

Bitterness of my Foreign Life

By Shan Gao

Before I came to Pitt, I often heard people say that Chinese are not good at communication with Americans, and when they are participating in local social activities, they prefer to stay together and maintain their groups. And such statements are usually accompanied by a kind of mocking tone. Regardless of whether the rumor was true or false, I secretly determined at the time that I must not become that kind of Chinese international student that people always talk about. However, what surprises and shocks me is that after I lived in the United States for almost 120 days, I did not even make one American friend who I can hang out with and I even started to consider whether I should integrate into American culture or not.

On the day before the new students' convocation, all the freshmen were led by their room assistants to the lawn next to the Petersen Event Center to complete the university's routine. That is an aerial photo of a head of a panther pieced together by all freshmen wearing blue and yellow sleeves. It was also the first time I saw all the girls on our floor. In the beginning, everyone was preparing to gather in the corridor and introduced themselves to each other. Then they started chatting with roommates or friends they knew. As the only international student on the entire floor, I felt a little bit lonely or embarrassed without a roommate, but I thought that it was the first time we met, and we would get acquainted with each other anyway later. On the way to the lawn, I started trying to chat with the girls on our floor. "Pittsburgh is quite hot!" I said, "Yeah, it's almost 95 degrees Fahrenheit!" she said, "There are many mosquitoes in summer in China, but I don't see any mosquitoes in the United States. That's great!" I said, "Sure thing!" she said with some perfunctory. It didn't sound like she was very interested in the summer in China, so that was the end of our conversation. After a while, another girl came next to me and started chatting with me. "Have you been to the United States before?" she asked, "Yeah! I came here to take the SAT last summer." I said, "Is this your first visit to Pittsburgh?" she asked again, "Yes, I was in Los Angeles last year" I answered, "Do you like Pittsburgh?" she asked, "It's pretty good so far!" (to be honest,

I had only been here for two days, I really couldn't say anything else!) "Sounds good!" Although I tried to start a new conversation, I couldn't think of anything to ask. I started to wonder what blocked us so much that I couldn't find a common topic. Maybe it is because I'm not proficient enough in English, and I just need to talk to them more, I comfort myself like this. I became a lonely person again in the crowd and tried to ease my embarrassment by playing with my phone.

I thought the awkward atmosphere would stop when I reached the shooting lawn, but things were not going as well as I expected. While the photographer was getting into place and picking the right angle and light, all of the students could only just wait on the lawn. Girls and boys around me all gathered in their groups and started their chats. Standing alone in the crowd made me feel embarrassed again. However, I found that it was not just an embarrassment that made me uncomfortable, but it was also a feeling of fear. I truly knew that such a feeling of fear is not derived from staying in an unfamiliar environment. It came from the people around me who were chatting with the language or expressions I did not understand. The lack of understanding of their language isolated me, which made me feel insecure and scared. Although I want to discern the content of their conversations carefully, the mix of different voices and incomplete expressions of each of them made my brain buzz. This is similar to Richard Rodriguez's feeling when he was a boy, "Crowds at Safeway or bus stops would be noisy with sound. And I would be forced to edge away from the chirping chatter above me." (4) For Richard, the unfamiliar sound from the subway or bus station scared him, creating a sense of oppression, and such feelings made him want to escape to those kinds of crowded and noisy environments. And at that moment, I truly have the same feeling as Richard. All I wanted was to get rid of or escape from that hustle and bustle.

Moreover, the feeling of fear does not just come from the fact that I didn't understand American students' language. After trying to get rid of the feeling of wanting to escape that environment, I forced myself to focus on the contents of those students in order to get some hints about their chats. Most of American students were talking about different TV series and celebrities that I even did not hear of before. I realized that it was not just the language but the cultural

background that separated me from American students. I couldn't start chatting with them by finding a common topic, because we are from different countries and immersed in different cultures.

In the past eighteen years, my outgoing and talkative personality made me rarely worry about being unable to make new friends or integrate into the new environment. Even though I was transferred to another city to go to an international high school by myself, I adapted well with the new environment and made many new friends. Thinking back on my experience, I instantly realized that even if I had been to a different city and went to a new school all by myself, the reason I was able to start a conversation with others was that I was in China and I had the same cultural background as those strangers. So I could easily use what happened recently or some news to stir up the topic. But being in the United States, the country that I had just arrive in two days ago, I had no knowledge of its cultural background, not to mention the celebrities or trends mentioned by those American students. Watching them chat with interest and hearing the occasional laughter from time to time in a nearby group, I felt Richard Rodriguez's sorrowful mood when he wrote "reminding me that in this world so big, I was a foreigner."(6) The unfamiliar English spoken by a gringo made Richard nervous, and even the voice of the gringo in the grocery store let him feel a sense of isolation since the language Richard was familiar with was different from that of a gringo. The cultural difference between me and Americans made me have the same feeling. The gap just like an invisible wall that separated me from American students and made me feel that even though we are in the same land, we are in two worlds. Just like Richard felt that even if he speaks the same language with a gringo in public, the sounds of a gringo are still foreign to him. What distinguishes me from American students at this time is not just my skin color or my race, but the invisible wall. The sense of helplessness that I can't easily fill in the cultural gap between us scares me.

