebral palsy in rural areas of the world, as well as the promotion of Chinese Medicine and Public health, have always been my life aspiration. However, while the volunteer team was working hard on curing children through acupuncture and cupping, packing second hand toys for local schools, I was here, joining orientation activities and drinking events of freshers’ week.

“Should I be staying here? Is this kind of indulgent and purposeless compared to what I want to aspire.” I became confused about my personal identity, having an indulgent impression of foreigners ,and doubting the meaning of having an exchange here. “Make good use of your intercultural opportunities, and every step of the way counts for the world.”, this is definitely a good sentence to summarize my reflection during the past month.

“Jojo, I guess I have caught a cold yesterday night, when I was walking back to the dorm in freezing weather,” Isabella said, while blowing her nose. She is one of my flatmates from America, who is talkative, considerate and open-minded. Chinese Medicine is the best method for curing some pre-cold symptoms, however I hesitated for a while, because I thought people from western countries tended not to believe in medicine without scientific basis. However, I still tried to share some of the herbal tea (Black sugar, ginger, Goji Berry and Red tea) that I boiled, and asked, “Would you like to try some herbal tea, which is especially for flu of a cold nature? If you have the symptoms of a hot nature, such as sore throat and runny nose with yellow nasal mucus, you should be taking chrysanthemum, which is of a cold nature.” Since there might be a cultural and language barrier for her to understand some terms in

Chinese Medicine like, 'Cold and Hot nature of herbs', 'Four properties and five tastes', I attempted to explain the nature of herbs nature through examples, and clarified the symptoms by showing the difference in redness between her throat and my throat in the mirror. Then, she received the tea with a grateful smile and drank all of it in one go, and said "I have never tried Chinese Medicine before, but I feel so warm in body and it immediately cured my runny nose! Chinese Medicine is so natural, yet amazingly effective!".

At that time, I felt glad that I abandoned the stereotype of Westerners being reluctant to try non-scientific Chinese medical treatments, and attempted to explain abstract knowledge of Chinese Medicine to people from other cultural backgrounds through verbal and non verbal communication methods. Apart from being culturally sensitive and open-minded, I started to think that the education and promotion of primary healthcare and Chinese Medicine could actually be started in our daily life. Intercultural exchange is actually a platform for diverse people with different beliefs in medical treatments, to develop cultural relativism, and understand the benefits of traditional medicine, which has thousands years of history. And I started to think, in fact making a small change to the world could begin with one small step. A small bowl of herbal tea, and a culturally adjusted explanation of theories in Chinese Medicine could be a way to promote alternatives.

Herbal tea, or helping someone in some small way, could be the intercultural connection we seek. "Tommy seems to be having a big headache, but the school clinic is already closed. What should we do?", Cassandra which is one of my badminton teammates asked nervously after our BUCS League competition. At that urgent situation, I tried to use my basic knowledge in acupressure and gently pressing the 'BaiHui Acupoint' (百會穴) in clock-wise direction for 15 minutes, while 19 times for one cycle. "Does it really work? We have never heard of this method for curing a headache," my other teammates, who were a bit skeptical about acupressure, questioned. After a while, the paleness on Tommy's face was fading gradually, and he could finally sit still on his own. Followed by the recovery of his headache, my

teammates, who are from Scotland, Indonesia, and Italy started to be extremely enthusiastic about the other functions of this acupoint, for example, alleviating dementia, hypertension, and insomnia. At that time, we were all sitting on the bench outside the badminton court. “It was our first time getting to know about acupressure. It is such an easy method to help others, and to keep illness away!” they shouted with excitement, and they tried to practice on each other immediately.

I felt satisfied and touched that I could actually help Tommy to soothe his headache through Chinese Medicine methods, but most importantly, to spark the curiosity of my teammates and other people around me. It could be the inspiration for all of us to genuinely nurture a sense of acceptance towards cultural differences (eg. the traditional medical treatment in China), to respect diversity, and to actively take part in serving the community or even the world in the future. These are the characteristics that everyone should pursue, as a global citizen. It might not be about health, but if we put ourselves in the service of others, we can use our strength or expertise to make an impact on our small community or even the world. I also recommended some Youtube videos in English for them to know more about Chinese Medicine.

