

Meet So-Hyeong Lee, Project Pengyou Summer Intern

by [Sohyeong Lee](#) on August 13th, 2016 257 views



Hello everyone! My name is Sohyeong—I know, it does sounds like ‘so young’ and yes I am quite young— and I am a rising sophomore at St. Lawrence University. I haven’t declared my major yet, but I am exploring various fields of study and fulfilling my academic curiosity.



City of Jeonju, Korea where I spent my childhood

Born and raised mostly in South Korea, I left my home country to attend a small liberal arts college in upstate New York. I remember smiling during the long hours of travel, thinking about making new friends and experiencing American college life. At the time, academics were my biggest concern. In Korea, academic success is almost inextricably tied to your worth as a person, so the pressure to adjust to studying abroad was great. Although I was fascinated by the idea of a liberal arts education, I was not sure how well I would handle my studies with English as my second language. After arriving at St. Lawrence University, my home for the next four years, I spent my first night awake with mixed feelings and—of course—jetlag. Before everyone else arrived, we were given a week of orientation for international students. I listened carefully, read pamphlets about American culture, and tried to cram everything I could about America into my head during that week. I was nervous but excited – academics are one thing, but making new friends should be fun, right?

Small-Talk and Culture Shock

When the rest of students started moving in, however, I realized something was wrong. On the first day of freshman orientation, I approached an American student introducing myself and trying my best to initiate conversation. She gave a short answer before quickly turning away and rejecting my attempts. Later that day I was shocked to see her having enthusiastic conversations with other American students, even though they were also meeting for the first time. Although that girl is now a friend of mine, at the time it felt like a slap in the face. For a while, it felt like the harder I tried, the more I noticed a subtle gap between myself and the local students. I tried mimicking conversations I heard other people have about the weather, their hometown, and even what they had for lunch, but as soon as I started talking, the conversation stuttered and an awkward silence would follow. I didn't know what to talk about and my brain would often freeze, a feeling that I rarely experienced in Korea. It seemed like American small-talk was not my thing. I went on websites searching 'American social culture', 'how to adapt fast to a new culture', and sometimes 'happiness'. I watched TED talks, such as *10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation*, and read books like *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie. I even read academic research on international college students. Reading books, studying, and searching things online was how I had been taught to solve problems, but nothing worked. Conversation started to seem like a task. I saw myself changing as I slowly became less courageous. I could not get rid of the lonely feeling that I didn't belong here. Sometimes I plugged in my earphones and increased the volume. Other times, when I was alone, I cried.

Finding Home in Unexpected Places



St. Lawrence, my new home for four years

But my story does not end here. I met my international coordinator Sara, who listened to my stories with a friendly smile and reassured me that this is an experience which lots of international students go through and overcome. She encouraged me to seek out resources such as the International-House tea party, host family connection program and counselors, and to participate in different campus activities. After our conversation, I tried to stay positive and kept reminding myself how precious this experience was.

So I gathered my courage and smiled at people I met on campus. I participated in lots of campus activities including guest-speaker lectures, movie nights, Chinese New Year Gala, international house Kaleidoscope showcase, Holi (Festival of Color), and more. I visited my History professor's family, who was my assigned host family, where they had even cooked a Korean snack especially for me. I became a part of the St. Lawrence Review club, where I made friends while evaluating submitted essays for the journal, and volunteered at Campus Kitchens, where I met students, professors, and volunteers.



My precious first year at St. Lawrence

As time passed, I slowly found support from a surprisingly diverse group of friends. In Korea, all of my friends spoke the same language, read the same books, and had the same history. But being in an American college was entirely different. In our dining halls, my Bosnian friend Ema often told me about the complex history of Balkan peninsula. She described traditional Bosnian Pita pie that tastes best with meat or cheese, and the beautiful bridge, Stari Most, in the city of Mostar where she went to high school. I had Chinese friends who were excited to teach me how to correctly pronounce the four tones of Mandarin, and introduce me to popular Chinese ballads. On my first Christmas away from home, I was invited by my American roommate's family to their house in Boston, where I was warmly welcomed by her family. I was amazed to realize that cultural exchange was not always a shock, but on the contrary could be heart-warming and relaxing.

Things started to get better. When someone asked me "how are you?" replying "I'm good thanks, how about you?" became automatic. My mind did not go blank when I encountered a fast-speaking American, and I was prepared to say "pardon?" I met my international coordinator again, with a wide smile on my face. As anxiety was replaced by friendship, I gradually understood how my life in Korea, where I bowed my head to my elders, listened to Korean acoustic music, and ate Kimchi everyday, could have been as shocking to an American as small-talk was to me.

Gaining Perspective and Empathy

Experiencing my own vulnerability and later how cultural exchange can enrich experiences opened my eyes and broadened my imagination. It was not something I could have ever learned through memorizing facts. My focus shifted from introspection to empathy for those who experience similar struggles to communicate, to belong.

At the same time, the small class environment was where I encountered thought-provoking questions that broadened my perspective about the world. A course in my first year called *Making A Difference*, I was shocked to learn about impoverished communities with “food deserts” where healthy food options are scarce. Though fast food options are plentiful, fresh fruits, vegetables and produce are costly. In another course called *Race, Culture and Identity*, I began to see how racial stereotypes and discrimination are present not only in US, but also the rest of the world.

Months later, on my last day of freshman year, I was walking around the now quiet campus, thinking about a quote from J.K Rowling:

“Unlike any other creature on this planet, humans can think themselves into other people’s places. We do not need magic to change the world, we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already – we have the power to imagine better.”

The personal realities of my own struggle and the social disparities I was learning about in class made me start thinking about how to be more inclusive of diverse backgrounds for myself, my campus, and the world. I saw the value of bridge-building, and how powerful precious personal bonds can be. This interest is what brought me to Beijing this summer, where I tried hot-pot for the first time, roamed through a Hutong to find my friend Haijing’s house, used hand signals to ask for a drink in a Chinese restaurant, and became friends with Chinese neighbors who would cook porridge for me when I have a cold, even with limited communication.



Unforgettable memories in Beijing

I now see that learning a language is not only about TOEFL scores or vocabulary. It is about embracing a new culture and understanding how people who speak that language think and act. It is often a long and hard process, but it is worth it: it is the process of opening our minds and expanding our horizons to a global community. It not only teaches us about another place and people, but also about ourselves, and in doing so we

can become bridge-builders. My adventure learning English is not finished, and my journey of learning Chinese has just begun.

Image sources: [Jeonju](#), [St.Lawrence](#), collages edited with [MixGram](#).