

Culture Shock

True Experiences in Foreign Places

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This booklet was compiled at CCLCS.

The stories were contributed by Paul Galea's Level 5/6 class.

Freedom by Jun - Shanghai, China

Two years ago, I came to Toronto, which is the cultural, entertainment and financial centre of Canada. I love Toronto because it is magnificent. However, I have been shocked by some of its cultural and social phenomena. As I become more and more familiar with the city, I come to realize that the causes of those shocks I have experienced root in the difference between Canada and my native country, China. In Canada, people enjoy much more freedom than those in China. The following examples are very common in our life.

My first shocking experience is that people in Toronto can freely access City Hall. Once I had a field trip with the class to Toronto City Hall, which is a landmark of the city. We went into the council chamber and listened to the city's budget meeting. After that, the guide gave us a warm welcome and was eager to answer our questions. The meeting was very inclusive and I felt I was fully respected. Contrasted to that, city halls in China are mostly inaccessible to the public. In front of the city hall is Nathan Phillips Square, which is a popular entertainment venue offering free concerts and many events. To my surprise, pedlars can even do business there. In the minds of Chinese people, the City Hall is a solemn place. There can never be any events held around it.

People in Canada think that government is of the people, by the people and for the people. It is not strange for government staff to serve the people sincerely. People are fully respected. The following example would show us that human rights are fully respected in Canada, too.

This year, almost a million spectators came out to celebrate the annual Gay Pride Parade, which is a colourful celebration of gay rights and lifestyle in Toronto. People, not just those from the queer community, but also those from others, came out to celebrate. They want to show the world that they are proud of what they are and share their happiness with others. My daughter told me Canada is a free country and her teacher is also gay. I was really shocked then. Today, I realize the value of being tolerant, and I believe that diversity is what makes Canada and Toronto strong and beautiful.

As I come to know my new country more, I love it more. The shocks I experienced have roused the awareness of something important in my mind. Freedom and human rights were strange to me before, but today I feel they are two of the most important values in a modern society.

Quiet vs. Irritated by Jae Kyung - Seoul, Korea

One month ago, I needed to buy some clothes and shoes, because I didn't bring my summer clothes and sandals from Korea. So I decided to go to the Bay department store -which is near my aunt's house.

I entered the store and looked around there. Then I found a very strange thing. THERE WERE NO CLERKS!!!! Where's everybody?

In my country, when people go to department stores, the clerks always come to you and say "How about this one? It is very popular these days." or "Just come and look. This is a good one". That makes me irritated and pressures me to buy something. So I usually don't go shopping in my country. I feel that it is harassment.

But here, nobody cares if you buy anything or not. It makes me very comfortable. When you go to some stores and see some clothes you want to buy, you can go to the fitting room and if you like it, you buy it. It is easy and convenient.

And if you have any questions about a product, you can ask and if you don't want to buy it, you don't have to. But in my country, if you ask about a product and later you don't buy it, the clerk gets angry with you.

If you were me, which one would you choose, Irritated or Quiet?
I'll pick the latter one.

My Story by Kamran - Tehran, Iran

This is not a story, this is life indeed
I changed my land to planet
I arrived from history to future, to mixed humanity!
And
The night is still night, the sun still shines
And
The sky is blue as everywhere
I know each person has his own blue-
I've tried to adapt being in Rome.....
My dreams started to be English dreams
And I'm happy that silence is the same in any language.

Shaking Hands by Mehri - Tehran, Iran

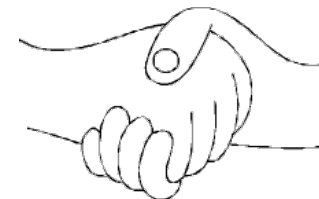
Every culture has some characteristics and values that you have to live with to understand. For this reason, signs and symbols help people connect to each other and recognize each other better. I got this expression from Saussure who understood language like a system of signs and ideas. That means we live with these symbols and we need them to connect to each other.

I live in a religious country and I was raised with this culture, so everybody knows shaking hands with other men is prohibited for women because of religious reasons. However, they know shaking hands is common practice in many places.

