WHEN WE FIND HOMES: A COLLECTION OF PERSONAL ESSAYS

A thesis submitted to the
Kent State University Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for University Honors

by

Joyce Ng Yoon Yi

May, 2014
Thesis written by

Joyce Ng Yoon Yi

Approved by

______________________________, Advisor

______________________________, Chair, Department of English

Accepted by

______________________________, Dean, Honors College
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.........................................................................................................................iv

CHAPTER

I. CRITICAL INTRODUCTION..............................................................................................................1

II. PERSONAL INTRODUCTION............................................................................................................5

PAST

III. SHAPESHIFTING..........................................................................................................................11

IV. TAKING THE STAGE.......................................................................................................................23

V. HOLIER THAN THOU.....................................................................................................................33

PRESENT

VI. MY NAMES....................................................................................................................................40

VII. IN BETWEEN PLACES................................................................................................................46

VIII. HOME AGAIN..........................................................................................................................65

BIBLIOGRAPHY..................................................................................................................................73
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Elizabeth Howard—thank you—for the conversations on excited commas and em dashes, for the challenging questions that pushed me to grow, and for sharing your life with me. Thank you for believing in my stories and my voice even before I believed in them. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for the immense care and attention that you have paid to my writing, for reading my haphazard experimental writing, and for sorting and molding them into writing that is clear and meaningful. Conversations with you never fail to inspire me—to read, to write, to live—and I hope to keep having such conversations with you for the rest of our lives.

To the members of my defense committee—Professor Varley O’Connor, Dr. Natasha Levinson, and Dr. Patrick Gallagher—thank you for your time and encouragement. The interest that you have taken in my stories will continue to encourage me to keep writing about matters close to my heart.

Miss Grace Lim, thank you for inviting me to join you in the intriguing universe of English literature. I am where I am today—a permanent resident of the worlds of Helen Burns and Pi Patel—because of you.

To the wonderful staff of the Honors College—it has been a great pleasure to be a part of your office. Thank you for this incredible opportunity that you have given me and other students to explore, to discover, and to create. I would like to especially thank the lovely ladies who greet me with their smiles every day—Lori Michael, Sally Yankovich, and Judy Yasenosky—for always watching out for me and having my back.
To my housemate, Selin Hunter, thank you showing me what it means to be generous, to be patient, and for being my friend and companion. April Phillips, thank you for your never-ending love, support, and for your loyalty to me. Jonathan Bundy, thank you for always listening to me and for being my family when mine was not here. I would also like to thank all the people who made an appearance in this thesis, your interactions with me have impacted me in some shape or form, and I’m grateful for that.

Lastly, I would like to express gratitude toward my family—daddy, mummy, kor kor (older brother), Elaine, and che che (older sister). Thank you for supporting my choice to go off to a country thousands of miles away from all of you to pursue an education that matters to me. Thank you for your immense love and care, and for allowing me to be who I am.
But don’t you know you can’t go home again? —Ella Winter
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The original goal of this Senior Honors Thesis was for me to write about my life in my own Malaysian voice. I grew up in Malaysia reading mostly American and British literature. Although the Malaysian school curriculum included some local Malaysian literature in English, I never respected or paid attention to it. I spent much of my childhood and teenage years poring over stories about English farms by Enid Blyton and series about Caucasian girls in high school. I remember some of my earliest story writing attempts as a child. I had characters with Caucasian last names like Hoffman. I tried to write like Enid Blyton and Francine Pascal because stories about white girls and boys were the only stories I knew. Writing about Malaysian life, the life that I actually lived, was completely unheard of. I wanted to do in this thesis what I had never done in my life—publicly write about my own life without feeling ashamed about it.

This goal was mostly achieved. I included several instances of Manglish in the dialogue found in these essays. However, for the purposes of clarity, understanding and academia, I had to use Standardized English throughout the main body of the narrative.

The second goal of this thesis was for me to explore my cultural identity as a Malaysian Chinese studying abroad in the United States. I wanted to understand better what being Malaysian means, what being Chinese means, and what being in the United States means to me as Joyce Ng. While significant portions of this thesis deal with cultural identity, many parts of it also deal with the question of my identity as a whole.

In preparation for this thesis, I read novels by minority authors. I read The
Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri and learned that pity-inducing scenes are simply annoying and do not convey a clear message. I also read The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan and took note of how she elegantly incorporated Chinese words into her writing in English. When I read Richard Rodriguez’s Hunger of Memory, I knew that I wanted to write reflective personal essays much like his. He reflected on how his bilingual education created cultural alienation, which is similar to my experience of studying abroad in a Western country.

In this process, I also read some Malaysian literature in English, which I had never done before. I read bits of The Harmony Silk Factory by Tash Aw, Green is the Color by Lloyd Fernando, and an anthology of Malaysian short stories. I hated reading most of them. These works of Malaysian literature were written and set in the early twentieth century, so they were distant from me and hard to relate to. They wrote of a Malaysia that I did not know; their portrayal of Malaysia was foreign and strange to me. I should have sought out more contemporary Malaysian literature to read; however, published Malaysian literature is really hard to come by in the United States.

I realized some time in my teenage years that I enjoyed writing on my blog where I could write about my daily life and reflect on it. I later came to discover that the type of writing that I enjoy most is called creative nonfiction. When I decided that I wanted to do a creative project, I knew that I wanted to write creative nonfiction. I believe that my best writing emerges in that genre. However, I was a little hesitant to rule out the genre of fiction as quickly as my heart did. Is creative nonfiction overly inward-looking? Are people really going to be interested in hearing about my life and my perspectives? Are my
reflections worth expressing out loud? The personal essay is limited by the very fact that it is written in first person and that the only perspective that the reader gets is mine, and only mine. I asked myself these questions, afraid that I had narrowed down my skills as a writer too hastily.

Still, it was hard to deny that creative nonfiction is where I find my voice most clearly. I am obscenely bad at understanding and writing poetry. Fiction writing would have encouraged me to hide behind the masks of carefully constructed characters and plot. I eventually stopped entertaining the idea of doing fiction writing, realizing that it would be a painful and agonizing process for me and that the stories would run the risk of sounding forced and fake. Conversely, the personal essay allows me to write freely in my own voice. It allows me to express my thoughts and experiences, doubt them, pull and tear at them, and finally come back to confront them and find meaning in them.

The initial process of writing involved 45 minutes of creative nonfiction writing every day in Fall 2013. Those daily writing sessions forced to purge my thoughts and allowed me to step back and find the most interesting and valuable bits of writing. I produced about one hundred pages of writing in that semester. From there, I picked out pieces which addressed the issue of cultural identity and reworked them into coherent essays. At one point, there was an overwhelming amount of writing for me to work with. I printed out all the essays that I knew I wanted to include in the thesis. From there, I divided the essays according to similar themes and ideas. This process allowed me to identify the main themes of this thesis and reorganize my thoughts and writing according to those themes.
The writing of this thesis also involved workshop sessions in the creative nonfiction class that I took in Fall 2013. My instructor and classmates provided me feedback and ideas on how to organize and improve my essays—particularly “Shapeshifting.” My thesis advisor and I also met regularly to discuss general ideas for the improvement of my writing and workshopped every single piece in this thesis. Dr. Howard asked me questions to help me reflect deeper on the issues raised in my essays and provided me examples of other authors’ writing to follow.

This Senior Honors Thesis starts off with a personal introduction. The main body of the thesis is divided into two sections—Past and Present. “Shapeshifting,” “Taking the Stage,” and “Holier Than Thou” belong in the “Past” section. These essays are accounts of my experience as a youth when I struggled to bring together the two different identities that I had constructed for myself in church and in school. “My Names” is the first piece of the “Present” section, in which I introduce how having my name in the right order is important to me. “In Between Places” explores my struggle to fight and to accept the Western influences in my life in the United States. “Home Again” serves as a conclusion to this thesis, in which I surmise that home is difficult to define and cannot be confined. I sometimes use Manglish and Chinese phrases in these essays, and the parentheses that follow each phrase contain the translations in English.
PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

I wonder when or how someone encounters their identity vis-à-vis for the first time. And then realize that it really isn’t all as solid as we thought it was and that all these labels that we give ourselves—writer, musician, singer, teacher, waiter, researcher, janitor—mean nothing but how we spend our time while we figure out who we think we actually are.

I attended weekly piano lessons for more than five years as a child and teenager. I stopped lessons and restarted them at least twice in those five years. Each restart was prompted by either pressure from my parents or my own desire to prove that I could succeed as long as I kept trying. I don’t remember having an actual interest in music or playing the piano, but my parents diligently sent me to piano lessons anyway as they did with my two siblings. It was the thing to do as a parent. You send your children to piano lessons, no matter their level of interest or talent. If you don’t, your child will be losing out. This seemed to be especially true among my peers in church youth group. I knew two of my friends hated going to piano lessons just as much as I did but had to anyway because their parents gave them no choice. I understand now that when parents send their children to some type of skills class, it is out of their love for them. I used to think that they severely misunderstood me and just enjoyed deliberately not giving me what I wanted.

It took my parents a long time to come to terms with the fact that I lacked the level of discipline and interest that successful piano-playing required. I realize today that
they spent an immense amount of money on my piano lessons that they could have spent on many other things. It must have been heartbreaking and frustrating for my parents to see their daughter have little regard for their desire to see her succeed in music.

I tried; not my best, but I certainly tried. I dreaded the coming of piano lessons every single week. I speed-practiced thirty minutes before my classes so that I could check off my daily practicing schedule which my teacher marked with stars that could be exchanged for rewards such as pencils and stickers. Every week, when the panic set in that I hadn’t practiced at all, I always vowed to myself that next week would be different—next week I would be diligent and practice every day, next week I would be a better pianist.

I panicked because I always felt like an irresponsible person next to my piano teacher. When my fingers stumbled across the white keys and missed the B-flat, I flustered, thinking that I must be one of her weaker piano students. She probably thought that I was a joke and dreaded our lessons just as much as I did. I felt embarrassed and helpless about my incompetence and lack of interest in piano-playing.

I never practiced much because practicing always frustrated me. It always took me a while to translate the little black ovals on paper into the right musical note; and when I had the right note in my mind, it took my fingers a while to translate that into position on the piano keys. I turned “Greensleeves” into this awful, choppy piece with too many pauses in between as I squinted at the music sheet—“Is that a C? No, wait, that’s a D. Er... No, no, it’s a G.” Although my inexpert reading and playing was a sign of my lack of practice, they were also clear signs of my lack of talent for music. I was not only
unable to read music; I also had a bad ear for music. I couldn’t play by ear as many of the musicians in church did.

I permanently ditched piano some time in my late teens. My mother finally gave up—probably because she didn’t want to waste even more money on something that would never come to be. About a year after I stopped piano lessons, I decided to start guitar lessons in a tiny studio, taught by a man young enough to make feel self-conscious about the fact that I was a young female teen struggling to play the guitar. I dreaded it just as much as I dreaded piano lessons. I stopped after about five lessons. In my last years of struggling to be a musician, I asked my musician friends for tips. How do you play by ear? How do you know how to play all the church songs? They told me to just play freestyle. They told me to practice picking simple melodies on the piano. They taught me how to change the base note of chords to produce slightly more complex chord progressions. I tried again and again, yet the music I produced always sounded forced and childish, and I constantly felt like a failure.

I’m still not sure why I kept trying to be a musician. Perhaps it was because the people who played musical instruments for my church services formed an inner circle. Everything about being a musician in youth group was cool and desirable. Being a musician meant performing and being the center of attention; it meant using your talents to serve God. They had music practice on Friday nights for the main church service on Sunday and afterwards headed out to mamak stalls, 24-hour food establishments run by Tamil Muslims all over Malaysia. I really wanted to be a part of that special circle, to be one of the older cool kids who hung out till 1 a.m. on Friday nights. I also liked a boy
from church then who played the guitar. I thought that guitar-playing would lead to further bonding between him and me. Incidentally, almost every boy I liked in my teenage years was a musician, and all those boys seemed to like all the musician girls. My crushes often bonded with other musician girls over playing music, and it made me envious.

