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Interview with Win Wen Ooi (Transcription)

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Carleton College

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I – interviewer, P – participant

I: Tell me briefly about you, where you are, and who you are with.

P: My name is Win Wen. I am a sophomore at Carleton College. I am still currently on campus. I am staying in Asia House, one of the cultural houses on campus, along with two of my other housemates. I am from Malaysia, which is why I chose to stay on campus at the end of winter term.

I: Why did you choose to stay on campus?

P: I think there are many reasons. One, I really wanted to make sure that my studies are not disrupted. I wasn't sure how things would be like if I were to go home. I don't know how time zone difference would be managed, and I just felt like there were too much to risk especially we didn't know if the second half of spring term was going to be in-person. I couldn't risk my visa status as an international student. Another significant factor was that my other international student friends also decided to stay for similar reasons. So I felt like choosing to stay was the right decision.

I: How has pandemic impacted you and your family?

P: I called my family so much more than I would during the term usually. I think now we probably call two or three times a week, which is a lot more than usual. I would pick up their calls more often. Usually I am like "I have this stuff to do, I have this essay to do, I don't have time to talk to you right now." [laughing] The main thing is that it makes me reflect more on my relationship with my family.

I: What are some lessons you learned from this experience?

P: The pandemic has made me more critical of how I usually cling onto my nationality because coming here to Carleton so far from home was something I always attached myself to by default. But this has made me realized that, to feel connected and supported, you don't have to be where you grew up. I never realized I would have that much support and feel so at peace at Carleton.

On the flip side of this is that I am super aware of how the fact that I am not an American means that ... you know ... a whole \$1200 relief bill is given to all tax-paying American. I pay taxes, but I don't get it. All of the federal aid given to colleges are not for undocumented migrants, not for international student. This is constantly contradictory ideas. I thought I belong to Carleton for once. I felt like I have a place here, but at the same time, large polity structure tells me that "no, you are essentially not an American." And looking at home which I used to see as *the* place that I was sure to belong, I am receiving the message that tells me "maybe, you don't belong during this time of crisis." I think that was very confusing.

I: Do you feel like you are caught in the boundary of national borders? What does nationality mean to you?

P: I question the significance of citizenship and what that means for me. Why do I, people, and the world value that so much and what are the inherent limitations? I am questioning why I used

to value citizenship so much. Perhaps, I still value it a lot, but I am beginning to be more critical of it.

I: What are some other challenges?

P: I think it's been hard to deal with the fact that I am on campus. Being on campus makes me feel like I have no right to feel like I need help and support. I just feel like I have no right to fail and be off track. I think honestly the idea of constantly comparing my situation with other people who are worse off than me has been the most challenging thing. Why am I struggling when there are people whose situations are objectively more challenging than mine? It makes me hesitant so much more to reach out to professors, mentors, and friends. I would think it as a zero-sum thing. If I take up professors' time, for example, am I taking away important resources from other people who may need it more? Do I need it enough to justify me going to that office hour? Usually, it is a level playing field ... But, now I am objectively in much more better place. For example, I don't have to worry about access to Wi-Fi and printer, and it makes me feel like I don't have as much right to get support.

I: For me, being able to take Carleton classes in my home South Korea makes me wonder who can be an international student. I used to think that international students are those who study in a country where they are not born. My physical distance from the United States makes me rethink my own definition of international student focused around nationality. How has your definition of international student changed after the pandemic has broken out?

P: As an international student, It has never just been about academics. Perhaps the most important part of my experience being international student was cultural immersion part. I think I enter different mindset when I am in a different geographical space. I think it's more physical scale of code-switching. I am a different self when I am on campus. When I am here, I am in a completely different mode.

Another part of being an international student is that you are inherently not belonging to that country. If you are physically in your own country and taking classes from another country, I don't think that changes a thing. It is that bracing yourself off being a foreigner in somewhere else. I think navigating that sense of inherent difference adds to it.

It's a very strange feeling to finally feel like we are such a visible population on campus right now. So many members of Carleton community, especially thinking about universal pass/fail policy forum for students to comment on ... it was almost surreal and strange to see so many domestic students saying, "we need a universal pass/fail policy because you have to think about international students who are navigating time zone differences." And I was like, "hold on, you are advocating for us? That's strange." It's something really hard to reconcile with the usual false illusion of equality that we have on campus during usual terms. You know, "everyone is Carl, we are all diverse, but at the same time we are all the same!" I think this has to be put things into perspectives for where international students stand on this campus and how few of us are actually not in the U.S. right now. I think that is interesting thing people easily assume.

I: Can you talk more about false illusion of equality?

P: I am mostly thinking about how colleges are meant to be the place that equalizes everyone. Everyone is living in the same dorm, eating same food, taking same classes, having access to same resources. I think the approach that has been taken was always celebratory model. Our cultures are always celebrated in the least controversial sense. It's about colorful, artistic, and aesthetic, but it's never about blatant inequality. A lot of international students are not on financial aid, but even that fact was never openly talked about. I don't think Carleton people shy away from talking about inequality at all, but all the conversation surrounding inequality on campus that I had seen or been a part of were always in American context. I don't know if this is because international students don't take a part in this conversation enough or domestic students who are involved in this conversation tend to focus on just American context because it's challenging enough to raise the awareness [of their own issues]. There are a lot of international students who are not on financial aid, but at the same time, there are few of us who are on full financial aid. That is what I meant by illusion of inequality. Maybe it's more about invisibility. We are very subtle presence on campus. We are there, our presence is highlighted every year during certain occasions like international festival. What is the purpose of having international students on campus?