

Cultural Chameleon

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For me, being late to school meant chasing down taxis at 7:15 am and hurriedly telling the driver, in broken Cantonese, to please hurry. A day of shopping meant searching the Hong Kong market streets for a pair of shoes larger than a size 7 and bargaining for thirty minutes with the shopkeeper to bring the price down to fewer than ten dollars. Lunch with a friend was being the only white girl in a small noodle house tainted by the smell of the ducks and chickens hanging in the window, my voice drowned out by music blaring through Cantonese speakers. Sometime in the five years I had lived in Hong Kong, between speaking a little Cantonese and knowing the downtown streets like the back of my hand, I was promoted from my status as a typical American blonde to a true Hong Kong kid. When I moved away the summer after my sophomore year in high school, I was leaving home and going somewhere completely foreign.

Texas.

I will always remember the first day of public school. My mom dropped me off at the front of the school, as kids sped by us in their huge SUVs to viciously snag a parking space. Inside, I was met with a swarm of Abercrombie-clad blondes and brunettes in every hall and at every corner. My thoughts were drowned out by singing of the latest songs on the radio, gossip, and laughter. Seeing as these were people who spoke the same native language as me, who looked the same and sounded the same, you

would think that I would finally feel at home and relieved. But I had never felt so foreign in my life.

This American culture that my parents called their own did not at all feel like something that was mine. I was confused by the fact that I felt more at home and at ease in a culture where I stuck out as blatantly different than in one where I blended in completely. It was this challenge and these feelings that established me as what is commonly referred to as one of the world's "Third Culture Kids." In their book so titled, David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken describe in detail the concept of what it means to grow up in a culture other than your own native culture, and the challenges and emotions that are often met. My mom had given me a copy of this book a couple of days after that horrific first day, and I found myself intrigued by the challenges it described. It surprised me that there was actually a name for my experience, and that the descriptions in the book matched exactly what I was experiencing at that particular moment in time.

Pollock and Van Reken define a Third Culture Kid (TCK) as a person who has spent a significant part of [his or her] developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership to any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background.

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Children of businessmen, "military brats," and study abroad students all fit this profile, and upon return to their home country, are confronted by both the benefits and

challenges wrought by their experience. They find themselves deeply affected by “this weaving together of [their] two dominant realities” (78).

I could strongly relate to the benefits and challenges described by Pollock and Van Reken, including an expanded worldview met by confused loyalties, a three-dimensional take on the world met by a painful view of reality, cross-cultural enrichment met by ignorance of the home culture, adaptability met by a desperate attempt to define differences between cultures, and knowledge of the “outside world” accompanied by sheer arrogance.

Although TCKs often benefit from the expanded worldview they gain from spending time in a foreign country, they also simultaneously gain a set of confused loyalties. I found that because of my experience attending an international school in Hong Kong, I encountered a huge blend of people from various backgrounds. My best friend was Dutch South African, and would often talk about her family being evacuated due to rioting rebels. A Chilean classmate would take an extra month off school during winter to go home for her summer. I became accustomed to the religious practices of my Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist friends. While in context it seemed normal, I look back now and realize how living in such an international setting made me more open-minded and perceptive not only to other cultures, but to the various beliefs and philosophies people of my own culture possess. Harboring this open-mindedness also brought on a strange sense of confusion.

As I was one of few Americans at my international school, my habits and subconscious rituals, accent, and appearance labeled me as an American to my peers. Wearing this label also came with a responsibility. Every time my president was

