

Experiencing American Culture with the Host Family

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Background and Motivation

In the section on English education, three Curriculum Goals are listed: (a) Develop basic communication competence in English and be able to use the language in real situations. (b) Teach students English learning strategies and encourage them to learn English actively and effectively. And, (c) Increase awareness of one's own native culture as well as different cultures. We, a group of 18 elementary school English teachers from New Taipei City, took 'a journey to the West' from October 24 to November 4, 2011, stayed with 9 different host families in Cerritos, Los Angeles, California, U.S.A. to experience and emerge ourselves in the English-speaking environment.



Serious Talks

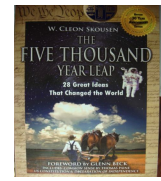
Mrs. Michelle Ward, the hostess of Miss Phoebe Yang and me, told us that Mr. Earick Ward, the host, always asks the interviewees to his sporting goods store this question: 'Who will you choose to have lunch with if you have the chance to invite them? Dead or alive!' Mr. Ward then placed the same question to me: Who will you invite to have lunch with if you have the chance to do so?



I pondered on this question for a long time.

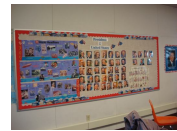
My answer was: Dr. Sun Yet-Sen. And later when we were headed for home, I got a gift from Earick. It was a book "The Five Thousand Year Leap" by W. Cleon Skousen. The writer says, 'This work is dedicated to that generation of resolute Americans whom we call the Founding fathers. They created the first free people to survive as a nation in modern times.'

They wrote a new kind of Constitution which is now the oldest in existence...’
Indeed, American proves itself a great country, especially when I realize the U.S. government and the people spend so much money and energy in educating people from all over the world to their country equally.

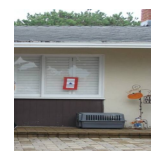


We had conversations like this and on other topics during our stay with them.

It is certainly true that we had a great time with our host family for the two weeks, and this was one of the major episodes that engraved on my mind. Mr. Ward is a ‘thinker’ as Miss Yang remarked, and, Mrs. Ward, as a school nurse, commits herself to her work as a nurse to three different schools as well as the job in the Teacher’s Union, were all very impressive. Aside from everything I learned from the visiting and workshops in ABC Adult School and the internship in Elliott Elementary School, the limited time spent with our host family was quality and precious to me.



Sometimes Mrs. Ward would tease her husband in conversation (that’s how we learn what the ‘bikini bars’ and the ‘dive bars’ are). We had very informative and inspiring conversations with Mr. and Mrs. Ward every day. On the way to school in Mr. Ward’s car one day, I found a thick hard-cover biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, (February 4, 1906 – April 9, 1945). This was a man who was involved in plans to assassinate Adolf Hitler. This led to his arrest in April 1943 and execution by hanging in April 1945, 23 days before the Nazis' surrender. His view of Christianity's role in the secular world has become very influential. I shouldn’t be surprised that Mr. Ward read through the book about this German Lutheran pastor, theologian and martyr and made notes in it after the two-week conversations with him later on. Their only son, Jonathan, is in the USA Navy. He is currently in a submarine somewhere in the Middle East. Every time he called



home, it always gave them a very happy day. The parents would announce that their son called, and they would expect another call from him some time they do not know because it is confidential. Hanging on their living room window is a flag with a star which tells this family has someone in the military serving their country. They respect and love their country. I saw they sang the national anthem solemnly in the soccer game filed.

We learned things like the ‘occupiers’ in Long Beach and downtown L.A.; the United State of America is a ‘constitutional republican’ rather than a ‘democratic’ country like Egypt; the Democratic President Barak Obama ‘gives fish’ to American people instead of teaching them how to fish; Teachers’ Union (or Unions of any kinds) are helpful or not are still in question; etc. On each new fact I learned from day to day, it had me to ask myself, ‘What is it like in Taiwan?’

