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Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person

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Person to Person in Hong Kong

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Field Notes From Abroad: Person to Person in Hong Kong

My interview with my roommate was very informal and unstructured. However, this allowed us to speak on a number of different topics, and it allowed my roommate to say what he felt was important about the issue at hand. One topic we discussed was romantic relationships and the search for a partner. Boya expressed he has had a girlfriend for four years, and his family met her for the first time during Chinese New Year break. To his dismay, his father and mother weren't fond of her, and told him they didn't approve of her as a marriage partner for him. I told him I was sorry to hear that, and he proceeded to tell me that it was basically a necessity for him to have his marriage partner approved by his parents. He told me first impressions are very important in China, and his father was under the impression his girlfriend is dishonest. Two things about this portion of the interview were quite surprising. One, Boya was clearly distraught about the situation; it was obvious he was weighing the options of either being loyal to his girlfriend or obeying the wishes of his parents. Two, it was conveyed that Boya's father felt it was possible to make a judgment about Boya's girlfriend after only meeting her for the first time. Not only is the custom of needing one's parents to approve of one's marriage partner foreign to me, but so is the notion that one can know another person's character after only meeting them.

Even though Boya treats the wishes of his parents with great respect, it was evident that he does resent the traditional ways of thinking that have made the situation he faces so complex. In this I found a cultural similarity between Chinese and American youth: In both groups of people, there is a fairly salient rejection of many "old" ways of thinking. In other words, we often have different ideas about how society should be than do our parents. At the same time, the cultural differences in our upbringings have resulted in some very disparate opinions about social policy. For example, I learned how to use a firearm safely at a young age, whereas Boya has

never had any experience with handling and firing a gun. It is perhaps for this reason that Boya doesn't understand the weak gun control laws of many states in the U.S., whereas I defend the constitutional right to bear arms. However, we do agree it is the sinister intent of people, not guns, that is at the root of the problem. The interview I conducted with my roommate shed light on how he lives differently and with a different set of worldviews than I. Furthermore, learning about his opinions, values, and his encounters with traditional Chinese wisdom has made me more aware of the cultural underpinnings of my own knowledge and opinions.

Interviewee: Boya Zheng (roommate)