

My Story ~ 18. Full Circle

“You need to possess a fearless spirit or you will be overwhelmed and buried alive.”



I was born in Jing Gang Shan, a significant revolutionary base area during the civil war. People from there all possess an adventurous pioneering spirit. They move from one life circle to another, of course, I'm no exception.

Consider the old saying - “knowledge changes destiny”, my college was the first life circle I encountered. However, what I hadn't expected was that despite the fact that I had moved through various circles, I have never left this big city. Most Chinese prefer the feeling of advantage, so poor students like me who have come from underdeveloped areas and have gone to successfully graduate from a general university to Chinese Academy of Science, have always been underestimated when they first started their studies. In my case, my basic skills were little better than those who studied at a famous school. But I never gave up. On the one hand, I followed my supervisor who had just come back from America and I spared no effort to make up for my lack of knowledge. On the other hand, I participated in the research and exhibitions of PhDs. My hard work and diligence paid dividends. I demonstrated my ability in various aspects of my studies which was acknowledged by my supervisors and tutors. Last year, my old supervisor wrote an article to congratulate me on my becoming an associate professor. The paper mentioned his early impressions of me and also commented on my work ethic and achievements.

This was followed in Germany where I earned a post-doctorate and the honor of becoming an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow. Frankly speaking, I was mixing with people from Tsinghua University, Hong Kong University and the National University of Singapore. They compared me to a country bumpkin and I could sense their scorn and superior attitude. I was not influenced by or hold these negative attitudes. It's research and results that matter, not class origin. I

remember a colleague approached me one day and said: “come and see, you will be inspired from this good piece of work?” I looked over and unexpectedly discovered that it was my writing that he was referring to. After that, I was often invited for coffee and a discussion. With a strong sense of belief and a pioneering spirit, I, as the only Chinese in this German Tutorial Project, finally won others’ acknowledgement and recognition. I also successfully participated in some big European research projects. After hearing that I was about to leave for Australia, my supervisor was quite sad and hoped that I could stay. However, in my mind, I knew that I should continue on my journey through life. So I started to roll just like a gyroscope, and to my surprise, here I am in the southern hemisphere. Many people have asked me: “There are so many countries, why do you choose Australia?” “Well, besides the comprehensive environment including nature and culture, Australia is an immigration country where Chinese can establish their identity and not feel excluded.” I think this is the main reason why many people choose Australia. However in spite of the smooth life here, we do encounter hard times. After all, it’s not difficult to imagine that if a seed cultivated in China wants to take root in Australia, it inevitably goes through periods of bitter suffering. For a new comer from northern China to break into the daily life of local teachers, we both must go through a process of accepting and being accepted. What I have to learn first are the rules of game. Although I’ve taken part in various national and other projects, participated at institute conferences and published papers, it is still a hard job to become accepted by your peers. A supervisor directing a Chinese student will find that the same article prepared by him will attract more attention and will create more opportunities. There’s also another saying: “Chinese people have to possess at least three to five abilities, thus receive acceptance”. After all, we are outsiders, and although they would approve of you and agree with you, there are still issues to be solved. Besides these career obstacles to overcome in order to get accepted in academia, we have another problem — our accent. English is not our mother tongue and we speak with an accent. Some students would frown once we started to speak and you could sense disapproval. Well, what comforts me is that we have an Iranian co-worker whose English is actually quite good, so we usually chat and share our opinions about life over coffee or tea. I feel that my English is finally being accepted and is no longer an issue.

I’ve been to many universities, both in the eastern and western parts of Australia. In terms of universities in the circle, the recognition of Chinese culture receives

high praise. People commonly agree that a Chinese person's qualities include a serious attitude, diligence, efficiency and application. A Chinese scholar is often given the important role of head of research because of these qualities. Once a student came to me and asked: "Tutor, I find us the Chinese are mostly hardworking while others are quite relaxed and do whatever they want after class, why?" I said to him: "You are right, but you should also think carefully that most top people are also Chinese, especially in technical matters. Because, after all, we are foreigners, and we have to make a greater effort to gain recognition." Thinking about recognition, I also find it an interesting phenomenon that students of different ages possess different attitude and knowledge of China. For example, two Australian English PhD students asked me some questions before they went to China on an exchange program: "Is there internet in China? Do Chinese use Skype? Can we surf Facebook in China?" These are typical questions that they imagine China to be a poor backward country shrouded in mystery. These perceptions all originate because of false information based on old ideas and perceptions. The first week in China, it was quite rainy, well, you know, once it starts to rain in winter in China, it will get pretty dark. One student cried out: "Oh, my god, the weather here is terrible!" They also refused to eat Chinese food but would only eat MacDonalds and KFC. They said the Chinese food was dirty. I told them there was no McDonald's or KFC on this rainy day so we had to make do with Chinese food. Well, they just refused and continued to find fault with everything. After drinking a little wine, they went back to the hotel, only to sneak out later to find food. The first week ended and they still refused to eat Chinese food. What is the meaning of this rejection and why is this? Well, basically they wouldn't touch any food placed before them but looked for McDonald's and KFC. Things started to change from the second week: they actually began to think that China was pretty good which was a change from their previous thinking. Yes, they changed and gradually began to eat Chinese food and find it to be quite delicious. Their original negative attitudes changed to a positive attitude and they became comfortable living in China. There was even one student who thought that Shanghai was much better than Perth. Let me give another example. It's late October this year, the air pollution was very bad and another group of students arrived. There was a student majoring in Commerce who refused to come to China after reading about China's air quality. He wrote an email to me which was very critical of China and he decided not to come. I countered that by saying that if China is really so bad, then why are there so many Australian student study groups wanting to go to China. I believe that universities take their duty of care of

students seriously and would not send them to an unsafe place. I have been with Australian students and of course there are many international students as well, most of whom are from Southern Asia with a Chinese cultural background. Although they are not very familiar with China, they are willing to see what life is like in the place where their families have lived for generations. They are willing to accept Chinese culture with a positive attitude and want to know about Confucian ideas and find out about their roots.

I believe, no matter how long these people have lived in Australia and how well they have fitted into that life circle, deep in their hearts, they are still Chinese. If they hear someone criticizing China, they want to jump up and protest — yes, our roots are in China. On the other hand, our children are quite different. They are comfortable being Australian. After all, they have grown up in this land. I will treat Australia as my home, because I also consider myself to be a guest so my heart is a little confused. I will continue to develop here and complete my pioneering work. As part of the first generation of immigrants, we have to rely on our pioneering spirit. If we don't have this spirit, we will inevitably be overwhelmed by life.

My friends often tell me that I'm quite different from other Chinese, even so I want to retain my roots in China because my parents, relatives and also my friends are there. They are part of me, part of my life, part of my history and then help to complete the full circle of my life.