WALK A MILE ON THE BRIDGE

Fan Jiang
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On the first day of arriving in East Lansing, I was so hungry that my belly was beginning to rumble. After sixteen hours on the flight and two hours on Michigan Flyer, I did not spare any time in tasting the excitement of being in United States, a wonderland I've been longing for during my earlier life.

Rushing to the closest place I could dine in, I ordered a random burger on the menu, feeling anxious to eat. Then an unfamiliar sentence came to my ear at the speed of light,

"For here or to go?"

I stared at the salesclerk with my face at sea for three seconds, and tried very hard to search this sentence in the "words bank" in my mind but found nothing. "It is definitely a question", a guess haunted and I murmured with my intuition "Yes..."

With a big question mark on her face, I realized that I said something improperly, "Sorry, pardon?" She slowed down, "I mean, FOR HERE OR TO GO? You want to dine here or take food out?" Oh Gosh, I finally understood, but I want to hide myself and escape from the awkwardness, replying "To go, please."

That night, I lay down on my bed in Spartan Village, using bedclothes I brought from home, sniffing the flavor of home thousands of miles away from me. There was no lamp in the bedroom, only soft summer moonlight spreading upon the room. That was how I started the brand new life here, with sounds of steam whistle and roaring of trains right outside the window.

From the beginning, every single day is a small-scale battle. With my first 21 years life in China, my original lifestyle was developed in a collective culture and urban sprawl - always a group of people's company, busy and crowded streets, neon lights in every corner, vendors with steaming hot snacks, blatant Chinese dialects. But here, I need to cook every meal alone, work hard many hours per day, cope with homework, projects, case studies, bank bills, and get used to the quiet lonely country life. At the same time, the most challenging one: the battle with inherent values and the strong appeal to blend in.
"Hey, what's your name?"

"Connie."

"What's your real name? You are a Chinese, it's weird to call you an American name."

Well... That's a good question. What is my real name? I gave myself an American name for your convenience. To show the respect and to demonstrate my easy-going nature, I always remember "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." But there will be risks that I lose my own identity in the process of compromising. Is there any chance I tell everyone my real name? They are two meaningful Chinese characters which mean "a sail boat on a river" and the shapes of the character (Hieroglyphic) originated from the imitation of water, mast and canvas. Indeed, everyone can pronounce my name "Fan"--a name relatively easy to pronounce compared to other Chinese names beginning with "X""Q"--but it lost its real meaning (you know what "fan" means in English right?) when it comes to another language system. And I still wonder that not too many people know: in China, there are 1.3 billion people put family names before given names. If you call me for three times and no reply back, please forgive me--- No one calls my name starting with "Fan" before I came here.

In this battle, the strongest enemy is always myself. Being a graduate student in Business School, if you sit silently for the whole course session, I bet you will feel like sitting on pins and needles. American students and MBA students are eloquent, freely expressing ideas and producing insightful sparks. You could probably find me, sitting in the front row, but acting like choked by words which cannot be spoken out loud. Educated with the doctrine of the Mean (maintain balance and harmony) and philosophy of keeping "face"("the social front, the ostensible display of one's social standing to the public"-From Wikipedia), we believe it is safe to be polite, a good listener, but not aggressive, and never blurt out immature opinions. In the battle to beat the "sheepish me", the only way is replace with a "courageous me". After one year's struggle to remove the dated tags people put on Chinese students, I made it-- I can finally raise up my hand without hesitation, defend my idea and articulate with organized statements. Regardless of accents, regardless of "face", I want to embrace the courage, the freedom, and the diversity of American life, in this land.
For a long time, United States is usually believed to be the "great melting pot", in which different cultures influence each other and blend into one. Before I came to the U.S., all the media and information were delivering the same idea to me. But there is certain distance between what I expected and what I experienced. On the campus, most white students hang out with white students, black with black, Asian with Asian. Even though I cannot deny that multinational group discussions and cooperation happens everywhere, I still doubt when we will arrive at the "melting point".

In one of the courses I participated, the Professor asked everybody to divide into voluntary groups. All of a sudden, white students formed groups, leaving two black students and two Asian students including me to form one team. Maybe there were some hidden reasons, like those white students know each other before this course. It was a little bit embarrassed to tell the truth, but it really happened.

When I traveled to New York City, I felt comfortable to be one of the million tourists walking on the busy streets and no one noticed me with unusual glances. Like a water drop falls into the sea, everyone can find a position in U.S. After I went to Chinatown and Little Italy in Manhattan, I was surprised to learn that immigrants still keep the way they live in their home countries. Again, I experienced untidy streets, Mandarin and Cantonese in the air, vendors with steaming hot snacks, my favorite authentic Szechuan food, which are exactly the same in China. When I read an article about "Salad Bowl" (it is a concept suggests many different cultures in United States combine like a salad), "Yes, that's truth!" I found this is the best description: each ingredient retain its identity, respect each other, without unnecessarily changing many parts of it, and piece together into a delicious, colorful dishes.

On the way of encountering different culture, where there are walls to block, there are bridges to connect. What we need are an open-minded heart, handful of respect and understanding, to walk a mile on this bridge in different shoes.

I want to tear down the wall, tell people what the other side looks like - I am not a Christian, but I go to churches, listen to Bible stories and get to know people, with an eye of self-examination; I will not send my elder
family member into nursing center, but I volunteer to take care of them, accompany them, draw pictures with them; I don't know football before I came here, but I went to tailgating parties and watched football games, proud of being a Spartan and fell in love with amazing football.

I want to build the bridge, let the isolated lands interact and learn from the essence of both cultures. I taught Chinese calligraphy and origami in Mason Middle School, told those teenagers what it looks like in the opposite side of China; I served as a volunteer Chinese teacher with Confusion Institution at MSU and have one-on-one language partner; I invited friends from different countries to my apartment, showing them how to cook Chinese dishes and holding a traditional party.

"For here or to go?"

This micro question lingers in my mind now and then. It reminds me of the one-year-and-a-half experience in the U.S. of freshness, excitement, frustration, independence, introspection, and self-growth. It is also a macro question, stay here or leave? Standing in front of the crossroad of graduation in the coming December, I ask myself again and again.

I don't want to say goodbye, to every nice and warm-hearted driver I meet on school buses; to friends, professors, and classmates who greatly help me in all aspects of life; to the fascinating autumn leaves, cedar river, pure snow and always-blue sky; to magnificent Spartan Stadium, lovely library, and my sweet apartment here; to the friendly Michigan people and all the terrific experience I have here...

Just as Henry David Thoreau said, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

I guess that's why I walked thousands of miles on the bridge to Michigan, to explore a new life here, and to write down my thoughts - inviting you to walk a mile in my story.