Those people not only spent extra time together during music practice, they also got together to jam frequently. They met in church on random weeknights to play the guitar, the piano, and the drums to their hearts’ content, followed by a mamak session. I longed to be a part of this group that required special skills to get you in. I felt isolated by my lack of music talent. The truth is, music has never been a really important part of my life. I enjoy listening to songs, but, most of the time, I’m content with the quiet hum of the heater vents as my background music. I understand that music is powerful and beautiful, but I simply do not connect to music the way a musician does. I do not have the interest or the passion for music to be a musician. I’m a casual listener of music. I can’t tell good music from bad music. My desire to be a musician only had to do with my search for a place to belong.

Although it’s been years since my last guitar lesson, a part of me today still wishes I were a musician. Whenever someone posts of video of them singing or playing a musical instrument, my heart tingles with envy at the attention and praise they are receiving. I want to be a performer. I want attention. I want to belong.

Every now and then, driven by desperation and restlessness, I approach the piano again. My fingers fall naturally on the keys that I played so frequently in my childhood
that I could never forget them. My right foot presses on the pedal with every change of
the chord, blending the sounds together but still keeping them separate. The sounds that I
can produce on the piano are unmistakably ones of someone who knows some piano but
only on a very basic level, despite having had five years of lessons. I shut my eyes and
play the only notes that I know, trying to make them sound like something beautiful;
imagining that I’m a skilled pianist who is expressing her soul fluently in music.

For some reason, placing myself in front of a piano always makes feel like I’m
peering into myself, searching for some answer within me about who I actually am.
“Pianist” is definitely a failed identity of mine—one that I desperately wanted but never
could have and never will have. So, when I sit on the piano bench and gently rest my
curved fingers on the keys, I’m pretending to be someone that I’m not and someone that I
will never be. I can see myself that much clearer in such moments when I cannot rely on
the skills that I possess to answer the question of who I am.

Every time I sit in front of a piano, I’m reminded of how far I am from the person
I wanted to be, and still want to be today. It makes me sad because I feel I have failed
myself, failed my parents and thrown all their piano lesson money and hopes for a
musician daughter down the drain. I wonder if there is anyone who is truly satisfied with
the person that I am today, especially myself, because I think of all the persons that I’m
not, all the identities that I don’t fulfill, all the hopes that I’ve failed, and I wonder how
any of us can ever truly come to terms with who we are. We spend so much of our time
wishing we were someone else, something else and struggle to accept that our hopes
simply do not line up with the reality of who we are and who we can or cannot be.
And with what authority do I speak? None, I’m obliged to say, according to the world of academia. I have no credentials, no qualifications, and no degree. I am a twenty-two-year-old Malaysian Chinese studying abroad in Kent, Ohio, and all I’m trying to do is tell you my story. When I set out to write this thesis, determined to tell the world of my life as a Malaysian Chinese, I thought that it would be the most interesting to tell all these stories about my adolescent and young adult years, to give you a window into a world that remains largely unwritten and unread about. To “educate” the world about the Malaysian Chinese, the people I feel have been unfairly ignored. However, I realize that as I sit down and attempt to write these stories, they come out bland, uninteresting, one foreign detail after another—and I start thinking that perhaps these are stories not worth telling after all. Perhaps my desire to tell these stories is not because I think that they are compelling and worthy of attention, but because I need to tell these stories in order to realize how I spent much of my past trying to be someone else. These stories are not stories of culture and diversity. These are stories of me struggling to come to terms with myself, both who I am not and who I am. These are stories written in hopes of finding out that I am not alone after all.
PAST
SHAPESHIFTING

It is cold—a sharp contrast to the thick heat outside. Just like shopping malls, karaoke rooms seem to be in a perpetual state of unnecessary coldness. There is a dial by the door of the room that controls the lights, but there isn’t one for the air-conditioning. I kick off my shoes and cross my legs on the black sofas that line the walls of the square karaoke room. I watch as my friends use the remote control tightly wrapped in clear plastic to pick songs on a small screen below the TV. No one really wants to pick the first few songs as we slowly settle into the room. The first songs are always tepid. Everyone is still warming up, and no one is really having fun yet.

The change from background advertisement noise to loud surround sound blares of melodies is too abrupt—no one is ready to sing yet. We’re selfish. We want to save our favorite songs for later on, when we’re hyped up with energy and our inhibitions gone as the songs slowly clump into one large mass of dry throats and cheeks hurting from smiling and laughing.

My friends turn down the lights. A dim light that lines the top of the sofas cuts across the center of the room. It looks like the sofas are glowing. The room is also lit up by the glare of the TV screen. I see moving colors reflected on the shiny black coffee table in the middle of the room. The room is cozy and just the right size. We stand on the sofa seats, our feet pushing into the cushy surfaces as we belt sappy love songs into the microphone.
Forever love

Wo zhi xiang yong wo zhe yi bei zi qu ai ni
(I want to use the rest of my life to love you)

The menu, printed in both English and Chinese, is riddled with English spelling and grammatical errors, much like the signs around the karaoke center. The sign that hangs on the inside of the door of the bathroom stall says, “Please threw sanitary napkins on the bin. Thank you!!!” The drinks menu is more interesting than the food menu. There is a large selection of fruity mixes with deliciousness floating in them like canned lychees, chewy nata-de-coco, and tapioca pearls. They come in tall clear glasses with a straw and a long spoon. There are also honeyed teas, iced cappuccinos, and mocha slushies. We eat battered chicken strips with fries or fried rice, spaghetti noodles fried in soy sauce with vegetables and meat—all of them a strange fusion of Asian and Western cuisine. The food gets cold too fast, but we always finish it anyway because we’re hungry, and we paid for it.

It is important to pick the right last song. My friends have perfected the timing and the technique of picking the last song. At the end of our three-hour time limit, the song-picking system automatically shuts us out of it. If that occurs mid-song, that song will be the last song for the day. So they are careful in the last fifteen minutes. The server enters our room with our bill—the first indication that our time is coming up. We turn up the lights and do the math. We dive into our wallets and pool together red ten Ringgit bills and blue one Ringgit bills. When the server reenters for our money, we hit the “skip”
button on our long list of songs that we were so hopeful to get through until we reach our
pre-planned final song. This final song is in actual fact not just *one* song. It is a collection
of about eight songs performed during a concert, strung together into one file. So our
final song lasts for twenty minutes and allows us to stay just a bit longer than the three
hours we paid for.

I had begged my mother for a long time to allow me to go for karaoke with my
friends after our final exams. After a grueling week of studying, we took the Light Rail
Transit in our uniforms and backpacks filled with heavy textbooks to head out to a
shopping mall. Then we would file away into the mall bathroom stalls to change out of
our uniforms. Picking out post-exam-mall-trip clothing was important because those were
the only times that we got to show off our sense of style and fashion to impress our peers.

“Ma, can I please go karaoke with my friends tomorrow?”

“*Harrr? Aiya,* why your friends always want you to go do this type of thing
*wan?***

“There’s nothing wrong with it what. Just singing songs only *mah.*”

“But going for *kah-rah-ok* is so Chinese. Only all the *ah lian* and *ah beng* do that
*wan.* Some more so dangerous, I don’t know what goes on in there. Better not go *lah.*
Don’t *hok wai* (learn bad), Just come home after your exams.”

I was always deeply frustrated by my mother’s response and struggled to explain
to my friends.

“I can’t go out with you guys because you’re going for karaoke,” I said. My
friends groaned.
“Why do you always have to tell your mother where you’re going? Just tell her that we’re going shopping lah!”

I mumbled something unintelligible, not knowing how to respond. Lying to my mother about something like that never seemed to cross my mind as an option. Lying is wrong; it’s a sin, the Bible says so. It’s un-Christian. My mother’s complete disapproval of going for karaoke was one of the first signs that my Chong Hwa Independent High School life, and my home and church life would never blend. I slowly learned that they were two distinct worlds, and I was somehow caught living in one for eight hours a day on weekdays, and in the other during the night and on weekends.

I spent much of my high school life trying to fit in, just like most teenagers. I wanted to be familiar with the latest Chinese hits, read Chinese novels, and put up the peace sign in photographs. On the other hand, my weekends were filled with church and youth group activities, and I, too, wanted to be like my church friends. I mocked them for being “bananas”—yellow on the outside, white on the inside. They are Chinese people who can’t speak Chinese. But I was also teased by them. I was too intense about school, spent way too much time doing homework and was obsessed with drama club. In school, I was too “English,” too “Westernized,” and spent all my time in church and jiang ye shu, “talk Jesus.” I vividly remember one of the many times my “Western-ness” got me in trouble.

“Yong yi, you have to watch what you say. You cannot be so direct and blunt. I know it’s part of your Western upbringing but here in Chong Hwa, you have to respect our culture. You cannot just say what you’re thinking. You must be careful because you
offend others easily,” said a drama club member who was part of the clique that I admired greatly.

I cried. I wrote a blog post in Chinese (the first and last) apologizing to all my drama club members for my bluntness. I will be careful with what I say in the future. I’m sorry. I didn’t know that I was being offensive. I am too insensitive to other people’s feelings. I will restrain my tongue. I really love and appreciate everyone here. I wanted to be a part of them so desperately. I wanted to be that student in drama club, the good one, the one that everyone feels threatened by, the strong one. The one who always delivers a stellar performance during impromptu acting activities, the one who writes and delivers the winning play of our school’s drama competition, the one who designs the best posters, the one who wins “best camper” every year at the annual drama camp, and the one who would be president of the drama club. And I tried really, really hard.

I proved to my drama teacher, *Milo lao shi* (Teacher Milo), that I was a serious student and one who was eager to learn by attending many drama camps. Teacher Milo had been talking about *ju zi ying*, a drama camp, for a while, and I wanted to go. But none of my friends were interested in going no matter how hard I begged for company. So I signed up to go alone, telling myself that it would pay off—I would make friends there, I would learn new things, and I would grow as an actor. My courage would show my teacher that I’m a dedicated and serious student.

When my parents dropped me off at the school where the camp was held, I noticed that all the other campers had sleeping bags and pillows in their hands. An uneasy sense of dread filled my stomach as I stood there without a sleeping bag and pillow. But
those items weren’t on the list, I thought, and I spent the rest of the registration process convincing myself that the other campers simply wanted extra comfort. I would just make do with the mattress and pillow provided.

When I arrived at our sleeping quarters, a classroom swept and mopped with its tables and chairs stacked against the walls, the cement floor glared at me coldly. I grabbed one of the bamboo mats from a corner of the classroom and rolled it out, acting as if I had planned to sleep on a paper-thin mat for four nights. The first night, I folded my towel, wet from my shower, into eighths and laid it on my book bag. That would be my pillow. I told myself that I was okay, that I was just roughin’ it.

We had heavily enforced curfews every night at camp, save for the last night. We were given complete freedom to do whatever we wanted the last night. Many campers stayed up all night chatting and playing games, high from the emotion of our final performance and the newfound sense of unity and friendship with other campers. Yet that last night at ju zi ying, I found myself still friend-less. I tried to convince myself that I didn’t want to be a part of the other campers’ all-night-long merrymaking anyway. I returned to my bamboo mat and lumpy pillow. I scribbled furiously in my xin de bao gao (experience report), a journal of our written camp reflections, which was handed in to our teachers at the end of every day. Even at the age of 15, I found comfort in the solitude of writing. I thought about how I was being the good student by doing serious activities like reflecting, learning, and growing instead of fooling around with games. That was all I could do to avoid confronting the fact that I truly did not fit in at drama camp, as the lines of empty sleeping bags reminded me. I went to bed when I was done journaling, thinking
“I’m exhausted anyway.”

