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A Reflection of Cultural Exchange

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Austin Browning
Hong Kong Spring 2015
4/12/15

A reflection of Cultural Exchange

Today is my 100th day abroad! In those 100 days the opportunity to observe the obvious, and also not so obvious, cultural differences between my own culture, and the Hong Kong culture have been abundant. In addition, I've contemplated the differences within Hong Kong culture, between native Hong Kongers, and individuals from Mainland China. Hong Kong is such a fusion between Eastern and Western cultural norms, and thus engaging in cultural exchange is sure not to disappoint.

I interviewed Li King Sum, or Sen. He is a year three student studying at Hong Kong Baptist University, studying Public Relations and Advertising. He is the youngest in his family, with an elder sister. His family lives about 1.5 hours away from campus by public transit in the New Territories. Sen is one of my closest friends and I've known him almost since day one, which has allowed me to dig a little deeper into the obvious culture differences I've observed thus far.

To begin with, in the U.S. it is common to greet someone and immediately ask them how they are doing, a simple "what's up?" or perhaps "how's your day going?" After a few weeks of me asking this every time I saw him, Sen finally told me that is not common at all here, and in fact he didn't know what to say when I asked him—should he actually tell me how his day is going, or how he was feeling? Additionally, in the U.S. it is common to hug close friends, or even semi-familiar acquaintances upon greeting them. However, every time I went in for a hug to Sen he isn't sure what to do, and would reluctantly hug back. This interesting difference may be due to the general respect for others and the group harmony dynamic—perhaps one person's feeling or day shouldn't be the topic of conversation, but maybe something more relevant to others.

The university culture on campus is very different from Linfield. There are four halls, or sub groups of dorms. The sense of group belonging and group identity is overwhelming and evident from a plethora of hall activities, from IM sports, to election campaigns, to carnival fundraising events, to group dinners and festivities. Each hall has their own clothing, chants, and songs, and each floor of each hall has unique identifiers too; it is honestly similar to the different houses in Harry Potter. When Sen talks about his local friends, he always knows what hall they are in, what they are studying, and the latest statistics from the hall competitions. This has been a stark difference from student life at Linfield because I never felt a certain sense of belonging by living in Mahaffey, Terrell, or the HPs. This difference in university culture may be tied back to a cultural difference between the more individualistic-centered culture in the U.S., as opposed to a more collective culture in China, as I learned about in my intercultural communication class.

Sen and his parents were incredibly kind and invited a group of us exchange students to their home during the Chinese New Year holiday. During my visit I observed so many differences from what I would experience in the U.S. For example, he lives on the 8th floor of a 40+ story apartment building, which is the norm here. His family's home is a 3 bedroom, 2 bath apartment style unit, but is smaller than an HP at Linfield. His family served us delicious traditional Chinese food in a classic Chinese family dining style where everyone shares the dishes. The

cultural value of family and togetherness is evident through this experience—returning home for a meal with your family during a holiday is also common in the U.S., but Sen returns home often to meet with his parents, and talks to them much more frequently than I would ever in the U.S. Interestingly, it is common for students in Hong Kong to live at home while they study, and even when they work after university because of the difficulty in affording your own flat. This is very different from the U.S., where, in general, people leave their family when they are 18 and move out on their own to work or go to school.

All in all, I've learned so much in my 100 days abroad and had the opportunity to engage in cultural exchange. Some of the key differences I've observed thus far include a difference in family structure and expectations, a difference in university culture, a difference in personal space and individual mannerisms, a large difference in cuisine culture, and a difference in the overall approach of considering the future. Living in a different culture for 100 days has really made me analyze and understand not only the Chinese culture I live in, but also my own cultural norms and values and I'm so grateful I decided to challenge myself and spend 5 months abroad. It's the best decision I've ever made!

Person interviewed: Li King Sum (Sen)

Date: 4/13/15