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Person to Person in China

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China—October 29, 2013

Field Notes from Abroad: Peron to Person in China

As an immersion student, my roommates and I live in an apartment along with one of the Chinese Studies Institute teachers, whose main priority in living with us is to ensure that we abide by our language pledge and all other rules that CSI requires. Ma Wei, or “Ma Laoshi (Mah Laow-sheer)” to her students, is the assistant director of the CSI program, as well as a full time teacher, and spends as much or more time working as we Immersion students do studying. But more than anything, Ma Laoshi has been a great mentor and friend throughout my stay in Beijing.

Ma Wei is twenty six years old, a Peking University graduate, and last year taught Chinese at the University of Richmond. For most of our interview we discussed the cultural differences between American and Chinese college students and her personal experiences as a student in China and as a teacher in America. It is easy to forget about the trench of a culture gap that exists between our two countries until we come upon it ourselves. Nowhere is this gap more apparent than in our education systems, including the college level. For example, Chinese educators place less emphasis on differing opinions and creativity, and more emphasis on memorization of the given material. American education is a mirrored opposite approach.

Cultural differences at the education level are often reflected in students’ relationships with their teachers. As a Chinese teacher teaching for the first time in America, Ma Laoshi

encountered many challenges in this area. She found that American students are often more outgoing and relaxed with their teachers, sometimes to the point of disobedience in her opinion. For example, Ma Laoshi found it quite rude that students in America would often express their opinions on the homework load, when a test should be taken, or personal teaching styles. On the other hand, Chinese students tend to shy away from expressing personal opinions or criticisms in school, where a strict and formal atmosphere is upheld. For Chinese, in school at least, as Ma Laoshi simply puts it “If you write or share a different opinion than that of the teacher, you are wrong.”

These fundamental differences in American and Chinese thought are what make relations at the higher levels of government and business so difficult to coordinate. But it is this fascinating situation that is attracting individuals like myself, Ma Laoshi, and other students of language and culture to make this gap a little easier to cross. Every day I learn something new about the Chinese culture and perspective, and, surprisingly, even more about my own culture. It is amazing how much is unknown about one’s own culture until it is gone. It is these kinds of realizations that make me look critically at my thoughts and actions in relation to other people that I might not ordinarily question back home. To sum up my thoughts on education, culture, and living abroad I would put forward a challenge to all students: Live in another country and culture that scares you, where your native language is not an option, where you look different than the locals. No matter what you will come out with a worthwhile education.

Interview: Ma Laoshi (CSI Assistant Director, Apartment roommate)