Despite my painful and lonely experience at *ju zi ying*, I didn’t give up my pursuit to be a good drama student. The *real* deal in the drama camp world was *zun kong ying*—the annual national drama camp. Everyone in drama club knew that if you went to *zun kong ying*, it was a big deal. It was famed to be the toughest and most challenging drama camp in the nation for high school kids. It divided campers into groups according to levels. Your drama teacher would place you in the level that he thought that your acting and general drama skills were at. Although the levels were never overtly declared, experienced campers could tell you which level you were in based on the teacher and the activities. “Ooooh, you have Jacky lao shi (Teacher Jacky), you must be in level four. It’s the physical training level. Be prepared to be tired and to cry.” Students either took pride or felt upset about the level that they have been placed in as it was a reflection of what the teacher thought of their skills. The real problem with *zun kong ying* was that it always overlapped with Christmas Day. Every year, I would wait in anticipation for the release of the camp dates, only to be disappointed.

“Why can’t you go?” Xiang Ying asked.

“It overlaps with Christmas Day.”

“So?”

“So… so that’s why I can’t go!”

“I don’t get it.”

“Christmas is important to Christians,” I explained.

“But I don’t see why you can’t just skip Christmas celebration for one year.”
“It’s just… never mind lah,” I gave up. I could see why it didn’t make sense to my Buddhist friend. It’s not like missing my church’s Christmas service on Christmas Day would mean that I’m not a Christian, but my parents made a big deal out of it.

“Har, it’s on Christmas Day ah? Cannot cannot. Is God or drama more important?” my mother said.

I, too, felt that spending Christmas at drama camp rather than singing Christmas carols with youth group and watching the Christmas cantata at church would be wrong. God first, always, I told myself. So I would sigh in disappointment and could only hope that the organizers would break tradition with the camp dates the following year. One year, it finally did. The first day of camp was 26th December that year. I was ecstatic and even saw it as an answered prayer from God for my faithfulness to Him.

One of the only memories I have of zun kong ying the only year I went is when my teacher instructed us to have lunch under the table. We crouched under the table with our orange plastic plates of rice and vegetables and ate in silence, as we were also forbidden to talk to one another. I told my sister about that experience.

“Ni men sha de (you’re all crazy),” she said. “I have no idea why you’re wasting time doing such useless things.”

I wanted to defend my choices. Eating under the table was a very useful activity. It helped us be better actors by placing us in uncomfortable and unusual circumstances, something that actors have to do all the time. It allowed us to experience absurdity in real life. But no matter how hard I tried, these justifications never made it out of my mind because I had a hard time convincing even myself that these activities were beneficial. It
made complete sense when my teacher explained it to us but not when I tried to articulate it to my sister.

Looking back, I’m not sure if my five years of heavy investment in drama club really had anything to do with drama itself. I don’t think I ever truly understood drama. Similar to my experience with playing musical instruments, I spent a lot of my time and energy trying to understand the art of drama, desperately wanting to be fluent in its lingo and to connect with it on a deep level. I first got involved with drama around the age of 10 or 11 in my last years of elementary school. I don’t remember what sparked my interest then, but it inspired me to continue in high school. I joined drama club during my first year of high school, which immediately follows elementary school in Malaysia, and stuck with it for the entire five years. My vested interest in drama club also had to do with simply finding somewhere to belong. I enjoyed being able to say that I was a drama club kid, and that I had drama club things to do.

When I was a teenager, I told my parents that I wanted to pursue a career in drama. I was so sure that it was what I was meant to do. After all, I had just spent five years of my life honing my drama skills. Yet three months after high school ended, I delved into the world of English literature for the first time, and I immediately dropped all my drama ambitions. It disappeared from my world as I buried myself in Charlotte Brontë, Shakespeare and Robert Louis Stevenson.

My discovery that I didn’t belong to the drama club world didn’t come in a watershed moment. In fact, my discovery probably came when I was still in it with every pang of painful loneliness; I simply refused to accept it. When I speak of the drama club
world, it may be extended to represent my high school which is commonly viewed as the most “Chinese” of the Chinese schools.

Malaysian schools may be broadly divided into three categories: Malay, Chinese and Tamil. Malay and English are compulsory languages in all schools in Malaysia while Chinese and Tamil are taught only in Chinese and Tamil schools. *Chong Hwa* Independent High School, as the name overtly states, is a private Chinese school which employs both the government’s public school syllabus and another syllabus modeled after schools in mainland China and Taiwan. I studied double the amount of material than the average public school student. I learned all my subjects in both English and Chinese, and I was tested in both languages in separate exams on all subjects. Learning in both English and Chinese was not simply a matter of translation. The Chinese syllabus delved a lot deeper in the math and sciences, and I learned Chinese philosophy, literature, and history that were not covered in the public school syllabus.

*Chong Hwa* had gained a reputation for being *that crazy* school over the years. My school days were not only excruciatingly long, I also had school on Saturdays all year round. The Malay and Tamil school students were known for being lazy and unmotivated. All they do is *lepak* (laze around) and smoke cigarettes after school. The public Chinese schools had a somewhat better reputation, but the Chinese independent schools were the ones notorious for pushing their students the hardest, for being the most cruel and heartless to their students, hence the most “Chinese.”

My siblings and I were the only ones who attended an independent Chinese high school in my church. At home, we spoke English, watched American TV, and read
American and British books. At church, we did Bible study, watched American Christian movies, and sang Sunday School songs written by Westerners. At school, we chattered away in Chinese, planned karaoke trips, and listened to Wang Leehom and Jay Chou, two of the most popular Chinese singers in Asia. And so we lived our double lives, each one coming close to the other but refusing to actually touch each other.

Of course, my “Western-ness” worked in my favor at points of time too. I was known as one of the “English” people. In English class, teachers used my essays as samples of good work. English class was a breeze for me, and my friends asked me for advice on how to improve their English. “Just keep reading and writing, that’s really all there is to it,” I said. I won English essay-writing competitions, was asked to be on the team for the school’s English newsletter, and excelled in all my English exams. Being “English” came really easily to me. It was who I was before I started schooling at the age of six, and it is still who I am today as I live and study in a Western country and pursue a Bachelor’s degree in English. I felt completely comfortable in church and tried to hide my “Chinese-ness” as much as possible. I never mentioned my karaoke or drama club experiences. I was somehow ashamed of them, despite how desperately I wanted to fit in there. In school, I carefully avoided talking about Christianity because I didn’t know how to explain to my Buddhist and Taoist friends the concept of salvation or the meaning of the Holy Communion.

When I stepped out of high school, I felt relieved. I could finally leave my “Chinese” life behind permanently. I did that with joy, as I was only truly interested in watching American TV, reading English novels and chattering away in English with my
Christian friends. I didn’t have to try to be “Chinese” anymore. I didn’t have to act like I was interested in getting to know more Chinese artists, trying to write a play with many layers of meaning in Chinese, or trying to convey unsuccessfully to Teacher Milo that being a Christian really makes a difference in how I live my life.

It’s strange. I spent eleven years of my life, exactly half of my life at this point, completing my education in a Chinese school. Nonetheless, I felt so much like a fish outside water most of the time. I definitely still think back to my high school days fondly, missing the bian xing hu (shape changing pond), the food stalls that lined the road selling fried mihun (rice noodles) drenched in curry, and walking on the cold cement floors barefoot.

All the pain that I had to endure in search of my identity, although I didn’t realize that’s what I was doing then, was necessary for me to come to where I am today. In many senses, I feel more at home in the U.S. than in Chong Hwa. It is a strange, strange feeling; almost revolting because I feel as if saying that makes me not Chinese, not Malaysian—not Joyce. But I feel more like myself in an American classroom than I did in a Malaysian classroom. So what does that mean? Who am I, really? It might seem obvious, but it has taken me a long time to truly come to see that labels simply don’t work. There is no way anyone can only be Chinese, Malaysian, English, or American because those labels do not have a definition in stone. No one is only “American” or “Chinese” or “English” or “Scottish” or whatever label you relate to the most. Only a person who has chosen to live a life of isolation can say that.
TAKING THE STAGE

There was an exception to my disappointing career in drama club. At the age of 17, my fifth and last year of high school, my script was selected among many others to be performed at TEA Time, an interschool drama competition. TEA stands for “Theatre Education Academy,” a drama company that my drama teacher founded in Malaysia. It was extremely exciting as it provided me the opportunity to direct a play that I had written on my own—two major milestones in one project. It also meant that for the first time in four years, my drama teacher perceived my work to be more valuable than other people’s.

When I got home from school the day it was announced that my script was selected, I stared at the cover page of it, which I had carefully bound in fuchsia ribbon, hardly believing that my teacher had picked my script. For once, I had a chance to be the star of drama club as the director and scriptwriter of Chong Hwa Independent High School’s TEA Time team. Everything was going to be my decision—the casting, the props, the lighting, the music, the costumes, the advertising posters, the actual execution of the play—I had the power to make executive decisions. It felt great. I felt the immense pressure to perform well as my teacher had finally handed me a chance to prove that I really am the student I had wanted to be all this time.

About thrice a week for the six months preceding the competition, my team of eight and I stayed after school. We set down our backpacks on the concrete benches and occupied a space in the courtyard. I started off by training my actors—performing
exercises that would help them get in the zone, get to know their character better, and be in better control of their bodies—all these things that I had watched other directors in drama club do. I had them sit cross-legged facing one another and hold a shoe up in their hand. I told them to raise the shoe high up and bring it down quickly close to the opposite person’s face but not hitting it. Repeat several times. They were not supposed to flinch or avoid the oncoming shoe. This activity was to build trust among the actors and also to practice good control over their own movements. I had them imagine what their characters would wear, how they would walk, how they would speak, how they would move. I had them observe real life people that they thought were similar to their characters and make notes about them.

Every day for those six months, my mind was occupied with thoughts about TEA Time—how I could be a better director, what I needed to do to train my actors better, how to tweak act one to convey the exact message I wanted to, what costumes to use… It was the only thing all my friends in school heard about. “No, I don’t have time, I have to do TEA Time stuff.” “Sorry, I can’t, we have TEA Time practice today.” “After TEA Time, okay?”

However, when it came to church, I never referred to my play as TEA Time. When I missed youth group a few weeks in a row, I told my church friends that I had “drama club stuff” to do. I didn’t have the desire to explain to my church friends the exact nature of TEA Time and why it was important to me. All they knew was that I had fallen out of youth group for a while because I was, once again, busy with drama club. I felt no one ever understood why drama club was really important to me because it was a
world so vastly different from theirs.

My parents also hardly supported my drama ambitions. My mother thought that it occupied too much of my time and my mind. I should be focusing more on my studies and my faith instead. No one in my family attended my TEA Time play. Although I felt a little tug in my heart that it was somehow supposed to be otherwise, it felt normal to me. “It’s too far away lah, so ma fan (troublesome),” they said. “I’m not going to understand because it’s in Mandarin,” my mother said as she only spoke Cantonese.

I simply accepted it as it was. They were not overtly against it; they were simply apathetic. During the days leading up to the play, my mother opened up our house for us to work on our props and fine-tune the final stages of our performance. My sister made spaghetti with red sauce and garlic bread for dinner, and we ate cross-legged on the cold tiled floor in the middle of the living room. My whole team spent the night at my place although I struggle to remember how all of us fit in my house.

On the night before our performance, I gathered my team and formed a circle sitting on the floor of the living room. I turned off all of the lights save for a small one and inserted a carefully-selected instrumental CD into my mother’s overly expensive surround sound stereo system. Being emotional is always a part of drama club. It’s even better if it ends with everyone in tears. We talked about our emotions, about the long journey we’ve taken and its culmination. Finally, I broke down into tears that night.

During the final weeks leading up to our performance, I felt I was disobeying God with my play. It was titled McFeeling, a fast food chain that sold emotions (bear with me; I was 17 when I wrote this). The central conflict of the play was that McFeeling could
sell just about any emotion but confidence. Confidence was impossible to produce artificially. The moral of the play was that confidence cannot be bought, that it can only come from within.

At some point, I felt my play was wrong because it asserted a belief in the self and not in God. It was too self-centered, and it implied a lack of belief in a higher power. It felt wrong because my play had no mention of God which was something that was an increasingly important part of my life in my late teens. At that point, I was learning in youth group about how God should be an all-compassing part of my life and how my belief in Jesus Christ implicated every part of my life and every single thing I do—and yes, that included drama club.

