Travels to Houyhnhnms, Laputa, and Lilliput

Observations from 16 Months Abroad

by

Matthew Chan

4b Civil Engineering

May 2014
Dear Dr. Roe:

This report, entitled “Travels to Houyhnhnms, Laputa, and Lilliput”, was prepared as my GENE 303 report for the International Studies Option. The purpose of this report is to detail my experiences abroad as an exchange student in Denmark and Singapore, as well as a combined two work terms abroad in Hong Kong.

For my exchanges, I was situated near Copenhagen at the Technical University of Denmark (DTU) for my 3B term equivalent and Singapore at the National University of Singapore for my 4A term equivalent. For my combined work terms, I was employed at Ove Arup and Partners in Hong Kong.

This report was written entirely by me and has not received any previous academic credit at this, or any other academic institution. All figures in this report were taken by me. I would like to thank everyone who helped me in any capacity to make this trip possible for me, including Ms. Cindy Howe, Dr. David Brush, Dr. Roe, Ms. Maria Lango, Ms. Merrirose Stone, and Ms. Andreea Ciucurita. I would also like to thank Jonathan Swift for providing the inspiration for several passages in this report. Finally, I would like to thank everyone along the way that made this the most unforgettable 16 months of my life, for their valuable contributions to the preparation of this report.

Sincerely,

Matthew Chan
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sixteen months ago, I began a journey that would take me to Denmark, Singapore, and Hong Kong for two academic exchanges to the Technical University of Denmark and the National University of Singapore and a 7-month work term at Ove Arup and Partners, Ltd. In that time, I learned not only about my chosen field of study of civil engineering, but I also gained much knowledge about the world and the cultures I immersed myself in. In the process, aside from learning how to adapt to living in other societies, I also learned many things about myself.

To me, Denmark is nearly the ideal society. Their optimal work-life balance, combined with comprehensive social services, creates an environment that is conducive to comfortable living. Transportation operates at model efficiency, with seamless integration of different modes and a comprehensive network of public transportation. This makes traveling very easy. The Danish people are a warm and welcoming society, who value family as much as their social and professional circles. Overall, the society is very well constructed and runs quite successfully.

On the other hand, I believe Singaporean society has been done in by their rules and regulations and an inexplicable desire to accomplish and achieve without practical end means. The society seems sterile and its people are like coiled springs—the more the government imposes rules and regulations, the more its citizens push back. However, this does not detract from the fact that they have amazing food and are a convenient travel point to other destinations in Southeast Asia. In my opinion, Hong Kong is a better version of Singapore, although the work hours are more insane. People also seem more open to making new friendships and connections, while family arguably takes a backseat in people’s lives. Lastly, as an overseas Chinese, I found that the overseas settlements live in an antiquated version of the original society, frozen in time of the era when the immigrants arrived.
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1. **Preface**

Having been condemned by nature and fortune to an active and restless life, I left my adopted country of Canada, and took a hop across the pond on the 22nd of August, 2012, with Lufthansa, Captain Helmut Koch, a German man, bound for Copenhagen. Our ship was originally bound to set sail for the northern port of Trondheim in Norway. However, after some very rough conditions in which many emails and proposals were pitched, there was simply no way it would work out. Consequently, Copenhagen was chosen as the next viable alternative port.

Thus began a journey lasting sixteen months in which I lived in three different countries other than my own and traveled through 14 more. While I write this from the comforts of a Waterloo residence I have learned to call “home” for the last two months, these chronicles are most assuredly not the end of adventures; they only serve to observe and record my voyages thus far.

2. **Part One: A Voyage to the Country of the Danes**

The perfection of the country and her inhabitants were quite apparent the moment I stepped onto Danish soil. The weather was ideal (Figure 1), the people were friendly, and the airport was laid out in an optimal manner. This sentiment stayed with me during my entire time there.

Roads are laid out flawlessly, allowing me to plan out any route easily with a huge number of origin-destination pairs. The integration between different transit modes is done seamlessly, with all road users working together to share the road. Customer service representatives know their products and policies extremely well, as they should. Moreover, those working in the service industry often independently accomplish tasks and requests efficiently without the need for the customer to follow up several times. Everyone has a healthy respect for the law, even if
it is evident there are no repercussions for breaking some of the rules. For example, I have frequently observed locals waiting patiently for the stop light to turn green in the middle of the night on various deserted suburban streets. Aside from governmental rules and regulations, social etiquette is also strictly adhered to—no one is ever late, and everyone has a perfectly balanced work-life dynamic. In all aspects I can discern, the Danes live in a utopia.

