# A HOSPITALITY EXCHANGE NETWORK

## Couch-surfing in Hong Kong

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I was introduced to CouchSurfing.org (CS) in 2008. During my exchange program in the U.S., I met two exchange students from Switzerland and Belgium carrying big backpacks. We chatted about their coming trips and I mentioned that a trip would be more "durable" for poor college students if accommodation is free. I still remembered how shocked I was when they replied with a calm smile, "We are exactly doing that!" They told me about this couch-surfing website which networks with others and lets people sleep on their couch or floor for free. I could only think about how much cost would be saved with such "free lunch". So, I immediately went to the school library and registered as a member. That was in December 2008.

In August 2009, the local news was temporarily rampant with a piece of news: "Man raped and threatened to kill a woman from Hong Kong in his Leeds flat after meeting her on the popular global website, couchsurfing.com" (Telegraph.co.uk 11/08/2009). It spurred public attention in Hong Kong as the victim was from Hong Kong and most people in the territory had no idea about couchsurfing.com. Some locals are convinced that letting a "stranger" stay in one's house is a dangerous act and couch-surfing as a way of traveling would not work.

Other than those who got negative impressions from the news reports, I believed most CS members or even non-members shared the same idea as I did when we first heard about CS: free accommodation while traveling. Yet, these two perspectives provide only preliminary ideas of couch-surfing. This paper is my attempt to reveal more about Couchsurfing.org in Hong Kong and understanding its essence.

The meanings of couch-surfing will be discussed in this article. The relationship between couch-surfing and globalization will be discussed in the first part of analysis, how the nature of traveling has been changed by CS and what it has to do with global ideoscape. The ultimate goal is to see how CS as a community is related to modern identity construction. From an etic point of view, it would be exaggerating to talk about an identity constructed from a website as opposed to national identity as explained by Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1983). Yet geographical difference is no longer such a hindrance to cultural diffusion, where one idea can be shared by people from every corner of the world via the internet. In the case of CS, some members also share similar values and missions despite their different nationalities and geographical locations, remaining committed to the activities and duties of CS. This implies

that an identity, partly being the widely discussed global citizen, is mainly created through sharing similar ideas. After all, the solidarity of Americans also comes from its people sharing the same ideas of freedom and individuality. It is hoped that this analysis can shed light on governance in the future as NGOs have become increasingly important whereas governments seem to be fading out in a globalized world.

**What is Couchsurfing.org?**

With the popularity of internet, every aspect of our life is being transformed, including the way people travel. Some travel services that are based on the internet have been thriving in recent years, like "hospitality exchange network", also known as "accommodation sharing", or "home stays", where people can seek or provide accommodation without monetary reward. This article, using Couchsurfing.org as the example, is devoted to finding out the consequences caused by the internet revolutionizing the way in which people travel.

The CouchSurfing is the largest hospitality exchange network, with approximately 1.5 million members in 231 countries (Couchsurfing Statistics 2009).   It is currently the most popular hospitality service on the internet, with around 30 million views on a daily basis, according to. If one accesses *www.couchsurfing.org*, the first thing he/she probably would notice is a picture of a crowd of people having fun on a beach. Underneath it is a box with "testimonials" from members and the regularly-updating statistics box, then a larger area below showing some random members with their profiles, consisting of their personal particulars (including names, sex, age, place of origins etc). People can just click and read any profile they are interested in.

*Surf/Host: How Couch-search Works*

An example will be useful to portray how the home-stay system works. If someone is visiting Hong Kong on a certain date, such as a three-day stay during Christmas, he/she may simply search "Hong Kong" and a list of members who can or cannot provide a couch will be shown. Then he/she can select available hosts to send a 'request to surf your couch'. If the host sends a positive reply, then a stay is basically fixed. Duration of stay and whether the host can be a guide will be further negotiated between the two parties.

A request looks like the following: (*Request to Surf Your Couch in Tai Po, Hong Kong)*

*USERNAME: TRINETH*
*GENDER: Female*
*AGE: 22*
*LOCATION: Finland - Southern Finland - Jarvenpaa*
*ARRIVAL DATE: 17th of oct*
*DEPARTURE DATE: 18th of oct*

*NUMBER OF PEOPLE: 1*
*ARRIVING VIA: ferry*


*Hi my fellow couchsurfer!*

*I'm planning to join the hiking trip in Hong Kong next Sunday and I noticed your profile from the same thread.*
*You seem like ………………..even better, it would be awesome to have a possibility to chat, exchange ideas etc. even before the hiking :)*
*Hopefully see you at least in the hiking trip!*

*The best regards,*
*Riikka*

Last-minute couch-surf requests happen all the time as well.

*ARRIVAL DATE: tonight at 5pm*
*DEPARTURE DATE: Tuesday afternoon at 3pm*
*NUMBER OF PEOPLE: 1*
*ARRIVING VIA: train - I will not need to be picked up*

*This is a bit of an emergency, so I apologize if this is a bit rushed………………..Please let me know if you have any more questions.*

*Yours,*
*Ray Deng*
It is recommended that a couch-surfing guest should not stay for more than three nights. Yet the duration of stay is all up to the two parties involved. After the guest has gone, there is a feedback system for both to leave a comment;
*From Riikka Suutari*
*Jarvenpaa, Finland*
*Positive*
*I'm extremely happy that I had a chance to meet ……… their dorm couch^^*

Besides a couch-surfing request, an incoming visitor can invite a particular member for a drink, and vice versa. Therefore, the list will show those members who cannot provide accommodation as well.

*Community*

Apart from the home-stay function, there are also different *Communities* where members and incoming visitors can post. Those *Communities* work like a forum where one can post a topic and others can reply to it. The Communities categories are diverse but so far the most popular ones are regional, like 'Hong Kong' 'The United States' or 'Europe'.

Below are some random topics from 'Hong Kong' Community page.

*"San Franciscan in hong kong. Anyone free for adventure???"*

*"Anyone feel like meeting up today?"*

*"Hello HongKong!!"*

*"Holiday Dinner Party!"*

If it is an event, people either sign up on the pages or show up at the right time and spot. For the first three threads, couch-surfers really mean they are physically in Hong Kong and are ready to meet up for any activities, such as a bike-tour or a beach party, with locals, internationals who reside in Hong Kong and other couch-surfers.