My teammates, who were all not Christians, were utterly confused, probably felt really uncomfortable, and did not know what to say. “But why can’t you have self-confidence and believe in God at the same time?” My guilt at that time was probably fostered by some disapproval that my mother or sister had expressed toward the theme of my play. “Har, all about believing in yourself wan ah? What about believing in God leh? So non-Christian wan your play.” TEA Time was one of the times I felt the tension between my faith and drama club the most strongly. These two overwhelmingly important things to me in my youth felt like oil and water. They stubbornly refused to blend together.

I tried to explain my struggles to my drama teacher on a couple of occasions. These were conversations held in Mandarin, which made it harder for me to express myself fully.
“I’m a Christian, my religion is important to me,” I said.

“Okay, I understand.”

“I feel like I might have to give up drama club at some point.”

“Why?”

“Because my religion is important to me, and sometimes I feel like what we do at drama club is against it.”

“Yong yi, drama is universal. It doesn’t matter what religion you are, you can still be in drama.”

“But sometimes they just don’t go together!”

“Religion is really important to some of the other drama club members too. We respect that. You don’t have to pick between drama and religion, we accept both here,” he said.

I always walked away from such conversations feeling frustrated and not understood. My teacher is not a Christian; he would never understand exactly how and why obeying God is something that permeated all parts of life. My church friends and family didn’t understand why drama was so important to me. They thought it silly and weird.

Sometimes my mother told me that I was spending too much time on drama club, and I should be spending more time in church instead. The values of Chong Hwa’s drama club did not line up with the Bible—there was too much about believing in yourself, about good luck, about how important drama was—it almost became a form of worship, which was a big no-no.
My heart wrestled with these two violently. I had learned to take my faith very seriously at a very young age. I grew out of merely being a church-goer very early in my teenage years. I learned to do my devotions and pray every day, participated actively in youth group and led Bible studies, and came to the understanding that being a Christian meant having every single part of my life influenced by Biblical teachings—do everything for God, make your daily choices based on What Would Jesus Do?

Something must be wrong with drama club if it was impossible for me to even talk about God and Jesus there. Something must be amiss if I had to act as if God was not a part of my life at all in drama club. Therefore, I started to feel that drama club was a place which caused me to disregard God—a serious disobedience.

The night before our TEA Time performance was a culmination of my struggle to bring my drama and my Christian life together. It was too late, we still had to go through with the performance, but a part of me felt McFeeling was a complete mistake. McFeeling was a sign of my disobedience to God as I trusted in the power of the “self” more than the power of God. It proclaimed self-sufficiency—which I’ve been taught is fundamentally against the philosophies of Christian life.

***

The pervasiveness of American culture in Malaysia is so strong that it never occurred to me that McFeeling, a play on the McDonald’s brand, was based on American fast food culture. McDonald’s did not feel foreign to me. In fact, during my first year in the U.S., McDonald’s was comfort food for me because it reminded me of home. Most of my outings to the mall with friends were marked with lunch at McDonald’s because it
was cheap. The night before the day I flew off to the U.S. in 2010, I had supper with a couple of friends at McDonald’s. On the day that I left, I had lunch at Kentucky Fried Chicken with my church friends. Although we considered McDonald’s to be “Western food,” it was part of our normal diet, just as Chinese food is part of an American’s diet. A Malaysian being able to find home in McDonald’s all around the globe is a testament to the marketing and advertising success of McDonald’s. I’m very impressed by their success, yet feel almost indignant about it—how dare American fast food chains take over the world?

At the time when I wrote McFeeling, I was wrestling a lot with my self-esteem as I struggled to believe in myself. I felt I wasn’t smart enough, pretty enough, creative enough… Apart from it being a copycat of a church play that I had seen on the harms of instant gratification, McFeeling was part of my efforts to believe in myself. I gave credit to a drama camp experience that I had for my decision to start believing in myself. It was a physical training day at drama camp, and our teacher spread us out across the empty classroom. He told us to lift our right hand straight up into the air and to start jumping with both our feet at the same time. He told us that we could stop when he tells us to. And so it began—the agony of physical exhaustion that filled my right arm and my calves. I was determined to not stop until my teacher told us to. I knew that this was not merely a physical training activity; this was also an activity to test our mental perseverance. Stopping would be weak. Stopping would mean failure. Stopping would mean that I’m a bad drama student.

I don’t remember how long it was that we jumped up and down in the same spot
with our right arm stretched out. It was probably somewhere between 30 to 60 minutes. I remember thinking to myself that hopping on one foot followed by the other would count as cheating. Dropping my right arm down to an “L” shape would be cheating too. When my teacher finally told us to stop, I collapsed into tears, just as many of my peers did. I might have cheated a little bit for a short time, but for the most part, I considered myself successful as I withstood the physical pain and stuck with the activity the entire time.

I started crying when it was over because it was a breakthrough moment. I put my mind to completing that activity, and I did. In the debriefing that followed, all of us sat in a circle, faces strewn with tears and bodies dripping in sweat. My teacher talked about how our mind controlled our body and that as long as we set our hearts and minds on something, we could achieve it. It was an extremely emotional moment for me because I actually believed in myself, if only for a brief 30 minutes. It was an important achievement for me probably because I finally found a bit of the validation that I had been seeking for in drama club for a long time.

During one of our early TEA Time practices, I repeated the “jumping with right hand held up” activity with my actors. I felt there was no better way for my actors to understand the inspiration behind McFeeling, and how truly important the message of this play was to me. I wonder how much of a fool I must have seemed to my actors. My actors were all about two years younger than me, but even as I forced myself to lead my team confidently, a part of me always questioned the value of these training activities that I made them do. I never actually knew what I was doing—I was merely pretending. Looking back, my actors probably thought I was an idiot, abusing my power by making
them jump up and down for 30 minutes simply because I wanted them to physically experience the dumb inspiration behind my play.

My acting skills were never highly looked upon in my drama club. My teacher once described my acting as *hen nen* (very inexperienced). I was surprised and hurt as I was already a third-year drama student at that point. I’ve not taken the stage in a long, long time, but I do remember how I felt every time I was on stage. Although I tried my best to step into my character confidently, every facial expression and hand gesture felt awkward and forced. No matter how hard I tried, I felt that my peers were thinking to themselves what a terribly awkward actor I was. I watched the cool kids who were deemed good actors and often wondered—“What would it take for me to actually be a good actor?” My confidence on stage was always forced; there was never any actual confidence. There was only a deep desire for acceptance. Nothing meant fitting in at high school well to me like fitting in at drama club.

I have been out of drama for five years now. Every now and then when I step into a black box theatre, I feel a wave of nostalgia. I miss the hushed silence of the audience as the lights dim, the anticipation of being backstage while waiting to go on stage, the bright spotlights that make me squint—and then I wonder, if theatre was really that important to me, why did I abandon it completely?

My current aspiration to be a writer is the complete opposite of theatre. My friends are mostly surprised to find out about my heavy involvement with drama club in high school because it seems so unlike me—the one who enjoys hiding behind a computer screen more than anything. I spent too much of my time in drama club trying to
be someone I’m not, so now theatre merely feels like a place where it is impossible to be myself.
HOLIER THAN THOU

My siblings and I always hated Chinese New Year. Of course, it was exciting that we had about ten days off from school, but it also meant that we would be visiting our relatives which was always an arduous task. It meant long hours sitting around the living room and pretending to be interested in the Chinese New Year game shows playing on TV and getting up every now and then to get some cookies or sweets from the coffee table out of sheer boredom. All this happens while our parents chatter away in Cantonese with our aunties and uncles. As with visiting relatives in any culture, Chinese New Year also came with unnecessary interrogations and remarks on our weight and marital status. “Wah, gom fei jor ah? (So fat already?)” “Lei gei xi kit fan ah? (When are you getting married?)” To which we would politely smile and give some modest answer in broken Cantonese.

Disliking Chinese New Year is unusual. Most Chinese look forward to the festival every year, much as most Americans look forward to Thanksgiving. Family gathers, and an abundance of food is shared. You get to see your cousins who live three hours away that you never see during the year. You get to spend your angpao (red packet) money on illegal fireworks and set them off by the cement porch. You get to eat lots of Chinese New Year cookies and sweets which sit in clear cylindrical containers with red lids on the coffee table of every Chinese household. Chinese New Year is the time you go from house to house to house with your friends to collect more angpao, gamble, and drink shandies.
My sister and I dreaded the coming of this festival every year because visiting our relatives was always an uncomfortable ordeal. We would be asked questions that we wouldn’t know how to answer. Our parents always bragged about us, and I never knew how to respond to that. My siblings and I never really got to know our cousins. I can’t list more than two of their names. I’m not sure how Chinese New Year came to be us sitting on sofas hoping to pass this festival unnoticed. I have a hunch that it has its roots with my parents’ conversion to Christianity in their teenage years.

Both of my parents grew up in Buddhist families and spoke strictly Hokkien and Cantonese at home. They were both sent to missionary schools for their secondary education whose medium of instruction was English. Only one other of my mother’s nine siblings was sent to her school, *Bukit Bintang Girls’ School*. My father was the only one in his family who attended *Saint Paul’s Institute* which was run by the Catholic Church. The rest of my parents’ siblings were sent to Chinese schools or government schools which had no Christian influence. It was during their years in secondary school that my parents were introduced to Christianity and converted. They started attending local English-speaking churches which provided them the opportunity to practice their English, unlike their siblings who continued to speak in Cantonese and Mandarin to their friends in school. All these circumstances led to my parents’ increased fluency in English.

I believe that it is a combination of division in language and religious beliefs which led my parents farther and farther away from their families. My parents’ conversion to Christianity signified a sort of betrayal to their family. We were, and probably still are, the snobby English-speaking family. Although my siblings and I were
fluent in Mandarin, we still felt uncomfortable around our relatives who spoke Chinese almost exclusively, save for the smatterings of English that they learned in school. My mother told us that our cousins are *hou kwai* (very naughty) *wan* and that we should not *hok wai* (learn bad) from them. My cousins gambled and bought illegal fireworks, which are all un-Christian and sinful according to my parents. So we isolated ourselves from our cousins because being around them made us feel uncomfortable.

Although I spoke Mandarin in school all day long, I was still far more comfortable conversing in English as I frequently forgot Mandarin words. My parents always encouraged us to read at home, and we only read books in English. Although I spent a lot of time in school speaking and reading Mandarin, I was still far more comfortable conversing in English because it was the language I spoke and read the most. Today, I still have a hard time conveying complex emotions or situations in Mandarin.

Our isolation from our relatives was of the “holier than thou” kind. Our English was far better than theirs, which put us above them in our minds. We also rejected worldly pleasures such as gambling and drinking, as the Christian faith encourages. I don’t blame my relatives for viewing us as snobby because we shoved ourselves into that “superior” box. Being more “Western” is superior within my immediate family. My community in Malaysia holds some type of reverence for Western culture. Countries in the West are viewed as more developed, more technologically advanced, and more civilized. I’m aware that there are many social and political explanations behind the West’s heavy influence on Asia, but understanding that is not the purpose of this essay. Our obsession with Western culture, which is not exclusive to Malaysia, is seen most
obviously in the overwhelming Western media that perpetuates Malaysian life. What else could be more glamorous than acting like the people one sees on TV?

At the same time, I also hesitate to say these things because I’m speaking from a perspective none other than my own. Perhaps my relatives never thought these things. Perhaps I simply enjoy thinking of myself as better than my friends who are currently studying in Hong Kong and post Facebook statuses in broken English. With every sentence that I write, I can’t help but doubt the validity of my perceived reality. I hesitate to make blanket statements about the Malaysian Chinese Christian population—I am by no means a representation of them.

