

HALO - HALONG AKO

“Reconnecting
the pieces”

BEAUTY STANDARDS AND RACIAL IDENTITY CRISIS AMONG FILIPINO THIRD CULTURE KIDS



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WANDERING PIECES







HALO- HALONG AKO

WRITTEN BY: RYELLA T.

In a world that's constantly changing and evolving, finding one's place can be challenging, especially for those who have grown up between cultures. This is the challenge faced by Filipino Third Culture Kids (TCKs): individuals who spent a significant part of their lives abroad and are now adjusting to life back in the Philippines. Their experiences often involve navigating identity confusion, cultural reintegration, and differing beauty standards. To help illuminate this journey, a group of Multimedia Arts students from De La Salle–College of Saint Benilde developed an interactive project called “Halo-halong Ako”.

At its core, “Halo-halong Ako” aims to serve as a compass for Filipino TCKs navigating their return to the Philippines after years of living abroad. Through an interactive website, the project becomes more than just a digital space; it is a haven that collects stories and reflections that validate the complex emotions of coming “home.”



For Filipino TCKs, this means balancing the global perspectives they've acquired abroad with the traditions and expectations rooted in Filipino society. Upon returning, many struggle to adjust to the country's social norms, language dynamics, and beauty standards.

The team behind "Halo-halong Ako" recognized how these internal and external pressures can lead to a loss of belonging. As a response, they created a platform designed to bridge the gap, one that not only educates but also nurtures understanding, self-acceptance, and empathy among TCKs.

Ultimately, "Halo-halong Ako" stands as a digital sanctuary where Filipino TCKs can see themselves represented. It reminds them that reintegration is not about erasing who they were abroad but about embracing both worlds and shaping a new, hybrid identity. Through shared experiences, visuals, and heartfelt storytelling, the project fosters a renewed sense of belonging, proof that no one has to navigate reintegration alone.

SECTION 1 ARTICLE 2:

A STORY WORTH TELLING

WRITTEN BY: SOPHIA S.

Halo-halong ako is a gift to adjusting third culture kids who still struggles to navigate their identity in a place that doesn't quite feel like home. Through this project that went through heaps of research and interviews, the team wishes for these TCKs to feel validated, seen, and heard. It is a project for TCKs, from TCKs.

About 3 months ago, the team concluded their final term of their second year in college by successfully defending their research paper—the study behind this project—which allowed them to carry on with further production.

The study took months of writing, researching credible sources, and conducting interviews with both TCKs and known professionals. The researchers listened to each story carefully, taking note of their experiences and how they were able to overcome certain challenges.

HYBRID

CULTURE

BEAUTY

IDENTITY

HOME

The process of writing the study itself has allowed the team to be more aware of each individual's experiences which further helped them in creating a project that would benefit TCKs. The team took note of what kind of guidance TCKs needed and how fellow TCKs' presence and advice would benefit their journey.

The team envisioned this project as a platform where TCKs could share their own unique stories of navigating their identity while also helping TCK students who are still adjusting. Months of planning and production has been put into this project, making sure it's personal but at the same time informative. Through this project, the team—and hopefully others as well—came to realize that TCKs' journey with identity is distinct, yet similar in many ways. Each story, with all its differences, is one worth telling.

DITY

FITY

HOME CAN BE TWO PLACES AT ONCE

WRITTEN BY: MIKA S.

Calling two places home at once is not always easy. For me, it has always felt like living with two truths at the same time. There is gratitude in being able to call both Abu Dhabi and the Philippines my home, but there is also confusion that comes with it. No matter where I am, a part of me still seems to be searching for another place.

This feeling is something many Filipino Third Culture Kids understand deeply. Home is not always a fixed place. Sometimes it is divided between countries, memories, people, and different versions of yourself that do not always seem to fit together perfectly. You grow up carrying more than one culture, and somewhere along the way, you begin asking where you truly belong.