In other places such as the U.S, people sometimes post room-sharing ads on such pages to look for people who want to share the rent of a house as well.


*CouchSurfing Collectives and Operations*

CouchSurfing is a non-profit organization funded by donations of members. Most of its funding supports a group of full-time staff such as website programmers based in San Francisco. CouchSurfing Collectives are held almost twice a year. Members from different parts of the world gather at a designated location to discuss how to improve the Couch-Surfing website and expand the community.


*Ambassadors system*

Members who wish to volunteer for various tasks on the site may apply to become ambassadors. According to one informant "Born to Travel", a nomadic Ambassador, the main duties of an Ambassador are to promote Couchsurfing.org, greet new members, help with visitors' questions on the Community page and perform other administrative tasks on a voluntary basis. There are three kinds of Ambassadors, namely, City Ambassador, Country Ambassador and Nomadic Ambassador.


*Ordinary members*

Although it is not stated, CouchSurfing is actually more like a free platform than organization with a lot of central authority. Ordinary members actually complete the major part of "work" by actively participating as guests and hosts.


**Methodology**

As a member of CS, I have been actively involved in CS as a host starting from September,

2009. I have hosted four times with no more than three continuous nights each time in my dormitory in the Chinese University of Hong Kon. By joining the social events posted on Hong Kong group page, I can approach my potential informants without being a host. For example, I knew Roddy from a 'dim sum meetup' that was supposed to be a welcoming luncheon for a '70-year-old traveler still eagerly traveling around the world' from Mumbai. By messaging services on CS, I get to know the Ambassadors who inspire me with unknown information on operation of CS, such as City Ambassador LiteraryGypsy and Nomadic Ambassador Born to Travel. This network naturally excludes inactive members as possible informants as they would not participate in such meetings nor apply to become an Ambassador. Yet I deliberately included some less active members as informants for receiving a more holistic result of people's views on CS. All the names of informants are their member names on CS.

My informants, include my guests as well as other members of Couchsurfing.com. It is not necessary for them to have experience on being hosts and guests. For example, Tiffany has never hosted or been hosted but actively participated in the meetings that other CSers organized. Their views contribute more to the meanings of CS whereas hosts and guests tell us more about how "sleeping on someone else's couch" works and its analysis. For the aim of participant observation, I may play my role as an observer and a host simultaneously. The result of my findings may be influenced by my own intentions when I am a host, even when I am doing research on the guests, and vice versa.


**Ethnography**

Field Notes---Meanings of couch-surfing

*Born to Travel --- To help out and to share*

Born to Travel is a thirty-seven-year-old woman growing up in Guwahati in India. As her user name may have shown, she was always eager to 'go out' especially when she was young. She became a crew member after her post-graduate degree, but such decision had caused conflicts between her parents as her mother thought the girl had her freedom whereas the father was convinced getting married was more important. In 2003, she resigned her job because she had a baby girl with an American man, and then became a freelance writer for the same airline. In 2004, she joined Couchsurfing and started traveling again, even with an 11-month-old girl. Her host in Washington D.C, an ex-army woman, admired her and said she was so tough to travel with a baby girl. Born to Travel made some more similar trips and said CS was so great that she could share her own traveling experience with some other people and learned local knowledge from her host. She gave an example:

> "If I love Turkish chicken so much and I go there. At most I can taste real
> Turkish chicken from a restaurant. But how am I gonna learn making it
> from the local people? Do I just suddenly talk to them?"

But what made Born to Travel so dedicated to CS and becoming a Nomadic Ambassador was the hospitality her couch-surfing hosts had shown. She recalled with gratitude to the ex-army woman from D.C.:

> *"She took care of me so much that I felt embarrassed as an old woman. When my baby girl pooped, she drove to buy diaper for me……When you were helped, you want to reciprocate."*

*Riikka: "To meet new people from the globe"*

Riikka, a twenty-one-year-old exchange student at Macau University, was my first guest and stayed for one night in my dormitory in early October. She browsed the Hong Kong community forum and became interested in a hiking trip. As it would begin quite early in the morning, she requested to stay on my couch for one night. I met her at the harbor, had a walk, and took her to Temple Street for dinner with Pot Rice, which she appreciated so much and said,

> *"I wouldn't have come to here (Temple Street) and eat in a local eatery (I introduced Pot Rice as a kind of traditional low-class eatery). Nor would I know that Hong Kong has so much natural beauty (from the picture she saw about her coming hiking trip)."*

Before coming to Macau, she had been an exchange student in Japan too. She still revised Japanese every day and started learning Cantonese. Learning foreign languages and meeting people from other countries in the world are both her interests, which CS gives her the connections to do so. As Hong Kong Communities are bigger than Macau's, Riikka often participates in those events held in Hong Kong. Since I knew Riikka, she has already come to Hong Kong five times solely for CS and met different people.

*Roddy: "A good thing to do"*

I met Roddy, who is in his late thirties, at a local event held by CSers. He is an instructor in a university in Hong Kong and a law consultant. He stays in Hong Kong mostly, but had been to the U.S., Thailand and France too, so he possesses good command of Cantonese, Mandarin, English as well as Thai and French. Not only a fascinating experience of meeting people from different cultures, it is more like an everyday life to him. In addition, Roddy preferred staying in 'his own room', which means a hotel or an inn, when traveling or working abroad as it takes time to organize a couch-surfing deal on the internet. Instead of being a guest, he joined CS to be a host. Roddy actively let people surf his flat in Causeway Bay. He even bought one more blanket when there was a European couple coming. The reason for more 'contributing' than 'taking' was, in his own words,

> *"To me that is a good thing to do. Something is good in nature and you want to do that not for any particular reason."*

He also mentioned about the experience sharing as Born to Travel did:

> *"Sometimes Couch-surfers can bring you their travel experience. Of course sometimes those teenage backpackers all talk about adventure and things which are really similar, but I am talking about some personal thought. Like a few youngsters from the UK said they feel more identified with social problems in Malaysia as Britain is also an ethnically diverse place. That was interesting."*

*LiteraryGypsy: "I appreciate the premise"*

LiteraryGypsy is a doctor of psychology from New York City in her mid-forties whom I met in an eatery meeting organized by her. I can hardly list all languages she speaks, amazing travel experience she has had and the professional titles she holds. So I refer back to her CS titles as a City Ambassador of Seoul and Hong Kong Island, a Country Ambassador of South Korea and going to be of China, and a coordinator of a new member welcome group. Actually, her devotion to CS is clearly written in her profile:

> *"I appreciate its premise and the organization of its website--and its ability to connect otherwise diverse people from around the globe"*

She shared with me with passion a story told by two Estonian women who were once her guests:

> *"Right before the breakdown of SAAR, one day thousands of Estonian people gathered in a gymnasium and started singing their folk songs and anthems which were forbidden by SAAR for more than 20 years. They claimed to be the first rebels against SAAR and called that day the Singing Revolution. If I hadn't met them, I probably wouldn't know anything about this small country. But after I heard the story and met these two nice ladies, I felt much closer to this country."*

*Tiffany: "To make friends, to have fun"*

Tiffany is twenty-four years old. She was born and raised in Hong Kong until she was eight. She has returned to Hong Kong from the U.S. with a Bachelors degree and now works as an English teacher, while pursuing a Masters degree at a local university. She joined CS as a

socializing place. As she is a shy and introverted person, having only a few friends in Hong Kong, she finds events proposed on the CS Hong Kong Community like 'Barbeque in Shek O' and 'all-you-can-eat for sushi' relaxing as, "you don't know these people. It is not like clubbing where sudden departure would seem impolite. You can always leave without obligation." To Tiffany, she can learn about opening herself up as "hanging out at a crazy night, talking like a dummy won't hurt as who you are talking to would probably be leaving the city tomorrow."

She joined the international students group and made regular friends there. CS also serves as a socializing hub for international residents in Hong Kong as a number of Hong Kong Community's members are non-ethnic Chinese.

*Kin: "Making Gwei Lo[2] friend and practice my English"*

Kin is twenty years old, born and raised in Hong Kong, who has already worked for a few years after taking the public examination, HKCEE. Through taking a look at his profile, it was shown that Kin has no CS friend or couch-surfing experience before. I invited him to a luncheon but he refused because he was having an exam, so we exchanged MSN contacts. Later I understood that Kin would like to be a host to show hospitality and practice his English. However, like most local students in Hong Kong, he lives with his parents in a small flat which has insufficient space for a couch-surfer. So I asked him why he has not joined any events in which he could also practice English and meet foreign friends since he registered in March. Then he said he has not joined any CS event because it is scary to go out with a bunch of people speaking fluent English. Yet, he still checks out new topics in forum.

*Aster --- Unexpectedness on the road*

Aster is a twenty-four-year-old female, also born and raised in Hong Kong and obtained her degree in Bachelors of Art in Humanities. I posted on 'Community' about my research and asked for funny and amazing couch-surfing stories. Aster was so excited to see someone "bringing CS, such great invention into the academia". Indeed, Aster's appreciation to the idea behind CS was shown with her comment on her round-Europe trip in the past July.

> *"To compare CS and hostels - only through CS you can really look into the locality, the way local people live, from their food, interiors, fashion, language, social life to mode of thought. While in hostels you meet travelers from all over the world, you explore the city from another foreign perspective like yourself. Sometimes it could be fun with such cultural collision to a third culture. During my 4-month trip in Europe I spend 1/3 time in CS, 1/3 in hostels, 1/3 time on night trains. I admit that CS makes the best of my time."*

Aster got into embarrassing situations while couch-surfing due to gender or cultural difference.

*"I had a bad experience when surfing in the south of France, in a single mid-aged man's fancy apartment. Based on his tremendous positive comments on his profile I held strong confidence in him before I arrived. But he was such a flirty, lonely, yucky man who was mad, perverted about young girls. He brought me to a nude beach where I rejected. We had furious negotiation on such 'cultural difference' on our bodies. The next day came two more young girl-surfers from Canada. He took us on a car ride to a castle on the hilltop at night, asking us to take pictures with him while acting like French-kissing him. I refused to do so because I thought both the posture and the man were terribly disgusting. However the girls felt it was quite fun. At the end I was forced to do so in such a 'funny mood' of everyone. He didn't allow me to lock the door of the bathroom when I was bathing. His reason is: 'Girl, if you have an accident nobody can help!' At the end I found some 'camera-like' device in his bathroom, after taking shower for two days. I couldn't be sure because I was very ignorant about electronic devices, and his house was full of these kinds of objects. You don't know whether it is simply the man's taste on electronic stuff or he is doing something else on purpose. Lastly, I found him sleeping on the sofa with a bath robe but no pants, when I woke up from the room in the morning. He was posing exaggeratingly, with his hairy legs opened wide, showing his penis completely. I was quite sure he should be conscious at that moment although he was acting like sleeping, because I made a big noise in the room packing my stuff for about half an hour, which should wake anybody up. THIS HOLY SHIT!!! I hesitated to write a complaint because I found only compliments from other girls on his profile. I was confused if my bad feeling came solely from my Chinese cultural perception or what."*

*"I met a frequent CS host in my host's flat in Portugal, he shared his pictures with me and many other surfers. In the pictures he and his girl-surfer were all nude on the beach. I felt like intruding into someone's privacy because those were the bodies of someone I didn't know, and I saw just too clearly her breasts and pubic area, and the penis of someone standing next to me, again and again. I can't believe that a girl was ever introduced to so many strangers from all over the world, by her nude pictures in such way. While the man was so happy playing the slide show, I*

*and other surfers from Austria felt so odd being the viewers."*

These stories are funny, yet actually reveal gender and cultural conflicts in couch-surfing which I will examine later. As Aster told me, this kind of experience was, although awkward and even dangerous at the time, still worthy experiences. Of course she knew the bottom line and did not mean to choose such 'yucky men' deliberately, yet that's life. One has ups and downs in his/her life and the same goes for trips. She could learn how to avoid danger for next time. It was not all bad experiences like these on the road. Sometimes, she met really great hosts with *"cool mums, very lovely children in divorced families, super crazy young girls, very nice gentlemen and of coz, some flirty freaks",* which is not possible in any other form of traveling.

