



It's rare for me to have experienced something intense enough to call it “culture shock” except possibly my first few days in Morocco a few years ago. I tend to put myself in the mindset of being as open and willing to accept whatever a new country has to offer and no matter how odd or different something tends to be I don't feel like I've ever felt discomfort or an inability to relate to the extent that I would label it as such... shock.

In the summer of 2011 I moved to South Korea to start teaching English, and of course the first few weeks were intense and there was an adjustment period. You tend to overlook a lot of those initial discomforts in the face of such exciting beginnings. I had similar discomforts when arriving in Surat in October, though they were different. I was now living in a house with people I didn't know and I was in a new city without my own transportation. I had also grown accustomed to the modern conveniences that living in a large South Korean city afforded and those things were not available in Surat, Thailand. Again, the discomforts of settling in and not “culture shock.”

Having foregone visiting home while in Korea and instead opted to travel eventually led to the longing for the comforts of home. However, after finishing my contract in Korea, once again, instead of returning home for a visit I went to China and Vietnam to backpack until my contract in Thailand kicked off. By the time Christmas rolled around I was well into 18 months in Asia without a visit home. Finally, at the insistence of my parents, due to some family issues that needed to be dealt with, as well as their offer to fly me home, I put off my trip to Cambodia to return home.

First off I have to make it clear that I had an amazing time visiting home it's just that the things that tend to stand out as having been a shock of culture were usually, but not always, the unpleasant. I had a

great and rather emotional time internally being home and visiting all of my friends as well as experiencing all of the change that had taken place at home, with my friends, and in my social circle.

Using “culture shock” to describe my experience at home might be a tad hyperbolic, but I was genuinely more out of sorts at “home” than I would have expected. After spending 18 months abroad, especially in the east, things at home tend to look quite different upon your return.



First off, your body has gone through a lot of changes due to your change in diet. After an extended period of time living off of an Asian (rice) filled diet your body has a hard time adjusting to a full-time diet of western food. Of course I was craving all of the fatty, cheesy, dairy filled products of home, but my body was none to pleased. I actually felt somewhat sick or nauseous after half of the meals I ate while at home (that being said I enjoyed every gluttonous moment of it). I'm assuming that a lot of this has to do with the lack of dairy used in Asia. Make no mistake about it, as westerners we like to put dairy in almost everything (mainly cheese). I had also grown quite used to eating about ½ of the portion sizes I would have been eating at home in America. The portion sizes in America looked massive and almost gluttonous after the meager Thai sized portions I'd been eating. I made sure to visit all of my old favorite restaurants and had to take almost every meal I ordered back home in a box because I couldn't finish even half of what I would have made easy work of before.

Ya know, people always ask me if America really is full of fat people and I would get offended before and take a defensive stance. After a visit back home I can't say I can defend that position anymore. America is full of fat people and it was never so obvious before. There was one particular group of.. well... rotund individuals, which come to mind in a Wendy's (go figure). It's not completely unusual to see an overweight person from time to time in Asia but they tend to roam in herds back home.

An odd thing I noticed was how, almost vulnerable I felt due to the ease with which people could now communicate with me. In Korea, as with Thailand, my language skills go about as far as they need to be to either order food or take a cab/tuk tuk. Transactions in Asia are minimal and utilitarian to say the least. Every time I had to make some sort of monetary transaction at home I was always caught off

guard by someone trying to make small talk and I never knew how to respond and often found it hard to really look people in the eye. I feel like when I'm in public I have become a bit more internalized due to the language barriers posed by Asia. Not to mention, I kept bowing to everyone, which is a habit I have yet to break from Korea (it seems to work with the Thais).

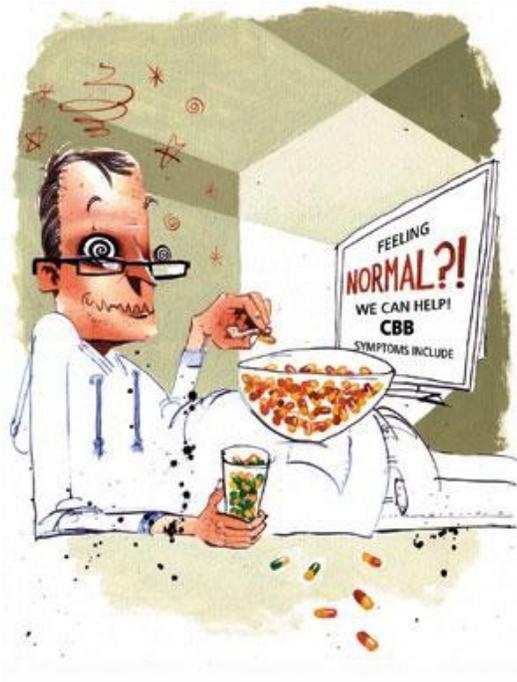
Another language related disconnect I experienced was my inability to edit myself in public. In Thailand and Korea alike it's easy to be out with a group of fellow teachers and say whatever you want no matter how offensive, because, hey no one else probably understands you anyway. I found this to be a bit of a problem at home when I would, on several occasions, start saying some very offensive or inappropriate things in public settings (family restaurants.. oops). It's also pretty nice being able to not understand what everyone is saying in Asia. You tend to forget how dumb other people's conversations can be when you unintentionally eavesdrop.

