

Postcrossing: the World in Your Mailbox

by Samantha Chung

Eighteen year old Christine Wong Wing-yan was filled with excitement as she checked her mailbox every day. She had been eagerly anticipating the arrival of postcards from people in other parts of the world she had written to.

But there was no postcard. Not for a long two weeks, until Christine finally received her first postcard on May 17 this year. It came from an unknown person in Finland.

“It was really surprising!” said Christine of the moment she finally got hold of her postcard. Printed on the card was a beautiful picture of a scenic place in Finland with beautiful handwriting. The sender was a woman who wrote to Christine about where she lived, and about her travels. “It really made my day! I opened my mailbox every day simply for the postcards,” Christine said.

The ability to send and receive postcards to and from a random

user is what fascinates Christine most about Postcrossing, an online postcard exchange service. The name “Postcrossing” comes from the words “postcards” and “crossing”.

“There are no designated countries and users, so you would have an opportunity to receive cards from different places.”

After registering for an account, a member can send up to five postcards to five addresses randomly selected by the website. The senders have to write an assigned postcard ID on each postcard. The receivers then need to register that ID in order to indicate that they have received their postcards. This ensures a fair share of postcards.

Christine was especially excited and surprised to receive cards from places rarely heard of. She got a postcard from French Polynesia, one of the French overseas territories located in the Pacific Ocean.

“There are no designated countries and users, so you have an opportunity to receive cards from different places,” Christine said.

It was the pictures on postcards that attracted Joey Lin Cho-yi, a 19-year-old student, to Postcrossing. Joey finds the pictures very meaningful. “Postcards can capture and present the most beautiful picture of a place and its unique culture,” she said.

Joey loves travelling and meeting people from different countries as she is interested in learning about different cultures. In the two years since she joined Postcrossing, Joey has collected over 1000 postcards. The more postcards she receives, the

more countries she knows about. The postcards have taught her about foreign cultures, historical sites and the living habits of different people.

“It is more worthwhile for me to pay just HK\$2 for a postcard and HK\$3 for a stamp to learn about different cultures than travelling,” Joey said. “The stamped and folded postcards have a special meaning for me. Postcrossers send their greetings to receivers in the cards. It is so warm.”

Fellow postcrosser, Mandy Tung Man-ching, a 20-year-old student who has sent postcards for over a year, shares the same view on the implicit meaning of a postcard.

“Every card and every word written is unique, and some of the handmade cards are full of creativity and thought,” Mandy said.

Postcrossers can request different types of postcards like handmade cards and map cards in their profiles. Some senders, like Mandy, try to satisfy other postcrossers’ requests after reading them. For instance, a postcrosser requested a frog. As the receiver was fond of frogs and Chinese culture, Mandy made a frog patch, pasted it onto the card and wrote the Chinese word for “frog” with a translation.

“It is a kind of cultural exchange. I taught them Chinese and learnt German in return,” Mandy said.



SAM WONG

Joey is so involved in Postcrossing because of the meaningful pictures of places.



COURTESY OF MANDY TUNG MAN-CHING

Handmade cards are full of creativity and thought.



COURTESY OF JOEY LIN CHO-YI

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Some postcrossers are interested in the language used in the postcards. Mandy has learnt German for a few years, so she requested postcards written in German. “It is so funny and I love reading postcards written in the sender’s native language. It helps me to know more about the usage of German,” Mandy explained.

Some postcrossers would send thank you messages to Mandy after receiving her “tailor-made” postcards. Mandy once received a message from a Japanese boy. He thanked Mandy for sending him his favourite card – a Disneyland card. His mother even sent Mandy another postcard in appreciation of her effort.

“I feel satisfied after receiving their messages as I successfully made others happy and fulfilled their desires,” Mandy said.

Apart from engaging in cultural exchanges, postcrossing also allows participants to establish friendships with pen pals in different countries.

Postcrosser Ameko Li Lok-yi, a 23-year-old fresh graduate, has her own tales to share about the friendships she made through exchanging postcards. Ameko has been trading postcards for seven years with a collection of over a

thousand postcards. She was one of the first to discover Postcrossing when it was first created.

Two years ago Ameko met up with one of her pen pals, Alicia from Singapore, who she has now known for five years. Alicia, who was then 21 years old, visited Hong Kong for a five-day trip. At that time, she was staying at a youth hostel in Mong Kok and was afraid to be alone. She called Ameko and invited her over. Ameko readily agreed to accompany her for the rest of her trip. Ameko became her guide, taking Alicia to see attractions such as Disneyland and even bringing her



SAMANTHA CHUNG

Ameko established friendships with pen pals through Postcrossing.




COURTESY OF MANDY TUNG MAN-CHING

Postcrossers can engage in cultural exchanges. These cards show the usage of German and Chinese.

more convenient, faster and cheaper alternatives to postcards which are written and sent through the mail. You can also get immediate feedback from others with e-cards. But you cannot hold one in your hand and you can only see it on a screen. It is lifeless.

As a Hong Kong postcrosser, Iris feels it is a pity that Hong Kong does not have any representative postcards with local features other than Victoria Harbour and the Peak. Special features such as lighthouses, which represent a specific country, are often used instead of famous buildings on postcards from other countries.

There are only 600 people involved in Postcrossing in Hong Kong, so it is still relatively uncommon to get postcards from the territory. That might explain why some foreign postcrossers insist that Hong Kong postcrossers send them postcards showing Hong Kong's trademark Victoria Harbour.

"But I think the postcards showing Victoria Harbour are too boring. In fact, lighthouses and hiking trails in Hong Kong could show other postcrossers different views of Hong Kong, other than as just a place for shopping," Iris said. 

"A postcard is not just a card. It is an object filled with surprises, care and thought."

home. Alicia had dinner with Ameko's family that night.

After those few days, Ameko felt that they got to know each other better. They are still in contact and send each other messages occasionally.

"I decided to look for her (Ameko) because I thought it would be great if I could meet up with my pen pal," Alicia said by email. "I trusted her because we had known each other for three years and we have become friends."

For Iris Eu, a 30-year-old teacher, postcrossing is about connecting with the world and communicating with others.

"Without postcards, the little knowledge we have about other countries comes only from the news we watch. However, postcards allow us to know more about the different views and stories of a country," Iris said. "It raises my awareness of different parts of the world. Postcards have connected me with people from places that I have little chance to visit."

Iris tried to spread the concept of Postcrossing to others. As an English teacher, she tried to incorporate Postcrossing in her classes. She requested

some foreign postcrossers to send postcards, explaining the cultures of their places. She then gave the postcards to students and asked them to reply, introducing Hong Kong with greetings.

Yet, she found her students' responses unsatisfactory. "Some of them thought it was a crazy idea and refused to do it. Some people are simply concerned about their unattractive handwriting. Writing postcards might be tough work for them," Iris said.

In Iris's view, handwritten words are a distinguishing feature of the postcards. It gives postcrossers a stronger sense of connection, "It is a connection between two unfamiliar individuals through a postcard and it contains the life stories of people in certain parts of the world," Iris explained.

Postcards differ from e-cards because they can be looked at and touched anytime. Feelings of friendship and care can be shared through postcards in each written word. "A postcard is not just a card. It is an object filled with surprises, care and thought," Iris said.

Iris added that with the growing use of the internet, e-cards are



COURTESY OF MANDY TUNG MAN-CHING



In foreign postcrossers' views, the most representative Hong Kong feature is Victoria Harbour.