When I went to the United States 20 years ago, at first I didn't really know how to manage and I always had anxiety dealing with this problem, because in this country shaking hands was very normal and like saying hello to somebody. In this culture shaking hands means you know somebody and you have sympathy for him or her, so it is impolite to reject their hand. I didn't want to be impolite. I didn't know how I could explain this matter. Sometimes I thought maybe explaining this would be stupid and not a big deal. Shaking hands is the initial act and if you don't do it, you could insult someone.

Several months later after I could express my concern, I felt better. Now I prepare myself before and just say, "Sorry, I don't shake hands".

Now in our country, tourists have thought to learn some cultural signs and some important things before their trip and we don't have this problem much now.



Sun Bath by Lei - Urumqi, China

I lived in France for several years. During these years, one of the facts which impressed me the most is the way that French people take sun baths.

I am Chinese, and in China, people don't like to have dark skin, especially Chinese women. When you go to the beach, you will see almost every woman has a parasol to protect herself from the sunshine. Usually when we go to the beach, we swim, we take time to relax, read books or do some beach sports. But every time I went to a beach in France, I saw only a few people who were swimming or playing. And most people, men and women, were lying there, half naked, taking sun baths. Some of them had already gotten their skin burned by the sunshine, because they were all red. They didn't care. They just lay there. I wondered why they were doing this to themselves. And, I'll never forget the time when I saw a very old French woman taking her sun bath without wearing a top!

I don't understand, and I don't want to find out the answer. Because what I feel is called "culture shock" and sometimes it is good to have culture shock. If culture shock didn't exist, the word 'tourism' would disappear from the dictionary. So let's find and face culture shock, and make ourselves "international".



New Life by Firoozeh - Tehran, Iran

I was not confronted with much culture shock when I arrived in Toronto. This surprised my classmates. I didn't experience any culture shock when I moved from Iran to Canada, although there are many differences between Canada and my country. Once I came, I felt so comfortable, as if I belonged here.

There are many interesting things to me. The most interesting one is that you can return your purchases within one month, mostly if you are not satisfied with them, whereas in my country purchases are non-refundable.

What surprised me most before coming here was the interest which is paid to your investments. I had to open an account and deposit a specified amount of money as proof of funds that I have. As I worked for a bank and we had a correspondence relationship with The Royal Bank of Canada, I applied to the RBC for a bank account. When I was told the interest rate, I was shocked because the rate in my country was 5 times as much.

There are many pleasant things to me here. First, people obey the traffic rules and drivers respect pedestrians unlike people in my country. Second, there is a strict rule for people who throw trash out of the car or spit. They will be fined here and I think it is a good punishment. This behaviour had made me upset and annoyed when I was living in my country.

In my country many people have complaints about municipalities due to constant construction which blocks the streets. I have been here for over one month and I wonder about long-term construction here.

Although I have met some prejudiced Canadians who don't welcome immigrants warmly and think they should get back to their countries, I am so delighted and grateful because I can experience new culture and new life. I found that it is a good place for me to fulfill my dreams and ambitions.

Inconvenient Reservation System by Jung-Yun - Seoul, Korea

While living here, I have found a different reservation system between Korea and Canada.

Last weekend, I went to see a movie with my husband. Even though we reserved our tickets in advance, we had to sit separately because the best seats were already taken. I felt so upset because there doesn't seem to be any advantage of having a reservation.

Why did I have to buy the tickets on the website before the movie?

In Korea, we have a very convenient system.

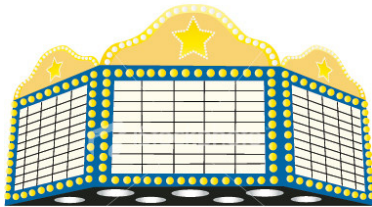
When you want to see a movie, you can reserve a movie, the time, and your own seat through the Internet. Also, the price is much cheaper than here. After that, you go to the machine, then enter your ID number to get your ticket. This process takes less than five minutes so you can save a lot of time. During a movie, the staff never lets people go inside. Nobody interrupts the movie, so you can enjoy it.