We value western civilization high and we thought we are practicing in Taiwan the democracy as they do. However, think of what Mr. Ward earnestly declared that America is a constitutional republican rather than a democracy country like Egypt, and the Iranian woman from the ABC Adult School seriously replied to our curious question of why she immigrated to the U.S.A. was the word ‘freedom.’ Also, in the classroom of Elliott Elementary I observed the class of 2nd graders stand up and pledge to their country every day. What does democracy mean in our understanding after all?

One detail I noticed in Cerritos that surprised me was to see how far away the car drivers will step on the brakes for the pedestrians. One explanation for our inability to do so in Taiwan is that we have a lot more cars and much less space on roads than in America. Still, it can also be viewed from a cultural aspect: American respects everyone. Another activity I considered major happened in the evening of Oct. 26 when Mr. Earick Ward took Miss Yang and me to the ‘Occupy Wall Street Movement’ camps in Long Beach. BBC News comments

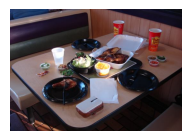
the movement as ‘a global movement opposed to corporate greed, the political power of big business and what the protesters see as the injustice of inequality’. Later we saw a much larger occupy area in downtown L.A. Mr. Ward himself is involved in this movement, but not as a protester, but as a ‘watcher’ who tries to hold these ‘know-all college young men’ from doing something foolish. In fact, early in the morning one day, Mr. Ward found the occupiers in Long Beach blocked his facebook. The protesters claim that they have the freedom of speech, while they do not recognize the right to speak of different voices. Still, one day, Mr. Ward went to Long Beach University with his leaflets to tell them don’t be ‘Useful Idiots’. When he got back that night, we cheered for this hero’s safe home.



In reflection, as a citizen, I participate nothing in public affairs. I have a small world; my work and my family, that’s all. My Chinese philosophy would say: ‘Oh, lucky me!’ but couldn’t I do better than this? Look how Mr. and Mrs. Ward have their own ways of taking parts in a citizen society. Couldn’t I do better than this in educating our children?

American Life-style: Food, Sports, Pets, Music

Ms. Phoebe Yang was a college student in Nevada State, therefore under the assistance of Mr. and Mrs. Ward, I had the pleasure to join her ‘Remembrance of Things Past’ moments in these days. We had typical American food - hotdogs – and salad of Earick’s special home-made dressing by the Jacuzzi in their yard. We had double-double from In-and-Out Hamburgers. We had the best grilled chicken meals from El Pollo Loco. Even the lemonade from Hot Dog On A Stick was a must-taste. To me, everything was fantastic at the first a few bites, and soon I had no doubt that American can easily out-weighted Taiwanese in body sizes. Food is a part of a culture; table manners also demonstrate cultural differences. I wonder why that instead of

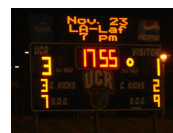


separating dishes into each person's plate like the Westerners do, Chinese ancestors insisted that everybody serve food from the same dishes. It couldn't be for hygienic reason only; after all, Chinese has been so proud on cuisines and the five-thousand-year history.

It says that sports are as important as air to Americans, therefore to set our foot on a soccer field to watch a real game is another cultural event to me. Miss Shannon Ward, the daughter of our host, is a sophomore college women's soccer player of California State Northridge University. Mrs. Ward said there was a cold-war between Mr. and



Miss Ward because the father wanted to coach the daughter on soccer, while she was reluctant to accept his advices. Then on Oct. 23, Wednesday night after school, we had the chance to accompany the supportive parents to the game. We put on our red T-shirts and grabbed the pom-poms in hand and drove for almost an hour and a half to watch her play. I was almost choked up



with emotions to see these 22 big girls ran around the field and played for two full 45-minute matches so fearlessly and courageously. Our girls shed tears when the game came to an end, 1:

3, they lost it to the UC Riverside. It was a pity that we did not have a sweet victory to share with, but on the other hand, we saw American sportsmanship and how every sport is for everyone, men or women. In Elliott Elementary, the



teacher told me the children have PE (physical education) class as always, and the teachers will have some extra time for children to stretch in order to keep up to the State's standard .|

