

United Kingdom

Life at Swansea University

To study overseas has been a dream of mine since I was a junior in high school. Back then I did not know where I wanted to go or what I wanted to study. I just knew that I wanted to go! Now that my dream has come true, I am happy I am here.

Before I start writing about my experience here, let me explain where I am. I am studying in Swansea, Wales, in the United Kingdom. Contrary to what many Americans believe, Wales is NOT a part of England, but it IS part of Great Britain, which consists of Wales, England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. It gets so tiresome that I sometimes found myself not correcting people when they say "England." Wales has its own distinct culture, people, history, and accent (and language). The Welsh are proud of their heritage. One more thing: NEVER call a Welsh person English.

When I told my Asian American friends that I was going to the U.K. to study, they asked: "Why?" I told them how it would be an excellent opportunity for me to experience another country and to meet new people, but what was on their minds was more of a racial issue. I had not thought of this prior to their mentioning it. Because San Francisco has a large Asian American population, they wanted to know how I would cope with not being around many Asians. Honestly, I did not know how to respond. I told them that I would "cross that bridge when I get there." Afterwards, I thought more about this issue of race. Living in America as an Asian American, I have personally experienced racist remarks. I was not going to let racism stop me from going to Britain. But my main concern was if the British people would consider me as an American, since I do not fit the "description" of what people believe Americans "should" look. I am not Caucasian, therefore, I am not "American."

Now that I have been here for five months, I have not experienced any queries or doubts about my nationality from professors or other students. They can tell from my accent where I am from. They do not question me with, "No, where are you *really* from?" like people do in the States.

However, there were two incidents that occurred while I was travelling. I flew to Dublin, Ireland, over a weekend, and from the airport, I took a bus to the city center. There was an elderly woman sitting next to me who asked me, "Do you speak English?" My first reaction was total disbelief. I was shocked that in the 1990's people still do not believe that Asians can speak English! The other incident was over the Christmas break. My friend Liz and I were in Inverness, Scotland, and we took a tour of Loch Ness. The tour leader asked where I was from, and when I responded that I was from California, he replied, "Oh, I thought it was someplace far." He thought that I was going to tell him I

was from a country in Asia, but California itself is 7,000 miles away! Isn't that far enough?! I later realized that although my initial reaction is anger, I know that people do not mean to offend me in any way. It is not as common for them to see Asian faces in their everyday lives, so they have to wonder whether or not this person speaks English, and where this person with an Asian face comes from.

It is interesting to point out that the term "Asian" is thought of as two different things between the British and the Americans. In Britain, the term "Asian" refers to persons who descend from parts of the Asian continent around India (eg. India, Bangladesh, etc.). Persons of Asian descent from Thailand, Korea, Japan, China, Vietnam, and this part of Asia, are referred to as "Oriental." When I first heard this term used, I was amazed that a word that is supposedly derogatory is still used. After reflecting on this, I have come to realize that this is how the British society is. They have been raised to believe that "Orientals" and "Asians" are different people.

Another thing I found interesting is the way the Chinese in Britain do not consider themselves "Chinese-British," whereas many Americans of Chinese descent consider themselves Chinese American. I had the opportunity to speak with a Chinese student born and raised in London. He said the Chinese in Britain, whether or not they were born on British soil, do not consider themselves "British." This is because they have a strong tie to China; the culture, the language. I admire them for having such a strong connection to their country, but for myself, I identify as a Chinese American. I am Chinese because my ancestors are from China, I speak the language, and I hold Chinese cultural beliefs. I am also American because I have lived in America almost all of my life, and my ways of thinking are American. However, I am not a Chinese person from China because I do not live in China and experience the everyday life there. If I had to choose one over the other, I am American. I put "Chinese" in front of "American" because that is a reminder for me to never forget where my ancestors are from, that I speak the language, I hold Chinese cultural beliefs, and that I am proud of all of these things.

I have accepted the differences between the Chinese in America and the Chinese in Britain. It is different, yet interesting at the same time. I am more aware and curious because of these differences. This demonstrates that I have become more tolerant and accepting of other cultures and peoples.