Most of my Christian friends really enjoy Chinese New Year as they have good relationships with their extended families. My severe and almost complete disconnection from mine is something that I don’t think about a lot. All my life I’ve been surrounded by school friends, church friends, and immediate family, and I forget that I might be missing out on something because these other experiences consume me so wholly. Every now and then, I wonder how different my perspectives would be if I had relationships with my cousins, aunties, and uncles. What if I got to meet even one of my grandparents? What if every Chinese New Year, I actually looked forward to seeing my cousins and hanging out with them? What if a grand reunion dinner on Chinese New Year Eve was a part of my life? Yet all these things, all these Chinese things, seem to be missing from my life. It’s not like I’m an American-born Chinese and that Chinese New Year is simply not a part of my life. It is a part of my life but only minimally. I’ve spent three Chinese New Years in the United States so far, and every single one of them has been completely ordinary, save
for some nostalgic longings for pineapple tarts.

One Malaysian thing that I can relate to with confidence is food. I love writing about food. For the longest time, I felt a little sheepish about the enjoyment I took in writing about food. I believe my embarrassment stems from our culture which often makes fun of fat people by depicting their love for food. I started indulging my love to write about food when a friend pointed out that writing about food is essentially writing about life. Food is life. There’s nothing more basic to life than food. That is why people love gathering together and eating because that is essentially what sharing life is.

Before I left for the United States, I already knew that I would miss Malaysian food greatly. I didn’t particularly look forward to eating authentic pizza, burgers and fries, as I was convinced that I have already had my share of that in Malaysia. However, when I was younger, eating Western food was a luxury and a privilege as it was more expensive then. It was what my siblings and I wanted to eat all the time.

My uncle used to own a typical Malaysian Chinese restaurant called Sun Heng. It was always cold. There were large circular wooden tables draped in red table cloths with cigarette burns in them. There was an altar with a statue of Buddha meditating in the center, surrounded by fake candles which illuminated the entire altar a dark red which always seemed devilish to me. My mother taught us to despise these altars. She always pointed them out whenever we saw them at restaurants, in our neighbors’ house, or at my friends’ place.

“Eh, better be careful ah, see their giant altar, afterwards they bad influence you ah.”
When we ate at Sun Heng, my mother would order for our family—vegetables dripping in oil and garlic, steamed whole fish with ginger strips and tofu, breaded chicken with lemon sauce. These dishes would emerge from the kitchen steaming hot.

My siblings and I hated it. We always groaned when we found out that we were going to Sun Heng for dinner. We successfully convinced our father about half the time to stop by McDonald’s before going to the restaurant. We would bring in white and red paper bags and munch on our cheeseburgers and fries while my parents ate my uncle’s Chinese food.

We also hated the Chinese tea that Sun Heng and all Chinese restaurants served. It’s the cheapest drink, even as compared to water, so it became the default drink. We got to drink sweetened barley water and soya bean milk sometimes, while soft drinks were reserved for special occasions. Our Chinese tea would arrive in textured clear plastic cups bleeding beads of sweat, showing its dark brown color. It was almost completely tasteless, with only a hint of bitterness—a child’s nightmare drink.

Perhaps I hated Chinese food so much when I was an adolescent because it was the cheapest option which naturally brought down its value in my eyes. Western Food—Pizza Hut, McDonald’s, TGIF—was strongly desired. It is likely that it was simply the novelty of having something from a foreign land. The less attainable it is, the more desirable it becomes. Therefore cheeses and berries and turkey and anything else that belonged more exclusively to Western cuisine attained this high ranking in my mind. I had only heard of these foods in books and on TV, so when I could actually eat them, it was special—this was brought all the way from England, very special wan.
As I write about my preoccupation with Western culture, I’m becoming increasingly aware that I’ve been fully indulging in Western culture the past three-and-a-half years of my life. I have left behind my life in Malaysia almost completely, and here I am, studying in an American university, celebrating American holidays, watching American football games—each one an indication of how un-Chinese my life is right now.

It’s scary how at ease I am with that.
PRESENT
MY NAMES

I knew that applying for graduation by the deadline was a matter of importance and cost efficiency. I made sure that I had all my important documents at hand just in case when I was filling out the application. I clicked on the radio button indicating that my curriculum is a Bachelor of Arts in English with a minor in writing. The next page displayed “Joyce Yoon Yi Ng” with the question “Is this your legal name?” right under it. I whispered a curse. No, it’s not. I stared at the screen for a while, wishing that my family name could float across the screen and slide itself between “Joyce” and “Yoon Yi” in its rightful place. I shut the tab with the application without even logging out.

My name is Joyce Ng Yoon Yi, not Joyce Yoon Yi Ng. The constraints of the Western naming system have forced me to rearrange my name for official purposes in this American university. Lest my family name be mistaken as “Yi,” there is no way for me to have my name in its legal order in the United States. I wondered whether I was being petty by wanting my name to appear in the right order on my diploma. After all, employees have many other things to pay attention to; middle names are insignificant. My diploma will merely be a very nice sheet of paper representing the four years of time, money, and effort I have put into obtaining it. There is no real need for my diploma to read “Joyce Ng Yoon Yi.”

I asked my sister who graduated from a university in Scotland three years ago how her name appears on her diploma.

“Oh, it’s ‘Sarah Yoon Ai Ng,’” she said.
“Doesn’t that bother you?”

“Ya, I was just like you. I wanted it to appear as ‘Sarah Ng Yoon Ai’ too but there was nothing I could do about it. Now I don’t care anymore.”

“Harr, really? So stupid wan. I don’t want to be Joyce Yoon Yi Ng.”

“Aiya, nobody is going to care what order your name is wan lah. Just go with it.”

I condemned myself for being unnecessarily picky and sentimental. What actually matters is the education that I received, not the physical diploma. I felt so young and childish caring about things like how my name appears on my Bachelor’s diploma. I proceeded to call the Registrar’s office anyway to ask if there was something I could do about it, not wanting to give up without putting up a fight first.

“So your last name is N-G?” the lady asked, refusing to pronounce my vowel-less family name despite having heard me say it three times already.

“Yes.”

“And Joyce is your first name?”

“Yes.”

“And the right order of your name is ‘Joyce Ng Yoon Yi’?”

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid there’s nothing you can do to get your diploma to read that. Your last name has to come last. Now what you could do is omit the ‘Yoon Yi’ altogether and have your diploma read just ‘Joyce Ng.’”

I thanked the helpful lady and hung up the phone. I was happy to hear that there was a way for my name to appear in the right order, except that then it would be
incomplete. I felt irked by the choices that have been presented to me—out of order or incomplete. That’s all I have.

A few of my Malaysian friends have their names in the Western order on Facebook. Due to the default Western name format that Facebook adopts, if you fill in your name correctly according to the fields, your last name will inevitably appear last, which is not how the Chinese name format is. A Chinese person’s family name appears first, followed by their given name. Malaysia has adopted a format where if a person were to have an English name, such as Joyce in my case, it goes before their family name.

It annoys me that some of my friends choose to have their name displayed out of order on Facebook. It’s Facebook—there are simple solutions to having your name appear in the right order, such as filling in the fields inaccurately so that it displays your name that way. There are no ramifications of filling in your family name incorrectly on Facebook. My friends’ Facebook names are none of my business, and I know that it’s nosy and bossy of me to feel annoyed by someone else’s choices. I realize that I am more sensitive to name order than many of my peers.

Changing the order of my name is a form of Westernization. The order of a Malaysian Chinese name is unique; you can’t really find it in any other part of the world, apart from Singapore. It bothers me to not have my name in its uniquely Malaysian order, because it’s part of what being Malaysian means to me—having a Malaysian name. Being known as “Joyce Yoon Yi Ng” makes me feel un-Malaysian. It makes me feel I’m this much less Malaysian and this much more Western. It makes me feel seperti kacang
"lupakan kulit," “like a peanut forgetting its skin,” a Malay idiom which means someone who has forgotten their roots.

When I was in high school, my teachers always called me “Yong Yi.” “Yong Yi” is the Pinyin for the Chinese characters of my name. “Yoon Yi” is the romanization of my Chinese name on paper. My friends and teachers in drama club also called me “Yong Yi.” My high school best friends always called me “Joyce.” All my church friends called me “Joyce.” I didn’t dislike being called “Yong Yi,” but it definitely felt more distant and more official. Chong Hwa Independent High School is a school whose medium of instruction is Mandarin, so it makes sense that teachers call their students by their Chinese names. My family calls me “Joyce” and never calls me “Yong Yi.” Therefore, I had learned to associate the name “Yong Yi” with formality and distance, while “Joyce” meant family and close friends.

It’s been a really long time since anyone has called me “Yong Yi.” I now live in a world where I’m Joyce “Vowel-less-Unpronounceable-Last-Name,” and that’s it. “Yoon Yi” is now my middle name, which no one pays attention to in the U.S. It’s easy to forget that I’m “Yong Yi” or “Yoon Yi.” It sounds foreign, distant, and strange, as if it’s no longer a part of me.

When I boarded a Singapore Airlines flight in New York headed to Malaysia two years ago, an air stewardess greeted me, “Welcome, Miss Ng,” pronouncing my family name precisely. I smiled and felt a wave of relief and pleasure. Finally, someone who knows how pronounce to “Ng” without having to ask me first. Although I was still a 20-hour flight away from Malaysia then, I already felt at home.
The next time I logged in to FlashLine, I felt really tired of seeing my name in
that stupid order—“Joyce Yoon Yi Ng.” Westernizing my name is only one of the
hundreds of things that I have had to change since my time here. I’ve also had to
dramatically revise my vocabulary because Malaysian English is modeled after British
English. It’s true, no one actually forces me to say “elevator” instead of “lift” or to use
Fahrenheit instead of Celsius. But I’ve become hyper aware of the differences between
British and American terms. Every now and then, I still let a British term slip
unintentionally. For example, I recently said, “I only have a five dollar note in my
wallet.” Most of the time, I’ve either gotten used to saying the American terms, or I
simply stop for a while to think and make sure that I have used the American term.

I have successfully blended into American culture so well that many people who
meet me for the first time assume that I’m an American-born Chinese. To many people, it
is not apparent that I’m a foreigner in the United States. Sometimes I’m afraid that if I
deliberately choose to use the British term even when I remember the American one, I’m
simply drawing attention to myself, because I learned quickly in my first year in the U.S.
to ditch all British terms. My insistence on being “Joyce Ng Yoon Yi” both on official
papers and on Facebook is like my final fight to remain Malaysian, amidst all the ways
I’ve Americanized.

At one point I realized that if I were to fight all the Western influences in my life,
I would be fighting a losing battle as it is impossible to escape the pervasiveness of
Western culture. In fact, I would be fighting a battle that doesn’t even exist. Is there
really a purpose to refusing to eat more pasta and bread out of sheer determination to not
eat Western food? Occasionally in my attempts to stay Malaysian, such as refusing to use a fork to eat rice, I realize how futile and unnecessary such battles are. I have started to feel silly about holding on so tightly to such mundane actions and choices. Surely my actions are not the only defining points of my Malaysian-ness.

Sometimes it seems like this slew of daily choices have become the only things that I can hold onto because they are the only tangible reminders of home. In my fear of forgetting home, I choose to say “housemate” instead of “roommate,” I don’t put soy sauce on my rice, I make people take off their shoes when they enter my house. At the same time, I also realize that no one really cares about those things, yet they hold so much meaning to me. Each time I measure in inches or type “center” instead of “centre,” I feel a bit like a betrayer. It’s silly, I know, but with every use of the word “store” instead of “shop,” “cellphone” instead of “handphone,” I’m reminded that I am no longer home.

I realize I don’t have to go all the way to Malaysia to find these reminders of home. I can find the usage of these terms and the metric system anywhere in the United Kingdom. British English reminds me of home. American English reminds me that I’m far away from home. This battle is not one against Western culture; it is my battle to remain Malaysian, my battle to remain true to myself. However, what I failed to realize in my adamancy is that parts of Malaysian culture is inherently Western—such as our use of British English, and I have already been living a Westernized life even before I came to the U.S.
IN BETWEEN PLACES

I once met an Asian with a flawless American accent, so I quickly concluded that he was an American-born Asian. When I meet an American-born Asian, one of the first things that comes to my mind is “What type of Asian are you?” Not wanting to draw conclusions based on my assumptions (maybe he just looks Asian), I usually try to phrase my inquiry in a roundabout way.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“New Jersey.” That wasn’t the answer I was looking for.