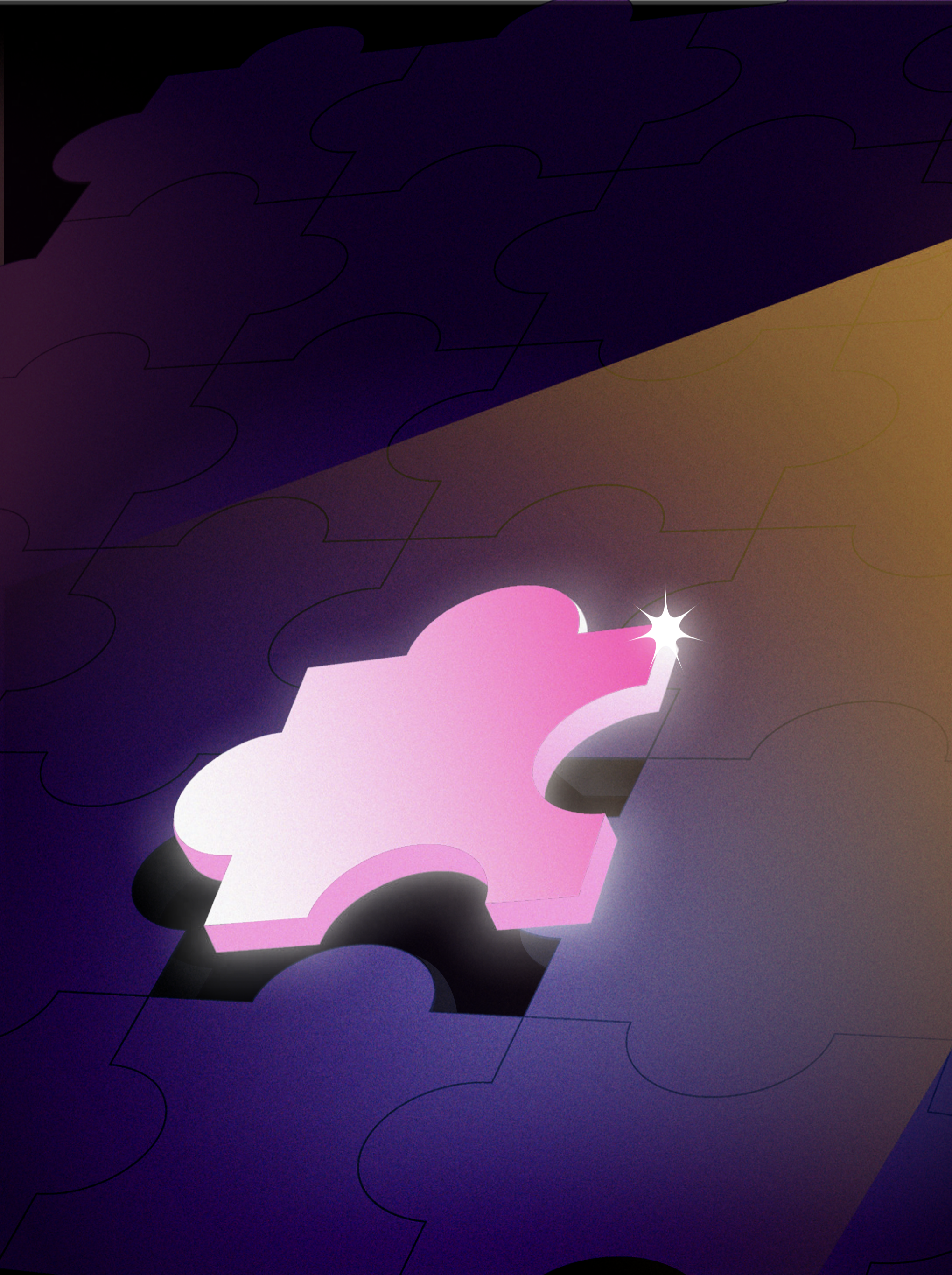
When I moved to the Philippines, I thought I was simply coming home. Instead, I found myself adjusting in ways I did not expect. I had to learn how to live in a place that felt familiar to me by blood, but unfamiliar in everyday life. I felt caught between what I had grown up with and what people expected me to already know. There were moments when I felt like I belonged to both places, but also fully to neither.

That is what makes Halo-halong Ako so meaningful to me and to our team. Created by Multimedia Arts students from De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde, the project introduces the experiences of Filipino TCKs in a way that feels honest, emotional, and real. It is not just about defining what a Third Culture Kid is, but about opening a space for stories that are often difficult to explain, even to the people living them.

Through this project, our team wanted to create a space that introduces these experiences with honesty and care. We wanted Halo-halong Ako to be more than just a presentation of a topic. We wanted it to be an opening, a way of introducing the project, the people behind it, and the stories that shaped it. It is our way of saying that these feelings are real, that these experiences matter, and that they deserve to be seen. This project reflects something I am still learning myself. Home is not always one place, and identity is not always simple. Sometimes, being in between does not mean you are lost. Sometimes, it simply means you are made from more than one world. Through Halo-halong Ako, we hope to create a space where people like us can feel understood, represented, and a little less alone.



**HOME IS NOT
ALWAYS A FIXED
PLACE.**





THE FINAL PIECE

SECTION 2 ARTICLE 1:

BECOMING YOUR OWN PERSON: WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

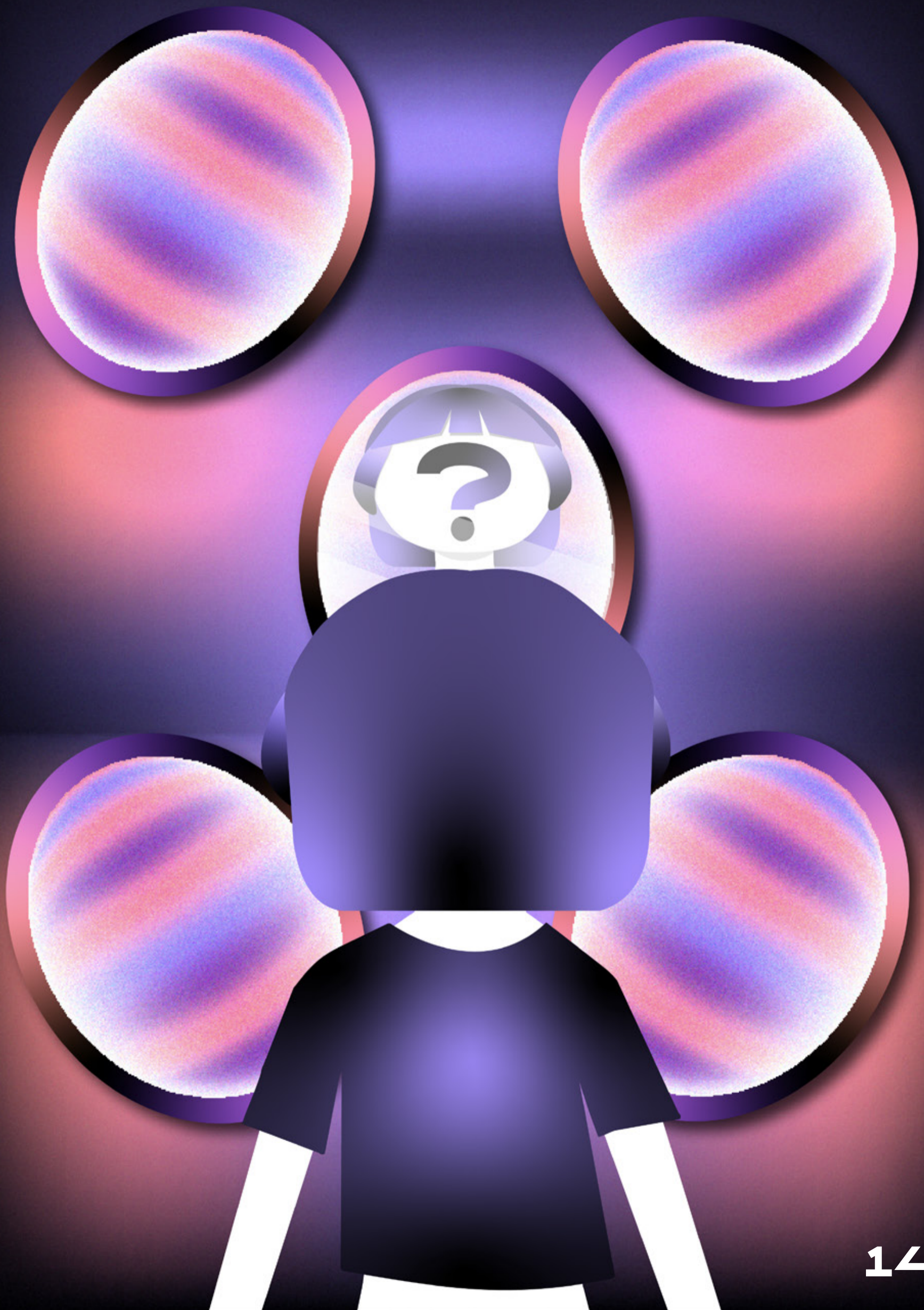
WRITTEN BY: SOPHIA S.

For third culture kids who are still adjusting during reintegration, it is almost impossible to avoid being shaped by multiculturalism that comes with this identity. It's one of the things that comes naturally with always being in a new environment—having the need to fit in by doing what others are doing. For TCKs, some often feel out of place when they can't relate to different jokes or references. Although it may feel disheartening for some, it is completely normal.

Third Culture Kids develop a sense of hybrid identity, blending behaviors from both their home and host cultures, after growing up exposed to both. Over the years, especially when they reintegrate into their home country, they may feel lost or conflicted about their true sense of identity. It is throughout their reintegration journey that they eventually develop a stronger sense of identity.

Becoming your own person and accepting these traits about yourself is the key to developing confidence and maintaining a healthier state of mind. Research shows that having the freedom and confidence to be authentically yourself promotes good mental health, connection, and well-being. Self-expression encompasses how you speak, how you present yourself, and how you choose to act. Understanding what personally works for you based on your own beliefs and preferences is the key to fully accepting who you really are.

In the case of TCKs, this also includes finding out your own personal style without feeling pressured to conform to strict beauty standards. Following these influences and disregarding your personal beliefs can lead to a sense of disconnection from yourself, which may eventually turn to feeling lost, fearful, and frustrated. Having a stronger sense of self allows you to set boundaries for yourself and accept your unique differences.



LEARNING TO BELONG IN BETWEEN

Written by: Mika Salas

For Samantha, who lived in China, the adjustment came with questions about identity. She used to wonder if she was “Filipino enough,” especially when her Tagalog felt awkward or her skin got darker than it used to be. “I don’t really feel pressured to look more Filipino anymore,” she said. “Now, I just focus on what makes me feel beautiful.” Her story mirrors a quiet shift among TCKs, moving away from trying to fit into one culture’s box, and instead making space for their own definition of home and self.

