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Yale-China End-of-Summer Report  
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Luckily, I finished college with a job already lined up, and had the luxury of being able to pick what I would do with my last “real summer.” I told myself early on in the spring that if I could find nothing truly meaningful as far as an internship, I would simply not work at all. This would be my last chance in a while to truly relax, to learn some new skill, to write, and to spend a large chunk of time with my family. I also felt a strong urge toward using the summer to find things that would be entirely new – completely new tastes, new experiences, new languages, new kinds of people, and new feelings. I wanted acute defamiliarization. Moreover, I also felt that this experience would have to take place abroad, allowing me to search for the feeling of real foreignness: to be so unfamiliar with my surroundings that, at least temporarily, the world would feel entirely new, ready to be discovered.

Yale-China’s service internship at Adventure-Ship simultaneously delivered the “truly meaningful” internship as well as the chance for novelty that I sought: to live for two months in Hong Kong, helping the disabled and disadvantaged, to work aboard a Chinese sailing junk, to discover an entire new continent and culture. I accepted without much hesitation.

Some may argue that so much of Hong Kong’s character is westernized that that there is no significant real cultural difference between it and a modern Western city – that the “defamiliarization” I was searching for could not be found here. Central and Admiralty, after all, may not look that much different from Manhattan. Yet anyone who has lived enough time in Hong Kong and not just passed through on a visit can tell that the city simply *feels* different; and that its culture is infinitely more nuanced than what the traditional “East meets West” moniker can express. Unfortunately, I have no exceptionally paradigmatic anecdotes which can fully capture just how Hong Kong is more than the sum of its historical parts. I can only say that one must experience it on the ground, in person, and one would then understand that Hong Kong is not a place one can encapsulate by simply “presuming” its essence.

As far as defamiliarization, it was undeniably not as acute as what I would have experienced had I gone somewhere farther off the beaten path. Yet it did occur, though it was actually rather subtle, and not the sledgehammer-blow of culture shock one might expect. There were amazing new experiences, such as taking traditional Chinese medicine (a tea including boiled roots, seahorses, and beetles), eating things I did not even know were edible (such as snakeskin and jellyfish), or sleeping under the stars on a Chinese junk. Yet the most remarkable cultural differences were the quotidian ones, and the more time I spent in Hong Kong, the larger some of them grew. For instance, there is the way people walk: people do not walk with a purpose the way they do in the U.S., they seem more to stroll very slowly and leisurely in a general direction, as if they would eventually remember where they had to go. Walking in a crowd here can be maddening. Also, Hong Kong people do not answer questions very directly, which can be funny at first, but incredibly exasperating after some time. For instance, it took over 10 minutes of conversation at a local bank to figure out whether I could exchange my US dollars into Hong Kong dollars there. For a practical, results-oriented American, this is also maddening. Other differences, however, were very entertaining to watch. On the ship, for instance, the typical behavior that one would expect of Western teenagers simply did not occur. The participants were incredibly well-behaved: there was no complaining, gossiping, horseplay, flirting, etc., and not once did I notice anyone even hinting that they were too cool to participate in the onboard activities. There seemed to be no hierarchy among them, no cliques, and no pressure to act in any specific way. It made me realize that, given my own mentality in my early teens, back then I might not have enjoyed these trips precisely for being too worried about the things these kids did not seem to worry about.

The work at Adventure-Ship was not taxing; in fact, my favorite part of the internship was that for one or two days a week when we worked on the ship it could probably not even have been considered work at all. Volunteering to help others is a noble undertaking and a privilege, but Adventure-Ship sees its sea voyages as joint training missions between volunteers and the youths participating – not “helping,” or even “volunteer work.” This could not be truer in practice: not once aboard the ship did I feel I was not having as much fun, or experiencing the journey as an equal with the participants.

My most memorable journey on the Huan came early in the summer. For my

second time aboard I was paired with Ah-Keet, a 10-year-old boy with severe Down's Syndrome. Not only could I not communicate with him due to the language barrier, Ah-Keet could not express a wide range of emotions. The way it was explained to me, he could only show when he was incredibly happy, otherwise his face was somewhat neutral, and it might even seem he was not aware of those interacting with him. At first this was somewhat jarring, yet as the day wore on, and Ah-Keet and I toured the ship together, took a ride on the speed-boat, ate together, etc., I began to notice a slight twinkle in his eye, and more agitation in his movements. By the end of the trip, on our return to Aberdeen, we sat together on the deck and I stroked his hair for several minutes, and Ah-Keet gave me as close as he could to a full-blown smile. An experience such as this was not only rewarding in itself, but to have the chance to travel to the other side of the world to do it was, in one word, invaluable.