

Leaving, living... believing

Phoebe Song tells the story of an international student who became a university counsellor



There was once a planet with only two countries, Homeland and Overseas. Edie left her Homeland to study at a university Overseas.

LAST DAY AT HOME

'You have made our family proud,' Grandpa said.

'You should always do your best,' said Dad.

'It's only a year and you'll be back again,' Mum cried.

FIRST CLASS

Edie's course began with a meeting with her classmates, where everyone was asked to reveal something about themselves. Someone wanted to be an astronaut. Another said she would like to travel abroad to do some voluntary work. An international student said her favourite book was written by someone who was born here, in Overseas. Finally it was Edie's turn: 'I was good at maths. This course will help me to get a job,' she ventured.

Someone was curious: 'Why study Overseas?' they asked.

'Because it has the best university,' replied Edie.

After that class, a question arose in her mind for the first time: 'What do I like?' Edie had always lived her life on

a 'track'. Everything in life had been planned out for her from the moment she was born. All her motivation came from her parents' expectation, and from competition with others. She had goals, but none of them were her own.

TASK 1: ASKING QUESTIONS

Edie had studied the Overseas language since she was five, and had managed to get a good enough grade to be accepted on this course. However, her listening and speaking skills were not as good as her reading and writing ones. She did not always understand what a lecturer was saying, but she did not want to ask because she felt it would be unfair to waste others' time, and feared looking stupid. Edie bought a dictaphone, but she had to spend more time than others after lectures listening to it. Sometimes she could not even transcribe it without help. She ended up relying on handout notes. She started to feel that it was pointless going to lectures.

TASK 2: ANSWERING QUESTIONS

Whenever a lecturer asked questions in class, Edie kept her head down to avoid eye contact. She was afraid that she would give a wrong answer. There were times when she felt confident she knew

the answer, but she was always too late to respond. 'How does everyone else respond so fast?' she wondered. Once, she managed to be first to give the answer. However, disappointingly, her answer was not noted. The lecturer did not say whether it was right or wrong but kept asking everyone else to speak. Everyone seemed to have different opinions. Some of the answers did not even seem to be related. Edie was very confused. Education in her Homeland was designed to teach you to be 'right'. However, here, Overseas, you were encouraged to have your own opinions.

TASK 3: GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Edie knew that she had to contribute. She tried very hard to prepare what to say. However, she could never get her voice heard. 'The students don't seem to be very polite. They interrupt each other. Sometimes it seems like an argument?'

Edie was an only child. She had grown up on her own, had everything to herself, without having to share or fight. Therefore she was not good at groupwork, and particularly not good at arguments. She was not allowed to argue with her parents, and she had no sibling with whom to practise how to express or receive disagreement. She

was not familiar with the boundaries between 'debating', 'arguing' and 'upsetting'. She was worried about hurting others or getting hurt herself.

FIRST TERM

Edie remembered at the beginning of term that the tutor had mentioned there was an essay to submit. Strangely, the lecturer hadn't told the students when to start it. Edie did not know that she needed to organise her own time, right from the beginning of the term. She started working on the essay. She stayed in her flat for days without a break, skipping meals as she felt guilty using the time for anything else. She even wished she did not need to sleep. She went to the library and stayed overnight. Once, she fell asleep, and was woken up by a security guard, who reminded her to look after her own safety. When she left the library at 7am, she saw other students starting their new day in their running gear. Exercise? In Homeland, wellbeing and life-balance were not seen as making any contribution to study, and therefore were not given very much attention.

FIRST MARK

'Criticism' had been a negative word in Edie's upbringing. 'You should do your best to avoid being criticised. It is nicer to respect others than to criticise them,' she had learned. At home her parents were always right. At school her teachers were always right. Whoever wrote an article was considered to be an expert in their field. So whatever they wrote was always right. Therefore, when Edie's first essay was criticised for not being critical enough, it was all very new and frustrating for her. 'Critical thinking' was easy enough to translate as a term, but how difficult it was to put it into action. It was a big challenge.

FIRST CHRISTMAS

Christmas was not a tradition in Edie's Homeland. In fact Edie's first impression of Christmas came from

Andersen's book, *The Little Match Girl!* As November arrived, the whole city in Overseas was full of festive atmosphere. Edie enjoyed it, until Christmas Day, when she woke up and realised everyone else had gone home or was travelling. She had never before felt so lonely. She thought she had made lots of friends here, but now realised that they were not actually 'friends.' Edie could not tell her parents how much she had been struggling. She did not want them to worry. She had been taught to be strong and independent. She knew she should not complain, but had to carry on.