Andrene and Ayneka both shared how it felt to constantly shape-shift, toning down accents, changing style, softening behavior just to blend in. But as time went on, they realized that their “in-betweenness” was something to be proud of. They learned that belonging doesn’t have to mean matching everyone else, it can mean showing up as your full, mixed self.

TA



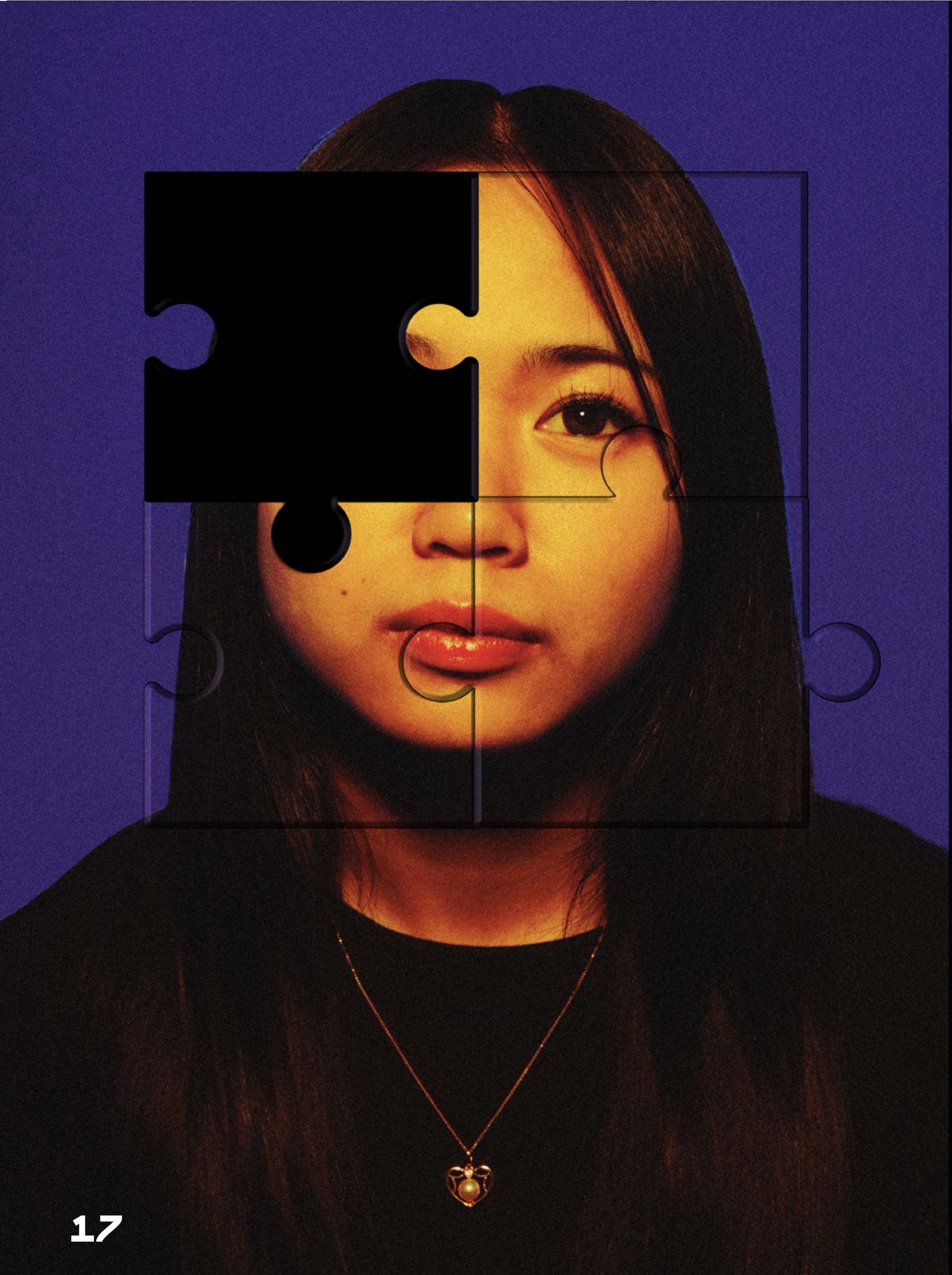


Moira found comfort through connection. She met another TCK who also grew up in the Middle East. “Finally, someone got it,” she said. There was relief in that simple understanding, that she wasn’t too foreign or too Filipino, just layered, like everyone else trying to figure out who they are.

Being in-between used to feel like a flaw. Now, it feels like a kind of freedom. These TCKs prove that identity isn’t about choosing sides, it’s about weaving your worlds together until it finally feels like you. Home isn’t one place anymore. It’s the feeling you get when you stop apologizing for the mix that makes you whole.

KEEP

PHILIPINO



SECTION 2 ARTICLE 3:

FITTING THE PIECES

Written by: Rain A.