Drinking at home is also a bit more of an uptight topic when compared to... well almost every where else. In Asia and most other sensible places people are allowed to drink in public. At home you can't just walk around with a beer, no matter how civil you're being, without a cop harassing you. I found this to be an issue on more than one occasion, having forgotten that carrying a beer around is frowned upon by Uncle Sam.

One of the major things that really stood out to me after having been away from home for so long was American media. Commercials were always something that annoyed me while at home but after returning home and having been away from American media for so long I felt like I was being brainwashed every time I turned on the television. After a few hours watching television I felt compelled to buy 3 different types of insurance for vehicles I don't own, self-diagnosed 5 different medical conditions, and almost purchased some commemorative limited addition 9/11 collectors coins. Wait! Order now and we'll throw in this limited addition coin to commemorate President Barrack Obama's strategic assassination of Osama Bin Laden, which has been coined (no pun intended) the "Justice Coin."



This advertisement was nothing short of mild propaganda. I think I actually had one of those surreal moments where you look at yourself as an outside observer and can't believe that you're actually there and a part of what's happening. American media appeared so exaggerated, forceful, and at times pandering to some cretinous way of life I no longer understand or want to be a part of. I can only describe it as feeling as if I were experiencing some sort of Orwellian brainwashing or I had somehow fallen into a South Park mockery of advertising and media. Of course, this could be the case for advertising everywhere, but seeing as I don't speak Thai or Korean well enough (or any other language for that matter), I have for the most part, completely avoided television since I left home, thus limiting the monotonous suggestions that I purchase this or that unnecessary policy, item, or pharmaceutical.



One of the most difficult things to adjust to upon a return back to the good ol' U.S. And A. will undoubtedly be the cost of living. Even in Korea, things are much cheaper than the United States but after leaving there, traveling through China and Vietnam and now living in Thailand, the cost of living at home is....well... outrageous.

A normal dinner in Thailand will cost you around 40baht on average (in Surat at least), which is less than \$1.50. A normal dinner at home will cost you around \$10. A nice dinner in Thailand, for a group of about 6-7 people might cost around \$20, whereas a nice dinner for 1 person at home will cost \$25-\$whatever-you-can-spend. A beer in Thailand will cost you about 50 baht (\$1.75 or so) and as low as .18cent in Vietnam (at a restaurant even), whereas a beer in a bar at home will cost you about \$5 minimum. A night in a hotel/bungalow in Thailand will cost about 300baht or \$10 (on the beach in Khanom) or possibly 500 baht or \$16.50 in Bangkok (on Koh San Road, which is heavily trafficked by tourists), whereas you'd be lucky to find something for less than \$60 in a place ran by Norman Bates (don't even think about bringing a black light) if you were in America.

Once you're so used to spending so little for everything it's hard to go back to spending dollars. There were a few times where I really had to think about what I was about to spend on a drink or a meal and compare it to what I'd spend on the same thing in Thailand. It's pretty easy to get by on spending very little in a day in Thailand. I think I've figured (not including my rent) that I can get by on around \$3 or less a day, which includes all of my meals for the day plus gas for my motorcycle. Obviously that's a cheap day where I don't do much, but it's easy to do if I'm working.

Of course there were a lot of wonderful things about visiting home and the people and food (I should not forget all of the good beer either!) were the highlights. But, through the haze of lingering jet-lag I felt truly and sincerely disconnected from this place I called "home." Part of the "shock" I experienced, and you probably will too if you're gone for as long without a visit home, is how things change. You will have this memory of the way things were and that is how you will expect them to be when you return but that is rarely the case. Life at home goes on indifferent to your absence and the changes do not wait for you to return. I had this idea of the way things were when I left and upon my return they were, undoubtedly, different. People move, grow apart, grow together, have kids, get engaged, get married, get divorced, get sick, get fired, get hired, graduate, dropout, clean themselves up, hit rock bottom, and can even die. Things change and that is the major shock that is hard to adjust to.

I in no way write this as a sad thing because change can be much more beautiful than the stagnation of sameness. As much as home has changed I have as much, if not more, changed as well. Ultimately, it is the change in myself that led to some of this disconnection I feel from home. And, for as much as home will always be just that...home... I feel all the more inclined to continue this journey onward for as long as it carries me wherever it may.