MAKING FRIENDS

Edie never felt that she was welcome. Even before arriving here, she had been told that Overseas students did not like foreigners. She noticed that people were already in groups. Overseas students did not often invite or even

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speak to Homeland students. The assumption that 'they do not want to be friends with us' was engraved onto Edie's heart.

One day Edie met a lady who was also from Homeland. She told Edie: 'It took me 10 years to learn that people who were born here do not need us; it is we who need them. So we need to ask. Their family and friends are not far away, so, they do not necessarily need new friends; they don't even know how lonely we can feel. But it doesn't mean, if you ask to be their friend, that they will not allow you in. Don't wait to be invited.'

'They are also young. They might not have seen many people from outside their own country. They can be shy.

They might be even more nervous than you, because they don't know how you would like to be approached. For some of them it might be their first time away from home as well. They might be searching for a support network, just like you. They have their insecurities too. Be brave; open your heart. You will find they are not so different from you.'

Edie was also told that doing activities could be a good way of meeting people. She joined the dance society, and found the exercise itself enjoyable. However, she soon found out that she was still on her own. Clubbing seemed to be important here. Edie did not go very often. As a result, everyone else became closer to each other, while Edie felt like an outsider. She preferred to stay in her flat, not seeing or talking to anyone. She believed no one cared for her.

In Homeland most people met up for dinner in a restaurant. They liked trying different foods, chatting, singing, playing games in a quiet place. They usually spent the whole evening there rather than going to the pub after a meal. However, here it seemed that almost all the student events involved drinking and if you did not join in, you risked feeling isolated.

DEPRESSION

Edie missed a few lectures and also her essay deadline. A member of her department suggested that she see a GP. She was diagnosed with depression and prescribed antidepressants. Edie was familiar with the word 'depressed'. People at home sometimes used it to describe a feeling, but only to mean 'unhappy'. Depression? It was seen as a stigma of mental disorder, almost like schizophrenia. Taking antidepressants was too shameful and scary. She could not tell anyone. The fact she had been told that she had depression made her feel hopeless.

FIRST COUNSELLING SESSION

Edie remembered when she had first arrived at the university, at a welcome event she had been given some leaflets about the Student Counselling Service. She also remembered that as soon as she saw the word 'counselling' she had put them back, as did everyone else. 'It is for when you have a mental disorder. I won't need it,' she had thought to herself.

Edie was referred to see a counsellor. In the first session she was still very dismissive. She tried to explain that her situation was normal. That everyone else was in the same boat, so it was not a problem. Her counsellor did not focus on the 'problem' and did not even mention 'depression'. They talked about her time since she arrived in Overseas, as well as her life in her Homeland. Edie had not expected to know what to say. However, she ended up exploring every event and person in her life. Some words that she uttered, she had never thought of before. Although she still did not want to admit that she had depression, and she did not know how counselling could help, she felt lighter after talking and wanted to come back again.

THE END OF STUDY

It was towards the end of the year. Edie had had a couple of counselling sessions, but had started to get anxious. The idea of 'questioning' came into her mind for the first time. Maybe she had been encouraged by the critical thinking she had experienced? Maybe it was the freedom she was given compared with life at home? Maybe it was the reflective relationship she had experienced with her counsellor – one she had never had before. Edie used to believe that she had had the happiest childhood and the best parents. But now she realised that time had been quite tough.

'Are parents always right?'

'I have almost forgotten that I liked painting when I was a child.'

'I don't know what I want to do in the future...'

'Not going back.'

'I never liked business.'

'I remember people saying I was a good listener.'

'Maybe I can go back to painting.'

Edie's family was very upset by her decision not to return to her Homeland. 'What about the family business?' shouted Dad.

Mum cried: 'Your Dad is unwell. What if he has a heart attack?'

You are so far away.'

'Your parents need you to look after them,' said everyone else she knew in Homeland.

'Selfish' was a title Edie had to carry. There was a battle in her heart,

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wrestling between 'guilt' and 'hope'. She hoped that one day she could show them that even though she had made her own choice, she could still solve their problems.

FIRST COUNSELLING TRAINING

Edie decided to take up a counselling course. Unfortunately, the decision was not supported by anyone at home. 'You will never be able to get a job. They will not trust you if they see that you are young and from a different background. Language will be a problem!' her parents warned.

'But you don't even know what counselling is, any more than I do,' Edie remonstrated with her parents (for the first time). This was also the first time that she had made a decision without thinking about the consequences 10 years ahead. She was not even sure

whether she would end up becoming a counsellor, but she believed the course might help her to find the answer. Her 'short-sightedness' disappointed everyone from Homeland.

