

6th Column (2015. 4. 15)

“Feel the jubilant atmosphere of the New Year, as people greet each other joyfully,

Happy New Year!”

– The New Year has Arrived, a traditional Chinese New Year song.

On 19th February, people of Chinese descent all over the world celebrated the beginning of a new year. Chinese New Year is one of the most significant events for the Chinese, and the reunion dinner on the eve of the New Year the biggest event every year. It is comparable to the Japanese New Year, during which we catch up with relatives and extended family members whom we hardly meet during the rest of the year. This year, I was invited to dinner on that day by a Chinese friend. Since I was unable to be home with my family in Singapore, I was grateful to have company. I had hotpot with her and we wished each other a happy New Year while watching China’s New Year countdown television programme with her family.

It was possibly my first time spending Chinese New Year with mainland Chinese people. It was then that I realized that even within the Chinese community, we celebrated the New Year differently. Singapore’s Chinese New Year countdown television programme is loud, has pointless comedy skits and celebrities singing the same old New Year songs over and over. I marveled at China’s national New Year countdown television programme, at the majestic shows which featured elegant dancers, artists and singers in a glamorous setting, but it felt unfamiliar. I used to think that traditional New Year songs would be played during the celebrations all over the world, but it appeared to be a tradition only found in Singapore and Malaysia. Similarly, nian gao (new year cakes) is traditionally eaten during the New Year in Singapore, but in my friend’s family, who originated from northern China, they celebrated the New Year by eating jiaozi (dumplings). Of course, while we also share common traditions such as wearing new clothes as well as the giving and receiving of red packets, it was an eye-opening experience to know that there are significant differences in the way we welcome Chinese New Year.

Often, I would get questions about China after introducing myself as a Singaporean-Chinese. The truth is, while our ancestors came from China, the Singaporean-Chinese no longer identify ourselves as part of the mainland. We see ourselves as Singaporeans first, recognize ourselves as different even from the mainland Chinese visitors in Singapore, and we get perplexed when confronted with questions about China. Differences in the way we celebrated Chinese New Year emphasized the fact that we, as Singaporean-Chinese, are a separate entity from the mainland Chinese.

In the same vein, foreigners in Japan are also sometimes viewed inaccurately as a homogenous group. As non-Japanese people we are sometimes categorized unfairly together as “foreigners” and stereotyped as loud and inconsiderate people. However, the definition of being a “foreigner” in Japan is wide-ranging, and spans across all cultures and backgrounds. For example, an Italian and a Vietnamese are both foreigners in Japan, but other than that share almost zero commonalities in terms of language, background and how they view Japan. It is my wish that one day we can overcome all boundaries and see every person for who they are, regardless of whether they are Japanese or non-Japanese, or by how they look. As the New Year begins, I hope we will find the good in everyone and truly live in a world without borders.