After spending nearly her whole life in the United Arab Emirates, Aeryka returned to the Philippines, and unexpectedly, “beauty” became a puzzle in rediscovering herself. She was surrounded by diversity— all while growing up in the United Arab Emirates. Exposed to Arab elegance, Western fashion, and an array of other influences, she always viewed beauty as a vibrant fusion of different backgrounds and styles. But coming back home felt different.

“In the Philippines,” she shared, “there seems to be a more specific image of what’s considered beautiful — fair skin, a high nose, the mestiza look.” Suddenly, what used to feel open and inclusive began to feel narrow. Her relatives’ well-meaning comments — “You’re lucky you’re fair” or “Don’t get dark” made her reflect. It wasn’t about not belonging, but a puzzle piece to know how beauty and identity connect and how these pieces could also be complicated.

Still the realization Aeryka had did not break the pieces of her forming identity. Back in UAE, it came into her mind that beauty isn’t about building an image someone else designed but about how you find and how you fit your own pieces together.

When she struggled to fit in her host country, her Tagalog was rusty, and the way she spoke was different, reminding her that identity isn’t about forcing the pieces to match perfectly. Eventually, she found strength in her uniqueness.

“I realized there’s no one right way to be Filipino”, she stated. “It’s about embracing who you are and growing from it”. Aeryka sees beauty as more than physical features but a harmony of self-expression and self-love. “I started using makeup and fashion not to fit in, but to express myself,” she said. Her story is a reminder that beauty isn’t a puzzle that others can solve, it is ourselves that will piece together, embracing every imperfection of pieces until something forms whole and true.

Through makeup, fashion, and self-acceptance, Aeryka began to express herself, to stand out on her own terms rather than to fit in. Her experience mirrors that of many Third Culture Kids, who piece together parts of various worlds to create an overall understanding of who they are.