Apart from some intercultural skills that all of us could attempt to do, such as language adjustment and constructive communication style, some global organizations also open doors for us to recognize the complexity of world connections. One Tuesday, I participated in a welcome night organized by the ‘Medecins San Frontiers @Glasgow’. That night, there was a guest talk given by a MSF nurse, Chris Sweeney, who had been working 12 years in the Refugee Camp in Ethiopia. Providing wound care, offering mental assistance and managing the logistics for urgent surgeries are Chris’ main duties in the Refugee camp, where the Asylum Seekers and refugees fleeing from South Sudan stay. After the talk, there is a seminar for participants to discuss issues. Combating humanitarian crisis, advocating disaster preparedness and protecting human rights are the major topics that we discussed deeply that day.

What used to be just a dream was now a reality because I could put the knowledge I

learnt in the Global Health course of my major into practice. I could share my thoughts and gain insights from people of different professions, nationalities, and ages. We were all pursuing the same goal: ‘committing to build the values and practices of the community’. For example, a student from Africa was asking, “Do you think providing compressed milk powder could alleviate the children malnutrition problem in Yemen due to the prolonged civil war?” Another surgeon from Sri Lanka raised a good point saying that the shift from MDGs to SDGs of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development for combatting worldwide poverty may create a bigger shortage in medical manpower. I shared about the current trainings for local Chinese Medicine practitioners in rural villages in the Philippines. Despite the fact that we hold different opinions on the same global issues, all of us were sympathetic to listen patiently before judging or demonstrating any bias. Being willing to embrace the difference of opinions and values, understanding the complexity of each individual, as well as our common humanitarian spirit are the essentials that connect us together. Gradually, I could discover my role in this exchange journey. Now, I don’t feel a sense of regret of taking part in the exchange programme here anymore, since it is genuinely a precious chance to build up a foundation for my global vision, to act as an agent for intercultural sharing, and to be clear and determined in fulfilling our position as a global citizen.

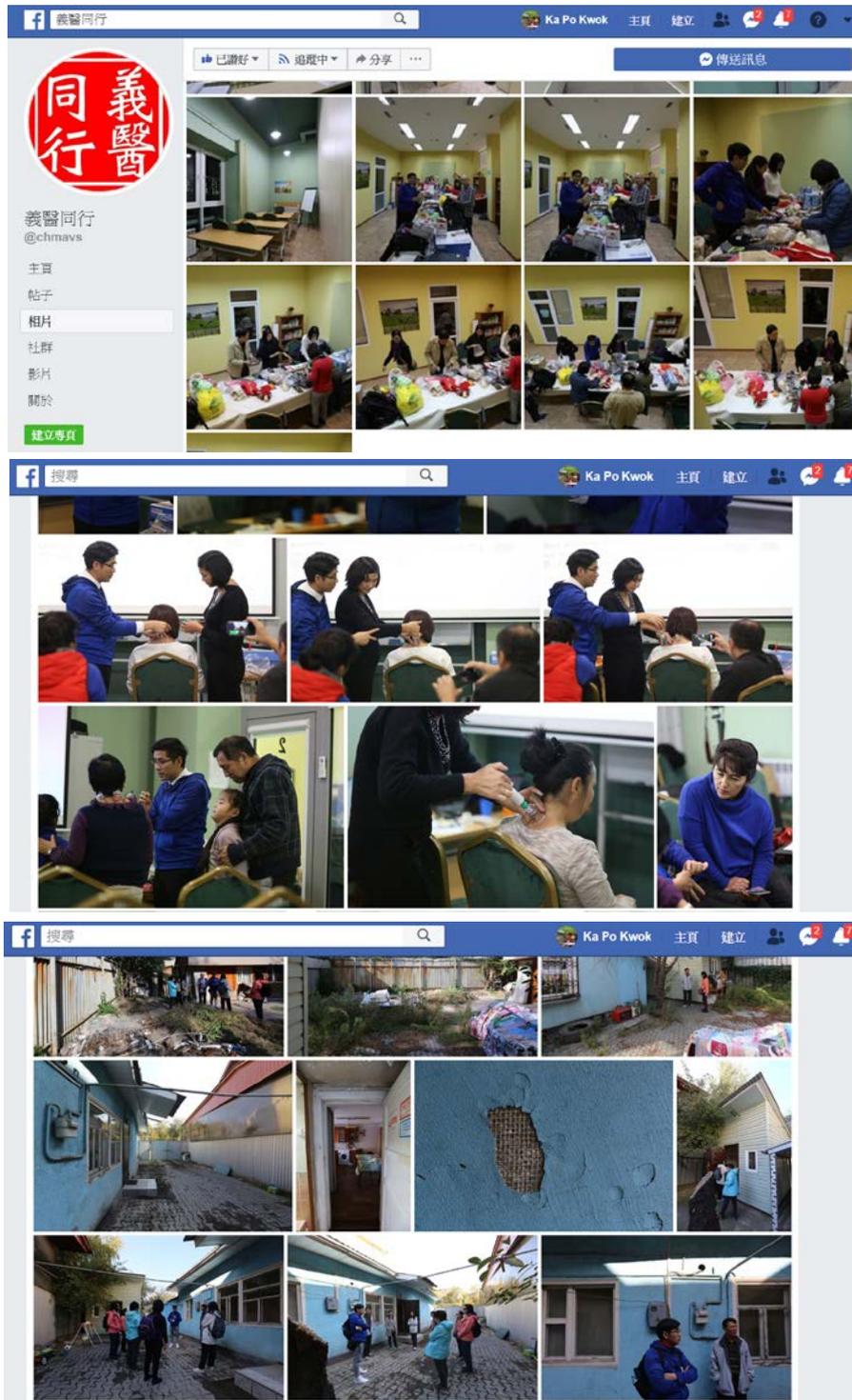
Several days ago, I heard some encouraging news. Isabella shared the recipe and the cold symptoms with her family in Virginia, Tommy used the acupuncture to help the elderly with mild dementia during his internship in ‘Scotland Help Age’, and the friends that I met in the MSF welcome night made donation to the local Chinese medicine practitioners trainings in Infanta, a post-war village in Philippines. These provoked me to reflect on the global engagement. Global engagement is in fact helping some people to start being aware of their role as a world citizen, extending our consciousness from community to global scale, as well as advocating change in human rights, environmental protection, racism, poverty, complex emergencies in the world. Therefore, promotion of Global Citizenship, which everyone of us