criticized, or some catastrophic event occurred in the US, I always felt obligated to explain or defend my country, regardless of whether I really believed or supported the circumstances. I felt like it was my responsibility to educate people as to why my country did something this way, or to justify our actions. When the US would involve itself in the conflict of another country, I would often find myself in heated debate as to why my country was doing what it was doing. While personally I didn't always advocate or support US actions, I felt I had to at least force these people who were criticizing the US to entertain another possibility, another reason that led to such actions. I felt as though their criticisms of Bill Clinton or George Bush were criticisms of me. However, when I moved to Texas, my position was quite different. I didn't feel at all American, and I felt instead a representative of the perspectives of the rest of the world. I was entirely offended when someone assumed that Hong Kong was part of Japan, or asked me if I rode in a rickshaw to school. It was so frustrating—I felt like I was an American in China, yet Chinese in America. Pollock and Reken describe this feeling as a “confusion of loyalty” that many TCKs experience, and that “can make them unwelcome citizens in their own countries” (83). I think in my frustration with Texas, I failed to realize that here I was preaching about the rest of the world's perspectives and how Americans need to be more open-minded, yet was at the same time being completely closed-minded towards my own country. It was hard trying to assimilate back into my own culture, and frustrating to deal with my classmates' ignorance of the world. Yet over time I realized how hypocritical and unsympathetic I was being, and how I had alienated myself and made it even more difficult to add onto and grow from my experience. Once I became more aware of how I was being perceived by others, I made an effort to be more

understanding, receptive, and patient to the people of the culture I call my own.

Aside from confronting a quality of acceptance and a quality of frustration, TCKs also develop a different kind of perspective on the world. In addition to witnessing cultural differences, TCKs see the world in a way that “is impossible to do through reading books, seeing movies or watching nightly newscasts” (83). Because of the things TCKs experience—sights, smells and, feelings in regard to situations they are put in—watching the news or a movie can bring back these senses in the form of a “3-D panoramic picture show” (84). Daily news topics become more real and visually stimulating to TCKs than to their non-TCK peers. This same ability also brings on a more painful sense of reality. Pollock and Reken describe a painful reality that a TCK may experience in watching the news: because of his or her “heightened senses,” a TCK realizes that behind the screen are real, living, breathing people. Watching the news can often seem redundant to people who have lived in their native country their entire lives. The pictures of suffering Middle Eastern women have recently been pervasive throughout the news and magazines. Their abundance has caused many viewers to become desensitized to their reality. To someone who has never been to the Middle East, these faces are often surreal, and exist as though they are a removed reality. However, a TCK who has lived in the Middle East sees a real woman, in real pain, in a place that is familiar. The women they see on the flat screen resemble the women they saw in everyday life, in shops and markets. They resemble the faces of their maids, a friend, or a waitress from their favorite restaurant. To them, bombs are more real than scenes in a movie, and are more meaningful than the statistics run off on the nightly news (85).

While TCKs gain knowledge and understanding of the various cultures outside theirs, they are often found to have a profound ignorance towards their native culture. I could give an in-depth breakdown on the history of politics and government in China; however, I could not begin to speak with any shred of knowledge in regard to US politics. I remember one particular experience when I had first moved to Texas, and was having dinner with a few friends. One girl was also a TCK and had lived in Shanghai for a number of years, and the other two girls were Texas born and bred. My Shanghai friend and I were joking around about how one of the Texas girls thought the capital of China was Hong Kong. That was crazy to me that someone could not know the capital of the most heavily populated country in the world, not to mention that China reigns as a world power. But then the girls turned around and asked me if I knew the capital of Texas, and in all honesty, I couldn't say. At the time it seemed to me inconsequential information, as Texas represents only a small fraction of the US, and was far less relevant than a major country's capital. But it was, nonetheless, the state I was living in, and my ignorance towards my own country became obvious (87).

It was at this point, or soon after, that I realized that it wasn't that America was the only ignorant place in the whole world and everybody else was ever-knowing and completely understanding. I realized that ignorance exists in every culture, but manifests itself in different ways. I finally saw that people know mostly only what is relevant to their own lives, and the fact that I was lucky enough to be a part of multiple cultures has given me a perspective and understanding that is rare. This understanding led me to another, perhaps more important realization: the people I meet throughout my life can benefit from my experience, and as a TCK it is my responsibility to share my stories.

Moving between various cultures, and gaining an understanding from each, leads to another main issue Pollock and Reken address, the TCK sense of cultural identity. They divide cultural identity into four main categories: foreigner, mirror, adopted, and hidden immigrant (52). The descriptions of the foreigner and the hidden immigrant I found especially relevant to the lifestyles I have been a part of. In Hong Kong, I exhibited the characteristics of a foreigner: I looked different, and I thought differently (in a cultural sense). Yet when I moved back to the US, I became a hidden immigrant; I looked the same, yet had completely different worldviews. Pollock and Reken discuss the complexity hidden immigrants face as foreigners in another culture, and as foreigners in a different sense in their own when they are confronted with blending in and trying to set themselves apart (94-95).