For me, even though I can communicate with others in English now, I still think that it is not a language that gives me those powers that Tan mentions in her article "Mother Tongue" and it even gives me lots of limitations. After I came to the United States, Andie, my room assistant, is the

only American I am more familiar with. Although it is hurtful to say that, even if she is more enthusiastic about me than the other girls on our floor, I still can't get close to her, and she can't bring me a familiar feeling. Although we have chatted many times and I have poured out my troubles or little secrets to her, every time I talk to her, I still feel as insecure as talking to a stranger. So I thought for a long time why I cannot have that kind of familiarity with her. Besides not knowing each other for a long time, another important reason is that I haven't shown her my true personality and true self. And English prevented me from doing that. Tan spends a great part of her time to study the power of language. For her, English can "evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea, or a simple truth." (5) Through her sentence, we can know that a language that one person is proficient with is more than just a language for everyday communication. But I don't think that all the languages that a person can speak are so powerful, just like how I feel about English.

By talking to a person and listening to his or her expressions, you can distinguish the person's personality and even determine what your impression of the person is. Since English for me is merely a language I have to use to carry out my daily communication, I do not know how to use it to express my joy and sorrow to others. I found resonance with Farah Iman Muhd Najib. In her article "The Loss of My 'Lah,'" she writes that "English can hide secrets...my secrets may very well lie hidden behind this American English that I've just begun to get to know." (3) That is because she doesn't speak English as well as she speaks Malaysian, so she can't express her emotions to others with appropriate words or tones. Through the tone of a person's speech, you can judge whether the person's emotions are happy or sad, but when I communicate with others in English, I can't let my emotions naturally follow my tone. When I speak Chinese, I can express my emotions by using different words or tones. However, when I speak English, my brain is always in a very nervous state because I need to ensure my pronunciation is standard and clear while I translate what I want to say into English. So when I speak English, I will never be in a relaxed state, so that I cannot express my emotions as naturally as when I speak Chinese. And when I want others

to know that I am happy or sad, I have to express it deliberately. So I think the person I am presenting in front of others is a limited one or the one that I want others to know, and my unskilled English expression makes others unable to perceive my true emotions.

The restrictions imposed by English, in addition to being unable to show my true disposition in daily communication, also cause trouble for my writing. When I started my college life and faced the situation that I have to write essays in English, I always felt distressed and anxious. Although I was asked to write English essays in high school, most of the articles at that time were used for exams, so they always had some fixed templates and routines. Sometimes, I even did not need to dig too much into my personal ideas. All I needed to do was just answer questions according to the requirements and connected those answers into one article. After I started to write long essays which asked me to convey my personal thoughts or experiences, I began to feel anxious since I did not know what I wanted to write in English. When I tried to think and write in English, I found that my ideas were all fragmented. I often did not know what to write in the next sentence. So I had to spend lots of time on essays, which also made me have some resistance to write. But when I used Chinese to write, my way of thinking returned to the pattern I am used to, so my thoughts were complete and I just greatly reduced the time I need to conceive and write. Moreover, since I cannot find the right words to express my true emotions in English due to my unskilled English, I sometimes could only express my meaning in plain words which makes my article dull and ordinary. So sometimes I even feel that the one writing article in English is not truly myself. I seem to be a ghostwriter for another person. If letting me write an article with the same topic in Chinese, maybe the structure and ideas of the two articles will be very different.

After thinking back my previous experiences of being unable to chat with American students smoothly and the restrictions that English brings to me, I started to understand why Chinese people always choose to get together with other Chinese people, which is the phenomenon I mentioned at the beginning of the article. Sometimes it may not be their initiative to block out the American group, and it may just be because they cannot integrate into the American community

smoothly just like what I experienced at the shooting lawn before. Even though we could conduct small talks, we could not achieve deep communication. I think the phenomenon of gathering by race or nationality is not only reflected in the Chinese people since people in other countries will do the same. It is reasonable for people to tend to get to know people who have the same ideas as them when they facing different languages and cultural backgrounds in a foreign country. And such practices can also be a reflection of maintaining their personal identities.

In these days of studying and living in the United States, I repeatedly pondered whether I should change the familiar lifestyle in order to try to integrate with the American population, or if I should maintain the current lifestyle, which is spending my time with the Chinese outside of class. On the one hand, I feel like Najib said, "I would be intentionally placing a barrier between myself and the people who have welcomed me into their country".(7) She has the same struggles with me, which she fears that if she keeps her language habits, she won't be able to get close to Americans, and such separation from Americans will also make those who want to accept her and make friends with her disappointed. Nevertheless, every time I think about integrating into the American community, the feeling of embarrassment and loneliness that I had before makes me feel insecure. Meanwhile, if I make up my mind to fill the cultural gap between me and American students, I will certainly not be able to maintain my Chinese culture and would sacrifice a part of myself to learn American culture. Fearing that I will lose parts of my Chinese identity makes me feel tangled.

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