2.1 … In Which the Author Cooks Up a Storm

Food culture in Denmark is, for lack of a better term, perfectly balanced—in taste, nutrition, and social companionship. Breakfasts and weekday dinners are times to gather with family and discuss the events of the day, and lunch and weekend dinners are times to spend with friends or
coworkers. Copenhagen has an abundance of good restaurants, including the world-renowned Noma, which was ranked the World’s Best Restaurant for three years in a row (2010, 2011, and 2012). An experience at the restaurant comes with a lengthy three-month wait time for reservations, but is certainly an unforgettable one—not only for the price, but also for the one-of-a-kind dishes like the soup served in raw potatoes, or live shrimp served as-is (Figure 2). However, I could not help but notice that families rarely dined out at restaurants, and that friends/coworkers dominated the majority of the tables in most restaurants. This practice is in stark contrast to what I now observe at local (Canadian) restaurants.

Since I lived with a local host family, I had the opportunity to learn how to cook a whole new type of cuisine, as well as participate in their customary dining practices. With my host family, I not only learned to make a myriad of new dishes like kanelsnegl and medisterpølse (Figure 3), but I also learned many new uses for everyday herbs and spices. Previously, I had only ever used parsley as a garnish or in salads, but with a little cream, butter, and flour, it becomes persillesovs, a delicious sauce for dipping boiled potatoes and other side dishes in (Figure 4). These boiled potatoes with persillesovs are paired with stegt flæsk (bacon deep fried with so
much salt that there is essentially no water left) to form a very traditional dish known as *steft flæsk med persillesovs.*

![Figure 3: Kanelsnegl (L) and Medisterpølse (R)](image)

![Figure 4: Stegt Flæsk med Persillesovs](image)
Other Danish specialties are the smorgasbord of different pastries and breads, and the way they are garnished/enhanced (Figure 5a). Bread is usually supplemented with spreads and smoked fish to create smørrebrød, which loosely translates to “open-faced sandwich” (Figure 5b). The bakeries providing these baked goods are unparalleled—I have yet to try a bread or pastry in Denmark that I do not like. All of these breads and pastries make quick, easy, and tasty breakfasts or lunches, and are more than capable of surviving morning commutes.

![Figure 5: Danish Bakery (a) and Smørrebrød (b)](image)

2.2 … IN WHICH THE AUTHOR VISITS NEARBY LANDS

Being of the restless nature that I am, I took the opportunity to traipse around Europe as much as I could. Travel in Europe is vastly different than in North America—transportation using private automobiles is frowned upon, and even actively discouraged by governments through heavy taxation on vehicles and exorbitant fuel prices. As a result, the rail, air, and bus networks in Europe are extensively developed. With the additional advantages of the “borderless” Schengen region (lack of customs, visas, etc.) and the proliferation of the Euro, traveling throughout Europe feels like the various countries have merged to become one brobdingnagian
country. Fortunately, the cultural borders are still quite significant in certain areas, which allow the majority of countries in Europe to retain their distinctive cultural flavours.

In total, I visited 15 cities, including Antwerp, Bruges, Brussels, Hamburg, Lübeck, Helsingør, Hillerød, Billund, London, Luxembourg, Møn, München, Paris, Malmö, and Vienna. Some of the trips involved interesting methods of transportation: on the train from Copenhagen to Hamburg, a portion of the journey involved the train physically rolling onto a boat and being ferried across to the German mainland (Figure 6). Some trips to other countries were also very short in terms of distance and time: Malmö in Sweden is located 40 km from Copenhagen Central Station, and it took us 45 minutes to travel between the two cities by train. However, once we stepped off the train in Malmö, we were already in a different country with a different currency, different language, and different culture (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Train on a Boat
Generally speaking, most cities in Europe, however small or old, are sufficiently advanced and contain many of the modern conveniences one has come to expect of larger and newer cities. This makes traveling independently through these small towns much easier. For instance, access to the two small cities of Lübeck and Bruges are only possible through rail connections (Figure 8). Even then, each city has their own bus system, locals know enough of a lingua franca to be able to communicate with tourists, and wi-fi is available in most of the cafés throughout the city. Yet even with such connectedness, each city retains an identity that is uniquely theirs and have a distinct culture and heritage that can be completely different the next city over.
2.3 ... In Which the Author Is Educated Academically

