The Man Falling to Earth from the Moon

“Study in America? Wow! Happy, eh? You must be proud of yourself.” Those first words from my friends and relatives after they heard about my plans to leave for the United States launched me into the sky as in a dream journey to the moon, filled with mysterious adventures. While they gave me enthusiastic support, they did not understand that my going to America was a challenging glory. To get ready for the trip, I neatly packed my suitcases with necessities, anticipations and also a lot of hope for good luck. My family left behind in the rain of tears, I stepped aboard the plane finding myself speeding through space over the clouds with silver linings. And there was America half-hidden under the wings of the plane as it was maneuvering over the cities that looked like radiant constellations. After more than 20 hours of flying, I arrived at Lansing Airport. “I’m here in America,” I yelled silently.

Lansing Airport was not as busy as I had thought it would be. Several minutes after my arrival, I remained the only passenger left. I and my two pieces of luggage waited for my new friend, whom I only knew through email. At that moment, I felt lonely like an astronaut landing on another planet. My friend, together with his wife, at last appeared at the exit of the arrival area, welcomed me to Lansing and drove me to my new home on quiet Cherry Lane. The first week in my new life was awesome. I was immersed in an international atmosphere at the orientation workshops, listened to many inspiring lectures, met interesting friends and learned how to navigate through the immense campus. Especially, at the welcome dinner for international students, the shouts of “Go Green! Go White!” have ever reverberated in my mind, instilling the spirit of a Spartan.
However, that elation did not last long as a series of down-to-earth problems occurred. First, I encountered some troubles with American technology that I had not been able to anticipate. When I was given an old microwave oven by a professor, I thought it would help me warm almost any kind of food faster to save my time for studies. One day, coming home from class with an empty stomach, I intended to prepare a frugal lunch with a boiled egg, cooked rice and soy-bean sauce. I hurriedly put an egg in the microwave oven and set it for three minutes. While waiting to enjoy the meal, I heard a low “boom” from the machine. Opening it, to my surprise, instead of seeing a boiled egg, I saw pieces of egg white and yolk scattered all over the inside of the microwave. I spent twenty minutes cleaning and had only rice and soy-bean for lunch.

I was also ashamed for not knowing how to operate the dryer at the laundry properly on my first weekend in MSU. The washing machine tells you how much you have to pay for one cycle, but the dryer does not. I put a quarter in the slot of the dryer only to see 15 minutes on the small screen. Meanwhile, glancing at my neighbor’s machine with envy, I saw 45 minutes on hers. I wondered why that machine favored my neighbor without noticing she had put three quarters in the slot.

Again, I was really frustrated with all kinds of passwords. While I was once using the computer to access my Federal Credit Union account, it froze due to my failure to type in the correct password. My simple head was always whirling with the buttons on many electronic devices as if I had been sitting in front of the control system of a spaceship. My roommate often reminded: “Read carefully, old man, before pressing any button.”

Then came the biggest problem with language. Never in my life had I been ashamed of my English skills until I was involved in daily conversations with native speakers of English during the first several days. It appeared to me that Americans were not speaking English. Their speaking speed was too fast for me to get what they meant.
But, how could I blame them for not knowing I am a new-comer to this country? As a result, I was often nervous in every contact with native-speakers, and when my anxiety was raised I could hardly open my mouth. One day I dropped by a MacDonald’s restaurant to try some fast food. Looking at the menu on the wall behind the counter, I was startled at the high price for foods and beverages. A hamburger here was roughly equal to ten bowls of “pho”, a kind of popular noodle dish in Vietnam. A quick thought came to my mind and told me to choose something as inexpensive as possible. Then, it was my turn to be served. My ears ringing after listening to a chain of unintelligible sounds by the attendant, I decided to get a cheeseburger with only $.99. Still, it was hard to choose a beverage when being hurried since the waiting line was long at that moment. The drinks which I knew could not be afforded whereas the cheaper beverages were the ones I did not know. Finally, at the bottom of the column of beverages I happily found the cheapest item with only $.65. I hastily ordered “U.S.A. Today”. With agility, the attendant placed on the counter the cheeseburger carefully wrapped in paper and, unexpectedly, a newspaper. I soon understood that the “beverage” I ordered was undrinkable.

I sometimes came across a Chinese friend I had become acquainted with during the first days at MSU. In response to my greeting, “How are you doing?”, she said, “So far, so depressed.” Yes, we are all depressed by thousands of day-to-day problems in addition to the assignments and papers due. When I could not understand people’s speech, I had the feeling that I was deaf; when I could not convey my ideas, I had the feeling that I was dumb; and when I could not understand what I read, I had the feeling that I was blind. Within a few days, all my wit, talent, confidence, and abilities seemed to be gone. I functioned as a man who fell to Earth from the moon without knowing anything about real life.
Luckily, those kinds of feeling just flashed through my mind in a moment and vanished in the air because I learned how to develop a more positive attitude toward every challenge. Problems are not totally personal failures, but precious opportunities for me to accumulate life experience, to discover new things, to grow up and, most importantly, to surpass myself. If I had not ordered “USA Today” at MacDonald, how could I know about the reading custom of Americans? If I had not faced the problem with the dryer, I would have considered those in the same situation idiots. New experience and knowledge have given me a more generous and sympathetic heart.

I began to achieve some encouraging small victories when newcomers ran into me asking for directions on campus, or asking for help with how to operate the dryer in the laundry. I found happiness in helping people and sharing my understanding and experience. I gained my confidence back, volunteered to voice my ideas in the class whether it was right or wrong, conversed with more people, and asked when I needed help. At home, if I read the material without understanding it the first time, I patiently read it a second time, then a third time until I got it. I did not flinch from homesickness, pressure of due dates, or working on a dense reading since I promised myself to face all the challenges with equanimity, with maturity, and with strength of character.

Tonight, watching the full moon shedding her gentle light over the small quiet space in front of my apartment, I suddenly remember that children back home are enjoying the Mid-Autumn Festival. They must be merrily swaying lanterns under the moonlight now. As for me, I am also bathed in another kind of light, the light of knowledge, which has allured me to America and helped me push back any pessimistic thought of returning home every time I encounter challenges. I am aware that I am not only learning for myself but also learning for those who have not had a chance as I do, and particularly for the children in Vietnam, including my sons, who are playing lanterns in the peaceful light of the moon.