FIRST GAP YEAR

It was very unusual in Edie's Homeland for people to take a gap year. 'Getting on with things' was seen as the key to success. Time was not to be wasted. Most people were expected to know what job they planned to do even before they started university, even though, a few years into their career, they might realise it wasn't for them. 'It is too late to change, now,' everyone would say.

At the end of the counselling course, Edie asked her supervisor, 'Should I get a qualification next?' The supervisor replied: 'Edie, you have spent a lot of time studying. I want you to take a break and to experience life.' Edie cried.

Art, volunteering and just 'chilling' filled the gap year. And Edie suddenly knew what she wanted to do in the future: 'I want to be a counsellor, and in my spare time I will do art,' she decided.

BECOMING A COUNSELLOR

Edie took another course. With the unconditional trust, support and encouragement of her personal tutor, she successfully got her counselling qualification. However, job hunting was not easy. Being a foreigner had always been a big factor in her low self-confidence. Life turned around, though, when Edie saw an advert from a university student counselling service that was looking for a counsellor. 'Equality and diversity' was highlighted on the advert, and the ability to speak the Homeland's language was an advantage. It was the first time Edie had ever felt that being a foreigner could be valued.

Everyone at this workplace respected and even appreciated the uniqueness of everyone else. Edie gradually got her confidence back. Language could be

an issue, but by acknowledging this, it helped clients to explore more. Everyone's background was different, regardless of which country they were born in. Having lived in different countries and experienced cultural differences, Edie felt had helped to open her mind and allow her not to be judgmental. She saw how some Homeland students struggled to express themselves in the Overseas language. So she offered to counsel those students in their Homeland language.

COUNSELLING HOMELAND STUDENTS

After her own experiences as an international student, Edie was very enthusiastic that she could help others. She wanted to help them avoid the difficulties she had experienced in the past. However, throughout the academic year not many Homeland students came to the counselling service. Almost until the end, that is. Edie could empathise: she had done the same when she was in their situation. What gave Edie hope was that once the students began counselling, they seemed very much engaged. Edie often heard them say, 'I wish I had come earlier.'

'How can we get them to seek help earlier?' she wondered. The Student Counselling Service website highlighted some of the problems Homeland students might want to talk about. At the student welcome event, Edie translated some copies of an information leaflet, 'What is counselling? How can counselling help you?', into their own Homeland language. She also spoke to them in person. The important thing was to tell them that they did not need to feel that seeing a counsellor meant that they had a 'mental disorder'. Having someone who could speak their Homeland language to them was really helpful and appreciated.

Edie also noticed that when the Homeland students heard the word 'career', their ears pricked up. They

were not particularly interested in counselling, wellbeing or even the student health service. But they did want to know about how to get a job, even when they had just arrived, and before their course had started. Again, Edie understood. It was how they had been brought up. She felt rather sad, especially now that she had challenged her Homeland tradition. Edie had to learn to step back and let them make their own choices. The worst scenario was that they would be changed by the Overseas culture, but would have to go back and fit into a culture that they might not be able to identify with any more. However, they might never feel that 'staying on track' was a problem. They might have no idea what they liked or disliked, but at least they had parents who could make their life secure.

Edie was also aware that Homeland students often came to counselling to ask for advice and solutions. The solution had to be 100 per cent guaranteed, direct and quick. If she told them it would take time to see how it might work, they would not try it. They didn't seem to have very much patience, did not like doing things if they felt it was for nothing, and did not like taking risks.

Often at the end of their study, Homeland students felt disappointed that they had not achieved what they had wanted. Edie asked them to look at what they had done since they arrived, and consider the difference from studying in their home country. The fact that they had lived Overseas must have been of some benefit to them. The difficulties they had encountered, for example, might make them better prepared if anything should happen in the future. 'But it does not show up on my CV,' some students replied, with disappointment.

The Homeland students' anxiety worsened when it was nearing time to go back home. Family and friends back home could not imagine how they had lived in Overseas during the year, but

simply expected them to have gained the best knowledge and ability they could. The students were worried about letting others down.

WE ARE STILL WORKING ON IT

International students want to feel cared for. Universities have never stopped offering international students help, but things are sometimes missed, so students do not always seek help, even when they need it. Maybe a different approach needs to be considered about what Homeland students might need. ●



About the Author

This is not a true story, but the underlying message is true. It is a story from Phoebe Song, who is originally from Beijing. Phoebe studied in the UK, and now works as a counsellor at the University of Bristol. She offers counselling in Mandarin to Chinese students. Counselling is still new in China. Phoebe believes developing the counselling service at her university could help people improve their wellbeing and quality of life. For students who come to the UK to study, universities' counselling services here could be their first experience of this kind of support. If they have a positive experience, they might encourage people at home to trust it too.



REFERENCES

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