“Oh… how long have you been here in Kent?” I tried to think of a better way to find out if he was Japanese, Korean, Filipino—just something else apart from New Jersey.

“Only since fall.”

“Cool, do you like it here?”

“Yeah, it’s not too bad. Kent’s a nice town.”

I was getting bored of small talk and wanted to get straight to the point, but I couldn’t come up with a way to get my question answered. “Where are you really from?” would just be offensive. I was also afraid that he would take offense to “What ethnicity are you?” as I’ve come to know that many non-white Americans find it annoying that people tend to identify them by their race, when all they want to be known as is simply American and human. The conversation continued with more generic getting-to-know you questions, and I never got round to finding out what “type” of Asian he was.
At this point, a Malaysian friend came by to join our conversation. Being blunter than me, he asked, “Where are you parents from?” I had thought to ask that question but felt uncertain because his parents might have just grown up in the United States.

“Oh, they’re from the Philippines.”

“Sweet, have you ever been there?”

“Nope.”

“Do you think you’re going to make a trip there some time?”

“Not really, we don’t have any plans as of now.”

It became apparent to me from the rest of our conversation that he had no identification with the Philippines or being Filipino. He considers himself one hundred percent American, and that’s it. It surprised me how little it mattered to him that he is an Asian living in a primarily non-Asian community. Why doesn’t he care about his cultural heritage? Does it not matter to him that he is different from most of his peers?

Conversely, I’m hyper aware of my Asian-ness. Whenever I’m at an Asian grocery store with my boyfriend, I feel extremely self-conscious, much more than my white boyfriend.

“So many Asians!” I said as we pulled into the parking lot.

“Yeah, makes sense right. Asian people shopping for Asian food.”

“Yeah. I’m feeling very self-conscious.”

“Why?” he asked in a somewhat incredulous tone.

“I don’t know… It’s just… stereotypes. I’m an Asian shopping at an Asian store in the U.S. It’s like you going to a McDonald’s in Malaysia, how would you feel?”
“I dunno. Normal?” he shrugged.

“It’s really stupid. I’m allowed to shop for my own type of food. I just feel like I become a part of this demographic whenever I’m around other Asians. It doesn’t really make sense. You’d think I’d feel more self-conscious about being the only Asian when I’m around non-Asians exclusively. But I feel much more self-conscious when I meet another Asian. I feel like I’m *supposed* to say something to them, or relate to them, just because they’re Asian too!”

Part of the wide gap between the level of awareness my boyfriend and I have of our ethnicities has to do with our personalities. I’m a much more self-conscious person, whereas he’s a lot more comfortable in his own skin (no pun intended). However, Jonathan also enjoys white privilege. If he were to travel to Malaysia, he would be showered with endless attention from my friends, family, and even strangers. He’s a white male—a rarity in Malaysia. White often automatically equals good and superior.

Conversely, I feel self-conscious about being Asian in the U.S. because Asians have been assigned many negative stereotypes. Asians have incomprehensible English. Asians only know how to study and have little social skills. Asians eat weird, disgusting food. Asians are bad drivers. Asians are stingy. Asians only hang out with Asians. Many of these things are facts: It is true that many international students from Asia are difficult to comprehend when speaking English. It is true that Asians know how to study well. It is true that Asians eat foods that are weird to Americans. It is true that Asians tend to hang out with other Asians. However, due to our position as a racial minority, all these facts possess a negative twist. There are many white Americans who are really good students.
There are many white Americans who are bad drivers. White Americans also tend to hang out with other white Americans.

I tend to react really strongly when I realize I’m being “really Asian” like bringing weird, strong smelling foods to eat in the library. I feel embarrassed. I don’t want to be viewed as “really Asian” by other people here because that is usually a negative thing. Asians are laughed at for being “really Asian,” while most of the time, white Americans doing white American things like eating pizza and being openly affectionate with their parents is viewed as completely normal and positive.

I only recently realized how strongly I, and most Malaysians, identify with my ethnicity and how much less I identify with my nationality. Explaining what exactly I am is always a challenge to Americans. People would often ask me, “Wait, you’re Chinese? I thought you were Malaysian?” It seems simple to me. I’m Chinese and I’m Malaysian. My nationality is Malaysian; I’m ethnically Chinese. I have always thought that it’s obvious that I’m Chinese. I’m from Malaysia, and I look like other Chinese people; how is it not obvious that I’m Chinese?

It always comes as a surprise to Americans, even the ones that I’ve known for a long time, that I’m Chinese. My campus minister, Kris, who has become a close friend over the course of my time in the U.S., texted me the first day I got back in the U.S. after having spent my summer break in Malaysia. The text read, “Joyce!!!! Did u know that u r Chinese?!! I do!!! :o)” I called him for more clarification on the text while I waited in line with the rest of the non-American citizens to pass through customs.

“Kris, of course I’m Chinese, didn’t you know that?”
“No, I had no idea! I thought you were Malaysian all this time.”

“I am Malaysian. I’m just ethnically Chinese.”

“I had just assumed that you’re just Malaysian the whole time.”

Kris had already known me for two years at that point. It surprised me that I hadn’t already emphasized the fact that I’m Chinese during those years. It is important for me to state that I’m a Malaysian Chinese, not just a Malaysian. It is true that I’m one hundred percent Malaysian, but I’m also one hundred percent Chinese. I tend to identify myself primarily as a Chinese and secondarily (very closely) as a Malaysian. Yes, I’m Chinese. That’s important. But no, I’m not from China, that’s also important. I dislike being identified merely as Malaysian because Malaysian is not an ethnicity, and somehow identifying myself by my ethnicity is really important to me.

If I were to tell you that someone is Malaysian, you have no way of knowing what the skin color or facial features of this person are because a Malaysian could be Chinese, Indian, Malay, or belong to an indigenous tribe. I think that one of the reasons Malaysians find it important to identify someone’s ethnicity is because each of these ethnicities have such distinct and different cultures and practices.

Much of my strong identification with being Chinese has to do with how the government has chosen to market Malaysia to its citizens. All throughout my schooling life, I was taught to appreciate Malaysia for its racial diversity. A common visual representation of Malaysia found in school textbooks is three people—a Malay, a Chinese, and an Indian—holding hands. There was a lot of emphasis on Malaysia’s san da zhong zu (three big races). The following equation is commonly seen on the Internet:
(Malay) + Chine(s)e + Ind(ian) = Malaysian. I perceive this equation to be a childish and gimmicky marketing tool used in attempts to promote a sense of national unity in the country.

It is also, however, an accurate representation of how Malaysians view their own country. It is a nation comprised of three very distinct ethnic groups—each with a different physical appearance, religion, and customs. Malaysian citizens have, over the course of time, come to realize the harms of such heavy emphasis on racial distinction, seen especially in the government’s race-based policies which favor the ethnic Malays by giving them extra scholarship and landownership opportunities, just to name a few. Realizing the citizens’ growing concern with blatant racism, there have been many governmental efforts to promote racial harmony in recent years. “Racial harmony” has become a buzzword in Malaysia, used by textbooks to inspire Malaysians to ditch the view that there are three races in Malaysia and to simply view oneself as “Malaysian” and nothing else.

However, each of these individual ethnicities are so distinct; each with a culture that is imported from another country—Chinese from China, Indians from India, and Malays from other parts of Southeast Asia such as Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand. Much like the United States, the present-day Malaysia is a compilation of immigrants, with the indigenous people at the sidelines. Malaysia is a conglomerate of cultures and traditions collected from different parts of Asia.

Of course, there are many parts of Malay, Chinese, and Indian culture which have been adapted to suit the diverse population of Malaysia, seen most noticeably in both our
language and our food. These three main cultures have caught on to one another due to proximity, creating a new culture which still has its roots based on Chinese, Indian and Malay culture.

One of the things that Malaysians identify ourselves heavily with is our accent and patterns of speech. I speak Manglish—an English-based Creole which uses Malay, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Hokkien phrases and words. Malaysians typically have one language that they are the strongest in—mine is English as I spoke and read English at home. Malaysia’s national language is Malay. English is a required language in all Malaysian schools. Therefore, all Malaysians who go to school have some command of both English and Malay. Mandarin and Tamil are optional languages taught by certain schools.

Regardless of one’s main language (Mandarin, English, Malay, or Tamil), there are terms and phrases that most, if not all, Malaysians will understand. A lot of times, I don’t even know what language these terms actually are. For example, kepoh is a word that can be used interchangeably as a verb or a noun, describing someone who is being a busybody. Used in a sentence, it goes like this—“Why you so kepoh wan?” or “Eh, let me kepoh a bit.” I honestly can’t tell you if kepoh is a Malay word, or a Chinese word (and if Chinese, which dialect), but I can tell you that most Malaysians that you meet will know exactly what the word means.

I developed a high sense of self-consciousness about my speech when I arrived in the U.S. I made sure that I spoke proper English—English that Americans would understand. I worked hard to shed particles that are a common part of a Malaysian’s
speech like *lah, mah, leh, loh* and to ask “May I please get a ride?” instead of “Can I follow you?” I felt the need to speak the way people in movies and TV spoke. I felt I couldn’t speak as I’ve been speaking all my life.

I feel self-conscious about both my English and my Mandarin because, for the first time in my life, I’m interacting with people who may be considered as the true native speakers of those languages. These are people who actually live in China and speak “real Chinese.” These are people who speak what is commonly accepted as Standardized American English. Whereas, as a Malaysian Chinese, it seems like all the languages that we speak are contaminated. Whenever I speak to a Chinese student here, I feel strangely awkward and self-conscious. Yes, I really am fluent, you have to believe me… although sometimes I simply gape at you and have no idea what you just said. I feel the constant need to prove that I truly am fluent in Mandarin because my reactions to the Chinese students speaking Mandarin seem to paint a different picture. I’m constantly at a loss for Mandarin words and often cave in and use English. It is easier that way. They might laugh at my choice of Mandarin words. We don’t speak any “pure” languages in Malaysia. I have never used the standard *ni hao ma* (How are you?) Chinese greeting because we simply begin our conversations with “Hello.”

“Your English is flawless! You sound like you grew up here,” many people have expressed upon meeting and talking to me for the first time. I usually smile and say thank you politely, feeling a mixture of pride and shame. Pride because mastering the American accent has come so naturally and easily to me, which makes me feel superior. Shame because I’m afraid that this means that I am no longer Malaysian. This means that I’ve
dropped my roots, quickly abandoning what seems to be a Malaysian way of life.

Many people express great interest when I tell them that how they’re hearing me speak is not how I usually speak with my friends and family in Malaysia. “Say something in Manglish for me!” Speaking in Manglish around Americans has proven to be a challenging task, as I have gotten so used to speaking in American English with an American accent here. I struggle to speak Manglish when surrounded by Americans, or even British people. Speaking American English has become second-nature to me now, just as I automatically speak Manglish when I’m around Malaysians.

So what does it mean that I have successfully changed my accent and speech patterns to adapt to Ohio? Adopting a foreign accent happens to the majority of Malaysians who have lived in a Western country for some period of time. We feel the need to shed our Malaysian accent because we fear that it is incomprehensible and stupid-sounding to the non-Malaysian. I’m not entirely sure what the roots of this notion are, but Malaysians and Singaporeans themselves actively encourage this notion that our accents (which I perceive to be identical, but some may disagree) are uncivilized and inferior.

There is a YouTube video titled “The Singaporean White Boy” showing an American boy who spent most of his life in Singapore speaking fluently in Singlish, an English-based Creole spoken in Singapore. He sounds exactly like a native Singaporean, which makes sense, seeing that he has lived in Singapore almost all his life. However, the statements made in the comments section are a showcase of how Singaporeans and Malaysians view their own accents. Here are a few examples: “please! just stick with american english. hotter! he seriously sounded like ah beng talking.. haha..”, “I think that
guy should stuck with talking British/American English. Really so much more charming just saying yup.” Although I cannot be sure of the identities of the people who made these comments, I can make a guess that they are either Malaysian or Singaporean because these sound like the very things that my own friends would say. To us, the American or British accent is cool and hot. The Malaysian accent is just plain dumb.

