

What! No soup?

Perhaps the most severe form of culture shock on arrival in any new country is dietary. HUANG GUI MEI, an INTI student from China, is slowly recovering

WAS so happy when I received the offer letter from INTI College Malaysia back home in China. Desperately opening the letter, I read it in detail, and Grandma and I both fell into deep thought...

Why is it that class time is from 9am until 4pm without a break? How would I have time to, as I usually do, have lunch at 12pm? As the Chinese proverb says: "Morning is the core of a day, the spring of a year." Why don't we just start classes at 7:30am as we do in China?

I started to imagine how different my life would be in Malaysia. It would be my first experience in a foreign country and the place where I would spend the next three years of my life. I would encounter very hot weather, see coconut trees and have many friends who would be dark - quite brown.

With my heavy luggage and also a bunch of questions waiting to be answered, I bid farewell to my family and friends and set off on a journey into the unknown.

Just to tell you how silly I was, as I realise now, half of my luggage space was occupied by autumn clothes because I thought it was definitely impossible for there to be no cold season - surely I would need a coat - even though I knew it was supposed to be hot the whole year round.

Now, as you folks can imagine, my poor autumn clothes will never have a chance to be shown off. The only thing I could do was to send them back the way they came!

However, when my mum talks to me on the phone, she is still extremely concerned and warns me to wear thick clothes so I don't catch a cold!

From time to time, she would repeat the question: "Is our place getting cold yet? Don't forget to wear more, don't get sick!" and from time to time, I would also have to repeat the same answer: "Mum, it's hot all year around. I only need to wear T-shirts and shorts!" Forever the same!

When I arrived at Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) at 8pm, I was excited to see a very beautiful airport. But things took a turn for the worse when my friends and I were stopped at customs (immigration hall). But it was also there that I had my first experience of Malaysia's multi-cultural society.

It happened to be time for the staff to change shifts. We saw a group of airport personnel in uniforms walking in, talking happily and loudly in a language that was totally alien to us. What's more, I witnessed an interesting scene, one which I thought could only be found on TV shows: All the women were wearing a sort of scarf on their heads, hiding their hair, and one of the men wearing an urban look like an Arab.

I also discovered that all the men sported small moustaches which made them look cute.

We expected to see this because we had already encountered a Malaysian officer at the Malaysian Embassy in China. I remember the moment when one of the girls in our group spotted this 'interesting look' and we were all excitedly driven to expect to see more in Malaysia.

Finally, I was in bed in my first home in Malaysia.

After a pretty good sleep, I eventually had a clear look at my roommate's face. She looked pure Chinese, not that different from myself. Hiding my surprise, I managed to ask her in English where she was from.

It was then that I received yet another surprise. She responded in rather standard Mandarin! And I started to wonder whether other languages would be spoken in this country.

At that moment, a familiar Chinese pop song caught my attention. It was playing on the radio that my housemate was listening to! I couldn't believe it! I would never have expected that, here in Malaysia, where I was anticipating completely new experiences and ways of life, the same language was being spoken and even the same pop songs were being played on the radio!

Of course, as time has passed, I have experienced more and more Chinese culture here and that has made it easier for me to adapt.

Lunch time was near and after scanning the restaurants

nearby, we realised that one advantage of a multi-racial society was the rich variety of food. Nevertheless, all the food was red and spicy. Driven by hunger, I would have liked to have tasted all the strange-looking and maybe tasty dishes.

However, after my friends had made it very clear that they would never be able to take spicy food, we finally found a Chinese mixed-rice stall and our eyes gleamed at the sight of familiar dishes. Queuing up, I took every dish I liked and finally reached the end.

I searched for the soup out of habit, but failed to find any. After a complicated conversation with the hawker, I realised that no soup was to be served with the dry rice! At home my family would have five dishes with a big bowl of soup! We couldn't live without it, especially in the fierce summer!

That evening, enticed by the name of a restaurant which was also that of my friend's hometown, we walked in, happily expecting a pure 'Chinese' dinner. Sadly, however, they didn't offer soup either!

Having suffered the ordeal of dry rice at lunch, we urged and even taught the master cook how to make the simplest sort of soup - egg soup with vegetables.

