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Person to Person in Hong Kong

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Field Notes From Abroad: Person to Person in Hong Kong

Living in a foreign country is about learning the different symbolic ways of communication within a culture, including both latent and manifest meanings. The world is a divorced pluralistic world where people from different countries carry their own cultural rituals, values and varied environmental influences. Growing up in a city like Hong Kong, as one of the most vibrant cities in the world, people have to be fast paced and learn to compete with others. Places in Hong Kong are always crowded, no matter how late or early the time is. Accordingly, people here are comfortable with close physical contact, where I am not used to being too close to people physically, as I prefer preserving a certain distance with one another. As Shirlene mentioned, in Hong Kong, only 50-60% high school graduates can go to college/university, the other 20% have to extend one more year in high school in order to get a higher score on the college admission test, and another 20% will need to study abroad in another country. After Hong Kong was handed over to the People's Republic of China in 1997, the college admissions started "the act of Affirmative Action" in order to balance the quota between Hong Kong Chinese, Mainland Chinese, and foreigners. Therefore, students have to stay active for all kinds of competitions, from the ages of kindergarten, to the job market. Undoubtedly, students in Hong Kong need to participate in various extracurricular activities in and outside of school. Comparing to the students in the U.S., Hong Kong students have a stronger sense of rivalry, stress, and emergency. However, people in Hong Kong have far more options for entertainment during their spare time, and there are two reasons for this: transportation, and divorced culture. Even though Hong Kong students tend to encounter or experience more stress than the students in the U.S., they have more venues available to them in order to release their stress. For example, it only takes them one hour (30 minutes MTR and 30 minutes ferry) to go to a peaceful fishing island

for a relaxing weekend; or they can go shopping, Karaoke, visit a theme park in 20-minutes by taking the subway.

Moreover, the lifestyle in Hong Kong is quite "sleepless." As Shirlene said, her family dines around 9 o'clock to 10 o'clock, and everyone in her family tends to stay up until 3 to 4 in the morning. Therefore, the living routine in Hong Kong seems to be delayed by four to five hours compared to the States. Another interesting cultural difference between the U.S. and Hong Kong is what people consider as being the ideal and attractive look. In the States, the majority of the people want to have tan skin, and it is quite easy to find products for tanning. In contrast, Hong Kong people do not like getting tanned, but instead wish for their skin color to stay as white as possible. In department stores, whitening products are to be found everywhere, and many people use umbrellas on the streets to hide from the sun. Also, Hong Kong people, as Shirlene explained, think being slim is beautiful and this is true for both men and women. Surprisingly, some male students that I interviewed told me that they want to be slim, but muscular and fit. In addition to life style, there is also a cultural difference on politeness. The idea in Eastern Confucianism has been discussed for years in cross-cultural research and eastern philosophy researches. Yet it is far more interesting to experience and compare the uniqueness by myself in a both westernized and eastern city like Hong Kong. Most people in Hong Kong have two names: an English name and a Chinese name. People normally call each other in their English names, and the Chinese name is reserved for their exclusive family members, close friends, or romantic partners. What is more, they might feel even offended when foreigners try to call them in their Chinese name, because it feels too intimate to them. Compared to the States, people would prefer their friends to use their first names regardless of their age, social status, and

gender in general. But in Hong Kong, people need to consider the title and social status of others in order to preserve the ritual of Li, namely social prosperity or etiquette. Shirlene told me that she has always been expected to use "we" rather than "I" in her daily conversations with her relatives. This could be a good illustration about cultural politeness in individual involvement (we) versus independence (I). Regardless the cultural similarities and differences, no one culture is strange, and there should be no one way of right or wrong because they each have their own way of uniqueness.

Interviewee Name: Shirlene (Xueying) Tam; Classmate

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