

BYRON TZOU

## Hardships of Student Life

After college graduation, because of my admiration for European culture, my ambition was to study in France. I took the screening examination for government scholarships and scored second among the students taking the examination. But only one scholarship was available, and this went to the top student. Without a government scholarship, it was impossible for me to pursue my education in France. So I changed my mind and hurriedly applied to some American universities. I sent out three applications—to Columbia University, Harvard University, and the University of Oregon, respectively. Luckily, all three universities admitted me. I did not make my decision immediately. Instead, I wanted to understand more about these universities.

In the summer of 1965, I flew from Taipei to Seattle and then took a Greyhound bus to Eugene. There I stayed with a schoolmate to obtain a preliminary understanding of American society and campus life. This was very important to me. I was not like my schoolmates, who could get this kind of information from their

---

Translation © 2003 M.E. Sharpe, Inc., from the Chinese text. Originally published in *Chinese Experiences Studying in America: Eighty Years of Cross-Cultural Learning*, ed. Li Yu-ning (New York: Outer Sky Press, 1999). Reprinted with permission. Revised for this edition.

Byron Tzou (Zou Nianzu) is a research fellow at the Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University, Taiwan, and a professor at Qinghua University in Taiwan.

elder brothers and sisters. Besides, I was not psychologically prepared to come to America.

A few days later, I hurriedly caught another Greyhound bus in Eugene and started my journey across the United States. I was one excited young man and full of wanderlust, sightseeing and trying to understand American conditions and customs on my way. I remember chatting with an old lady on the bus. She praised my English offhandedly. I was very happy. I thought I really spoke good English! But when I later sat in the classroom, I found out that my English was very poor. I heard what the professors were saying but could not understand them. When the professors said something humorous, all my schoolmates laughed, but not me. There is an ancient Chinese saying: "It is only when you need to use your knowledge that you realize you don't have enough." I believe the ancients would understand how embarrassed I was. After I had lived in the United States for a long time, I began to realize that it is customary for Americans to compliment others. The old lady said my English was good only out of politeness, but I took her words literally. Later, I saw an American lady praising the beautiful figure of a Chinese coed in her cheongsam. The coed was beside herself with happiness. She was probably like me, taking the woman's polite words literally.

I studied for two years at Harvard. In those two years, I barely saw daylight. Early each morning I headed for the library and buried my head in books till late at night. One night someone patted my shoulder and said to me: "Sir, the library is closed." I asked him: "When does the library close?" He said: "Twelve o'clock." I looked at my watch; it was five past twelve. I hurriedly packed my schoolbag and walked out the library door. Outside, snow was flying in all directions, and the wind was frigid. It was hard to see where you were going. I walked through knee-high snow, my feet making deep holes in it every step of the way. After walking for thirty minutes, I finally reached the place where I lived.

I had to study hard like this. I had loads of schoolwork to do. I had not had enough education and enough preparation before I came to the United States. I studied Chinese law at Taiwan University

and had memorized laws and regulations, but I had not become a scholar. An American education encourages people to study on their own, to explore and probe by themselves; and this kind of training starts in elementary school. Students from Taiwan were used to rote learning. When we were suddenly told to find our own source materials and to write papers, we did not know where to start. We had no training in logical reasoning. Some students even found it difficult to use the library. This was a predicament that many students from Taiwan faced at that time. I do not know whether today's Taiwanese college students are receiving basic training for becoming scholars. Of course, nowadays the computer makes life more convenient.

I studied a variety of subjects at Harvard, including history, philosophy, political science, and international law. These courses assume a good background in Western culture, and in this regard I could not compete with American students. Terms such as "Plato," "Aristotle," "Bismarck," and "Peace of Westphalia" flew out of the mouths of American professors as often and as easily as Chinese professors say "emperor of Qin" or "Emperor Wu of the Han" and spout classical poems. I believe that Chinese students studying in America today find it as difficult to catch up as I did at Harvard. Therefore, my advice to Taiwanese students who plan on going to America is this: try not to switch your field of study; if you are going to study the social sciences, you should know more about Western culture; only then will you not find it so difficult to study in America.

Of course, I benefited from the scholarly training that I received during those two years in graduate school, but even more important were the opportunities I had then to meet many master teachers. Professors had fixed office hours when they would see students. Many leading scholars even opened their own living rooms to students one afternoon a week. Students were welcome to go there to chat with them over a cup of tea. Therefore, I had exposure to their words, their thoughts, their graceful bearing. These broadened my own field of vision and breadth of mind in scholarly pursuits. I did not quite feel the benefits at the time. But later, when I was in discussing knowledge in other working environments, I could not

help feeling that I had seen and experienced the very best; and it was difficult for me to adjust to the mediocre.

After earning my master's degree, I worked in the New York city government. After work, I studied international politics under the master of political science and originator of the theory of power, Hans Morgenthau of the Department of Political Science at the New School for Social Research. By then, although I still dared not say studying was easy for me, it was by no means as difficult as before.

I switched my field of study to international politics, but my published Ph.D. dissertation is on international law. My learning is mixed instead of focused. This has much to do with my study process. I first changed the country where I wanted to study, then repeatedly changed the departments where I studied. Therefore, my knowledge is not systematic. It is better to walk a straight way instead of having many turns and curves.

This article is not well organized and has no central theme. I do not know whether it will prove helpful to students who are preparing to study abroad.

Copyright of Chinese Studies in History is the property of M.E. Sharpe Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of Chinese Studies in History is the property of M.E. Sharpe Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.