*Commentary*
The seven informants above talked about the meanings of CS to them. All of them said they want to make new friends but what is embedded in this statement is pretty diverse. However, they can be sorted into three groups to look into their general trend.

By age and educational background, Born to Travel, Roddy and LiteraryGypsy are all above thirty and possess a higher level of education. Riikka, Aster and Tiffany are all under thirty years old, have obtained or will obtain a Bachelors degree. Kin is twenty and has not received tertiary education.

Referring back to field-notes, it is not hard to notice that the oldest group with the highest educational background, participate in CS as a self-fulfillment, identification with a set of values, all of which is motivated from the inside. The other two younger groups tend to focus on experiencing of local culture in travel and the fascination of intercultural friendship.

*As a comparison, different groups show different meanings of CS.*
Of course some members have more straightforward reasons to join: cut a great deal of accommodation cost for poor travelers such as some backpackers. Some others assume that CS is a place for people to look for romantic relationship. Roddy recalled a couch-surfing request from a woman who actually had a place to stay in Hong Kong:

> *"She called me and said we could meet in this restaurant before. When I get there, she was dressed up like attending a ball. I felt something wrong in the conversation. It seemed that she has taken it as a date. After the dinner, she has probably noticed my meaning, and so said that she would rather stay with her relatives. I didn't know she was planning to stay in her relatives' house originally."*

Field notes---Romantic experience, Sex and Couch-surfing

As previously mentioned, some members of Couchsurfing.com consider the website as another Match.com. Aster and Roddy's experiences are only a tip of the iceberg from a lot of romantic, often awful experiences in couch-surfing. Actually, the founders of CS regulated its members not to use it for dating. Members are asked to check other's identity on their passports, and encouraged to verify their own by making a small credit card contribution of about $10 US dollars to CS. "Couch-surfing is not a dating site. We do not tolerate members using couch-surfing to find romance or sexual relationships," said forum administrators. I received tons of responses, some even with hostility when I casually put "Your romantic experience on CS" as an open topic on the discussion group.

> *"I was in Leon and …..."*

> *"Please know that CS is not a website for dates."*

> *"Your post is misleading. CS is a site for cultural exchange instead of romantic relationships."*

Certainly, some people are offended if the idealistic principle of CS is stained. Yet a little research on peoples' profiles led to an expected result. The number of request for a couch is much higher for a pretty girl than a middle-aged lady. The implication was that some people do choose their hosts. The administrators of CS regulate users, stipulating that users cannot seek romantic experience through CS. But this is what occasionally happens, even if both parties did not intend to do so in the beginning. The relationship between host and guest is one important aspect on couch-surfing.

*Vienna: "Unexpected relationship"*

Vienna, born and raised in Hong Kong, is thirty-one years old now. She holds a degree in Public Relations and has worked in a public relations company for several years. In the summer of 2008, she joined the 'working holiday scheme' and went to Sydney, Australia. According to Vienna, the working holiday scheme allows more flexible working hours and more days-off because employers know participants are seeking a relaxing holiday and cultural experience rather than a permanent job. Without devoting too great a commitment to the job, she could travel around Australia. There she met David through CS and stayed with him for a week. David drove Vienna to many fun and beautiful places, as most hosts would do. Vienna said she took David as a gentleman and a kind friend at the time. She added that David should have been thinking the same as he had a girlfriend who worked in another state in Australia. Yet, they kept contact through MSN and in the last three months of her stay in Australia, Vienna quit her job in Sydney and actually stayed in Brisbane with David. She

finally won in the eternal triangle, though both she and David knew a long-distance relationship can be tough.

They are still in good relationship up to now. To my surprise, when I contacted her a few days ago, she was in Brisbane. Vienna never expected any romantic experience in surfing, but it was all natural when both David and she got to know each other more.

*Jack: "The Hippie"*

To call Jack a hippie may not be right. As a host, he acted as a gentleman and tried to be helpful. Desire for romantic experience was not the reason behind his hospitality, at least by others' feedbacks towards him. A Masters student from San Diego renting an apartment near his school has written an interesting sentence on his profile: "most of my CS experience was pleasant, sometimes friendly, sometimes out of my anticipation". I asked about its implications. Though Jack told me it did not mean what I reckoned, he did share with me some stories concerning sex during hosting or surfing. He said frankly, "sex was what happened sometimes between couch-surfers, especially young travelers who were alone for a long time during trip and suddenly welcome in a warm home with coffee and food served". Jack once hosted two people in his tiny apartment, but he got a mail from Katy who was driving down from SF by a rental car and needed a place to stay. At the beginning he thought his flat was too crowded and was about to turn her down. After rolling through Katy's profile, he found Katy should be an easy-going person and have the same favorite movies with him. So he changed his mind and took Katy back home.

> *"We then slept side by side to each other on my bed. In the morning, I found her snuggling against me and the two French gone, leaving a probably thank-you note on the table. Suddenly I felt my space with Katy back and then we made out hungrily and ......Probably Katy felt the same way...... A private space is miraculous. Sometimes words are not needed."*

Jack frankly shared with me his thought about couch-surfing, "If someone who came to my place happens to be a cute girl, there is no harm in seeing how far things go……Well, I would not call it love or a relationship. Both of us know soon this person in front of you will disappear and go back to her life." It is thus the attitude, instead of act, that I decided to call him a hippie. I am convinced that many travelers on CS have the same attitude towards couch-surfing. Provided with a nice chat, a cute face or just a moment of fancy, relations can go to the extent of sex.

*Justin Clark*

Justin Clark was not my informant. I found his article on the internet in which one comment of him about CS really struck me profoundly.

