

## **Being open-minded about others and myself**

*Ngan Sau Ching Jennifer*

When the sun hit me mercilessly, I knew this was California. What surrounds La Jolla are beautiful beaches, palm trees, and a cloudless sky where you get to enjoy a pink and purple sunset every day. The vibrant, modern, and colorful campus of University of California, San Diego (UCSD) is filled with scooters, skateboards, and around 10,000 international students (one third of all UCSD students). The diverse racial and linguistic backgrounds shape San Diego as an open-minded city, where people respect all genders, including the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) community. I told myself, “I’m going to be more open-minded about others and myself.”



*Geisel Library, University of California, San Diego*



*The sunset in La Jolla – I won't take it for granted despite seeing it every day*

During my sojourn, I experienced a lot of cultural differences, although instances of culture shock often developed into cultural understanding. I remember on my first day of school, a girl approached me, breathing heavily and said, “Hey, is this the classroom for the gay and lesbian class?” “Yes, it is,” I replied. We then chatted for a few minutes until she finally introduced herself formally, “I’m Lexy, by the way.” People here love chatting. They can easily talk to a stranger without feeling embarrassed. What’s interesting is that they usually introduce themselves at the end of the conversation with a handshake. This friending strategy is so different from Hong Kong’s, where we first introduce ourselves, follow each other’s Instagram and Facebook accounts, then begin the chat. At first, this frustrated me and I wondered whether they wanted to befriend me. But as time goes by, I begin to realize these different practices. People here are more casual and not that “eager and desperate” for a friend, so their style of communication focuses more on the exchange of information and feelings,

which I appreciate and find myself getting more comfortable with. With increasing exposure to intercultural communication, I have become more open-minded towards cultural differences.

Being open-minded is easier said than done. As I continuously engage in intercultural communication, I gradually realize the difficulty of keeping yourself open-minded all the time since we may have unconsciously judged a particular group based on stereotypes. Partying is considered part of American culture. I used to think that people in UCSD, including my two local roommates, loved partying. However, this is actually an over-generalized belief that limits possibilities. As I interacted with more American students at UCSD, I learned that the majority actually focus more on academics. I seldom see my neighbors hosting a party. It is ironic that it was one of my roommates, an exchange student from Korea, and I who actually threw a party (more precisely, a cultural dining night) in our apartment. I feel sorry for labelling the students here as “party animals”. I am also surprised by how I, with zero experiences in partying, became the host of a dinner party for the first time. I realize how I should be open-minded and stop putting both the locals and myself into boxes.



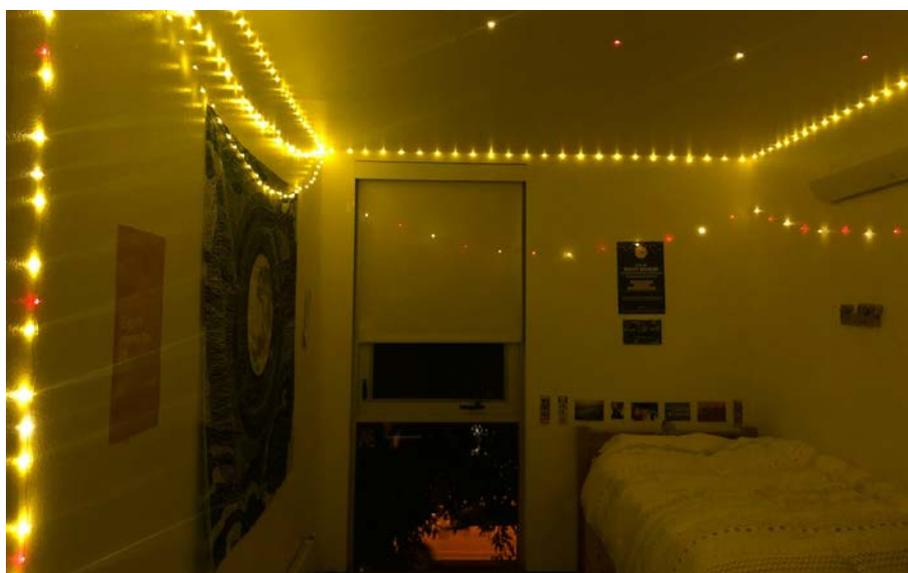
*Dinner party with friends coming from Hong Kong, China, Japan, Korea, India and Pakistan*



*Apart from the salad and the chicken, all the dishes were made by us, including the pizza*

While the locals enjoyed talking a lot, they also valued independence and privacy. I lived in the I-House, which is an apartment with four single rooms. Although all of them are very nice, the two local girls, upon entering the house, would immediately return to their room and close the door. When we'd meet each other in the house, we would chat, but usually have only brief conversations (2-3 minutes). The nonverbal forms of communication such as smiling were more frequent than the verbal ones. I also found that the Americans love to use text messages and Facebook Messenger. This form of communication is becoming more common worldwide, yet it can facilitate or hinder communication. This is because both the speaker and listener are involved in the interaction, where language (words) can be encoded in one way, yet decoded in another way. Texting as a medium of communication may not deliver the intended tone. While the emojis can help create the tone and are common in Hong Kong, they aren't that common in the United States (US). When I first chatted with my roommates, I used

to overthink their “plain” texts, wondering whether their cool attitude meant something. As I texted with more local as well as international students, I realized the use of emojis is not a global trend but a cultural thing. I have then shifted my texting style, which however changes back to emoji-based texts when chatting with my Hong Kong friends. I realize how changing texting style is part of my motive of blending with the locals by adopting their practices, while maintaining a close relationship with my Hong Kong identity and friends through the use of emojis.



