T.S. Eliot, a renowned poet, once said, “We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” I never really understood this statement, not until I went on this trip organized by the WYNG Foundation and Trinity Hall of the University of Cambridge as one of the winners of the WYNG Philomathia Student Essay Contest 2016-2017. Amid the trip, us winners were granted the opportunity to stay in the University of Cambridge for a handful of days so as to explore around different colleges as well as to walk in the shoes of Cambridge students. We have also spent a few days in London to have fun and get a glimpse of the local ambience. If I were to use one word to conclude the trip, it would with no doubt be the word “life-changing”, since all the trip did was change my mindset and hence my perspective in life and learning.

On the second day upon our arrival, we had our first supervision session with Dr David Erdos. At first, I assumed the session to be all about our essays and the theme of this year’s competition—identity. However, to my surprise, during the session, we talked about liberalism and fairness, and Dr Erdos even asked us to suggest ways to strike a balance between liberalism and fairness betwixt locals and immigrants. That has then provoked me to always think further and to think in a multi-dimensional way when dealing with problems, which is a far cry from my usual practice, which is to simply criticize and opine about an issue based on its causes and impacts without digging deep into the solutions or the things that have triggered the factors. Take my essay as an example, I have only discussed one perspective of identity, which is identity crisis as well as its causes and impacts, and have
absolutely no intention of formulating any solutions. Therefore, what I have learnt from the supervision session is that, we should always look for solutions since through doing so, not only can we view issues from a wider perspective, but it can also help us cultivate our skills of being a decision maker one day, which is a role that is unnoticeably ubiquitous in our daily life.

After the first supervision session, we had a formal dinner with the fellows of Trinity Hall. I was seated next to Mr Colm McGrath, and on the other side of Mr McGrath was Kristen, my roommate. So, throughout the dinner, Kristen, Mr McGrath and I kept discussing various topics within the spectrum of law. Amid the discussion, I was motivated to rack my brain to answer the thought stimulating questions raised by Mr McGrath. Before the trip, I only knew little about law, nevertheless, after the chat, I gained a brand new perspective to law and have been more interested in learning more about the subject. Moreover, owing to my limited knowledge in the field, my mind would occasionally go blank when challenged with tricky questions. I have then realized that before attending supervisions and formal dinners, it is unwise to just research different professor’s biographies, instead, I should also learn more about as well as deepen my understanding in the field of study of the professors, so as to make the most of these precious opportunities. Therefore, I have done some research in the biology and chemistry perspective of one’s identity before my second supervision session with Dr Andrew Murray, who teaches biology and chemistry at the University of Cambridge. As a result to that, I have acquired hefty new knowledge in biology and chemistry, which, has truly intrigued me.

To add up with, other than my mode of thinking, this trip has also enlightened me to reflect on the mindset that I have been having all along. Ever since I was a toddler, I have been immersed in the educational system in Hong Kong, which appears to be extremely exam-oriented. Correspondingly, I have always set getting high marks as my goal towards studying and learning. However, after this trip to the University of Cambridge, through chatting with
professors and fellows, attending mock lectures at the open days and talking with the students studying there, I have realized that we should never learn with the ambition to show off our intelligence, to be better than our counterparts or to score high marks, but instead, we should always learn with the passion for acquiring new knowledge. Only when we genuinely love knowledge can we master and acquire knowledge in the correct way. I can still remember what Dr McGrath said at the formal dinner at Trinity Hall the other day, “Attend the open days with an open mind and explore different subjects. Then follow your instincts and listen to your gut feeling. If you are interested in a certain subject, just go for it.” Indeed. Learning is always about developing our interests and deepening our understanding of the world as well as ourselves rather than aiming for fruitful future prospects such as higher salaries, higher socio-economic statuses or better promotion opportunities. In Hong Kong, I have always been coaxed by the social atmosphere into agreeing with the logic that, we should study for the sake of getting better jobs in the future, and by better jobs we mean jobs with higher salaries. Yet, I have now realized that this is just nothing but total nonsense. This trip has made me understand life is so much more than money and labels, and what comes down to in life is how we listen to our inner self and choose what is the best for us.