> *"Free couches and free love aren't the same thing, and yet the symbiosis of sex and travel is more obvious in couch surfing than any other kind of travel…The vast majority of hookups, however, are probably accidental. When people search for a compatible host, they may inadvertently find themselves with exactly the kind of person they'd like to hook up with under other circumstances."* (Clark 2007)

Having the same experience as Jack, he explained more concisely the nature of sharing space with a 'half stranger':

> *"In a shared space, attraction is more difficult to conceal, and sometimes more problematic. For better or for worse, it all happens much faster than it would even on a date. A couch-surfing fling has no strings attached: the guest will move onto a new couch, a new host, a new city."* (Clark 2007)

**Commentary**

For Vienna's case, I would quote Clark's saying as a possible explanation:

> *"A couch-surfing fling doesn't just begin or end at the airport curb, however. Couch-surfers tend to see themselves as part of a tribe; unlike two people hooking up at a bar, they meet under an altruistic premise. One does not host with the expectation of anything in return, and that conditions the circumstances of the hook-up — it seems less like an act of self-gratification than one of mutual generosity. In the best of circumstances, couch-surfing puts the kindness back into sex, and perhaps relationships in general."* (Clark 2007: 2)

As a result, Vienna's unexpected relationship was probably foreshadowed by David's generosity and hospitality during the stay. Although repaying for David's kindness may not be the main reason, a favorable first impression was indeed developed between them during Vienna's stay, which lead them to get closer to each other.

If Vienna goes well with David, and I hope they will, they will get married. Actually CS has already become an inadvertent matchmaker through couch-surfing. However, it has to be noted that hosting and surfing stories seldom end up in long-term friendship or relationship and we are not to romanticize such encounters. After all, these fellow friends, brothers, or even sweethearts, whatever the relationship feels like, were total strangers not too long ago.

As Bauman has said in *Liquid Modernity* about the concept of 'stranger' and *mis*-meeting, these are people whose encounters

> *"ends as abruptly as it starts……no shared recollection: nothing to fall*
> *back on and to go by in the course of the present encounter. The meeting of*
> *strangers is an event without a past. More often than not, it is also an event*
> *without a future (it is expected to be, hoped to be, free of a future), a story*
> *most certainly 'not to be continued', a one-off chance, to be consummated*
> *in full while it lasts and on the spot, without delay and without putting the*
> *unfinished business off to another occasion…… At the time of meeting,*
> *there is no room for trial and error, no learning from mistakes and no hope*
> *for another go."* (Bauman 2000: 95)

Under these circumstances, it is not hard to know why things can happen faster than a date. The lack of words by Jack and Katy was exactly because a single word at that moment would ruin their relationship as *half-stranger* and turn them into 'new friends' or any other equivalent form, which might then make the act of kissing or sexual intercourse awkward. Deep mutual understanding through conversation is usually a prerequisite in intimate relationship and friendship. However, in the case of strangers, impulse is everything. It is similar to one-night-stands at clubs where favorable impressions of the moment are much more important than characteristics. Words, therefore, were redundant when Jack had private space with Katy. More importantly, they both felt favorable impressions towards each other. What they had to do and did was simply consummating in full while it lasted and on the spot.

A more exemplifying on-the-spot scenario was shared by Clark about one of his informants, "In the middle of the ride down the escalator at Angel Station, he kissed me. I had two choices: slap him or kiss him back" (Clark 2007: 3).

As mentioned, the encounter between hosts and guests are similar to strangers. Yet a stranger usually does not approach another stranger. So, I term CSers in couch-surfing as *half-strangers*, which I will explain in the later section. This may be something non-existent without internet. One saying from Clark happened to echo my proposition, "Our parents had communes. What our generation has, I thought, is couch surfing" (Clark 2007: 2).

**Analysis**

Through the ethnography, it should be shown that the internet is bringing in an unprecedented form of traveling. Now, travelers are making themselves indistinguishable from locals by hanging around with them through participation in internet social network like CS. Under the circumstances, traveling is evolving from merely stage performance where the two involved parties did not get many interactions, to a level of mutual participation where travelers and locals cooperate to construct an image of the authenticity, which I will explain later. From my point of view, intercultural communication cannot be more direct than this kind. In the following sections, I aim to discuss the essential nature and the social network system of Couchsurfing, followed by a study of relationship between CS and globalization.

*On Communicative Structure and Reciprocity of Couch-surfing*

Before understanding the relationship between couch-surfing and globalization, it is necessary to first define the nature of CS. It is internet-based, but involves or even initiates real-life activities, which is one of the fundamental differences from other virtual communities such as online forums where conversations among multiple parties seem to be the only function rather than gatherings in real life.

"A virtual community is a social collectivity sustained primarily through ongoing communication process. It is not geographically defined or depends on existing social relationships" (Bagozzi & Dholakia 2002: 3) explains that anyone with similar interests, hobbies or people with the same goals can be part of a community. As a virtual community is a computer-mediated platform through the internet, people from all over the world can share information with each other, regardless of physical boundaries. Thus, social relations can extend across borders. With instant messengers and social networking websites such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, we can contact anyone on earth almost immediately and access their latest information. This is about the distinction of time and space

Internet also provides a decentralized communication environment where autonomous individuals can interact with other people (Miller 1996). Without a ruling authority, internet users can express whatever they want on the internet. Viewers can also take in any information they like. Unlike the past, which radio or TV served to be a one-way communication, internet requires multiple cooperative interactions among users otherwise a forum cannot be sustained. Yet, why would people be motivated to contribute so much into a virtual community like forums or CS instead of just taking resources from it? For the biggest interest of a rational being, for example, they are not supposed to say anything or post up valuable information and resources on a forum but enjoy a movie uploaded by others, or not to respond to a confused traveler on accommodation, even if it is an easy job. By the same rationale, it is weird that people are so kind to foreigners who are essentially strangers, by driving them around the city or even cooking meals for them. Sohn, in his book *Social Network Structure and the Internet: Collective Dynamics in Virtual Communities* (2008), gave us a lot of insights into this question.

