



Recording and reviewing my trip to the U.S.

Liu Xuan, a participant in the inaugural SLE to the United States in February 2007, wrote the following essay shortly after his return to China.

Cultural adventure

I have long been enthusiastic about a journey to the US. Eventually, I had the chance.

Before our departure, every one of us 12 Chinese students was a bit nervous rather than excited about chatting or joking. However, I did not take this emotion as negative. I considered it to be the typical feeling of a group of fearless expeditioners awaiting a thrilling adventure. After some sixteen hours of flight, we were in the US. Now, our 14 days of exploration could begin.

I call this journey an adventure, because it was rather like a process in which we encountered new people, learned things and recognized diverse ideas. In short, we were experiencing the culture of the “melting pot.”

As I anticipated, a great characteristic of the American culture is the diversity. I first learned of this concept from a friend studying in the US. Now that I had arrived in the US, I would have a better chance to understand this big concept in person. True, I saw the diversity in the different colors of faces on the campus of Harvard; I heard the diversity in the different languages used in broadcasting at the VOA; I tasted the diversity in the variety of dining places; I felt the diversity traveling through the East Coast.

New Hampshire

I had not expected to find myself in the rural region of the highly-developed country, yet I enjoyed staying in the mountains of New Hampshire thoroughly.

In the morning, Richard, my host student, drove me from his home hiding in the woods to school. Actually, he was both my driver and tour guide. Not to mention that he took me to the top of Mount Kearsarge, where I photographed the breathtaking view of the forests bathing in the sunlight, he also showed me around the small town and the restaurant where he worked as a part-time waiter and brought me to his friend Amy’s birthday party, where I mingled with a bunch of “crazy” American teenagers.

It was an unbelievable experience to meet Richard and his friends. They were all crazy over Chinese Kungfu and coincidentally I had practiced martial arts when I was 5 years old. As a result, we could not help going outside onto the snow-covered road to bring our theoretic discussion into action. Of course, we did not fight each other, but performed our skills and, believe it or not, they were all excellent Kungfu performers (I learned afterwards that they were medal-winners in a national martial art competition)! When I started to introduce the concept that Chinese do not practice Kungfu to overwhelm others but to improve ourselves, they seemed quite familiar with it and totally for it. I was beyond surprised that they understood the Chinese culture so well.

Apart from my amazement of these American teenagers’ zeal in the culture of my motherland, I was taken in by the peaceful feel of the countryside as well. Under the white clothes of snow, the town lies quiet. Golden sunlight reflected by the white coating brightened the green of the trees. It was just like nature telling me that there were such places which kept their natural feeling in the US other than the bustling cities. I’ve already seen a different aspect of this highly-developed country.

New York City

This is typical America, I told myself.



The Big Apple, as imagined, was a busy, fast and modern city. In contrary to the vast forests in N.H., trees here could hardly be seen outside of Central Park. What is more, since it is during winter time, nothing was left on the trees but for the dead brown branches. So NYC gave me the general impression of a purely man-made yet prosperous city.

One night, after watching an excellent musical in Broadway, I, with Jon from the NCUSCR for company, plunged myself into the cold air and walked along the street to Times Square. Now I realized what “fancy neon lights” really means. Neon lights were flickering continuously like traffic lights which had gone mad and the streets were decorated by numerous colorful advertisements as if it had been daytime. They seemed to have not only emotionally warmed people up, but also speeded up the flow of time so that everyone was talking, laughing and hustling hurriedly. Jon pointed out the place where the New Year Ball had dropped. I could not help imagining the rowdy crowd which gathered under the clock to count down for a new start of the year. I could not help exclaiming: “Wow! This is the place I saw on TV!”

Perhaps affected by the fast pace of NYC, our itinerary seemed to have become so intense that we even sacrificed our lunchtime. Having to go through a security check almost everywhere we went also made things unsettling. Though the US stands as one of the most powerful nations in the world, it has been severely threaten by terrorist attacks. While American people are still laughing happily, deep sorrow has left a mark on their hearts ever after 9/11. We traveled to the site of the World Trade Center, Ground Zero, and listened to the story of tears and blood silently. I was touched. And upon picturing how happy people were at the Times Square on New Year’s Eve, I was more touched by the contradiction. The US, much like my homeland China, had once experienced bone-deep pain.