should do, is not only a transmission of culture, but also a way to provide views of the world, and to strengthen our skills to be capable of exploring the world. Reflection is always indispensable for every intercultural experience, since our human brain has a short term memory when it comes to experiences. Therefore, identifying the common patterns in a group of experiences, putting them into real-life practice and deeply integrating them into our daily life allows us to face intercultural challenges effectively in the future. Every one of us could be the soil of the giant tree of life in the world.

I looked once more at the Facebook photos of the team in Kazakhstan serving children and doing acupressure for pain relief. I smiled from the bottom of heart, “I am working as hard as you guys. Just on the other side of the world.”

Attached Photos:

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*The updates of the team in Kazakhstan during the preparation process in Facebook
Photos credit to : 'Capering Holistic Medical Alliance' (義醫同行)*

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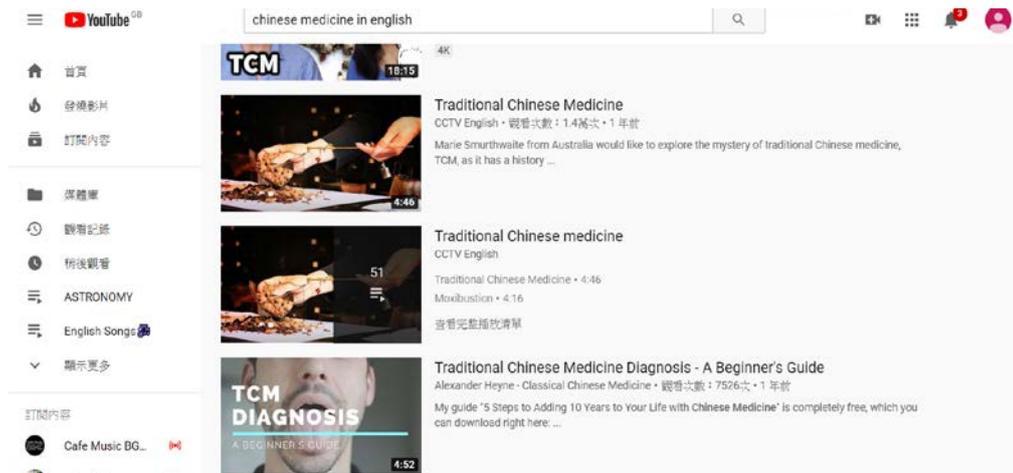
The Herbal tea that I shared with Isabella.

(3)



Taking part in the BUCS League with my badminton teammates.

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Some Youtube videos in English version for my foreign teammates to know more about Chinese Medicine

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The guest talk given by a MSF nurse, Chris Sweeney, who has been working 12 years in the Refugee Camp in Ethiopia.

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Taking a photo together with the staff and participants of the MSF Welcome night after the group sharing session.

About the author

Kwok Ka Po Jojo is a third year Public Health major who went to the University of Glasgow in Semester 1 2019-2020 and is currently studying education, astronomy and sociolinguistics.