*I have a single room, but most students live in double or triple rooms – how lucky I am!*

The greatest change that occurred to me was my perception of English in terms of accent, grammar, and pronunciation. Being an English major, people tend to have high expectations of my English proficiency. What I observed from my classes at CUHK is that students are generally not that active because we tend to focus on how we talk and are afraid of judgements. People who are active in class are usually labelled as “chur”, a negative word meaning aggressive. Also, using the dictionary implies your lack of English proficiency. When I first

arrived in the US, I was a little bit nervous when speaking to strangers in their native language. I know that accents play an important role in communication and identity. That's why I was obsessed by the idea of "perfect accent". Yet, what surprises me is that people here aren't that judgmental compared to Hong Kong. With a lot of international students and hence a high level of racial diversity, students here speak with different accents such as Chinese, Indian, and Singaporean. They are however not ashamed of their accents, nor do the locals discriminate against them. Moreover, both local and international students make grammatical and pronunciation mistakes, just as how we also make mistakes in Chinese syntax and Cantonese pronunciation. But what makes them differ from us is the attitude and approach they take against these situations. The American students are more active in class. They will volunteer to read a passage and ask questions when confused, where I can always see five to six hands at the same time waiting for "selection". When I had my literature class, an American student volunteered to read an excerpt. When she encountered the word, *coquettish*, she calmly asked the professor, "How do I pronounce it?" I wonder what will happen if the same case happens in Hong Kong. I guess most students will probably notice that word and give up the thought of reading the passage in class. Without the pressure of being judged based on my English skills, I become more confident in speaking English. Because I get to practice speaking English more, my skills have improved. Now, I am more open-minded about accents, and have freed myself from the constraints. I even think it's nice to have a mixture of the American accent, the British accent, and even the Hong Kong accent in some occasions. Accents are associated with identity, where a change in accent reflects a change in identity, serving different purposes in social interactions.

My identity changes according to the people I talk to. Since English is a lingua franca, I feel more interculturally competent when speaking in English, boosting my global identity. When I speak Mandarin, I am more attached to my Chinese national identity and my Asian race. As for Cantonese, I have the strongest sense of Hong Kong identity as I was born and raised here, so I would usually introduce myself as a Hongkonger. Being multilingual is beneficial in the sense that it enriches my intercultural communication. However, the multiple identities can be contested. It is important to know that identity, being an intriguing concept, is shaped by socialization and is dynamic. When I am with my Hong Kong friends, they always speak Cantonese even though there are people who can't understand our language. In order not to create a "division", I will translate the conversations to English after replying to my Hong Kong friends in Cantonese. The constant shift in languages can sometimes be exhausting, and makes me question whether I identify as a Hongkonger or an international student. These two identities can still coexist because they are not in conflict with one another. However, as the situation in Hong Kong gets worse, I start to question, "Can multiple identities truly coexist?" When I am facing mainland students who hold a distinct political view from us, I find it difficult for my regional and national identities to coexist peacefully even though we still respect each other. It has been a struggle for me to establish coexisting identities, especially in times of rising political tensions. I once almost gave up my national identity because of the pressure from my group of Hong Kong friends. I feel like they are more dominant than I am in the control of my identity because identity is a social construction. However, as I try to talk to other "peaceful" and "gentle" mainland students, I realize that I am able to recognize my national identity and our similarities. I try to understand the different reasons behind their avowed identity, just as how I wish they could understand mine. I also notice that I should

remain rational and shouldn't alter my identity due to peer pressure. After all, it's my identity and by keeping an open mind, I know how to let these conflicting identities coexist.

As this reflective essay comes to an end, I realize that I have become more sensitive to cultural differences. The writing process has both reinforced my intercultural experiences and helped me dig deeper into the underlying lessons, contributing to my interpersonal and personal growth. After writing the essay, I'm more clear about the goal of my remaining two months of exchange: continue to strike a balance between my academics and my cultural exploration, and continue to be challenged, frustrated, and inspired by cultural differences, stereotypes, and my multiple dynamic identities, while nurturing an increasingly open mind.



*Experiencing the Mexican culture: Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebration*



*Open mind: my first Halloween party – it was very different from those depicted in films!*

### **About the author**

Ngan Sau Ching Jennifer is a fourth-year English major who went to the University of California, San Diego for a fall quarter exchange in 2019-20, and is currently taking courses on literature, film, sociology, and psychology.