ALONG THE JOURNEY



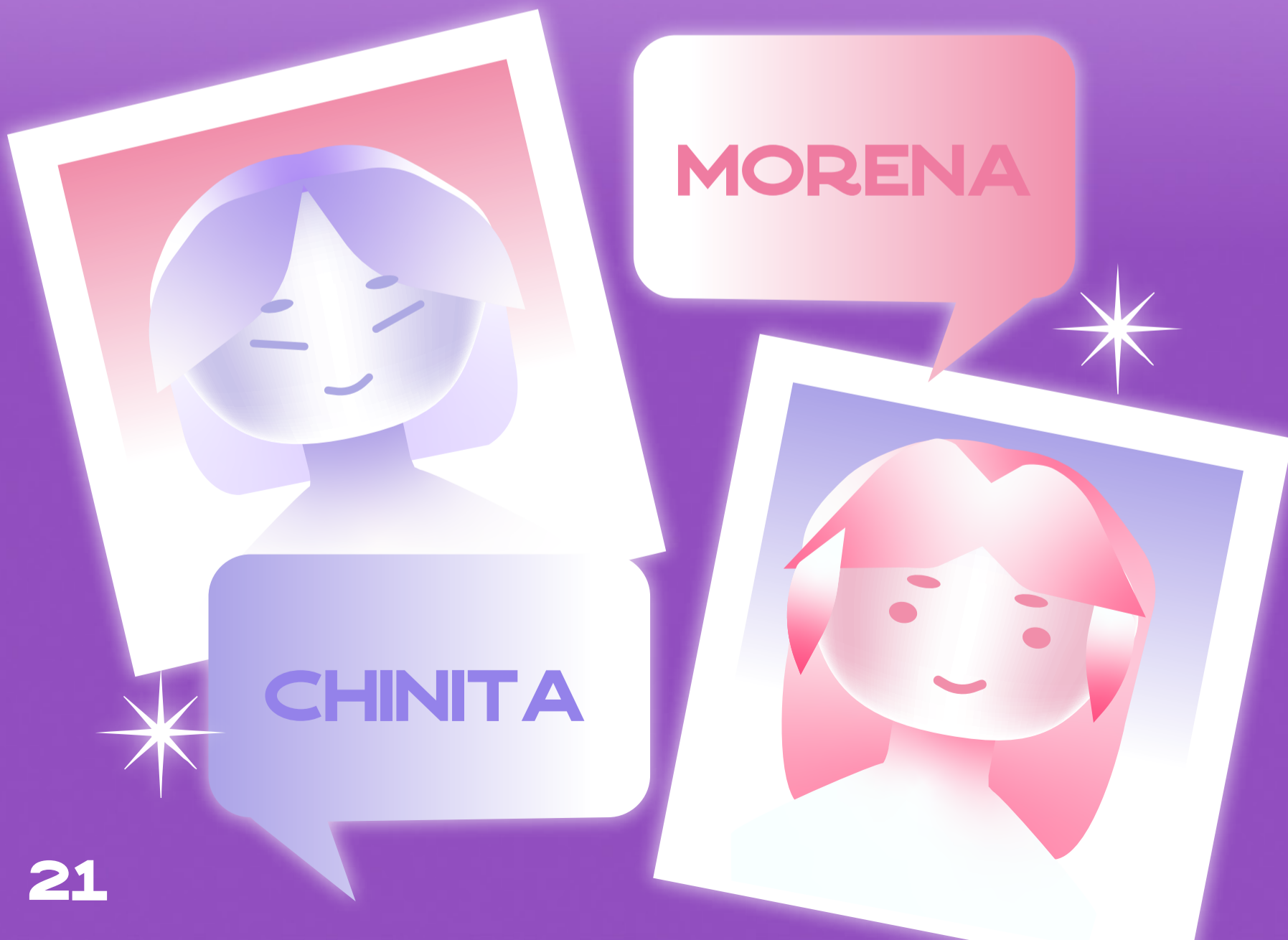


BETWEEN CULTURE BEYOND PRETTY

WRITTEN BY: RAIN A.

1 You Don't Have to "Represent" Anyone for Belonging

For TCKs, beauty sometimes feels like a responsibility, you have to adjust yourself to fit in your home or host country, and the pressure of who to represent. This forms pressure to meet expectations that are not fit for you. But changing can never guarantee acceptance. Once appearance becomes tied to belongingness, every word and glance starts to feel like a challenge. You are here not to represent everyone, but to exist as yourself. Belonging is gained through connection, not appearance.



SECTION 3 ARTICLE 1:

“ FINDING E IDENTITY AND

Many Third Culture Kids (TCKs) experienced culture shock when they came back to the Philippines. After living abroad, they quickly noticed how local beauty standards and social norms felt more restrictive and appearance- focused. They grew up in environments where individuality was celebrated, especially through personal style. But here, many felt pressure to tone things down or change how they looked just to fit in. Relatives and peers often made casual comments about their skin tone, weight, or the way they dressed. Those words stuck with them, making them more self-conscious and aware of what was considered “beautiful” in the Philippines. Some felt they had to fit into a category like Morena, Mestiza, or Chinita to be accepted. They never really thought about these labels until they moved back. A few even admitted to avoiding the sun to keep from getting darker because of these beauty ideals that still linger today.

Beyond physical appearance, many TCKs also struggled with their sense of identity. Language barriers, accents, and even small habits made them stand out. Some were called “maarte” or “different,” labels that often came from misunderstanding rather than malice. It left them feeling caught between two worlds, not

IDENTITY

REINTEG



BALANCE: COMING HOME

WRITTEN BY: KEITHLY R.

fully belonging to one or the other. Social media only made things harder. The endless stream of polished photos and “perfect” faces added more pressure to fit into a certain mold. Some TCKs felt tired trying to balance who they were abroad with what was expected of them back home.

But over time, things started to change. They began to realize they did not have to choose between their two worlds. Instead, they learned to blend both and create a space of their own. Many started by accepting small parts of themselves that once made them feel out of place. Some grew more confident in expressing their personal style again, even if it stood out. Others became comfortable speaking in Taglish or reconnecting with Filipino culture through friends, food, and shared experiences. These small acts helped them regain a sense of belonging.

In that middle ground, they found the freedom to express who they truly are. They learned that self-acceptance and cultural pride can exist together. Through this process, many TCKs developed a deeper and more inclusive understanding of beauty and identity. They found comfort in being both, and confidence in knowing that belonging does not have to mean fitting in.



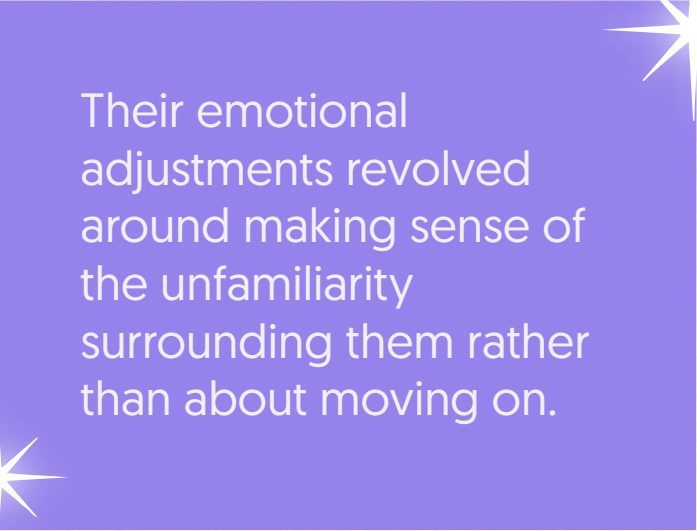
SECTION 3 ARTICLE 2:

FINDING THE PIECES



WRITTEN BY: RAIN A.

Reintegrating for many Third Culture Kids feels like being handed a puzzle with missing pieces, each day spent looking for familiarity in a place that had suddenly become foreign. Even though it was exhausting, Kirsten endured by reaching out to classmates and other TCKs, even when it felt tiring. During her first lonely month in the Philippines, Isabelle reached out to her extended family. Later, she found comfort in other TCKs from her school organization's community. While Gwyneth learned to cope by embracing all of the influences of both countries at once, and incorporated them into her hobbies, lifestyle, and organizations she joined.