Here, although the movie has already started, they allow people to go inside and walk around to find a seat. It's very annoying and I can't usually focus on the movie.

I wonder why people don't complain about this.

If Canada had the same system as Korea, it would give people more convenience and save their time.

I hope they will change this system by the time I come back to Toronto in two years.



Life on Buses by Andres - Cali - Colombia

I believe the TTC is an excellent system for transportation. You can get to a lot of places and reach your destination in a secure way, but when I took my first bus here it was very strange. Drivers, people, buses and the general system were very different here.

First if you take a bus in my city, you can only pay with cash, and if you don't have the exact amount, the driver will give you change and take your money with the same hand while the bus is moving!

My second impression was that the driver must be bored. Why not put the radio on? In my city you can hear the news in the morning or some funny program or listen to music while you are traveling.

It is weird to hear people talking here, because in the majority of cases, they have iPods, mp3s, or some others apparatus connected to their ears. Many people here look like robots. The scene is always the same, listen to music, read the news, or use laptops.

In Cali we have buses painted with different colours inside and outside. The outside colours tell the routes that the buses travel. Destinations are also displayed on papers placed on the windshield.

One thing that I like here is drivers never compete with others drivers, and it is unusual if you find some drivers driving carelessly (I used to wait for a race between buses). I believe the difference is that here there is only one company. In Colombia there are lots of bus companies that compete among themselves.

And finally, you don't have to worry about the stop. Buses only stop in special areas. In my city, buses stop when the driver sees a passenger waving his hand. He doesn't care if it is in the middle of the block or street (of course, this is illegal but...). If you want to get off the bus, you touch the ring or press the button and you never know when the bus is going to stop. This depends on the driver. Maybe he will stop immediately or one or two blocks later.



Thick Accent by Marlene - Cotonou, Benin

My name is Marlene. I come from Benin (West Africa). I have been in Canada for 4 years for my studies. I live in Montreal, but I'm in Toronto this summer (2008) to improve my English.

But before I continue my story!
Do you speak French?
Have you ever been to Montreal?
Have you ever heard something about their French?
There's something really different!!!!!!

My first year in Montreal wasn't easy because I faced a thick accent. People in the Quebec province have a different accent when they speak French from other people from Europe or Africa. That isn't easy when it is the first time you come here. In the beginning I was unable to understand people or TV.

I remember my first day at university, in my Microeconomics course, the teacher was lecturing but I couldn't understand everything she said because of her **THICK ACCENT!!!**

In fact, their French is a lot different from other countries' French. First, it's like a real translation of the English language without any adaptation of the French of France. Second, they have a lot of different expressions that I'd never heard before. They usually use church words to insult, bless, swear or even when they are surprised by something. That's something nobody does in France or Africa. And third, they have a different accent which is kind of hard (thick) if you're not used to it. They have different pronunciation. They use a lot of English expressions in their French and sometimes things don't have the same meaning with Parisian French. It's a little strange!!!

It took me a couple of months to get used to this language, because when you come from another country, it's another French. It's another culture. It's **another reality**. But now, I'm integrated. I know and use a lot of their expressions. I can speak like them. I can joke with them and the most important thing: I can understand them!

Begging Everywhere by Taghi - Tehran, Iran

Begging is one of the main issues in any society. It does not matter how the society runs or what the social and developmental levels of the society are. I had many experiences of meeting beggars in my society. It is possible to meet them in the street, in front of offices, across the avenue, and even close to our homes. Some of them sometimes come and knock on the doors and ask for money, food, shoes and so on. When I came to Toronto, I had a new experience with these people. I am going to give you my feelings about them, because they act very different from other parts of the world. Let me explain the way in which one of these beggars near Spadina Subway station behaves.