Sohn analyzed information exchange on the internet. He found out whether people 'free ride' on a virtual community depends on its exchange structure of information. If it is a *group-generalized structure*, which means that a group member can get resources from a pool where everyone else can also generate benefits in it, people tend not to cooperate. An electronic bulletin board is an example. However, if it is a *network-generalized structure* where users receive and give out resources through their interpersonal networks, people are more devoted. (Sohn 2008: 52) CS is exactly such a structure.

The major difference between these two is how the responsibility to maintain a public resource pool with useful and adequate information is distributed to members. On an electronic bulletin board, for example, one can free ride on others' contribution with no cost to

the pool or other members. Plus, their irresponsibility is hard to be detected. Thus, whether others contribute or not, it is of a member's greatest benefit not to contribute because providing that provision of a public good always carries a cost. Such situation is more prominent in big groups than in small groups. That was the reason why Sohn quoted in his book that "a large group will fail, while a small group is likely to succeed" (Sohn 2008: 44). This may help explain why a forum, for example, HK Discuss or Uwants, is always divided into sub-groups. Forums and groups of CS are also classified geographically or hobbies accordingly.

On the other hand, in a private communication space, like the personal profile on CS, the owners' contribution – being an Ambassador, taking up responsibility of the group or showing up punctually to promised couch-surfers are all revealed. When everyone is supposed to benefit from the website and other members' hospitality, members' contributions are more important as a proof of their effort and support for sustaining the group in this virtual community. One's cost of maintaining his/her private space does not vary with regards to how much other members of the same community contribute.

As a consequence, we can make sense of a series of facilities and a descriptive personal profile on CS. Examples of details shown of a member includes percentage of couch-surfing requests replied, status (a 'coffee or drink' member, a couch provider, or a voluntary country ambassador), feedbacks by guests or hosts, number of friends on CS and friend type. The feedback system is particularly essential in maintaining the integrity and cooperation of members. It hints on the success of eBay as a platform for internet business which a lot of people doubted its trustworthiness and accountability at the beginning. Both eBay and Couchsurfing, therefore, could sustain and even grew to become a giant in their respective field with the feedback system.

In general, group-generalized structure like forums tends to abate their drawbacks by learning from network-based communities. So more and more of them have introduced ranking systems determined by the number of posts and replies members have made. Some subgroups are restricted to members of a certain ranking only. In local forums at least, this measure was not implemented until several years ago. The whole habitat of the internet communication and information exchange is constantly changing.

*The Development of Tourism: What is the Changing Structure of Trips?*

Through media, people from various corners of the world may have built up a beautiful perception of the Other. It can be a documentary about a Yunnan minority village with a different marriage system, or simply a program introducing Hong Kong. But the two-dimensional screen seems insufficient for most of the viewers. They wanted to bear eye-witness to those brilliant stories and exotic rituals in order to verify whether those programs are telling the truth. This was the origin of modern tourist industry with organized mass tours especially designed for busy city dwellers, so that one can go to as many

'visit-worthy' spots as possible within the shortest time. Scholars have been criticizing the work-nature and the commodification embedded in such kind of traveling (Richards and Wilson 2004: 77).

Yet tour-taking is eventually abandoned by people whom we call "backpackers" who prefer traveling by themselves. It is claimed that as people grow up in the West with the stories of famous adventurers like Marco Polo and Da Gama, the romantic and mysterious Oriental has always enchanted many people. By following the footsteps of these pioneers, some westerners had the perception that they are doing the same adventure as their childhood heroes (Richards and Wilson 2004: 39). Such perceptions were said to be the motives of the very first drifters, and later backpackers. Those backpackers believe that what one sees in tours is all fake and meaningless, like the case in Toraja of Indonesia (Yamashita 2003), and their sense of authenticity is justified by their non-participation into the packaged version of destination by the tourist industry. They mean to have a real version of their destination 'by themselves'. Yet critical scholars have been revealing the similarity between backpackers and their counterpart, the mass tourists, and the embedded consumerism. There are other typologies for backpacking like gap-backing and flash-packing (Richards and Wilson 2004: 56).

I will not go into too much detail between mass tourists and backpackers, but want to point out one similarity, that is travelers' common desire for authenticity. Even for mass tourists, no one wants to go all the way to the middle of nowhere to see a drama. If we take tourists as passive participants in the structure of tourism, we ignore that every individual possesses an agency against existing structure. This is what has allowed backpacking to thrive, but this form of traveling has developed to another structure. The rise of guidebook giant *Lonely Planet* results in a lot of backpackers who are supposedly "off the beaten track" are in fact actually doing an identical trip. Ethnography always tells of incidence where backpackers with the same guidebook on the same route meet in the same hostel, because everything was planned according to the book (Notar 2006: 30).

Under this circumstance, it is possible that couch-surfing is a new form of agency, where travelers try to seek authenticity through being involved with local people as they believe that what they are shown through tours has been modified. My hosting experience with three Finnish backpackers and couch-surfers was convincing evidence that some travelers, especially young backpackers nowadays, have this kind of thought or at least greatly appreciate their chance to interact with local people and see something unexpected. During their stay in Hong Kong, besides going to such conventional tourist destinations as the Peak and the Big Buddha, they joined me on a river-tracking in Tai Po, after which one told me that it was the most rewarding trip he had in Hong Kong: "It is so nice to have a hike after all these urban cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen. I wouldn't have known that Hong Kong has so much natural beauty, if we haven't met." Hong Kong is well known as a metropolitan city with its skyscrapers and shopping paradise. Yet what I showed to this

Finnish friend is contrary to that 'fact' or orthodoxy viewpoint. In this sense, he built up a perception about Hong Kong that is different from what ordinary tourists would say about Hong Kong.

With CS, there come more genuine versions of destinations for travelers. However, in a post-modern manner, there are no objective answers in response to subjective questions like how a place is, and performance also exists in an individual level. A story of "What is Hong Kong" is not necessarily truer from me than from the so-called constructed general view with my own intention and perception.