Another comment on the video says, “What kind of a damn English is Singlish. It has no grammatical sense. Disappointed to see a developed country act like that. Sounds like an illiterates’ language.” This comment reflects how at least one person views the Malaysian and Singaporean accent from the outside. There was also another comment on a YouTube video made by Malaysians stating “WTF Chinese in Malaysian accent sounds so bad!” Malaysians’ distinct accent also bleeds into our Chinese speaking, which some people think sounds dumb, too.

In 2002, Singaporean officials rated the Singaporean movie Talking Cock: The Movie NC-17, disallowing people under the age of 17 to watch it in theaters. The NC-17 rating is usually given to movies with excessive violence, sex, or profanity. However, in this case, Talking Cock: The Movie was given that rating for bad grammar and excessive use of Singlish. The Singaporean government has come to fear that the younger generation will lose the respect of others if they were to speak Singlish exclusively. Singlish is viewed as so offensive and low-class by officials that they wish to protect their children from it.

While a few YouTube comments and an old piece of news are by no means a reliable research method to collect opinion, they support my statement. It shows you a
degree of reason for my self-consciousness about my native accent. Just “being yourself”
does not work in this case. Speaking in Manglish in the U.S. will cause confusion and
perhaps cause others to lose respect for me.

Despite this fear of being disrespected for our native accent, Malaysians tend to
drop our Malaysian accent only when we are in Australia, the United States or the U.K. I
have never heard anyone who studied abroad in Russia or India come back with a
Russian or Indian accent. This probably has to do with the fact that British and American
English are widely accepted as Standardized English, and they are the ones who “own”
the language (in a very loose sense). At the same time, it is also a reflection of the respect
of American and British culture that we have. Given that I change my Malaysian accent
so quickly and drop it immediately to avoid embarrassment, it seems foolish to consider
it an important part of my identity.

The millennial generation of Malaysians has definitely grown to respect and love
our “Malaysian-ness.” We often talk about Malaysia as having a unique culture as it is a
fusion of Malay, Indian, and Chinese cultures. Though sometimes I can’t help but feel
that using the word “fusion” to describe Malaysia carries a rather idealistic perspective
because, in actual fact, the typical Malaysian lives a life quite isolated from races that are
outside their own. I have lived in a Muslim country for 18 years of my life but I do not
have a single Muslim friend. I am the weakest in my national language, Malay. All of my
closest friends are Chinese. However, I do not feel like a “pure” Chinese in any way
because I have never been to China. I can’t help but feel that my identity as a Malaysian
is a fragmented one: I’m not completely Chinese, yet I sometimes feel hesitant to identify
myself as a Malaysian, because I occasionally feel our so-called unique culture is simply a mish-mash of everything, strange to the outsider.

As I talk at length about how Malaysian culture is so unique and different, I can’t help but feel I might be thinking a little too highly of ourselves. How many more cultures out there remain unheard of and unwritten of like Malaysia’s? American and British culture in the media seem like the only normal thing to me. How interested am I in other cultures like Russian or Saudi, simply to name a couple?

I can only recall two instances in which we cared about local Malaysian and Singaporean life portrayed on TV: Kopitiam and Phua Chu Kang. The former is about life in a kopitiam, which is a term for traditional coffee shops in Southeast Asia. The latter is about a Singaporean construction worker and his family. I spent the rest of my childhood and teenage years watching Kim Possible, Lizzie McGuire, All That, and Rugrats. I became very well-acquainted with many parts of American teenager culture such as proms, Halloween parties, jocks in school, year-book pictures, lockers in school hallways—none of which exists in Malaysia. When I first arrived in the U.S., all I could think was, “This is exactly how it is on TV!” I often ask my American friends, “Is American high school really like how the mainstream media portray it to be? Like Mean Girls, Lizzie McGuire, High School Musical? Are the cheerleaders the cool kids and are they really mean? Do nerdy kids really get their faces slammed in their lockers?”

The TV series that I’ve watched either in the past or am currently watching—Gilmore Girls, Criminal Minds, Mad Men, Lost, Friends, How I Met Your Mother—are one hundred percent and overwhelmingly American. Sure, local Malaysian productions
exist, and we pay some attention to them, but only a little. Our mainstream TV, music and movies still come from the U.S. The politics behind the dominance of the Hollywood entertainment industry is not something I’m interested in. What I’m interested in is why I spend so much of my time watching another people rather than my own. I know that I am not alone. I am sure that there are many artists and writers in the rest of the world who have wrangled with this issue extensively, where they realize that their own culture is under-appreciated. Sometimes I feel like I can only think of the ways in which my life is “American,” and it closes in on me and blocks out the diverse range of influences that I have had in my life. Perhaps I give the U.S. too much credit.

Looking back to my teenage years, my preoccupation with American life saddens me a little. I wonder why Malaysians spend so much of their time watching and modeling Western culture. I feel upset that we enjoyed watching life in a country more than 9,000 miles away rather than the one that we actually felt and experienced.

Today, I still feel I have to work hard on making Malaysian news important and significant. I used to think that being an international student automatically made me a cool and interesting person in this country. When I arrived here at the age of 19, I strode around the campus feeling I was inherently important because “I’m not from here.” I’m interesting because I’m different. People are going to be interested in me and my life because I grew up speaking three languages, ate delicious fresh tropical fruit and spent Christmas caroling outdoors in shorts and a T-shirt.

When the other 4,000 freshmen arrived on campus a week after I did, I felt myself shrinking into insignificance. No one gives a damn that I’m not from here. I am in the
United States of America now, so I need to be American. Instead of being admired and being cool, I felt I was simply the weird exchange student who no one knew how to react to. I encountered this apathy mostly in class. I would casually drop lines like “Oh, I didn’t grow up here,” or “I’m not American!” hoping to spark some questions about where I’m from because it is so incredibly important to me for people to know that I’m not American. “Not American” is a fundamental part of who I am in America. It is important because it helps someone understand me better. It reminds people that I can’t just go home for the weekend; that it can be very confusing to assimilate with a foreign culture so easily; that studying abroad for an extended period of time is a strange, strange experience.

For some reason, I started feeling almost ashamed of my foreignness. This shame is perhaps due to the lack of response that I’ve gotten from my classmates when they hear that I’m an international student. Reality never matched my expectations. Instead of getting the special treatment that I thought I deserved, I felt that many faked their interest in Malaysia’s location and never asked more than that. I started questioning how I viewed myself as an international student. What if Americans think that I have no business being in their country? Perhaps my foreignness is not as interesting or as unique as I thought it was. I started to feel an expectation for me to fit in and to intuitively understand how American life works.

I often felt I was behind, especially during my freshman year. We were constantly given talks on how to handle our first year of college. With every talk that encouraged us to not go home every weekend and that pointed out the differences between American
high school and college, my heart ached as I wanted so badly to yell, “I’m going through SO MUCH MORE than this,” hoping that someone would notice how lonely I truly felt in my first month in the U.S. The idea that many of my classmates were a mere 20 – 60 minute to drive away from home made my heart sink. Their friends and community are a short drive away? And me, what about me? I’m 30 hours and $1,300 away. I’ve felt like a fool many times. I’ve felt like an invader in the U.S. many times, absorbing resources that don’t belong to me.

There’s a part of me that fears that one day someone will yell at me “Go back where you came from!” There’s a part of me that feels I’m unwelcome in this country—not because I’ve ever been mistreated—but simply because I’m hyper aware that I’m a foreigner. I’m on a limited student visa. Once it expires, my time in the U.S. is up. Sometimes I hear my visa whispering to me, “You don’t belong here. Go home.” This fear is like a person who hangs out in the back of my mind, silently reading a magazine. It’s not intrusive, but it’s definitely present. I feel the pressure of its weight pressing against my brain.

I feel at home most of the time here in the U.S., as I no longer fumble with coins, drive on the right side without thinking twice, and breeze through self-checkout confidently. Like any person who has become familiar with their surroundings, I’ve come far in my three-and-a-half years here. My first two months in the U.S. were really rough. The excitement of leaving Malaysia and finally studying abroad—that thing that I had watched my sister, the boys I liked, and all the cool kids do—finally becoming a physical reality… all that must have blocked out what studying abroad actually entailed. It meant
leaving the comforts of the familiar and coming to a new place all alone, building a new community from scratch because the only acquaintance that I had in the U.S. was at least 30 minutes away from Kent.

During lunchtime of my first day of classes my freshman year, I found myself desperately texting the only two friends that I had made so far, not knowing what to do if I couldn’t find anyone to eat with. As the week progressed, it hit me that this would be an everyday ordeal—finding someone to eat with. As I brought a basket of chicken fingers back to my dorm room one day, not wanting to eat alone in public, I realized that having dinner with my parents is no longer a default. In fact, I wouldn’t be eating dinner with my parents for a very long time. Meal times were really difficult during my first semester as a freshman as they highlighted how truly alone I was.

In my entire time in Malaysia, I almost never ate alone. There was always my family, my high school friends, or my church friends to eat with. Eating with other people was something that I had done my entire life. The very idea of eating alone was so foreign to me. My meal times were always spent with people, no matter where I was or what time it was, with the exception of breakfast at 5:30 a.m. during my high school days. When I was first hit by the reality of eating meals alone during freshman year, I was afraid that there was something wrong with me and that I lacked social skills because I had to eat alone.

Sundays were especially difficult. A couple months into freshman year, things were beginning to feel normal as I had started to develop a routine during the weekdays and had come to terms with the fact that I would be eating many meals alone from now
on. Yet, whenever Sunday hit, post-church afternoon would weave out a web of depression that I frequently got stuck in. I would be dropped off at my dorm around 12:30 p.m., and then I would sit on my dorm bed, not knowing what to do next.

My Sunday afternoons were activity-filled all my life. Church started at 9:00 a.m. My friends and I would arrive 20 minutes before that for breakfast at Tiam Fatt, the coffee shop a thirty-second walk from my church. After the church service, we had a youth group Bible study. Then, we would return to Tiam Fatt for lunch together. I would go home for an afternoon nap and wake up to a text reminding me that there would be captain ball, a team sport commonly played within the Malaysian Christian circle using a volleyball, at 5 p.m. at H field. Sometimes I would go out for dinner with my youth group after captain ball; other times, I would go out for dinner with my parents. After dinner, I would shower, scramble to finish my homework, and then go straight to bed.

My Sundays in the U.S. ended silently with church and, afterwards, everyone would go home to have lunch with their own families, leaving me alone at meal time again. Every time I shut my single-room door behind me, I felt I was shutting myself off from the rest of the world, that I didn’t belong anywhere but in my own head. The silence of Sundays and the stillness of the campus made me wonder whether there was still life out there or I had been abandoned to be on my own.

My difficulties in adapting during my first few months in the U.S. had nothing to do with American culture. It had to do with my lack of a stable community, the uncertainty of finding friends, the lack of safe space as I experienced my life alone day by day, watching others experience theirs with meal-time buddies and someone to go out
with on weekends. When I began to meet people that I knew would be my friends, people who thought like me and acted in the same rhythm as me, I started to feel a sense of comfort from knowing that I was capable of finding life outside of the one that I’ve had for the previous 19 years.

Living in this country has made it especially easy for me to think that the world is overwhelmingly American because it is my world now. Nonetheless, I’m aware that thoughts like these are based on gross generalizations. So what if the rest of the world pays attention to U.S. media? We still have our individual meaningful lives, just as I did during my whole life spent in Malaysia. Realizing that Adeline had signed “BFF” to both Susan and me in elementary school crushed my heart; finding out that Peter liked Yvonne was really upsetting; drama club and youth group was my world; and finding friends in Methodist College mattered more than anything else during the most difficult time of my life so far. All these things were my life. They were emotional, and they mattered. It did not matter to me at all what kids did in Ohio. The change of seasons barely mattered. It’s hot and humid, and that’s it. It’s all there is, and the arrival of fall pumpkins and apple cider was merely something I watched on TV, understood that it was something that happened thousands of miles away—far from my reality.