At the intersection of Spadina and Bloor, on the northeast side, homeless people stay there all day. Some of them are addicted to alcohol and some have no space to stay or job to work. Among them, a middle age man, around 55 years old, puts some stuff on the ground, and stands up. These include two candles, a glass of water, a book, and two pots. He stands over this stuff and looks at the people who are running, jogging, or walking across the intersection. The first time I saw this man, I did not understand why he was there and what I should do. Should I stay and look at his stuff or listen to what he is saying or pass by without paying attention? Finally, I decided to find out what he was doing. I have even asked my son and other family members about him. My son, Mohammad, told me that he is asking for money. Then, we called him a beggar. I am not sure that we are right or not. But when we had seen him every day, I was confident to look at him as a beggar.

I will discuss his behaviour and how he is different from other beggars all over the world. Let's assume, his name is Joe. First of all he stays on the corner of the street to avoid blocking the way. Second, his clothes are clean and he takes a shower daily. He is different from other sick or homeless people across the street. Third, he is very polite and asks for money only once. This is the point that I can see is different from beggars in other places. He does not follow people in the street and ask them for money or food. On the contrary, I have seen many beggars who follow newcomers or foreigners to make money. Sometimes they come very close and take the newcomer's bag and run away. These kinds of beggars do many things such as begging, stealing, and behaving violently.

I have had chances to listen to Joe's words. He says, "spare some change." That is what I have heard and what he says all the time. He doesn't make eye contact. He stays far away from people and stares at his stuff and repeats one statement: "spare some change."

In conclusion, I can say that beggars in Canada are very different from the rest of the world. They are very polite and behave; therefore people give them coins. It does not matter how much they give.

Wedding Factory by Ji Hye - Incheon, Korea

One of the big differences between Canada and Korea is wedding culture.

A wedding here seems too long because they have a ceremony, a reception after the ceremony, and dancing. Literally, it takes all day long. However it is very romantic and people are so happy to be there to congratulate the couple.

In Korea, we have a very unique wedding culture. Most people get married inside a building called a “wedding hall”. My husband calls it a ‘wedding factory’. Every hour there is a ceremony. So when you get married, you go there and wait until it’s your turn. They will announce your name to get ready. The ceremony takes about 30 minutes and after that we have lunch at a buffet in the building and leave. In the buffet you don’t get your own seat, so you have to be fast to get a seat. Many people even skip the ceremony and just have lunch. It is almost like the wedding is not about the bride and groom but more about showing up. Oh! You should bring at least \$50 as a gift and that pays for your lunch. Don’t bring any gift because they might not be happy with that. To be honest, it’s so sad that it’s the most important day in one’s life and not romantic at all.

When I went to a wedding in Halifax, I was so surprised. The ceremony took about 30 minutes which is similar to Korea but after that we moved to a reception place. I had my own seat with a name tag. We could get food after the couple got served. We enjoyed the meal with nice music and pleasant atmosphere. After the meal, the bride started dancing with her father and people joined them later on. The whole thing was about love and happiness.

How different it is! It would be nice if Korea could adapt more of western wedding culture and make the day more like a fairy tale.



Life in Toronto by Hugo - Lima, Peru

The culture in Toronto is different from Latin countries like Peru. Toronto is really diverse and fun. You can find people from everywhere to spend time with. If somebody wants to be sociable, it is easy to know and understand different customs of people from India, China, Africa, South America, Europe, etc...

After a year and a little bit, I feel like Toronto is my home. I met my best friends here. One is French and the other is African. We support each other as immigrants in Canada.

In Toronto, seasons are really different from Peru. Summer in Toronto is hot and cool, and you can do a lot of outside activities like playing soccer, volleyball, going to festivals and other activities.

Winter is long and a little boring, but you can go to some bars to watch hockey and drink European beer like Heineken, Stella and Amstel. You can find these easily in Toronto. You can also go to some restaurants for Thai, Vietnamese, Korean, Italian, Greek and other international food.

If you have the opportunity to go to a small town like Timmins, when you are back in Toronto, you can see the differences. Toronto is a financial city and everybody is busy, but you can have fun too.

Everybody is accepted here no matter what religion or sexual orientation you are. Most people in Toronto are open-minded and nobody cares if you are different.