But we can surely say that traveling with such hospitality exchange networks like CS would give travelers greater involvement with locals, which was originally the goal of backpackers, and unique traveling experience with real local people. Many Finnish people may have passed through Hong Kong in their previous backpacking trips. By seeing brilliant night views of Hong Kong does not make anyone special. But how many Finnish people have done river-tracking with a local college student in Tai Po? When long backpacking trips are more often than not taken as a *rite de passage* and identity recognition for youngsters in European countries like Finland, those with long backpacking experience stand out from those without. In turn, those with a different story to tell on their journey would stand out in front of his/her counterparts.

However, a breakthrough in human agency will soon become a structure itself, making the conflict between agents and structures never-ending by nature. To quote a comment on Lonely Planet by *The New Yorker*, "like Apple and Starbucks and Ben & Jerry's, all of which began as plucky alternatives, Lonely Planet has become a mainstream brand" (Wheeler and Wheeler: 2005). The essence of backpacking is not as we know of it from the Lonely Planet today. It was neither a taken-for-granted form of traveling nor was it as easy as it is today (backpacking facilities have become flawless all around the world) Nowadays, when college students are booking a flight, ready with their backpacks, they will imagine the whole trip as adventurous and even educational. Backpacking, once an alternative, is now a big mainstream.

Then the question comes as whether 'staying in a local's home while traveling' is a new invention or another future structure of traveling. Perhaps now it is cool for one to say he/she has a couch-surfing experience and so on. Sooner or later, the supposedly special experience with local people on traveling may become cliché, similar to the development of backpacking. Here I am talking about the macro form of traveling, instead of the particular stories of every individual. I still believe that CS has brought differences and changes to traveling as travelers' perceptions of the destination becomes very unique and various depending on his/her host.

When it seems so hard to get outside a structure for another angle of perception, some travelers can get a glance into authenticity, give up struggling and take traveling in a hedonistic manner. Scholars give them a name: post-modern travelers (Richards and Wilson 2004: 92-109).

*Couchsurfing: Facilitator of a World of Liquid Modernity and Cultural Supermarket.*
The essence of CS is, as previously mentioned, a network-generalized communication platform which facilitates real-world encounter. It lies between traditional means of communication and the modern one. When internet did not exist, communication, more often than not, takes place between friends who know each other. However, with internet, what happens on online forums is opposite. People do not recognize all other members who are in virtual conversation with them. Yet in CS, as in a lot of privatized network-generalized communities, one's "friend" can be solely someone who has a simple chat with him/her online last night. Normally, we do not consider a stranger who suddenly approaches and talks to us on the street as a friend. This is possible and frequently happens within CS when two 'strangers' talk and come out to meet each other. As a result, *it builds a link from stranger to friend, virtual reality to daily-life*. This is the context of the '*half-stranger*' I mentioned before, which is important if we think back on the case of Jack and Katy. They are but more than total strangers.

The concept of *half-stranger* gives us insight on not only romantic stories on CS, it is indeed an element or facilitator of the concept of liquid modernity (Bauman 2000) and cultural supermarket (Mathews 2000).

From couch to couch, couch-surfers' trips are sliced up to many encounters with hosts or meet-ups with local communities in various places and countries. For example, my three Finnish backpacker guests told me their experiences and stories with other hosts, which were rather separate and short-term in terms of their seven-month trip (from Finland, crossing Russia and Siberia and all the way down to China until they arrived Hong Kong, couch-surfing all the way). Yet each host has different characteristics and I bet they had to constantly adjust and adapt themselves in order to suit the daily lives and habits of hosts. Considering the short stay with a particular host or guest, both parties tend not to express themselves too much in the beginning, but remain courteous because one way or another they will not make good friends with soon leaving "friends".

This is similar to the situation of liquid modernity as proposed by Bauman. Social relationship between the host and guest has no time to solidify before the guest is gone, most likely for good. Thus, a harmonic stay with the last host does not guarantee the same situation with the next host. More importantly, the last experience does not give any lesson on how to deal with next one nicely. The uncertainty towards changing hosts reflects what Bauman said of the situation in recent times. With rapidly changing social environments and institutions, nobody can solidify their experience that leads to some life-long goals or values (Bauman 2000:113). For instance, the belief of an ancient farmer can be firm because not only he, but his ancestors and sons lived and will live on the same piece of land as a farmer. Yet, our life nowadays is like couch-surfing, when slices of different tastes are put on the same plate to become the main dish, the main dish loses a consistent flavor, as do the slices.

Cultural identity is another aspect I want to explore in CS. An interesting phenomenon

on CS, with reference to the couch-surf request I received and on the community forums, is that identity is negotiable. One can receive E-mail, not necessarily couch-surf requests, like "I am an Indonesian and am very interested in Hong Kong……Of course you are welcome to my city……Can we make friends?" but "Hi there, my name is Chris……You seem to be an interesting person……I like reading George Orwell too." In short, Chris can be either Chris or a Taiwanese, or both because work on CS. This hints on why sometimes hosts are so kind to their guests. They take themselves as representatives of their own country or city and their hospitality has something to do with national honor, even though this is just a casual meeting between two persons. When I was couch-surfing in Zhaoqing, China, my host Rantu was very nice. He tidied up the guest room in his luxurious house, prepared blankets, showed me around downtown and paid the taxi fee. He even made me vegetarian noodle before I left. To begin with, Rantu is indeed a nice person. However, he keeps telling me merits about Zhaoqing on the way and acts it out himself as a good Zhaoqing-*ren* (person from Zhaoqing), which made me feel that personal characteristics was not the sole reason behind his hospitality.

When hospitality is conceived as something related to bigger than oneself, it becomes a must regardless of personal merits. Whether the guest is behaving properly or whether the two parties are getting along well, it is necessary for the host to treat his guest well. Vice versa is true to the guest. In the beginning, I thought the rise of such hospitality exchange networks like CS would decrease the weight of national identity against others with more encounters and time spent with other nationals, through which people appreciate other's culture or find out that they are not really that different, a positive consequence by any means. Yet, whether or not this is true, the sense of national identity may be strengthened on the contrary, as explained by Rantu's case.

