

## Crossing Borders: How my international experience has affected my view of the world

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*“When in Rome, do as the Romans do.”*

This old but well-known proverb (in Chinese 入乡随俗 *rù xiāng suí sú*) advises us to adjust to new cultures when we travel, because each culture is unique. My own experience in the United States has attested to the wisdom of this popular saying. The United States has the most advanced system of higher education in the world, and the academic environment in this country is reputed for stimulation and invigoration. Given that, I regarded this country as a dream place to further my education after finishing my bachelor degree in diplomacy. Aiming at becoming a capable policy analyst and practitioner, I came to the University of North Carolina at Charlotte to pursue a Ph.D. degree in public policy in 2006.

Studying at UNCC not only allows me to gain knowledge in my field, but also delve further into American culture by learning their ways of thinking and lifestyle. However, adjusting to American society is not an easy task. I was born, brought up, and educated in China, a country that is so different from the United States in terms of languages, political systems, economies, religions, social values, and traditions. Not surprisingly, excitement conquered me when I walked off the plane in Los Angeles by saying “America, I am here” in my heart. After settling down in Charlotte, I buried myself in enjoying things such as living in my private room, driving my own car, breathing fresh air, playing soccer in spacious parks, and hanging out with friends on the weekends. However, the initial stage of euphoria or excitement did not last long. It gradually conceded to a stage of irritation, frustration, and depression as I noticed more and more dissimilarities between life here and life in my hometown. Often times, I felt bored and homesick, and did not want to communicate with local people.

In the first few weeks, I encountered a variety of challenges and difficulties, among which communication is the biggest one. I felt sad when I gradually realized that my high scores in both TOEFL (Test of English Language as a Foreign Language) and GRE (Graduate Record Examinations) did not guarantee the smooth communication between me and the people I met in

the United States. On many occasions, I failed to find the exact words to express my ideas and found myself in a fairly awkward situation of misunderstanding or being misunderstood. Today, I still remember how embarrassing I was when someone comforted me with “God bless you” after I sneezed in a computer lab, because I did not understand that phrase at that point. The language barriers eventually became a negative force that discouraged me from actively communicating with American people for fear of seeming awkward or stupid in their eyes.

As time progressed, I came to realize that the communication barriers between me and American people not only lie in language itself, but also with the many implications behind each culture. I did not realize this until one American friend invited me over for a dinner. When I arrived at his apartment, he showed me the room of his roommate, saying that I could take anything I wanted since his roommate had already moved out and had left all these things for him to sell or throw away. When he finally opened bags and asked if I wanted to take them with me, I felt too awkward to say yes, because it is disgraceful to accept so many things for free in my culture. In both business and daily settings, people in America tend to state their thoughts and demands in a candid and straightforward way, while Chinese people prefer to do this in a circuitous way, either in written or oral form. As a result, people in China usually display hesitation and wait for the giver to figure out his or her real feelings or intentions when they actually need many of these things. Fortunately, since my friend had lived in China for a couple of years and obtained a certain understanding of Chinese culture, he smiled to me, saying “Come on, Chengxiu. If you need anything, just take it. It is not greedy at all but a great help to me, otherwise I have to take time to throw them away.” Then I felt a lot easier and comfortable to pick up the things I needed.

I was deeply impressed by this event. More importantly, this event impelled me to think seriously about the necessity and importance of learning the different communication styles between the two countries. As my English improves, I know more about the crucial characteristics of communication in American culture, and that allows me to adapt as much as I can while in the United States. Though I am still not totally familiar with American culture, I feel much more comfortable now. I firmly believe that my experience in the United States will help me in communicating and developing friendship with people from different cultures.

Besides communication, my experience in the United States has enriched me in many other ways. I like travelling and America, the most mobile country in the world, has helped make my hobby become a reality. The freedom to drive my car has enabled me to visit cities of New York, Atlanta, and Washington DC. Traveling to these places has exposed me to a variety of people and cultures, and that allows me to find that America is really a welcoming place for any nationality. I was fascinated by the authentic flavor of Chinese food when I travelled to China Town in New York City; I did not feel like a foreigner thanks to the hospitality and politeness that people showed to me when I travelled to Atlanta; I was surprised by the diversity of American culture when I visited museums and historical sites in Washington DC. Though people are not the same everywhere and may share different cultures, travelling to different places of the United States promoted me to acknowledge their cultural differences and appreciate the values that different culture holds. As to academics, I have obtained certain needed skills, such as how to read and write research papers and how to develop and evaluate projects that will enable me to become a skilled policy analyst and practitioner in the near future. More importantly, my experience at UNCC has opened my mind, reinforced my critical thinking, and fostered a broader perspective when looking at things.

In closing, my experience in the United States is exciting and rewarding. There were times when I struggled with the cultural shock in the United States. I even experienced reverse cultural shock when I went to visit my parents last summer (For example, I had a hard time driving and queuing for buses during the first few days of my stay in Beijing; you probably will have a similar feeling if you travel to Beijing to watch the 2008 Olympic Games). Over time, I have successfully adapted to the new culture in the United State. Now, knowing both Chinese and American culture is helping me become a bicultural individual and, to some extent, a citizen of the world. I strongly believe that my experience in the United States will continue to exert an important and far-reaching impact on my future life and career. This essay allows me to thank the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and the United States for providing such a precious opportunity for me to cross borders and explore deeper into both cultures and myself.