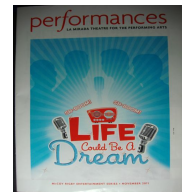
Mrs. Ward disagreed with me when I once said that their pet dogs live better than some people in Taiwan. I was not kidding. Of course there are vagrants in America. I said this with sorry because I know how poor people in our society struggle for lives. The Wards keep 2 big dogs and 2 small dogs at home. These dogs live with ease and dignity under Southern California sunshine, like any other human being;



even better, they do not suffer from inflation or deflation. They get 'walked' and 'food' every

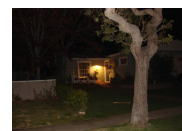
day on time. Many other host families keep pets at home. Some have dogs. Some have cats. Some have both. Their children grow up with these pets like family members. I would like to think this is where the spirit of humanity starts to grow.

On Oct. 29, Saturday evening, after a crazy long day in the Universal Studio, we went to La Mirada Theater to enjoy the Doo-Wop Musical: Life Could Be a Dream. Most of the doo-wop music in the play was familiar to me. These oldies but goodies were older than my age, but somehow they came into my life before I even learn English. The melodies and lyrics of songs always help a great deal in language learning and teaching. Mr. Ward said he preferred rocks. Michelle's mother might like it. Indeed, the audiences were most elder people that night. Music is one thing that you do not pretend.



Tradition! Tradition!

It is no doubt that parents love their sons and daughters, but Mrs. Ward expressed herself more passionately and directly compared to parents I know in Taiwan. She wants to 'get retired if I have a grandson to take care of' and to 'live where my grandson lives,' while parents around me in Taiwan keep sending out the message, 'I am fed up with the family. I want my life back, so don't bother me with kiddos.' According to newspapers and magazines reports, it is the same to Japanese women. It seems that oriental women have been submitted to men too long in tradition. Why, this could be one of the reasons for our world No. 1 low birth rate! This American couple seems to be more 'conservative and traditional' than we Orientals in some ways in my opinion. Mrs. Ward was also surprised to know Taiwanese women have the right to choose whether to keep or to change their last names in marriage. American women always lose their



maiden names after they get married. To her surprise even more is that parents in Taiwan can negotiate which last name to heir for their offspring.

As we know learning a foreign language well involves more than just learning its vocabulary words and grammar rules, the scope of learning must extend to the cultural aspect as well. We are here at the right time: the Halloween season. The Stowers Elementary Schools' teachers adjust the festival from scary BOO to happy costume parade to accommodate people from different cultures. We joined the joyful atmosphere of Harvest Parade there. All the teachers and children and parents dressed up just for fun. That morning was full of happy festival spirits. In the neighborhood of Seal Beach where we stayed were so many amazing Halloween decorations around that we cannot take enough pictures of. Mr. and Mrs. Ward showed us all about Halloween from the Pumpkin Patch to trick or treat on Halloween night. Just for fun, why not!



Cultural Understandings

We lived with the host family for only two weeks, but this American couple and the environment led me to think more into culture issues. We discussed and compared cultural similarities and differences between American and Chinese in every aspects we encountered or interested in. We talked something about Yin-Yang, Feng-Shui, and even Chinese medical theory about not to having iced food to avoid period pain. Now that I am back to school, standing on the platform, facing children of my same cultural background, WHAT am I going to give them about cultures?

I will expect more on cultural globalization in my future language classes to students.

Conversations with Mr. and Mrs. Ward and the visiting of these three ABC Unified District Schools made me realized that cultural globalization is a process that involves competition as well as negotiation. What we value precious, important and attempt to keep, place, or show in global space and cross-cultural understanding is a specific dimension and the foundation of it. It involves learning to understand and appreciate those who have different cultural backgrounds from ours. It is to see the world through the eyes and minds of others, and it is about the native cultures. It is about the human value systems and awareness.



Cultural globalization is to realize that other peoples of the world want and need much the same things as us.

Now, let me ask you: Who will you choose to have lunch with if you have the chance to do so, why?