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International Perspective

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Every international student’s life at Iowa State will begin with, “Wow, it is America! Air of freedom! Hooray!” followed with a slight sound of, “but where the hell is Iowa?” Fresh air, green grass and nice people will fill up the whole picture for a newly arrived student. It will not take long, however, to think that, “It is some kind of boring here.” Then there comes culture shock. If you are a graduate student, unfortunately, just double the pain you have imagined.

My culture shock began very early in my first week. I do not know how to respond to cashier when they ask, “How are you doing?” Seriously? You want to know what happened to me? In details? I’m also surprised by strangers who talked to me so naturally at the CyRide shelter because everyone is in their separate room, reading, playing with cell phones or listening to music in China. I feel awkward by having people standing by and waiting for my decision when I’m looking at the menu in the restaurant because we only call the waitress when we need them. My American classmates look nice but feel far from me ‘cause I really do not know how to start a conversation with them. In such a confusing but not annoying brand new experience, I finished my first week in Ames.

It got terrible when I started the classes. Every American student has a button called: “Let’s sit in a circle,” which will turn on the talkative mode during discussion parts. Instead, Chinese students were setted up with a long distance to burning talk.

My classmates talked about Google glasses. They have thrown a penny or a quarter to make wishes when they were kids. They discussed about a singer or a football player when I still prefer thinking of football as soccer automatically. They use Facebook and Twitter while I use Weibo and WeChat in China. What is worse is that I do not know what I do not know. It proved to not only be a language problem, but a cultural difference problem as well. It drives me nuts.

I went to talk with other second-year Chinese students. They told me that they never hang out with Americans, which is desperate. I confirmed their words after looking around in the campus. It is very common to see that Chinese students hang out with each other, Indian students hang out with each other, Arabian students hang out with each other and American students hang out with everyone. I started to think that maybe I should not leave Beijing, where I can easily tell where to find a discounted book store, where to see a fabulous show and where to read a book under warm sunlight in the afternoon. I will have a quality-guaranteed and colorful life there.

All those situations changed accidentally after I had an unexpected midnight talk with my Californian roommate while drinking glasses of wine. We drank a lot and talked more. It does not indicates how important was the content. It was just a watershed which I believe every international student can meet as long as you go out to seek.

That talk reminds me of what I was hoping for before I came here. I did not travel 20 hours from the other side of the Earth to find how desperate I can be. I was seeking a different life. So why do you just carry your habitat here from China in the integrity? Hanging out with Chinese friends to Chinese restaurant or to see Chinese films is not what I want to spend twenty-thousand bucks each year on. Then why don’t you go out to really live your life?

“I do not know what I do not know.”

I tried to talk in class then. Surprisingly, nobody blamed me for saying boring things at all. After forgetting about the fear of talking in a foreign language, I can express my thoughts more clearly, and enjoy the content too. I also tried to have conversations with local friends and get involved in those activities. A different mood leads me to an entirely different situation. The more I experience in this brand new culture, the more I can feel it. Now I’m really starting to love this country and my life here.