Their emotional adjustments revolved around making sense of the unfamiliarity surrounding them rather than about moving on.

They all experienced grief in different ways on an emotional level. Kirsten battled the heartbreak of seeing her old friends go through life together as she rebuilt from a distance. Isabelle had the realization of how deeply she missed her family abroad, especially when she was reminded of what she had left behind for an unexpected visit. Gwyneth dealt with the persistent sense of alienation by staying present and by self-compassion. Their emotional adjustments revolved around making sense of the unfamiliarity surrounding them rather than about moving on.

In the end, each TCK found pieces of belonging in their own unique ways. Kirsten struck a balance between making new relationships and maintaining old ones. Isabella learned to show affection more freely, extending the love she had shown to her family into her friendships. Communities that welcomed cross-cultural identity provided Gwyneth with assurance. Their advice to fellow TCKs reflects their journey in reintegrating by taking their time, asking for help, and staying authentic. Reintegrating is a process that you gradually experience, searching for the pieces that make you whole, and it is not about fitting in quickly.

SECTION 3 ARTICLE 3:

FOOD FOR THE SOUL:

FILIPINO FOOD YOU SHOULDN'T MISS!

WRITTEN BY: SOPHIA S.

For Third Culture Kids who aren't fully familiar with other Filipino food, we've got you covered.

Tapa

Tapa is a famous breakfast dish in the Philippines commonly served with garlic rice and egg. It is thinly sliced meat (beef, chicken, or pork) marinated with soy sauce, calamansi juice, sugar, salt, and pepper. The seasoned meat is then fried or grilled until tender.



Bulalo

Bulalo is a beef stew dish that originated in Batangas and Cavite. Bulalo uses a specific type of meat which is the beef shank with bone marrow. It is best to boiled for three to four hours to bring out the flavors from the bones.

Chicken Inasal

Chicken Inasal is a grilled chicken dish marinated with calamansi, vinegar, and lemongrass. It is brushed with chicken oil that can also be mixed with rice. The dish originated from Visayas, specifically in Bacolod City and Iloilo. The word 'Inasal' is a Hiligaynon term meaning 'roasted'.



A pink, fluffy dessert on a stick, topped with colorful sprinkles and a white marshmallow. A string of white beads is visible on the left side.

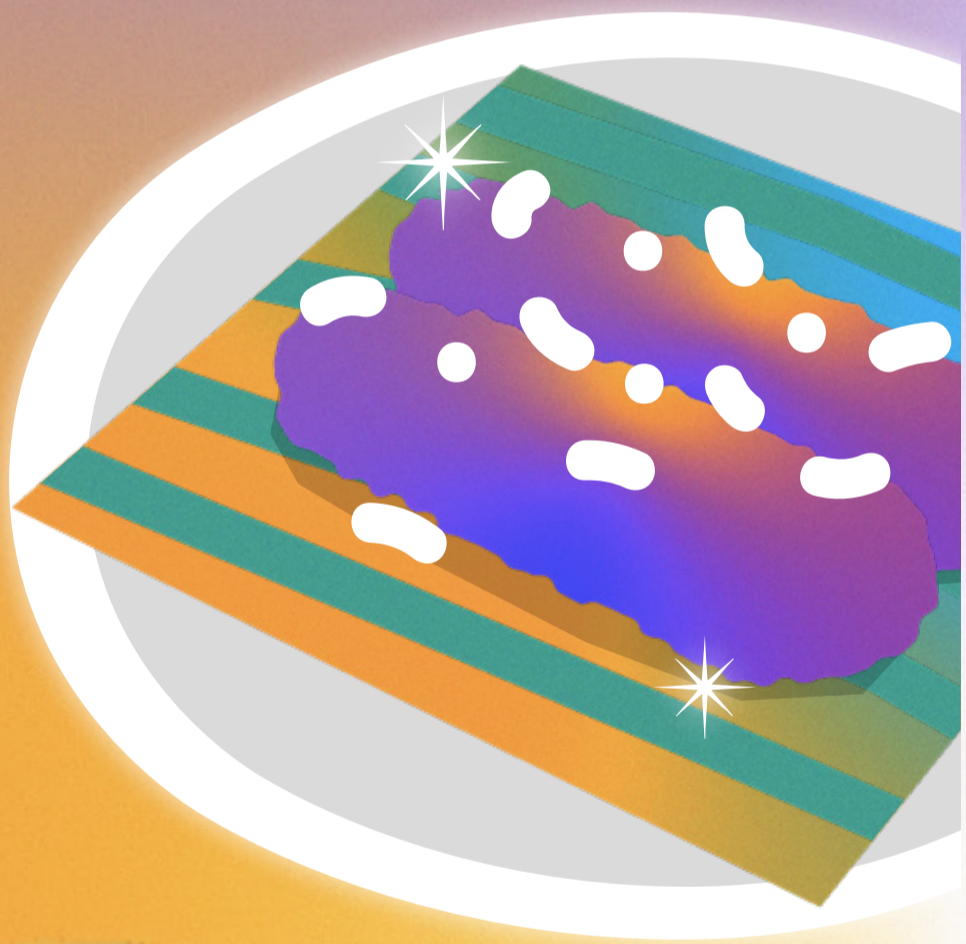
Ice Scramble (Iskrambol)