Washington D.C.

One most extraordinary trait of the places in the US is that they are absolutely different from each other in one way or two. If N.H. stands for the beauty of nature and NYC stands for the prosperity of industrialization, then Washington D.C. bears the past memories of the American history.

Despite the fact that D.C. is the political center of the whole nation, there are quite a number of museums and memorials throughout the city. Each of these historic sights tells a different story of fighting for freedom and prosperity. We went to the Washington Monument, where we were able to imagine the take-off of this relatively young country; we traveled to the Lincoln Memorial, where we admired the most beloved American who fought against inhumane slavery; we traveled to the Franklin Roosevelt’s Memorial, where we read the New Deal of this iron president carved into stones. The sights silently tell the history of the U.S.

On the other hand, history is like a bright mirror which faithfully reflects the nation’s culture. So D.C. is just like a place where American culture is displayed via looking back on the past. After my tour around this nation’s capital, I believed myself to have understood more of the American culture. Though it seems to compose of a large diversity of languages, races, cultures, etc., the inner quality always remains the strong and bright side of human nature – faith, love, persistence, pursuit of freedom...

Besides admiring those historic sights, I must not fail to mention other activities I participated in D.C. On arriving in the city, we first settled in William Penn House, one of the Quaker Centers in the US. There I met a group of kind-hearted people who were willing to help others suffering from homelessness, discrimination, family violence, etc. In the orientation late at night, for the first time in my life, I listened and talked to a homeless man and found him to be just a normal and nice person; the next morning, for the first time in my life, I attended a Quaker’s Worship and sat wordlessly with other people of different skin color trying to communicate with God; and for the first time in my



life, I helped out at a homeless shelter and learned that there still is a misfortune called homelessness in the United States.

Review and thinking

After all, it was just like a great adventure to encounter different people, to learn about new things and to recognize various ideas. That is why I came. That is what this journey was about. And there was plenty for me to mediate on, plenty of time for me to reflect on its tolerance and diversity, to reflect on its unbreakable and beautiful inner quality, to reflect on its blossom of flourish and to reflect on its painful scars of time, I cannot deny that I admire this culture. I would like to “delve deeply into all things American” – just as an article in [USAToday](#) pointed out – then absorb and digest the advantages and make use for myself, for the development of my mother country.

And to say something about the article concerning our journey in *USAToday*, I was glad that I had been interviewed and that my name had been printed in black and white. However, I felt sorry and slightly uneasy with what I considered to be overstatements like, “All swoon for American culture” or “They all fall in love with America.”

I do not want to argue over the wording, but I would like to make it clear that we are by no means a bunch of so-called American enthusiasts, but observers and learners of the American culture. While I was emerged in the amazement and happiness of discovering a whole new culture, I maintained a clear mind that I am Chinese.

That was why I was thrilled to know that I had brothers of Chinese martial art fans overseas; that was why at Ground Zero, I sensed the similar yet more recent load of past as the weight of more than five-thousand years of endurance and struggle; that was why I, with eleven other Chinese students, sang songs and put on other performance with Chinese fervor; that was why I was willing to present my handwriting of Chinese calligraphy to my foreign friends. I understood I was obliged to spread the culture of my own country and I conceived that I was one of my nation’s representatives to learn from another culture. While we were selecting iPods in the fancy shopping malls, we could have very well have been buying the Analects of Confucius at bookstores back at home.

To become open to international understanding in a modern world while maintaining our Chinese soul, this is what my school, Nanjing Foreign Language School, as well as my nation, expects me to be. And I will not fail them.

The *USAToday* article ended by saying that competition between China and the US should yield additional competitive elements. I would be greatly honored to become one of the witnesses of the cooperation and competition, as well as cultural comprehension between the two strong nations.