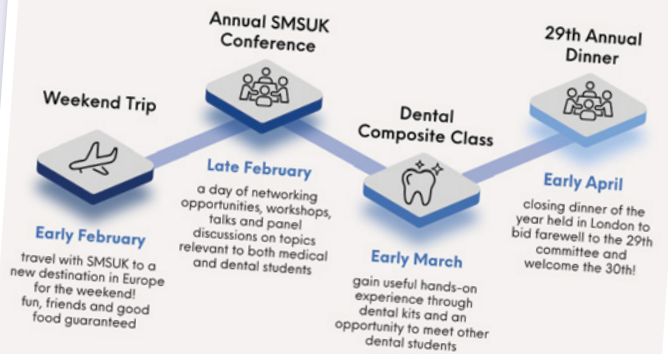


# WEATHERING CHANGE

## On Cultural Differences

### SMSUK TERM 2 EVENTS 2024



SMSUK events overview

Text and photos by Melanie Chee

Melanie is a Year 4 medical student at the University of Leicester and is Editor on the 29th executive committee of SMSUK.



The UK is notorious for its grey skies and rainy weather. And based on my experience of living here for the past three years, I can confirm that this stereotype is mostly true – the weather is more often gloomy than not! While the rain is often a constant drizzle unlike the torrential downpours we have back home in Singapore, the UK gets its occasional storms too. Back in October, Storm Babet brought heavy rains and strong winds to many parts of the UK, causing flooding and widespread destruction. This just so happened to coincide with our first UK-based event of the year, the Dinsical (dinner and musical). Despite the sudden train cancellations and transport disruptions, our members made it from all over the UK to London to watch *Mamma Mia!*,

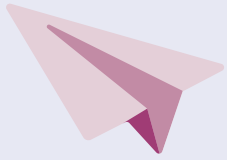
the award-winning romantic comedy musical set to a soundtrack of familiar ABBA tunes. The musical's rendition of "The Winner Takes It All" in particular gave many of us chills. Afterwards, our members had a good catchup with old and new friends at nearby fusion Japanese restaurant *Flesh and Buns*. Although we were absolutely drenched each time we left shelter that day, it was worth it for the enthralling performance and great company.

The constant rain is something we have had to adjust to while living in the

UK. Many of us have learnt to always be prepared with an umbrella or raincoat when leaving the house (we do not trust the weather forecast – it lies!). When moving to a country so far from home for university, not only do we students have to adapt to the culture shock of university and placement-based education, but also to the culture of our new environment. In this month's letter from the UK, Andrew reflects on his experience living and studying in the UK, and how it continues to shape his cultural identity.



SMSUK members at Dinsical 2023 held in London on 21 October



*Umbrellas out! The weather was less than ideal during Dinsical, but we did not let it dampen our spirits*

Text by Andrew Gan

Andrew is a Year 2 medical student at the University of Birmingham.



Culture can be thought of as the roots of a tree. We have our original radicle,<sup>a</sup> where our upbringing and influence from family and friends have solidified our early germination. Over the years, our roots branch out and extend, most significantly when we move countries; the experience of a new soil, temperature, fertiliser and sunshine can sprout new roots, which absorb the fresh yet unfamiliar water. With culture being so fluid, individual, and yet so integrated into our daily lives, we sometimes adapt seamlessly to changes in language, food, attitudes and habits, growing and extending with these new “roots”.

### Growing roots without permanent soil

Adapting to new cultures has always felt like a part of me. Moving to Shanghai, China at the tender age of two, I grew up unconventionally as an overseas Singaporean for 12 years. Living in an international bubble, my accent, habits and views on life blended in with those of my peers from other Asian and European nations, while the colours of my Singaporean roots flowed from my parents and our annual returning summer visits. The intensity of Chinese food shaped my palate, but I am ironically still unable to tolerate spicy food. Moreover, living a year abroad in Tokyo, Japan and London intertwined my culture with theirs. I felt that I became quite adaptable, but at the same time felt as if I had only

grown incomplete roots – essentially a plant without permanent soil.

Perhaps having studied in a British international school (Dulwich College), along with a year I spent in London at the age of 14, has made me more aware of British culture, and prepared me for the weather and what to expect for food. Despite this, I was not as acclimatised as I had thought. Unbeknown to me was the experience of university culture: the drinking, the food, the local friends and how distant that made my culture feel on the other side of the world. At university, surrounded by my new British friends, my culture sometimes felt isolated. I thus looked towards international friends from Hong Kong, Malaysia and Taiwan. I also looked towards my university’s Singapore society (also known as SingSoc) which happened to be making a slow start post-COVID-19 pandemic. With a mix of friends, I felt more connected as my roots could roam further with other plants, while the new conditions tested my existing roots.

Celebrating festivities such as the Lunar New Year (LNY) and Christmas with friends from Singapore and Malaysia solidified my roots, allowing my Singlish to flow comfortably (which I found rather surprising as I only developed it during my National Service). During our dinner celebrations, my companions shared their cultures while we enjoyed homemade hotpots and delicacies. On top of that, I also shared my culture with my flatmates, who thoroughly enjoyed learning about Singapore and its LNY traditions over another hotpot session.

Luckily, I do not have a strong reliance on Singaporean food, though I did miss the affordable hawker centre prices. In the small student residential area next to my university, I am lucky to have two

large Asian supermarkets that became my fridge’s and stomach’s best friends. These supermarkets provided not only Asian ingredients, but Chinese and Korean cuisine takeaway meals too. I really appreciated the plethora of international cuisines in the area, which not all cities or towns in the UK have. Adapting to a new culture requires some luck, but I knew that by applying to study at Birmingham, the second largest city in the UK, I would have a higher likelihood of access to international cuisine.

### Rooted but adaptable

I believe that the ability to grow, retract, extend and morph our roots is key to adapting to a cultural change, especially when moving to a completely foreign country. We all adjust differently at different rates, either embracing the new culture or disliking it completely. Personally, I feel that having strong principles and values has helped my own roots to adapt and find their place in this new soil – creating a new cosy home away from home. I wanted to treasure this time of personal growth, and I will continue to find my own cultural roots through the next five years of my studies. By joining in the local celebrations of other cultures, I can widen my appreciation of other individuals and learn more about their practices. I want to continue juggling the various aspects of my culture and ensure that I am still strongly rooted, but also adaptable. Culture shapes you, as you shape culture. ♦

#### Note

*a. The radicle is defined by the Encyclopedia Britannica as the first organ to appear when a seed germinates. It grows downward into the soil, anchoring the seedling.*