This awkward silence was not new to me. I had experienced this familiar silence for many times during lunch in Singapore, when the Singaporeans sitting around me refrained from talking to me, despite our classmates status, our same skin color, our same language, and our same talkative nature. In fact, most of the time, I did not even have the chance to sit next to them. Therefore, I comforted myself by thinking so on the first day of O-week, when twelve of us sited around the huge table, staring at each other blankly. As the only international student, I felt absolutely no remorse for not being able to contribute to the conversation.

Our poor advisors seemed to be deeply bothered by our silence. They exchanged uncomfortable looks, pretended to write some important things down, and brought up interesting jokes which quickly went cold after throwing out. Eventually, like spotting a huge treasure around the corner, one of our advisor, Christine, jumped onto the table and spoke in extremely bubbly voice: “you have not introduced yourself yet! Let’s do it!”

Something was not quite right about my self-introduction just now. This strange feeling has been bubbling inside my body since the day I came to the U.S. My accent must be a strange mixture of Chinese and Singapore English; my speed of speaking must be too slow; my facial expression must be affected because I paid too much attention to my pronunciation; my content of introduction must be too shallow or boring, because no one was laughing about my “interesting” fact.
After the self-introduction, this group communication game began to change delicately. With this little bit of understanding, and the common cultural background they came from, my dear group mates, whose names I have all remembered by heart through days of memorization before I came here, began to form their own groups without me. When they talked about their favorite songs, movies, snacks and ads, I could only sit there with beautiful smile on my face, although I had no idea about what they were talking about. All of my attentions were on how to cautiously match my pitch, frequency and time to laugh with theirs. This painstaking process almost drained out all of my energy even before the o-week activities started.

I threw myself into the bed after a day of activities, a day of seclusions. Darkness made it perfect for me to think and reflect. I used to be a bubbly, energetic and cheerful girl in front of my Chinese friends. However, it seems to be a knee-jerk reaction for me to put up a restrained, shy and diffident look with foreigners. However, why did I feel perfectly normal to stay within my small circle in Singapore, but so upset about constraining myself in the U.S.? After twenty minutes of meditation and ten minutes of diary reading, I suddenly found a paragraph of my diary which was written two years ago:

I may feel alright to remain as a pre-shelled pistachio right now, although my inner self screamed so desperately for someone to open me up and feel my enthusiasm. Singapore is the perfect place for me to remain isolated without feeling uncomfortable, but I don’t want this situation to continue anymore. The U.S. should be the right place to go, because Americans have been used to embracing otherness since they were born. I will try to not only be among them, but one of them.
I could feel a determined girl standing right in front of me, holding my hand and articulating her dream so joyfully. How could I so easily forget my dream, my dream to be visible since I was 15 years old? After saying good bye to the girl, I closed the diary and went to bed with a peaceful mind. I know that something must be different tomorrow.

I started up my following day by eating breakfast with E, a pretty, blonde girl in my o-week group. Despite the fact that she couldn’t remember my name, I still happily introduced myself again and complimented her hair. I should have done this yesterday, but was just too afraid to speak up. She seemed happy and a pleasant conversation took place naturally between us. To my surprise, our delicate communication carried out extremely well without mentioning anything about American culture. We talked about my experience in Singapore, the food quality in the west servery, the confusing Rice campus, and the awkward silence yesterday. Interestingly, I realized that I’m not the only one who is waiting to be opened up and understood, everyone is. Regardless of where we are from, people are already different from each other through the beliefs they buy in, the preferred ways they express thoughts, and the ideals they want to pursue. The only thing that obstructs personal connections is not culture, identity or race, but the fear to bridge the difference, which makes most of people pretend to give up the efforts of networking altogether.

I’m so glad that I discovered this truth on the second day of o-week, which makes my following days too enjoyable to forget. For the first time, I listened to exciting party music which I initially deemed as dumb and crazy; I learnt to dance in wild American way from my group mates; I tried out spicy Mexican food in the most authentic Mexican restaurant and learnt to read Mexican menus; I shared with them my fear of being alone, my insecurity as an international student, and my sense of relief after becoming friends with amazing friends.
like them. For all the efforts I made, I gradually become a member of the big family, my second home in this foreign country.

I really hope that this personal story can inspire my fellow international students to overcome their fear of being different, and immerse themselves in this brand new country. People at Rice are amazing, as long as you take the effort to know them.