HONORABLE MENTION
“BREAKING THROUGH THE WALLS”
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HOME COUNTRY: CHINA

My husband told me this story one day, before I left China for MSU on September 14: When his German boss called and asked, “How are you Mr. Wan?” My husband, who had perhaps just drunk a bottle of wine, said this: “VERY GOOD!” His boss sounded extremely surprised, “Very good? Are you sure, Mr. Wan? You sound like an American!”

My husband was confused: Why should “very good” be a problem? And why can’t I be very good? His boss then explained, “Well, unlike our American colleagues, our dear Chinese colleagues usually say ‘Just so-so,’ ‘Just fine,’ or ‘I’m ok’…”

They both laughed — it’s very true that none of their Chinese co-workers ever said “very good” in reply to this simple daily greeting.

After reflecting on this subtle discovery, I couldn’t help wondering: Are we so downbeat that even an occasional expression of satisfaction comes as a big surprise to foreigners?

In China, we are a typical middle-class family; and we are a middle-class family even by American standards. We live in a one-million dollar apartment in Beijing; our son goes to a private bilingual kindergarten; we go to movies, theaters and concerts; we stay in five-star hotels during vacations. So why aren’t we happy?

Well, I forgot to mention that our wonderful one-million dollar home is no bigger than the two-bedroom apartment in Spartan Village. We live in a 22-storey high-rise
residential compound which is home to more than 5,000 people. Work is stressful, but we’d rather stay in the office than go home. Wondering why? Try to live with your in-laws for four years and you’ll understand.

Thanks to the visiting scholar program offered by Michigan State University, I was finally granted a respite and I landed in America. In Chinese, America (Meiguo) literally means “beautiful country.” But we never think of America as a beautiful country. Through history textbooks and your Hollywood blockbusters, America, to many of us, is synonymous with imperialism, violence, and aggression. My mother was extremely worried when she heard that I was going to study in the US: Be careful! Americans are dangerous! They have guns! They can shoot whoever they want!

As a native of Nanjing, whose parents were lucky survivors of the 1937 Massacre (when invading Japanese troops savagely killed more than 300,000 people in Nanjing), my mother was born to be afraid of guns, and she has passed that fear on to me.

But if my mother’s concerns were true, why do Americans appreciate their lives more than we do? Are they irrational? I brought this question with me when I arrived in Spartan Village.

Surprisingly, everyone is so nice. Wherever I go, total strangers will start a conversation with a big smile on their faces -How are you doing?- as if we’ve known each other for quite some time. In China, if we tried to smile and say hi to everyone we met, our face and tongue would be numb by the end of the day. But here in America, on MSU campus in particular, the chances are that we’ll run into a hopping squirrel more often than a human being. Of course the Americans are nice to strangers, I said to myself.

The second day in Spartan Village was quite frustrating, as I could not get cable news
on my newly-bought TV. Three teams of maintenance workers came by, and they concluded that the problem was with the TV.

“Return the TV, and get a new one,” they said.

“That’s impossible! I’ve already opened the box; I lost the instruction book and it’s been three weeks since I first bought it.” In China, if you open the package, it means you take the product, good or bad. You want to return it? Just imagine how much you have to pay for a divorce. To save money, I had bought the cheapest set, totally forgetting lessons learned at home: cheap means bad. Now, I had to pay the price. I hated myself for making such stupid mistake.

After being fretful and upset for three days, I turned for comfort to my Chinese American friend.

“Of course you can return it. You can actually return it even if it’s just because you don’t like it. You know nothing about consumer protection? It’s your right!” My right?

Living in a culture which appreciates obedience and harmony, I never complain even if I feel like I’ve been wronged, because I know for sure, no matter how reasonable my case is, I will never win a lawsuit against a big company or the government. Like many of my fellow countrymen, I always console myself by using the idiom: Suffering is a blessing in disguise.

My friend, however, dragged me to Walmart. Without a single question being asked, I returned the TV, got a full refund, and bought a new one.

With my new Samsung TV connected to the cable, I lay down on my sofa and randomly flicked through the channels, happy and satisfied - life was so beautiful knowing that my individual rights would be respected and protected. All my previous feelings of nervousness disappear in a flash.
So why can’t we argue for the same protection back home?
All of a sudden, some lines from *Shawshank Redemption* struck me: *These walls are funny. First you hate them; then you get used to them. Enough time passes, you get to depend on them. That’s institutionalized.*

Are we all victims of institutionalization in our society? Perhaps. Before I came to the US, China was all I knew. I am used to Beijing’s toxic air and the never-ending traffic. I’m used to swallowing my complaints and never asking questions. I was raised to follow other people’s directions and not my own heart. I was taught at a very young age that an individual should always submit his or her own interests to the interests of the group. There was never any talk of ‘individual rights’.

But who can we blame? China opened itself just a little over three decades ago. We are actually new comers in this sophisticated international arena. There are so many lessons that we must learn from the rest of the world.

Change is hard, and it never happens all at once.

But like Andy, the hero in the movie, we can always hope. With more Chinese people like myself going abroad to study and do research, we will bring home the most advanced social, economic and technological knowledge – knowledge that will help us to break through the walls and set us free from institutionalization.

One day, after studying for a month in MSU, I was a little startled to hear myself replying “very good” to the question “how are you doing today?”

It’s not just because I want to blend in, I figured. It’s because I really am.