

Ines Purcell  
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Professor Lillehaugen  
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### *Open Doors*

Claudia Chung is a freshman at Bryn Mawr College. She is 18 but will turn 19 very soon. She was born in Hong Kong and grew up there until she left for the states to go to a boarding High School in Massachusetts. In Hong Kong growing up her parents spoke to her in Cantonese, while she was exposed to Mandarin and English in her primary school. She started learning French when she was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and claims she has a “working proficiency” in French (6). She considers Cantonese and English as her primary languages however she relates the most to Cantonese, as it reminds her of her home and culture. She likes to view her multilingualism as doorways to different cultures, but also how it can be viewed as something negative in one’s own culture. This interview, among other things, examines the way multilingualism shapes one’s identity, and their relationship with the rest of the world.

Hong Kong is a city that is caught in between the old and the new, the east and the west: a dialectic of languages and cultures mixed together to create a unique landscape. Technically not a part of China, Hong Kong is an old British colony that still has questionable ties to its western parents. It is a city full of open doors into different cultures and different worlds. Claudia, born and raised in Hong Kong, grew up within this dichotomy of east and west. When she was thirteen her parents sent her to a prestigious boarding school in the suburbs of Boston Massachusetts, and has been continuing her college education here in the States, where I met her. We were randomly selected to be roommates, something which I am eternally grateful for. The first thing you notice when you enter our room are the large quantities of books in all different languages, mirroring the depth of knowledge Claudia holds. Then you’ll notice the paper pineapple mobiles hanging around our ceiling, something which we thought would be amusing to add to our room décor. Claudia and I have bonded over our similar multi-cultural backgrounds and our love for books and the arts. Our relationship, which varies from serious late night cultural discussions to absolute absurdity is a hallmark of Claudia’s personality, and you are immediately welcomed into her world, a world of diversity and as she puts it “open doors”.

Claudia learned Cantonese through speaking with her parents and family at home, while the schools in Hong Kong taught Claudia English and Mandarin (5). She remembers singing English nursery rhymes when she was in kindergarten, but doesn’t recall learning the language

stating “I’ve known English basically since I was a toddler” (12). However, when she talked about her experience dealing with Mandarin and Cantonese (two languages that share the same characters yet sound completely different) she confesses “I remember being very confused as to why the same thing can sound two different ways” (12). She however distinctly remembers learning French; “I’m pretty good with languages so pronunciation wise I was fine, it was more learning a completely new set of grammar, and especially because French is a romance language so it has gender and a completely different set of norms” (12). Although she has known Mandarin since a very young age, she has lost some degree of comfort in speaking, reading, and writing since she doesn’t practice it daily. A common joke between us, she laughs about how none of the Chinese foreign students like her (since she’s from Hong Kong) so they never talk to her (13). Instead, she resorts to reading books to keep her Mandarin in check. Her ability to tap into a wide variety of languages and cultures does leave her overwhelmed at times. I asked her about the cons of being bilingual she responded, “your brain is constantly muddled up, like I have to compartmentalize a lot of things” (31). Although she has access to all these different doorways through her way of compartmentalizing ideas, throughout the interview she constantly refers back to her roots in Hong Kong.

Even though Claudia has spent the last five years speaking English in the States and learning French, she has very close ties to her city and Cantonese. She describes what it is like to feel connected to a place that is so culturally diverse: “I think it’s kinda weird for me to say that I belong to Hong Kong. Hong Kong is a very international place, like it’s really funny”, she pauses and chuckles a little to herself, “I didn’t even know there was a problem with diversity in colleges because I grew up with people from Kenya and Mauritius and from all over the world so when I came to the States and realized these people were all from the same state I was like this is really weird” (21). She later adds to clarify the affect that the United States has had on her, “of course I’ve picked up bits and pieces of New England culture on the way”, looking down at her navy-blue Vineyard Vine long sleeve and laughing. While she thinks of English as a “bland and common language”, a purely utilitarian language, she relates Cantonese with her family and her home. She also acknowledges that it is a dying language, distinctly local, yet at the same time distinctly global due to the diversity of people living in Hong Kong. This gives the language, as she puts it, “an international vibe”. She sees Mandarin as a doorway to the other side of Hong Kong, the side attached to its nationalistic Chinese roots. She has a much more romantic view of

French however, and thinks of French in terms of history and art (20). While she views these different languages as doorways to different concepts and aspects of her life, she doesn't explicitly think differently in these languages.

Different doors usually lead to different places, so I was surprised when Claudia confessed that she does not think in different languages on different occasions. She confesses that instead of thinking in different languages, she prefers to think in concepts. She explained that since she is a very visual person, things get less "muddled" by thinking in concepts (14). However, having personally heard her speak a variety of English, Cantonese, and French in her sleep, I can attest that she dreams in different languages. She clarifies that the languages she dreams in are dependent on the people she is interacting with (15). However, she shrugged at the question regarding whether one language comes out naturally in relation to a certain emotion. The only thing she noticed was that when she gets angry her English turns into a British accent (16). I was also surprised to hear that when asked if she behaved differently in another language all she said was "not consciously" (27). I got the impression that she doesn't really think about how the different languages affect her thoughts, and if they do it's not consciously notable. She also translates this into her social life, and the relationships with other people in different doorways.

When Claudia talked about different relationships in different languages, she divided her interactions into formal and friendly interactions, claiming that it was pretty much the same in each language. She noticed however that Cantonese (as a language) does not have many formal words compared to her other languages, formality in Cantonese depends on the tone. Because of this she has to focus more on the way she stresses certain words rather than the words themselves (28). She later goes on to talk about the different cultural relations between each of her languages. Another standing joke of ours is complaining about how awful French people are so naturally she brought up the example of trying to speak to a Frenchman in English, and how they will straight up ignore you. However, if you speak to them in French they will be much more open in helping you. She brought in her own perspective also, enthusiastically stating that if an American were to come up to her in Hong Kong and attempted to speak in Cantonese she would willingly help him. Because of her experiences, she views as being multilingual as a way of

connecting with people, an “open door” (31). However, this ability to open doors does have its downfalls.

When I asked her whether she has ever had to hide any of her languages she said that sometimes she pretends she is not as fluent in English as she seems, so as not to be viewed as “westernized” by her family members. She mentions a cultural stigma towards losing Mandarin in Chinese culture, as that is viewed as a sign of “westernization”. She tells me an anecdote while laughing (she loves to make fun of English): “one of the slang words for English in Cantonese is chicken intestines. Back when we were still under colonial rule all the kids would be forced to learn script in school. The older Chinese generation know that we are learning English in school they instantly think to the curly scribbly cursive and they say you’re writing chicken intestines! So, like you can tell it’s not a good connotation, its literally *organs of an animal*. But also, like they think you’re being “Americanized” and “westernized” that you’re being removed from your culture. So, for the older generation sometimes I have to try extra to impress them on Chinese or Japanese” (32).

Being multilingual for Claudia is more than just being able to speak in multiple different languages. Having the experience of being able to live full time in two different countries has really shaped her thinking about the implications of language on culture and vice versa. She acknowledges that “being multilingual is sort of a privilege”. Claudia, having traveled extensively around the world, understands the depths of diversity this world has to offer. (19). She views being multilingual not as knowing a lot of languages, rather, as an understanding of a wide variety of cultures, a tool to open new doorways. Taking the question “What does it mean for you to be multilingual” a step further, she tells me “I think being bilingual is almost like not just a privilege but also your job. Now you have to go out and make people understand the two sides of the world you come from or whatever your experiences are, widen people’s perspective” (12).