Cindy Chen
chencin2@msu.edu

Essay Contest
A myriad of emotions washed over me the moment I passed the customs booths. No matter how painfully I craned my neck, I could no longer see my parents, my boyfriend, and my friends waving back at me. A heavy lump started to form at the back of my throat; tears threatened to spill down my cheeks. I took a look around – everyone seemed happy to be going somewhere, to leave the country for a while.

Well, they’re not exactly leaving home for a good four years, are they, I thought to myself bitterly. As soon as the thought popped up, I chided myself. I am very blessed to have this opportunity, I muttered silently. I know that is true enough – most people could only dream of doing what I was about to do – or so I’m told by all my overenthusiastic relatives. As I stepped into the flight, conflicting thoughts were still keeping a furious battle in my mind. I don’t want to go! A whiny part of me cried. I want to stay with my family, my boyfriend, and my friends. I love it here! What am I doing, leaving all this behind for a foreign lifestyle, in a strange land so different from what I am used to?

Then another part of me, sounding very much like my parents, would argue gently that it is for my own good, for a better future. It is the sort of thinking that has shaped most of my life and thoughts. Expensive, respected American degree equals to better paying job and higher social status, which will inevitably lead to a better lifestyle.

Since I was an adolescent, I have always dreamt of studying in the country where everyone always seemed to look like the cast of “Friends” and teenagers had first kisses at the age of twelve. Teenage fiction novels like the Sweet Valley series only served to fuel my imagination further. Perky cheerleaders, beautifully manicured lawns with no fences – I was led to believe that America was almost akin to a paradise on earth.
extreme weather. Everyday I trotted my way through the blistering cold to class all bundled up in several layers of clothing, admiring those daring souls donning fashionable but painfully flimsy jackets and knee-high boots. Cata bus routes meant to make the campus look smaller only succeeded in making me confused.

Coming from a tropical country where the weather is consistently warm and humid, I was initially rather fascinated by the carpets of snow that covered every inch of flat surfaces everywhere; the way everything - from the trees to the cars - appeared to be sprinkled with generous amounts of powdered sugar thrilled me to pieces.

However, the novelty of winter quickly wore off as time and time again I was forced to wait for the bus while violent gusts of snowflakes and winds attacked me.

The lessons are like a breath of fresh air compared to my rigid school education back home. Instead of mandatory chorus of greetings to the lecturer at the beginning of every class, students here merely stroll in at any moment holding a bottle of pop and chewing on some gum without another glance at the lecturer. Throughout the lessons, some might munch on some junk food noisily or even eat a full meal of bagel and cream cheese while the lecturer was teaching. Besides that, the way students could just leave the room anytime they want simply baffled me. There is no humble whisper to be excused, no apologetic bow towards the lecturer; they simply pack up and leave. The thing that enthralled me the most was that more often than not, the lecturer does not look the slightest bit offended or even bothered. Why, back in my old schools, we would have been sent to the headmaster's office if we so much as talk back to our teachers!

Even the classrooms are nothing like my old colleges back home. The size of some classes is enormous, making me feel even more insignificant than I already do, as
an international student. Before long, I resigned myself to a few years of alienation as the local students talked and laughed about their latest stories of parties and sports games or grumbled about typical American problems with gas prices and whatnot. The realization dawned uncomfortably upon me – I did not fit into the majority here. I do not go to any parties, I have never done anything wilder than kayaking in the rain; I do not even own a car here. Too many times have I remembered with a pang that back in my country, I was just like every other college student. We talked the same way, complained about the same issues, and did the same things for fun.

Soon enough, the thought of being the only Asian in a roomful of huge, loud Americans no longer scared me; it merely depressed me.

On better days, I revel in my different looks and culture. I gladly take on the patriotic responsibility of representing my country and heritage in this foreign land. Here, I am unique and not simply another common face. I also came to see that on contrary to my biased belief, Americans are not out to ruin my life. In fact, slogans like ‘Everybody loves an Asian girl’ on t-shirts and random Chinese characters tattooed on American bodies and limbs had me convinced that indeed, we fascinate them. It was a strange revelation. While we teenagers from the East were busy coveting the liberal lifestyles of the American teens, they were in turn intrigued by our traditions and cultural arts.

As cliché as it sounds, being here has been a learning experience for me. Without the comforts and familiarity of home, I found myself having to plow through obstacle after obstacle on my own. Sometimes it does wear me out, having to fend for myself on a daily basis; but other times it makes me feel alive and empowered, and as people always say - if it does not break you, it’ll only make you stronger.