Walking in Two Different Shoes

“Hey, come on! This should not be so difficult!” I thought with more than a little exasperation tinged with frustration. After procrastinating for more than twenty minutes inside the food court, located in the MSU Union Building, I realized that I must order some food quickly, or else suffer the indignity of fainting from hunger. Fainting and starvation were not the only problems I faced, for in front of me lay the daunting task of reading and comprehending unfamiliar words on the menu in front of me, which supposedly represented Mexican meals? Why hadn’t I read the English menus when I had the chance while still in China? Where were the pictures of the food items to help foreigners, a practice done in my home of China? “Ugh! Give me a…ugh…Taco!” I blurted out at the attendant. Truthfully speaking, I did NOT have any idea of what a taco was, looked like, or how it was suppose to taste. My choice was solely based upon the ease of pronunciation. Immediately following my success, I was presented with another obstacle…sauces. The attendant questioned me, asking which sauces I would prefer on my taco, looking at what seemed like an ocean of choice, coupled with my ignorance the names of these choices, I began to exercise my index finger and utter in an unsure voice, “this one, and this one, and this one…” I felt like a complete fool. When finished choosing out multiple sauces and toppings, I sat down and bit into the taco. Immediately a scene from the past flashed into my mind; it was the closing ceremony in Nankai University, the college where I was employed in China. Marcus, one of my MSU Study Abroad students who studied at Nankai this past summer, had performed in a short performance during this ceremony. In this performance, Marcus in China, there came a situation exactly like the one I was currently in; inside of a Chinese restaurant for the very first time, he was unable to understand anything on the menu, “I did not
know how to order food. So, I guessed!” is what his line said. I had never thought to find myself in the same predicament.

This has been my life here at MSU so far; experiencing new as an international student like other international students, and at the same time, identifying with – and living – the experiences of my previous foreign students who studied in China. Therefore, I’m walking in two different shoes. Currently, my life is taking a course as if I were playing as Marcus in that short play with some small revisions.

Two years ago, a Chinese girl decided to come to the United States (U.S.) to study education, and to experience American Culture. Two months ago, she boarded a flight whose destination was East Lansing, Michigan. Little did she know the journey and experiences she would have:

“Hey, Mei! We are waiting for you at Wells Hall, where are you?” a student said to me via cell phone. We had scheduled to meet for lunch.

“Where I am? I don’t know!” I replied

“What?” was the incredulous response given.

“I’m lost!” I replied again.

“What can you see around you?” the student asked helpfully.

“Ugh, let me see…Trees and buildings!” I responded unhelpfully.

Situations like this have occurred many times since I’ve arrive in the U.S. This humorous occurrence can happen anytime and anywhere. For example, just now; I was to arrive at Erickson
from Kellogg Center in fifteen minutes. I boarded a CATA bus, route 31, a route I had never taken previously, and I had on given the route a quick glance thinking it simple. It was very late in the day, and it was also dark outside, preventing me from being able to see clearly out of the bus windows. I decided to get off a stop that many other students also got off at, thinking that our destination was the same. But, in actuality it wasn’t, and I had no idea where I was. “Calm down, you will find your classroom.” I whispered to myself bracingly. The fact that at night, all of the buildings on MSU’s campus look similar worked out to my disadvantage. What’s more, the signs indicating streets and buildings are much smaller than those found in China, and they were often hidden by bushes. Why did I forget to put the map in my bag? I don’t know. Though I cannot entirely understand the map since I am unfamiliar with the cardinal directions of east, west, north, and south here in MSU, and I also lacked the knowledge of the location of landmarks which could have aided me in this. Even so, having a map would still have given me comfort. In China, a choice I had when I encountered the same situation was to take a taxi. But, where were the taxis to be found on MSU’s campus? Here, I learned, one must call the cab and coordinate a pickup. So, besides lost in translation, I was also literally lost in darkness, which made me eager to receive a portable GPS as my New Year’s gift. Finally, I recognized the Main Library, used it as my landmark and made it to Erickson Hall on time, ready to experience American class.

Compared to classes, daily life is a piece of cake. When I arrived at my first class, I finally fully comprehended Marcus’ saying; “My first day of class was really difficult; I didn’t understand a word that my teacher, Miss Mei, said. She spoke a really long and fast Chinese sentence, then asked if I understood, to which I replied, I will certainly fail this class…” I can understand most of what my instructor says, but seldom is the time that I know what my American classmates are talking about. They speak far too fast for me to comprehend. The 3-
hour class made me head hurt. American students also have an immense amount of questions? If a foreign student sat in a classroom in China, the professor would slow down in his communication, and many Chinese students would also help that student understand what is required of him/her. In our eyes, foreign students are ‘pandas’, and like pandas, are to be nurtured and protected, are seen as precious.

The pressures of my studies are mounting higher and higher; it seems as if I have an endless amount of readings and writings. After being out of school for 4 years, I now have to study again. If everything were in Chinese, there would be no problem. However, everything is in English. Even while writing this essay in library, I am confused about the functions of Word 2007 in English, and it has taken me a long time to adjust to the unfamiliar format.

Take the pain with pleasure. This is the sentence that now describes my life. Obviously, living in a foreign country is not easy, this fact is evident to all. The crucial point is how I react and cope with these difficulties. Should I quit the program when difficulties arise? A choice that is chosen by some international students. No way! Being a Spartan is my dream! I am actually luckier than other international students because I have many American friends here. They were my students, now my friends. They have taken me to Kroger, restaurants, and football games. They’ve told me what a Baffulo chicken sandwich is, the meaning of “first down” and where I can buy Halloween costumes. Although I keep silent in class, my classmates often approach me and say “Hi, how is everything going? Call me if you need help.” I would like to thank you all. I am sure I will enjoy my existence walking in two different shoes, just like my students in China. By the way, when I return to China to teach again, I will give consider more consideration to the foreign students, because I now know more deeply what they are experiencing. Because it is what I have, and will continue to until I leave, experience.