

Reflections on my culture shock experiences

You would think that I'd have overcome culture shock after moving more than a dozen times in my life. Ironically, coming to Holland has been the biggest and longest culture shock I've ever experienced. Even after four years, I still have not mastered the language comfortably enough to engage in active conversation. As I read anthropologist Kalvero Oberg's writings on "culture shock," I'm aghast that I have not reached "recovery" phase yet.

Born in Brunei of Chinese parents, I moved to Taiwan as a toddler where my sister and brother soon followed. That first relocation by itself would qualify me as a Third Culture Kid (TCK) or global nomad, someone who (as a child) has spent a significant period of time in one or more culture(s) other than his or her own, thus integrating elements of those cultures and their own birth culture, into a third culture.

When I was 7, my family relocated to the island of Okinawa where I was to spend the next 11 years attending American schools, living in an international neighbourhood of translators and editors, and returning to Taiwan every other summer to refresh my Chinese heritage. The culture shock of not speaking English or Japanese was short-lived. By the time I turned 16, I was actively interacting in three cultures: speaking Mandarin Chinese at home and observing all the Chinese rituals with my family, speaking English like an American, and playing the keyboards in an Okinawan rock band.

Growing up on an American air base did not prepare me for the lengthy culture shock at a university in the USA. In my freshman year, I wrote an article for the campus newspaper called "Beautiful People," a description I gave to my fellow classmates who came from privileged families. I wrote of how I tried but couldn't fit in. I didn't have the right clothes or shoes. I didn't have their athletic looks or sports cars. Although I sounded American and people treated me as though I were an American-born Chinese (ABC), I did not understand their slang or way of asking "how are you," without expecting a reply. I had to struggle to pass what used to be my best subjects. Music and food were the only comfort I had, and I gained 20 pounds within a few months on

a diet of pizza and ice cream. Needless to say, I preferred to hide in sub-basement libraries and piano rooms rather than show my face at sorority parties.

What brought me out of that miserable first year at university was my involvement with activities at the International House, where foreigners congregated with those Americans truly interested in people from other countries. These were also the Americans who wanted to study or live abroad. And so I decided that I, too, would study abroad. Surprisingly I fitted in very well in Montreal where I spent my third year and Oxford that subsequent summer. Between the two schools, I backpacked through Europe and fell in love with London.

I tried to find reasons to move to London. First I went to study. Then I went to work. Each time I got sent away, I wanted to return again and again. What attracted me to London was the diversity of cultures: it's a city bursting with foreigners and foreign accents. English was everybody's second language as it seemed in St John's Wood where I lived for several years. Whenever there is a majority, I would feel like a minority. When the majority is full of minorities, that's when the diversity is the highest and I feel the most comfortable. No wonder I felt like an illegal immigrant when I uprooted from London to Bussum in 2004.

For me, culture shock is not just about moving from one country to another. It is everything about transitions: moving from one culture or situation to another. It could be the shift from being a full-time university student to a full-time salaried employee, from being single to being married, from working for someone to working for oneself, from moderating energy discussion panels in Houston to giving concerts in remote Dutch villages. It all takes getting used to, just like the weather.

Anne Ku, Utrecht, 2 June 2008

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Anne's opera "Culture Shock!" premieres 2 June 2008 in Utrecht