

**Out of Hot Water:**  
Culture Shock in the United States

Flying to the US, I realized with a sigh that I had forgotten again what values each of these American coins in my hand stood for. Hardly had I took another careful look at them when the airline attendant pushed a beverage carriage to my seat.

“Would you like something to drink?” She smiled politely.

“Hot water please,” I replied without a second thought.

“Miss, you said...water right?” She inquired very uncertainly.

“Yes, hot water please,” I confirmed confidently.

A second later a glass of water filled with ice was handed over to me. I was shocked to see a glass of cold water with ice cubes floating, which reminded me of Antarctica icebergs.

“Ma’am, may I have *hot* water?” I asked a small, controlled squeak.

“Oh,” She replied after a minute’s considered thought, “we don’t have hot water here. We have hot tea and hot coffee.”

For the first time, I found all of my years of English learning failed to cover an important aspect of the United States, that people would always put ice in their drinks and that drinking *hot* water is never heard of. Back home in China, families would always boil a kettle of hot water for everybody to drink during the day. In schools, our drinking water faucet would always have one tab for hot water. It was unfathomable why Americans like to drink freezing ice drinks because ice will dilute the beverage, and ice drinks could cause irritation to those who have bad teeth that are sensitive to the cold. Yet, even before I officially landed in the US, I have already learned a valuable piece of information about the new culture. So there was a certain sense of achievement when I stepped out from the airplane into the warm, dazzling, sunlight-kissed terminal.

The memory of my first class at University of Delaware still stays in a kind of fresh vivid daze— an unfamiliar mixture of restless excitement and anxiety. Looking around the big lecture room, the diversity of students is truly amazing. I would hardly see in a traditional Chinese classroom students who are from Jamaica, Mexico, Spain, France, India all at once, but here I can! No wonder America is coined as “a big melting pot” by Israel Zangwill.<sup>1</sup>

Proud of its culture diversity, this “melting pot” offers a dynamic and lively academic atmosphere. In many classes, I am encouraged to think critically and to express my opinions freely in a heated discussion. Meanwhile, the professor serves not only as the source of knowledge, but also as a participant in a common search for understanding. Comparatively, it is much less common for me and other classmates to raise debates in the middle of a class in China, for fear of interrupting the instructor’s thoughts. Rather, we are encouraged to note down the doubts and take them to meet the professor after the class for one-on-one discussions. Here, creative thinking, heated discussions and critical debates are at the heart of many of my classes. “It is not just about examinations and regurgitating facts, it is about synthesizing knowledge and adopt it for life practices,” one of my UD professors once remarked.

Equipped with classroom knowledge, I gained further practical experience through the internship with Winterthur Garden & Museum. From tour guiding to event coordinating, I learned extremely useful skills such as personal communication, time management and task prioritization. This opportunity also introduced me to American fine arts, Delaware’s history and DuPont family’s heritage.

At the end of the semester, I ran into a friend of mine whom I have not seen for a while.

“Oh Hey! How have you been?” She cheered happily, running over to give me a big hug.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Melting Pot* is a play created by Israel Zangwill.

“So nice to see you! I’ve been...” Thinking how to answer her in a simplest manner, I replied, “good, I have been good.”

What I did not say was how rich the word “good” meant to me. Saturated in this word are the ups and downs, bitters and sweets in this study abroad experience. Yet these challenges and adjustments are exactly what have tested me and molded me to become a more responsible, mature individual. Many international students, just like me and you, are those who acknowledged the language difficulties but never ceased to improve themselves; are those who experienced homesickness but never stopped to adapt to the new environment. We are willing to learn, ready for challenges and believe in “I can do this!” ; we embrace differences and challenges and come out as a generation of strong, independent young adults. During this study abroad journey, I harvested priceless knowledge and mentalities, from understanding the culture of drinking ice water to critical thinking, self-discipline and open-mindedness— and they will continue to benefit me in the rest of my life and career.

**Reference:**

Israel Zangwill. “Full Text of The Melting Pot” Internet Archive. Web. 26 Sept. 2014.

<http://archive.org/stream/themeltingpot23893gut/23893.txt>