But they still failed to make the perfect soup for a group of soup lovers!

After the first day's 'food orientation', we were ready for a challenge - the first English lecture at INTI.

Dressed neatly as usual, we were ready to go to the college which was just opposite the apartment. However, just as I was stepping out of the apartment, I chanced to glimpse a rather surprised expression on my housemate's face.

"Are you going to a party? What are you dressed so nicely for?"

I was at a loss. I didn't feel that anything was out of place with my dress and pair of stockings until I walked into the college.

Some of the students looked at me strangely - but my friend fared worse. Two students playing around and blocking the doorway thought that she was a lecturer!

"They said 'sorry!' and whispered: 'Hey, stop playing! Here comes a lecturer!' to each other. Only then did we realise that we were in a sea of big-sized T-shirts and jeans. We were the odd ones out.

We finally understood our housemate's advice. But we had a good laugh! I'm sure you know what I wear now - T-shirts, jeans! Never buck the trend!

After I finally established the dress code at INTI, I discovered another interesting phenomenon: You simply can't differentiate a guy from girl from the back.

I have been stunned by this several times. I have been so sure that the person in front was a girl who has tied up her hair with a nice ribbon.

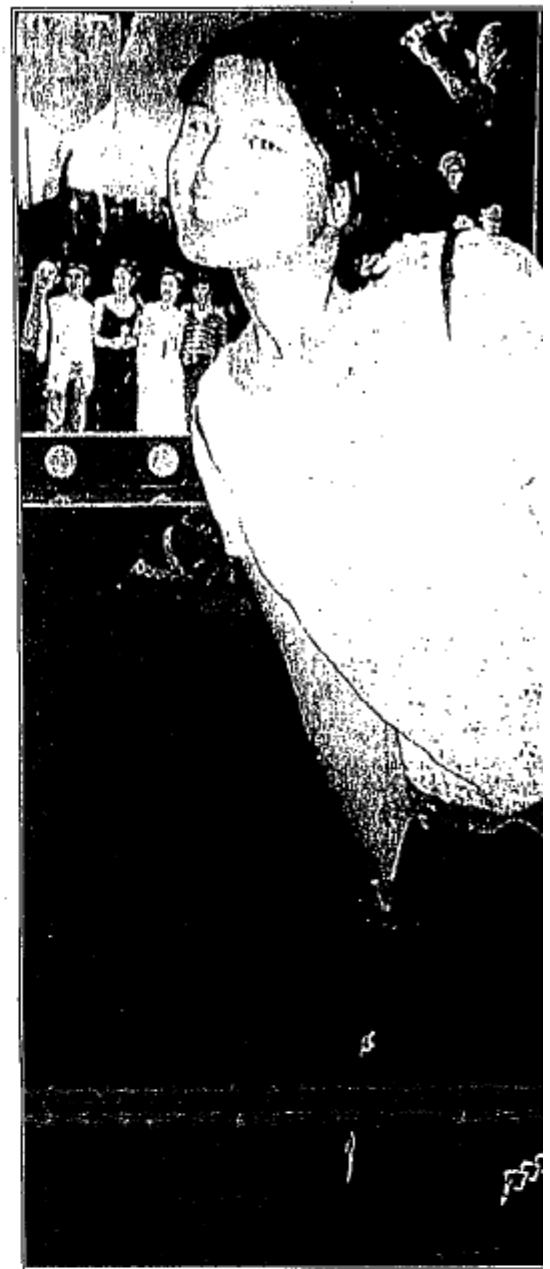
The truth was only revealed when I heard her talking to a friend. Her voice told me that 'she' was actually a he!

In fact, it took me a whole semester to adjust my usual way of differentiating men from women.

Even now, there are times when I find myself admiring a good female basketball player who has turned out to be a man.

The hair-band and appearance didn't tell me anything different - until the hoarse shouting betrayed 'her' disguise.

ARE you a foreign student studying here in Malaysia - or a Malaysian who has studied overseas? Send your views/comments about your experiences to: smail@nstp.com.my (all RAHIMAH DAUD)



NEW DRESS CODE: Even though Gul Mei has established that it's forever hot here in Malaysia, she still looks like she's holding a jersey - just in case!