Room 305

“This is just a naked balanced tree!” Tim yelled at me wearily after I asked him for this data structure problem for the third time. “I just don't understand. Could you explain more of it?” “Alright.” And he explained again, nothing new, but in a rather strange way of thinking. “See?” “Nope. I've tried this method. It didn't work. See my code, please Big T.” Tim shook his head in disgust because he knew what was waiting for him – reading other's code is the most exhausting job for every one in Informatics. But he knew he was obliged to do so. This was a common scene in room 305, the computer lab for students studying Olympiad in Informatics. I was senior 1 at that time, new to everything, while Tim was two years ahead of me, ready to graduate. Tim was not the teacher, nor literally TA. He was just one member of room 305, and it is a tradition that the old helped the new for beginning. Teachers rarely gave us lessons because they could hardly catch up with the pace of variation in Informatics, a rather fast evolving subject. We kept our “lineage” by inheritance from one grade to another.

305 to me was like a second home. Thanks to school's loose management, we, a bunch of abnormals who had special interest in Olympiad in Informatics could spend most of the time in the lab instead of dull classes as long as remembering to take regular examinations. We had a huge blackboard for multi-functionality: countdown for our next trial, map for seats ownership, doodles of somebody(usually for mocking in good temper), and vestige left by previous generations. We had sufficient facilities: a large wooden guitar for improvisation, a never-washed cushion for napping, one portable armchair for laying in a comfortable manner when watching movies, several sets of badminton and ping-pong rackets, and an overloaded modem which guaranteed a one-in-five-seconds crash of network. And most importantly, we had senior students, who had earned offers to colleges after gaining medals in Informatics, reaching for help every time in need, though not always response with patience. It took me some time to get used to everything in 305 after I was led into for the first time. Senior students seemed both admirable and formidable, some with gold medals and top awards. But as time lapsed, they proved to be extremely easy to get along with, and were willing to share everything from jokes to programming skills.

When Tim and his fellow students finally graduated and leaved 305, students of my grade took the relay, and became the main force for competition. Since the tutors were gone, we were responsible for learning by ourselves. At first, everyone was wary of the others, because we were both comrades and rivals, for sometimes we had to fight for privileges which could only be given to some of us. At that time, although we stayed together most of the time, there was a inclination to study in individual to avoid leaking some tricks or methods though by oneself. It was sad of me to find the home-like feeling faded under the stress of competition, and it had to change, for we could improve our skills as a whole more efficiently. In the beginning, I tried the method of setting common goals. For instance, every week, I would find around 20 problems concerning with a specific algorithm, order from easiest to hardest, and ask everybody to try solving some of them as an additional practice besides individual tasks. Some agreed to give it a shot. And it proved to have extraordinarily good effect. Since each one of us had others to supervise his progress and to compete with, everyone worked harder than usual. After the week, we all cultivated a profound understanding in that algorithm, and we enjoyed a lot. So this was transformed into a ritual every week. It seemed simple enough, but in practice we potentially broke the ice among each other day by day. Gradually, every once in a while one would volunteer to bring up a new problem set, with solutions they found interesting and hard. We even held group contest and formed 3-4 groups to compete with each other, though nervous but excited every time with new teammates. Before long, 305 felt like home again.

When we all got our expected results and entered senior 3, new faces of freshmen emerged in 305. This time, we knew our mission clearly: to teach, to enlighten, and to let them feel a sense of belonging. Giving lectures and making problem set made us exhausted, but I did enjoy helping those brilliant though sometime stupid students, who were like phantoms of myself years ago. And when they made some accomplishments and sit around a lunch table, complaining about what bugs did they ignore, or how they solved the problem in an unconventional way, I was satisfied.

Even today, I still missed the time struggling in 305, with friends and rivals, tutors and novices, light and dark. I was lucky that I had chosen a different path with more leaves and less trails, and had found and built room 305 to which I belong, a place where we can speak without words caught in our throat, with voices celebrating and hands receiving us whenever we come into accomplishment or fall.