

## **My side of this world**

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Coming from a third world country, and from a middle class family from the Philippines nonetheless, it remains a wonder even to myself how I got to have the opportunity to see and experience a variety of cultures and countries over the years. Of course, my perpetually weak buying powers, innate compulsion to abide by the law and built-in cheapskate genes are dead giveaways that almost all these were sweet freebies in the form of scholarships, sponsorships and amazing individual generousities.

My MSU leg of the journey is no different. It would have been unimaginable to come up with the hefty US dollar fees to put me through school without a heaven-sent graduate assistantship. The good thing though about traveling under a student allowance with no tourist-ish budget is that, in lieu of shopping sprees, I have learned to take sheer joy in simply living the experience. In the process, I honed my abilities to observe, learned to appreciate similarities and truly respect inherent differences. Naturally, for the few months I have been here in the midst of this famed American way of life, I have amused myself non-stop with the many hundred new things and ways that came along with this adventure.

One of the first things I get to appreciate on this corner of the earth is the rich variety of nearly everything – from types of people I meet each day, to the multitude of available junk food choices offered on grocery shelves. Apart from these many options, are the conveniences that come along with it: computerized checkouts, online banking, online

ticketing, and online everything. Apparently, you can even customize the specs of your ideal life partner and find one online, if you want. Now that's variety and convenience right at your fingertips.

While I have seen so much festivities, fanfare and regale in different countries rooted in religion or ancient history, it is here that I found such can also be defined by something as raw and as less poetic as.... football. Having watched the Spartans in a homecoming game was an awakening – aside from the fact that so many people were doing something not online, I have seen self-confessed unaffectionate Americans body-slammin' and passionate to the end. And yes, this even involved occasional singing.

One other sweet surprise is to find so much faith here in Michigan. Having been raised to keep the faith and having gone through many similar experiences of nearly futile hunt for fruitful Catholic encounters in many other continents, I have prepared myself to be disappointed. But I was happy to be wrong and glad to now belong to a warm, vibrant parish filled with involved youth, similar to what I have left back home.

Being here however, somehow renders a feeling of entering a different dimension, a place where time seems to move quicker than the usual 24 hours per day like everywhere else on this earth. An ordinary day is always filled with tasks to accomplish, projects to get done, people to meet with, or some other daily thing that gets squeezed in every now and then. And although this is a similar routine since my career was born many years ago, this time I can't seem to get the chance to make excuses for my fondness for

creatively wasting time, because everything is either entirely computerized, conveniently accessed online, or can be sent as an email attachment.

It is a different story, however, when it comes to the mobility of the car-less, hardcopy me. On top of my daily struggle to not get lost in this HUGE campus, perfecting abilities to catch CATA buses on the right stop at the right time are tricks I also needed to learn.

Although I am used to driving back home, taking public transport was not too big a drama for me. However, I was more used to flagging down taxicabs from the streets, and yes, to Philippine jeepneys - the noisy, messy, packed public transport that ferries people to and fro anytime, anywhere! Not exactly the most ideal or the most orderly, but definitely far more convenient, especially when seedless watermelons and cantaloupes are two of your most favorite things from the grocery shop. In fairness, I have to give some credit to the local transport system for toning my hamstring muscles and adding strength to my biceps, as well as for the additional layer of (uneven) bronze to my already tanned Asian skin. Needless to say, the limited routes and specific stops made me depend largely on my raw leg power and good ol' bones and muscles.

In spite of these initial opportunities to burn calories, however, I later continued to gain weight as the American fried butter diet started to kick in. In comparison with the intricate and exotic cuisines of many other cultures of the world, America seems to have a fixation on fast food, instant meals and HUGE servings. Growing up in a country where good food is synonymous to slowly cooked and laboriously prepared meals, having a microwaved TV dinner seemed sinful, especially when I started enjoying it.

There'd be less guilt of course if they were zero trans-fat, reduced salt, low calorie, no preservatives, and on 50% off sale at Meijer. I am admittedly a convert. I now begin to wonder whether I will finally develop a passion for tailgating and football if I stay here long enough.

To live in the midst of a totally different culture takes getting used to. And yes, I had my share of a few unfortunate encounters here, but nothing that I have not had elsewhere, even in my own country, and nothing that cannot be outweighed by the goodness that I see nearly everyday around me.

The more I get to experience life regardless of which spot on earth I may be on, the more do I realize people from all over the world have more things in common than they probably assume. I guess to be able to embrace our similarities and find humor and amusement in our differences, separates the line between living in bliss, and being confined in sad prejudice.

Being part of the many thousands of international students here at MSU, I hardly can even say I am different. All I know is that, for as long as I am here in this beautiful hodge-podge of cultures, races, beliefs, and everything else, I will be home. Happily amused.