

# There's No Place That's Home

By **Yenni Kwok**

Born in Nantes of French parentage, Hana Le Clam holds a French passport. Yet it is the French part of her that she least identifies with.

“For me, France feels like a foreign land where I don’t belong,” says Le Clam. “In school in France, I felt I didn’t fit in. The students treated me like an outsider, although I was French just like them.”

The 19-year-old has spent much of her life away from France. She was raised in Nepal, where she felt very much at home and whose language she speaks fluently. Having also lived in Hong Kong, Beijing, Canada, England and Cyprus over the past 10 years, mostly following her artist mother (herself raised in Morocco), Le Clam says she feels like a foreigner in Western countries.

“I have a French passport, but I feel more Asian,” confesses Le Clam, who is about to enter an arts academy in Beijing. “I went to England to study but I found it very hard to be accepted, so I left after six months.”

This plucky young lady belongs to the tribe of so-called third culture kids (or TCKs) - those who spend their formative years overseas and outside their parents’ culture. Many of them are multilingual, have friends scattered around the world, and have a never-ending feeling of homesickness for their adopted countries.

The term was coined by the sociologist Ruth Hill Useem in the early 1960s based on her experiences working and living in India. She and her husband took their sons to the subcontinent in the 1950s while they conducted field research on cross-cultural people, first foreign-educated Indians and later American expatriates. Children of diplomats, military staff, multinational businessmen, international schoolteachers and missionaries are examples of third culture kids, also referred to as “global nomads.” Unlike the children of immigrants, they are not expected to settle in the places they move to.

“They live in a highly cross-cultural world and tend to be mobile,” says Lesley Lewis, director of the Hong Kong-based Culture 3 Counsel and an expert on TCKs.

“Personally, I prefer to call them ‘culture three kids.’ They are involved in different cultures. They might carry a passport from country A, move to country B, are often schooled in international schools, and they socialize with children from different cultures.”

Third culture kids are not a new phenomenon. Such illustrious figures as Pearl S. Buck, who grew up a daughter of missionaries in China, or Rudyard Kipling, born and raised in British India, often come to mind. But in the 21st century, global nomads are seriously on the rise. “All kinds of cross-cultural families and children will continue to increase,” says Ann Baker Cottrell, a sociologist specializing in third culture kids and a disciple of Useem’s. As well as immigration, says Cottrell, more people are working outside their passport countries without deciding to immigrate, many taking their families with them.

One change is that overseas postings are getting shorter - four or five years, or even less - instead of a decade or more. Moreover, while in the past third culture kids usually came from the West, now it is not uncommon to see Asian families trotting around the globe.

Born in Seoul, Hyun Soo-jung was two-and-a-half when her parents moved to Hong Kong. Her life reflects the nuances of growing up multilingual. Her mother tongue is Korean, which she describes as her “playful and affectionate language,” but having done her studies and work in English, that is her “intellectual language.”

The writer Minfong Ho calls this fragmentation “linguistic schizophrenia.” “I never feel able to bridge the languages of my life,” says Ho, who was born in Myanmar, and grew up in Thailand and Singapore. “I lived in the United States for two decades, and I write in English. But even now, when I cry, I cry in Chinese.”

Today, many become global nomads by choice, leaving home just out of school to study or work abroad. Chris Stowers, a Taipei-based

photojournalist, was 19 when he left his home in southern England. He has since spent two decades living and traveling in Asia. “All of my adult and working life has been in Asia. I wouldn’t know how to go about living and working in the West,” he says.

While Cottrell insists that the term “third culture kids” only includes “someone who lived abroad as a child because of a parent’s employment,” Lewis has a more flexible definition. “Most research consider adolescents those up to the age of 24,” says Lewis, herself a mother of two TCKs. “They have the same cross-cultural experience as the children who move with their parents.”

There are pluses and minuses to being a TCK. Many feel out of sync with their age group, are restless to keep moving (which often takes a toll on relationships), and have a hard time with goodbyes. But they are also highly adaptable – “cultural chameleons,” Lewis quips - broad-minded, relating easily to a wide range of people, often with high career and academic achievements.

Yet one question lingers: Where is home?

“Funnily enough,” Stowers recalls, “I was in Calcutta when an Indian shouted at me: “Go back to your own country! Apart from being taken aback, it started me wondering where and what my country is anyway.”

Many have given up. “I have always felt home is something I carry inside me, rather than a physical place,” says Hyun. “I am equally happy whether walking through a market in Udaipur, having meetings in New York or eating in a Korean *pojangmacha*.”

Global nomads might borrow Le Clam’s answer: “I come from nowhere but everywhere at the same time.”

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