According to Pollock and Reken, foreigners feel a sense of obligation to blend in and become a part of their new culture. I experienced this when I became a part of the international subculture of Hong Kong. Having been strongly influenced during Hong Kong's time as a British colony, most English writing and speaking found there is British. Not really intending to, I developed a British accent and began referring to trash as "rubbish," erasers as "rubbers," lines as "queues," and so on. Because of my swift change of environments, I had become what Pollock and Reken like to call a "cultural chameleon," and blended into my surroundings (95). While this developed my adaptability to change, it created a challenge for me coming back to my home culture. When I came back to the states, like many TCKs, everyone seemed to me to be the same. Everyone wore this, everyone listened to that, and everyone wanted to drive this car and watch that TV show. I felt that this greatly contradicted the eclectic lifestyle I was

accustomed to, and the fact that I looked and pretty much talked like these people who seemed so mundane to me was all the more frustrating and upsetting. I felt like I had to stand out, and prove to everyone that I was different and that I wasn't like them. Pollock and Reken define these types of feelings as an "anti-identity": an inadvertent attempt by "hidden immigrants" to preserve what they view as their "true identity" (97). I look back now and see that I was trying so hard to be different that I wasn't really preserving who I really was. Trying so desperately to separate myself led to only more frustration with trying to come to terms with my cultural identity—American, Chinese, International, or some strange combination of the three. I abandoned my "anti-identity" when I finally came to terms with the fact that I wasn't just one, I was all three.

Behind the desire to acquire an "anti-identity" lies a great, often unrealized characteristic of TCKs that often leads to frustration and angst: their arrogance. Pollock reflects, "it seems the very awareness which helps TCKs view a situation from multiple perspectives can also make TCKs impatient or arrogant with others who only see things from their own perspective—particularly people from their own culture" (103). This arrogance occurs unknowingly for a number of reasons, most importantly that often TCKs don't realize the value of their experience, and how much it has actually changed their perspective. TCKs often relate better to those with similar backgrounds—and all too often get together and talk about the ignorance of their native culture. One of my closest friends, for example, had just moved to Texas from Cairo for her senior year in high school. Not having wanted to leave Egypt, her bitterness towards Texas was especially strong. We would talk a lot about how difficult it was to come back "home," and the frustration in trying to be patient with ignorance was often overwhelming. She was often

asked if she rode camels to school, or had to wear traditional Muslim attire. These questions seemed a nuisance, as she expected everyone to be as knowledgeable about the rest of the world as she was. Ironically, my friend, like many other TCKs, unknowingly was doing the exact thing she hated having done unto her: “equating ignorance with stupidity” (104). I feel as though my arrogance was quite strong initially, but as I came to understand American culture and develop patience with people who came from different backgrounds, I became more aware of how I was acting, and almost disgusted that I had acted so condescendingly.

I can vividly remember the day we left Hong Kong. I had to force myself to choke on the resentment I had towards my parents for making me leave—to go to Texas, of all places. I couldn’t believe they would do this to me. The resentment lasted for several months afterward—through my horrific first day in American public high school, through the “do you speak Japanese”’s, and most especially through my insatiable desire to go “home.” Yet now that I have graduated and can look back on my moving experience with a little more maturity than I had going in, I can confidently say that leaving for Texas when we did was the best thing my parents ever did for me. While I hated it at the time and thought that the rest of my life could never measure up to my five years in Hong Kong, and feared that I would lose my international status, I find myself more international and understanding now than I ever was before. My uncomfortable confrontation with confused loyalties, painful views of reality, and ignorance towards my home culture challenged me to become a more adaptable and wiser person. My success in dealing with these challenges has made me no less of a TCK than I was before I moved to

Texas, but has become another part of me. International. Third culture kid. Chinese. And now I can finally say, American.

Works Cited

Pollock, David C., and Ruth E. Van Reken. *Third Culture Kids*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2001.

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