Not only can CSers negotiate between personal and national identity, they can also pick and choose from the "*global cultural supermarket*" (Mathews 2000: preface). It signifies a world where the concept that we all belong to a particular national culture is problematic, because in today's affluent society we are able to choose aspects of our life. I argue that couch-surfing is facilitating this proposition. Personally, I have been to a Bollywood movie gathering organized by a few Pakistanis and an African drumming workshop. I have also noticed some other activities such as Mexican movie day and IDAHO event 2010 which opposes discrimination against homosexuality. I would not have come across these events if not for CS. If eBay serves to be a place where one can buy others' goods regardless of geographic location, CS is a network where one can pick and choose whatever national culture, if that still exists, they want to adopt, whether or not in the middle of traveling. This is why CS is so popular. It features the biggest and most convenient cultural supermarket and it is a free one.

**Internet and a World of Globalization? Couch-surfing and ideoscape**

Much of globalization is about the spreading of ideology and governance under the rules of capitalism and how cultures are sold as commodities in global tourism. To add in the growing factor of social networks like CS into the discussion, CS is a mutation; CS has nothing to do with money. From the offering of a place to sleep, free tour guide, to cooking a local cuisine for the guest, everything is on a voluntary basis. Reward in monetary terms for the host's hospitality is not expected. The guest, however, is only expected to appreciate what this "stranger" exemplifies about the kindness of his nationals, and reciprocate this host should he/she become your guest one day.

Relation between travelers and locals then becomes different. One thing about the tourist gaze and so much discussion on tourism is the material inequality implicitly discovered by the local people, which is said to have negative effects on local culture sometimes. Moreover, travelers normally pay for hospitality service they receive. In these senses, relations between tourists and locals build up on money. Yet in the case of CS, the superior status induced from paying the local for service is gone when monetary return is not expected. Moreover, the travelers are supposed to observe house rules and local customs, unless one wants to degrade his/her own nationals by giving ignorance and arrogance in return to hospitality. In this case, however, travelers and locals are equal, which social setting is so crucial to how perceptions are formed of a place.

If we remember what mass tours are like; tourists are stay in hotels, transit to a coach, eat in designated restaurants where no locals will sit in the same table, or even eat in the same restaurant sometimes. In contrast, couch-surfers dwell in exactly a local house; hang around with local people, which all blur the identity of a tourist. Local people may not even identify tourists when they are spotted with local folks in an event. For the travelers, more interaction with local people should arouse more diverse answers if questions like "what is Hong Kong" are given to them. A general idea about one place would be more and more challenged since everyone's experience there is different. Some may stay with rich people in the Peak and get amazed by the affluence of Hong Kongers. Some may however, stay in public housing flats and find out the fact that a lot of people are actually poor in Hong Kong though its GNP is within top 10 in the world. Then when these two people discuss about Hong Kong, they either have conflicts or find out that there is a serious wealth gap in Hong Kong. In any case, more diverse views should result. As for the local people, their perceptions on tourists will also change. An assumption about tourism is, those who can afford to travel are mostly from developed countries and those visited have never been abroad. What they can tell of the white Europeans visiting their country is that they are rich, since they can come here showing off their wealth but we cannot afford to go there. In the past, where interaction between locals and tourists were few, nothing more can be known. Yet with CS, many poor families may interact with visitors for the first time in their lives and gain more positive information about those visitors besides from the fact that they are from a richer country. Scholars have talked

about such reverse situations of tourism where travelers themselves become the scenic spots of locals (Richards and Wilson: 2004). They may even "export" some local culture to those travelers, which is actually coherent to Inda and Rosaldo's idea that globalization is not only a one-way process (2002: 1-34). When some universal values which are rampant in developed countries may be spread due to tourism, local ideas may as well be appreciated and picked up by travelers. In this way, intercultural communication may become more positive, and more importantly, the global ideoscape more complicated.

This is actually the essence of internet where all kinds of ideas are allowed. What CS is doing can be seen as what internet is doing on our lives in one aspect: it provides a platform for free interaction and ideological exchange on a global level.

Globalization allows travelers to be able to go to anywhere they want in the world, and builds linkages between people regardless of their physical separation. With Couchsurfing as an example here, the combination of both is an unpredictable world.

**Conclusion**

As student of anthropology, it is our task to see what culture is through a descriptive ethnography of a certain people or institution. Yet, in today's globalized world, where the existence of a particular set of cultures is doubted, it is sometimes questionable, under the shadow of post-modernism, what we are looking for exactly. Maybe it is because things are changing too fast. When we dig into the root of a certain phenomenon, more often than not we can only find a mix of everything, because everything was already so blurred under globalization. We examine how people mobilize, ideas spread, or people's connections become more distant, but how it is going to change what we are and what we will become remain unknown. Taking identity as an example, if identity is up to people's choice under a global village, we can only examine the process of globalization - how it facilitates and makes our choices towards what we want to be possible. Yet, the fundamental questions are still not answered. There does not seem to be a holistic picture of globalization, or we will boil down to the same conclusion as every study on globalization: things change faster and faster and they get mixed up with each other, which is the very definition of globalization. To the extreme, this sounds like the study of a blender with a conclusion that a blender is a blender and it blends, which is very true but is an empty proposition as well (Rong & Liang: 2005).

Perhaps, the only truth in this world is *change*. Under such circumstances, the job of anthropologists is more like a journalist's: to record these *unknown* stories. If anyone says cultural anthropology is more of a social science. Somehow we are all story tellers in our own fields. Even in modern science, with a rather short appearance in history, can be yet another belief system as claimed by some scholars. There is cultural relativism where we believe no society is more superior and no belief is more right if we take each cultural context into consideration. No story is truer. But as a story teller, we are always looking forward to more brilliant ones. Honestly I find the way anthropology interprets our world to be very

meaningful in the sense that it embraces and appreciates difference in a mixed world. This is also what I saw as the culture and ideology of CS, its founder Casey, or members from all over the world, which I think is a worthy field of study for Anthropology.

**Notes**
[1]  Leung Wing Cheong has recently completed his undergraduate degree in anthropology at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. His Email address is kenneth870412@hotmail.com.
[2]  A Cantonese word meaning "westerner."

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