In my last two years of high school, I watched my sister and her peers leave Malaysia to study abroad. At that point, going abroad to live seemed like something so distant and so absurd. In my mind, it was really cool, but also really scary. The thought of their living in a Western country was really exciting—they would make foreign friends, eat foreign food, and live a foreign life—one that seemed so cool. Since arriving
here, I have actively kept count of the time that I have been in the U.S. I started off by counting in weeks. When weeks became hard to keep track of, then I started counting in months. Eventually I simply switched over to keeping track in years, which I still do today. I’ve been here three and a half years—not three, not four—it’s three and a half.

Somehow, it all seems significant. It’s as if the length of time that I’ve spent here justifies my current life—how I act and how I live today. I’ve been in the U.S. for X amount of time, so it’s acceptable that I’m acting this much American and that much Malaysian.

The idea of living abroad that was once so distant and so unreachable is my reality now. Sometimes I still find it a little surreal realizing that I’m experiencing fall and winter first-hand. This—is all a reality? It is tangible, and I can feel the itchiness of the hay against my butt on a hayride and my toes cold with numbness in the winter. Snow glitters. The snow on roads turns slushy. American TV never showed me that. Sometimes I stop midway on the sidewalk and simply take in a large breath of winter air. Hands shoved in my coat pocket and my cheeks pink from the cold. America has finally become my reality; the whole study abroad experience that I’ve been looking forward to all my teenage life is here—it is now, and sometimes it all just seems too strangely normal to me.
HOME AGAIN

When my Vietnamese friend, pursuing his Bachelor’s degree here at Kent State, told me that he is determined to stay in the United States forever, I was a little surprised. How could he say something like that with so much certainty? How can he just leave his home and not even turn back to take a glance? Does he wonder, even for just a moment, whether leaving his home was a wrong choice? The determination he has to leave his home sounds ungrateful and almost cruel to me. It’s your home country, how could you just pack up your bags with no hesitation? It surprised me because, in my entire time here, I always hesitate to say that I’m going to stay in the U.S. for good. For one, my future is uncertain, just like many fresh college graduates’. Secondly, it would imply that I have left Malaysia—where much of my heart still is—for good.

I soon came to believe that if someone leaves their home country without a second thought, their home country must not mean much to them at all. My friend’s life in Vietnam was a challenging one, with financial uncertainty and a poor standard of living. He probably doesn’t feel he owes his country anything because it did not provide him the opportunities to gain the standard of living that he wanted. His determination to walk away and seek a better life in a foreign land is understandable.

There seems to be a strong conviction in the Malaysian Christian circle to remain in the country rather than flee from the corruption of the government and seek greener pastures abroad. However, this sentiment has its roots primarily in the younger Malaysian generation. My parents have absolutely no qualms about leaving the country. In fact, they
have always expressed a desire to move to a Western country such as the U.S. or the U.K. They believe that those countries will provide them a higher standard of living—better food, better treatment of the elderly, and more advanced technology. They, too, like my Vietnamese friend, feel no guilt in leaving the country. Although my parents have lived mostly comfortable lives in Malaysia, they are confident that life in the West will always be superior. You can drink water straight from the tap, there are higher standards of sanitation here, and everything is more convenient here.

Leaving Malaysia, my homeland, despite the low levels of public safety, the racism against everyone but the Malays, and the corruption of those in political power, is somewhat frowned upon within my generation of Christians. We have been raised to be a generation of do-ers and make-a-changers. One of the primary reasons there’s been advocacy to remain in Malaysia is part of the Christian mission to evangelize. If all the Christians leave the country, then Malaysia will be left to thrive as a Muslim nation. If the local Christians were to leave Malaysia, the Great Commission of spreading the word about Jesus’ resurrection would not be carried out at home.

There is typically some sense of guilt in those who choose to establish permanent life in a foreign country. The race-based policies of Malaysia put the non-Malays at a severe disadvantage in terms of opportunities for education and jobs. Many have left the country due to a lack of tolerance for such inequalities and a desire for better opportunities for their next generation. Those who emigrate to a different country usually do so with some hesitance, because their hearts are still tied to the country to some extent, but they end up choosing to do what’s ultimately best for them and their family.
“Going home” has become something that Malaysians do with hope. It means that they are dealing with or putting up with the unfair policies of Malaysia in hopes of making a change in the country, in hopes of Malaysia one day being a country of freedom and equality. That is as far as our patriotism goes within the Malaysian Chinese circle. None of it stems from actual pride in Malaysia as a country. Many of us are often embarrassed and ashamed of the actions of the Malaysian Government. Many of us are convinced that the government is corrupt, selfish, and has little common sense. They run the country in a manner that will benefit the Malay population most, with little concern for the rest of the country.

The day of I left for the United States in 2010, I promised my church, “I will come back.” At that point, I was already aware of the high likelihood of my staying in the U.S. permanently. I knew that there were pretty high chances of my meeting an American boy and settling down in the U.S. I knew that there would be more lucrative career opportunities in the U.S. given my interest in creative writing. I knew that it would be really easy to establish a permanent life in the U.S. because I’ve watched many previous generations of Malaysians leave to study abroad who have never looked back.

I still made myself say it in front of the entire congregation of my church (which was only about 50 people) because I wanted it to be true. I wanted to be the loyal citizen who would return home with all the knowledge that I’ve learned from being abroad and perhaps make a change. I wanted to be selfless, a person who cares more about her country than herself—although I have never been an activist, and I find myself supporting my country mostly through lip service. I did not want to abandon my parents
in Malaysia while I live a much better life in a developed country. So I told myself and my church, “I will come back.”

In recent discussions about my post-graduation plans with my friend April, she pointed out that the only reasons I ever long to go home are sentimental. It’s hard for me to admit, but there is truth in that statement. Life in the U.S. for me has been easy and comfortable. I have figured out at least some of the nuts and bolts of being an adult here—the cheapest way to grocery shop, how to pay bills and look for an apartment, how to do the little banking that I need to with the little money that I have. There are so many things that I still don’t know how to do, of course, like buying a car, getting a job, being in a job, all those scary adult things, yet I feel at ease because I know I can figure it out, just as I figured out American college life more than three years ago. I can figure this out because I trust the system and the people here. People here are more honest and more helpful.

I feel a sense of uncertainty about figuring out how to function as an adult in Malaysia. I first experienced living independently in the U.S., not Malaysia. In fact, imagining living in Malaysia for the rest of my life is difficult. I’ve been away from Malaysia for three and a half years now—yet it feels like an eternity. I have never been independent or self-sufficient—an adult—in Malaysia before. I have only been a child, a teenager, an almost-adult, but never an adult.

Sometimes, I look at pictures of my friends in Malaysia on Facebook and realize that they are hanging out with their same high school friends, going out to the same malls, and eating the same food that I used to when I was home. I think about how our
lives used to be the same, but they are so vastly different now. It is so easy to forget that life exists outside of me. Did I expect Malaysia to simply remain unchanged once I left it? Life in Malaysia seems so distant to me now. Sure, I still pay attention to major events in my home country, but the small little things—like new restaurants opening, old theme parks being torn down, new malls being built—these are all so inconsequential to me now. They don’t matter—what matters more is the new musical Kent State is putting on, the new pizza place on campus, and the new courses that the English department is offering.

Perhaps I feel all this because it is easier to think in terms of our present. It’s as if life as I know it now is the only life that exists. So life in Kent, life in the U.S., life with Jonathan, life with four seasons, seems like the only life that exists now, the only life that matters now. Yes, I still long for home, but I only long for what home used to be, not what home actually is now.

In the months leading up to summer break 2012, I constantly felt overcome with excitement at the thought of going home for the first time in two years. I would be able to eat *nasi lemak*, Malaysia’s national dish of fragrant rice cooked in coconut milk, every day. I would be able to see my high school friends and go for karaoke again. I would *finally* be home again. When I was actually back in Malaysia, however, everything turned out to be far less fun and exciting than I had imagined it to be.

Sure, *Gombak laksa*, my family’s favorite curry noodles store, was still there; my parents were there; *Red Box*, my favorite karaoke center, was still there. But the people who made home *home*, the precise dynamic and rhythm to which my community jived
was no longer there. It has been broken into a million pieces and scattered across the globe. That summer, I did not find what I was looking for, and I realized that I could never find it again.

The excitement of being in Malaysia wore down quickly after a week—and then life resumed as it was two years ago. I spent many days that summer lying on my bed in the air-conditioned room feeling restless because I did not have a schedule to follow. I read through my old journals, played stupid games on my mother’s iPad while lying on the cold floor, and brought out old Lego sets to entertain myself. I continued to argue with my mother, to complain about the hot and humid weather, to get bored of the food that I had yearned for so much during my time abroad, and to simply live a normal, uneventful life. In this case, distance had definitely made the heart grow fonder. When there was no more distance between Malaysia and me, my fondness for the country quickly wore out. I got annoyed with how food went bad so much more quickly in tropical weather, how there were lizards and cockroaches all around my kitchen, how grocery shopping was so much less convenient, how rude and inconsiderate the drivers were, and how ridiculously expensive the cost of living was.

The summer of 2012, I missed so many things about the U.S., so many things about Kent, Ohio. I yearned to be back at Pleasant Hill Outdoor Camp, spending long summer nights by wood fires roasting marshmallows and dipping my feet in lake water while watching the sunset at 10 p.m. I missed the freedom of messing up my own house, making my own dinners, and not having to constantly report my whereabouts to my parents. That summer, I realized that I was no longer Joyce the teenager. I had slowly
become Joyce the adult in my two years away from Malaysia, and it felt like Malaysia did not catch on to that. In some senses, Malaysia indeed remained as unchanged as I had thought it would during the time that I was away. Malaysia reminded me only of my youth and my naivety. I was once again Joyce the teenager who is not allowed to drive in the city alone, Joyce the teenager who hangs out in shopping malls with her friends, and Joyce who fights with her parents too much. It was as if I were fresh out of high school again—as if those two years in the U.S. had simply vanished.

I flew off to the U.S. at the end of that summer feeling only slightly sentimental, but eager to get back to cleaner restaurants, insect-free houses, and weather that didn’t make me sweat like a pig. More than that, I was also flying back to my community in Kent. Two years away from Malaysia stretched my Malaysian community thin, and all I had left was to hang out with high school friends to catch up on our lives in the time that had passed. After lunch together, we would simply walk away in different directions. They would never understand my life in the U.S.; I would never truly understand their lives in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Malaysia has simply become our meeting point—our place to reminisce about the times we fought over boys, the times we cried in drama club, and the times we went for karaoke—all in the past, with nothing really left to hold on to in the present.

*Places* seem to hold such special meaning in our hearts. Our high school, the street that we walked on everyday of our teenage lives, the house we spent much of our childhood in… These places remind us of the people who made us who we are today. Yet, without these people, these places are simply empty shells that remind us that our
lives are no longer what they used to be. Sometimes I am grateful that my life is no longer what it used to be; sometimes I wish my life were still what it was.

My desire to return to Malaysia is, in fact, my desire to look for these places, these moments that used to exist but no longer do. It is my desire to show my boyfriend and the friends I’ve found here in Kent what I had in Malaysia. It is my desire, once again, to bring my two worlds, my Malaysian and my American life, together, to gel, to move to the same rhythm so that I can finally bring my identities together, to stitch up these fragments that seem to have been bred and born in completely separate labs but have, by some strange fortune, been brought together as one.

The United States and Malaysia cannot physically be one, and so I want to bring my friends and family from one end of the globe to another and point to a street, a classroom, a restaurant that is significant to me, an epiphany, a moment of joy—wanting them, too, to see what I saw and experience what I experienced. But what can bringing an important friend to an important place achieve? A street will be a street, a high school will be a high school, a restaurant will be a restaurant—all these things, wrought of the life that fills it, stand alone with no meaning. Home is no longer my only home. When I go home to Malaysia, I’m also leaving home in Kent, Ohio. Home starts to unfold into a kaleidoscope of complexities that is no longer bound by time and space but simply follows wherever my heart goes.