Racking our brains to answer challenging questions raised by Dr McGrath at the formal dinner! (photo taken by YanYan)
Apart from changing my mindset and attitude in learning, this trip has also broadened and diversified my perspectives in identity. Whenever the idea of identity crosses my mind, I would only perceive it as something chaotic and troubling, for instance, I would only recall the identity crisis and struggles that I have gone through. However, from reading the essays of the other winners and chatting with professors who are specialized in different fields, I have been exposed to various brand new perspectives of identity. First and foremost, rather than thinking about the identity confusions and crisis that we have been struggling with, we can also scrutinize the reasons for the changes in our identity throughout our years of life, in a philosophical way or even in a biological way. Secondly, I have been provoked to think that, rather than having my thoughts confined within the negative impacts of identity, in actuality, identity can indeed be beneficial. Identity is one indispensable element of our overall well-being, since it helps us identify ourselves to certain social groups then seek comfort and conformity within the group in order to find our purpose and motivation in life. Without our identity, we would lose track of our life, which, would in turn make our life meaningless and purposeless.

*Smiling for a group photo after the second supervision session! (photo taken by Ms Ho)*
Furthermore, within the week spent in England, as a person who has never travelled to places beyond Asia, I have been observing the behaviors of the local people there, and their attitude has definitely changed me. Amid the first day of the two consecutive open days in Cambridge, I witnessed how kind the locals are. On that day, my friends and I have got lost and for the sake of saving time to visit more colleges, we randomly went into a shop and asked the cashier for directions. Jaw-dropping as it is, in spite of the fact that we did not buy anything from the shop, the cashier patiently explained the directions to us. Then, having seen our lost and confused faces, he immediately grabbed a piece of paper and drew a map for us. Not prepared to stumble upon someone so cordial and full of hospitality, we were shocked and awed and hence thanked him non-stop.

It is not uncommon to get lost in the streets of Cambridge! (photo taken by myself)

At the mock lecture of Land Economy on the same day, I started to embrace the fact that the local students are indeed extremely smart. Getting exposure to the subject for the first time, I happily jotted down the materials being taught amidst still struggling to understand the concepts taught. By the end of the mock lecture session, the professor spared out some time for the audience to raise questions. Deadly silence was what followed. However, just when I was feeling relieved thinking that I am not the only one who was sometimes lost during the lecture, someone’s voice broke the silence. Then, question after question, people were getting more and more enthusiastic and the questions raised became more and more interesting. I then recognized local students’ ability to think out of the box and master critical thinking. I
used to be a person who accepts facts and knowledge blankly, without asking myself “why”. Also, whenever I felt confused with a certain concept, I would just lock myself in my room and try to figure out the problem on my own, despite the fact that every single time, all effort would be in vain. After the mock lecture, I was then encouraged to always think out of the box, be critical, and never keep inquiries to just myself. In fact, I embraced this new habit at school after having returned to Hong Kong, and this has definitely helped me learn in a more efficient and effective way.

Last but not least, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Trinity Hall and the WYNG Foundation for organizing this trip for us winners. Before winning this competition and going on this trip, I never considered studying overseas in such prestigious schools like Cambridge an option since I have always been studying in humble schools in which not much students get applied to these institutes. Nonetheless, after going on this trip and being constantly complimented by extremely nice fellows, I have realized that as long as I work hard enough, I may have the ability be accepted by these widely coveted schools as well. From listening to YanYan chat with the fellows, I learned that the aim of this trip is to expose us winners to the options provided by tertiary institutes outside Hong Kong, which, I believe, has been reached and beyond. I would also like to make use of this chance to thank YanYan for taking good care of us six kids and always bringing us to different dessert places to get a bite of some local sweet food to soothe our sweet tooth; and Ms Ho for always taking pictures for us so that we can send them to our parents. This trip has been more than fulfilling and life-changing such that it is so arduous to fathom my thoughts into just 2,000 words. I am beyond grateful for this trip and I wish more and more students can go on this fabulous trip in the future and feel all the amazing feelings I have felt throughout these seven days.

How strange it is, it only takes seven days to change your life, but forever to forget. These seven days are days that I will always look back to and be nostalgic about. Thank you for everything.