Saturday

October 24 2026

Issue 5

Postdoc Daily

THE DIGITAL NEWSPAPER

Co-funded by the European Union



We SYS-LIFErs navigated some pretty rough winds at the start. A group of highly educated strangers, uprooting our old lives and moving to a new country. The photo shows the author by the wheel while sailing through a storm in the Finnish archipelago. The tell-tale sign is by the tilt of the ship. The author failed to convince the other SYS-LIFERs to go sailing with her.

What is Finnish culture?

And who am I?

---------- LI-FANG YEO, SYS-LIFE

As a handful of us embark on our final year as a SYS-LIFE fellow, I figured now would be a good time to look back and see how far we have come. Things may soon get quite hectic as one has to decide if there is money, (or perhaps will) to stay on, or to pack up and leave. And it dawned upon me that my days of calling myself a postdoc are perhaps numbered. SYS-LIFE has sheltered me for three years, to breathe, to heal, and to grow into my full capacity. Soon it will be time to get back out into the open sea. Who knows what awaits.

I think the biggest thing I realized while living in Finland was that I started by identifying different characteristics of Finnish people and Finnish culture, to eventually finding more similarities than differences. Did I become “Finnished” or did I stumble upon a key to living in Finland?

When friends say to me, “You are so Finnish,” or the most common one, “You are more Finnish than most Finns.” (Usually, this comment comes when I jump into cold water, either after sauna or that one time I jumped from the bow of the ship into the sea. It was honestly more of, I was already there, people were watching and it was too late to back down.)

I am flattered by the comment, but I also become deep in thoughts. What on earth does that even mean? I am just doing as I please. If Malaysia had an ice-cold lake, I would walk into it too. If Malaysia had berries and mushrooms, I would pick them too. I hiked in the Malaysian jungles with my friends, camped in them too. The decisions I made are grounded in values that I have even when living in Malaysia. So where did the “Finn” in me come from?

I like to think of it as a universal key, not just to Finland, but a key to humanity, rooted in basic respect and simple curiosity. I am willing to learn and embrace aspects of the Finnish culture. I pick up new, weird and interesting things along the way. I argue against aspects that I simply cannot agree with. *Buy me a cider and I will tell you aspects I don’t agree with.*

Learning a new culture and language does not make me any less Malaysian, and not doing so does not make me more Malaysian. At the end of the day, we are more alike than we are different. If only we took the time to get to know each other.

To my SYS-LIFErs

---------- LI-FANG YEO

I dedicate this section to you, fellow strangers who became acquaintances, collaborators and eventually friends.

Yes, I come from a culture where you don’t have to know each other from childhood to call each other friends. (^_~)

A toast, to the people who left us, to the people who stayed, and to new people who came into our lives.

The road here (or more accurately, the flight here) was a bumpy one, and perhaps a little nerve-wrecking. But we made it. We built some resemblance of our old life here, built ourselves back up from scratch, survived winter, learnt the importance of a beanie and sat with our bosses in a tiny hot room in states of semi-undressed-ness.

We came from different backgrounds, were at different stages of our career and lives. At first I wondered, if forcing all of us, so different from each other, to be in one space every month was a recipe for disaster. Over time I learnt, we are perhaps still the children being dropped off at daycare. We learnt to play with each other. We learnt each other’s names, interests outside of work, shared jokes and worries over drinks and became a familiar face to each other in a lonely, foreign country.

Soon we will graduate daycare and join the big kids. To all the SYS-LIFErs, coordinators, managers, and everyone who made SYS-LIFE possible, the biggest thank you. It was nice meeting you and thank you for sharing your toys. May we enjoy our remaining time in the programme.



Aurajoki in her finest autumn drapery on a beautiful sunny day.