

## Remembering when during holiday season

This past Christmas and New Year, my wife and I spent the holidays in Hong Kong while others in our family are in the US. This feeling of being away from family is quite familiar to me, as I spent many Christmases by myself when I first went to Caltech as an undergraduate student many years ago.

Study abroad today is still a challenging experience for many. I would like to take the opportunity to share with you my experience of assimilation as a new arrival to the US, and may be that would ring a bell or two for you down the road.



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First, there was the language problem. I realized that my English was very limited as soon as I landed in the US. Even though I could read English fine, I had difficulty conducting a conversation in English, and I could hardly understand half of the movies I watched, as they had no subtitles, and I could never get the jokes in the movie, as I did not really understand the US culture and current affairs.

I told myself that I must get better in English—it was the only way for me to understand the American culture. Soon, I started watching well known political satire shows like “Saturday Night Live” and the “Tonight Show”, which not only helped me improve my English, but also kept me up to date with the latest in the US. I began to be able to watch and understand a movie without subtitles and my confidence grew exponentially.

To get myself out of the comfort zone of speaking Chinese, I joined many different school activities to make new friends from other countries. I was on the University’s soccer team, and with my teammates coming from the US, South America, and Europe, English was the only common language and I also got to learn about their cultures. Driving to different universities in Southern California for games also gave me an opportunity to see the region. Another way to get to know people was to live in the dormitories; I still miss my time in my University dorm although I only stayed for 1 year.

Celebrating foreign holidays was also a valuable experience. I had no clue what Thanksgiving was when I left HK. Within a few months of my arrival in the US, my host family invited me to join their Thanksgiving celebration at 3 pm, which I thought was too early for dinner, and when I arrived at 6 pm, thinking that I would just make the dinner, I was shocked to discover that they were almost finished! It was a wonderful meal, but I did not know that the turkey main dish is usually followed by a big pumpkin pie dessert, something not commonly served at my home in HK! I was too full to eat much of the dessert but too embarrassed not to eat any. When it comes to academics, the US and HK hold very different views. Many in HK think that we take exams too seriously and only because we have to, but a high score does not necessarily mean that you understand what you learnt. At Caltech, the emphasis was to get the students to understand thoroughly what they studied, and a lot of my exams did not have “model answers”.

In contrary to the HK custom of hunting for classes that would give them the highest GPA, many freshmen and sophomores in the US would spend their first couple years taking different classes from different disciplines to get a better understanding of themselves and where their real interest lies. Caltech also had an honor system where we could do “take-home” exams (we were not supposed to cheat, even at home). It is with this high degree of freedom where we learnt to cherish academic honesty and self-discipline, two major qualities which would help many even today to go a long way in their careers. This is something HK schools can learn from, too.

Living in foreign soil forces one to develop a sense of identity. I joined my very first Diaoyu Island protest with my classmates in my first year in the U.S; the protesters’ passion and drive made me discover my Chinese identity. Hearing my ancestral Taishan dialect in the Chinatowns in San Francisco and Los Angeles also made real the historical connection between my ancestors and the US.

As the saying goes, “every country has its own customs”. To get used to a new environment, we first have to observe and respect the different norms and rules in the host country. Why are Americans always considered as more innovative than others? May be it is their open culture, which provides support and trust to their young, and allow them more room to think and chart their own course.

Stay open, and never be afraid to try and experience new things. A new world awaits you.