Aside from the famous street food such as Isaw, Fishball, and Kwek Kwek, Ice Scramble is also a traditional Filipino street food made from crushed ice. The recipe varies, but banana essence and skimmed milk powder is added to the crushed ice and mixed to make a slushy-like texture. It is then topped off with more milk powder, chocolate syrup, and other toppings like marshmallows or sprinkles.

A stack of white, round rice cakes on a stick, with a white string of beads on the left side.

Puto Bumbong

A very common dessert in the Philippines especially during the Christmas season. It is made by steaming ground purple rice mixture inside a bamboo tube called “bumbong ng kawayan”. It’s a sticky rice cake that’s commonly topped with margarine, grated coconut, muscovado sugar, and sometimes cheese.

A bowl of purple rice pudding with a white swirl on top, served on a white plate. The pudding is topped with white sprinkles.

Champorado

A chocolate rice pudding commonly eaten during breakfast or during rainy days. It is made with tablea, which is a locally made pure ground roasted cacao bean shaped into tablets. Champorado is often topped with powdered milk or condensed milk.

FINDING YOUR CIRCLE

TIPS ON FILIPINO TCK'S AFTER COMING HOME!

WRITTEN BY: RYELLA TOBIAS

You're in a room full of Filipinos, yet somehow you still feel like a foreigner when you, yourself, are a Filipino. The jokes are hard to understand, speaking Tagalog comes out choppy, and the non-stop 'Where are you from?' The question hits differently when the answer is, 'Here, I'm also a Filipino.' For many Filipino Third Culture Kids, returning to the Philippines to study isn't just about going home. It's also about learning how to belong again.

Here are a few real-life tips from fellow Filipino TCKs who've already walked the same path:



Many Filipino TCKs shared that local humor was one of their biggest challenges, from teasing to inside jokes they don't understand. In the Philippines, humor is a language of belonging. What might be a normal banter here can feel confusing or even offensive.

TIP! Observe first. Listen to how the people around you joke or tease each other. Filipino humor is often playful, relational, and full of references. Laugh along and don't be afraid to ask what something means, and you'll soon pick up the humor. Don't take 'teasing' seriously; it's often a way to make friends in the Philippines.

1

Learn to laugh the Filipino way!

2 Join Communities that reflect Filipino values!

TCKs shared that joining student organizations or volunteer programs didn't just help them make friends; it helped them truly understand what being a Filipino means in practice. When you work closely with fellow students who grew up in the Philippines, you also learn other values that define everyday Filipino life: pakikisama (getting along with others), malasakit (genuine care), bayanihan (spirit of helping one another), and utang na loob (deep gratitude). These aren't the things you can learn from books; you learn them from people themselves!

3 It's not you, it's their comments

Relatives may point out your accent or how "different" your appearance might be, but remember: These words reflect your journey in finding yourself, not your worth. Take them lightly and let them guide you, not define you.

4 Don't be a performative Filipino, just be you!

Some TCKs are pressured to act "more Filipino", even changing styles, makeup, and personality just to fit in. But connection doesn't come from imitation. It comes from being authentic. Bring your international experiences to conversations, but stay curious about others' perspectives too! Adapt, but don't erase yourself. Filipinos appreciate genuineness more than forced conformity.



5 Find Your People by Finding Your Passions

Several TCKs shared that joining TCK or international student organizations made them feel less alone and helped them reconnect faster. Whether it's an org, club, or hobby event, shared interests make starting conversations easier. One good space can lead you to real, lasting friendships.

Look for others who understand the 'in-between' feeling. Having someone who gets it eases homesickness and lets you talk openly about identity without needing to explain everything. They can help you process cultural shocks while encouraging you with the local life, not avoiding it.

6 Be patient with yourself.

Reintegration involves relearning unspoken rules. There will be days when you'll feel out of place or misunderstood, and that's normal. When in doubt, observe and ask. Don't be too hard on yourself when you make 'social mistakes'. Every 'What does that mean?' and 'How do I practice that?' The question brings you closer to understanding and reconnecting the pieces as a Filipino.

Belonging, for TCKs, isn't about perfectly fitting in — it's about learning to flow between worlds without losing yourself. As one TCK in our study said, "I realized that I don't have to sound or act Filipino to belong — I just needed to be open enough to learn." So take your time, reach out, and let every small interaction remind you that home isn't just a place, it's the people you grow to understand.







HALO-HALONG AKO
2025