While the majority of my time was spent traveling and cooking, I was arguably there to study civil engineering at the Technical University of Denmark (DTU), in which I took a total of five courses during the term. The classes are laid out differently than in North America; there are a maximum of two classes per day, each lasting four hours. Therefore, classes only meet once each week. Each class’ time slot is further subdivided during that four hour session. The first two hours are usually spent in lecture with the professor, followed by one hour of tutorial with the teaching assistant(s), and lastly followed by one hour of independent/group study and project work with classmates. Weekly assignments are unheard of; the only evaluations in courses are projects, midterms, and final examinations. Thus, the onus of attending class and learning the material falls squarely on the student, as opposed to the micromanagement model present in North America. However, aside from the mode of delivery and types of evaluations, the quality of education and course material are virtually the same as anywhere else in the world. Initially, I found myself having a little trouble familiarizing myself with the different technical terminology and engineering standards used in Europe, but with the principles of science being universal, it did not take too long to adjust.

While I shall leave a detailed analysis of the merits of each type of teaching to the appropriate experts, I will note two things I have observed during my brief stay amongst the Danes. First, Scandinavian countries value tertiary education so much that they pay for their students to attend, a phenomenon generally not present in other countries. Second, the method of teaching using cumulative projects and summative examinations seems much more conducive to learning than the weekly evaluation method. From what I observed in my Danish peers, many of them
actually remembered things from previous terms and years. This is completely opposite to what I have observed in my Canadian peers, where many were unable to recall anything about a course after the final examination had been written. I deduce that this must be the result of memorization and fulfillment of only the bare minimum requirements. With weekly evaluations, there is not much leftover time after completing the assignment to absorb, learn, or even review the material. I will not go so far as to condemn the type of education provided in North America, but any learning method that involves less work yet results in more learning and retention of concepts receives my vote for efficiency and appeal.

2.4 … In Which the Author Attempts Mimesis

When in Denmark, I certainly tried to do as the Danish did. However, her society is so well put together and functions so perfectly that it took me quite some time to adjust to their lifestyle. I will recount some of my attempts at integrating into the local environment, of which there were several times I blended in perhaps better than I was intending to.

With the prevalence of cycling as a means of transportation, I bought a bicycle within a week of arriving. However, it took me almost two more weeks before I could signal and gesture my intentions with confidence, and another five weeks before I could cycle from my residence to the DTU campus without looking (and sounding) like I had run a marathon. After some time, I started using my bicycle to get everywhere, from traveling downtown to going to the supermarket. The first few times I tried to juggle 3 bags of groceries in addition to steering the bicycle must have been quite an amusing sight, considering several other matronly figures passed me on the road with similar baggage in tow.
I also took the opportunity to take some Danish language classes (Figure 9), since Danish is rarely taught outside of Denmark. Many of the Danish students I had gotten to know told me that they first learned to speak English at home, followed by Danish several years later. I quickly found out why—it is easily the hardest language I have ever had to learn. Many of the phonetic constructs require a complete reconfiguration of the tongue’s positions and functions in the mouth. After a number of lessons, I tried using Danish in everyday interactions. The results were mixed. Many locals were more than delighted that I was trying the language, and would patiently wait for me to form my sentences and cheerily correct any mispronunciations. Some would smile politely and ask me to repeat in English, and some would reply back in Danish at such speed that I would have no idea what was being said to me. Overall, Danish is an interesting language, but requires much more than four months to obtain a functional grasp.
To me, Denmark is nearly a perfect society (Figure 10). I believe that anyone attempting to replicate my experience will require some adjustments to get used to the Danish way of life, since they are likely to come from a less ideal society. However, these adjustments are all for the better in my opinion, and although it may take some time to fully integrate, I find it is well worth the effort. These modifications to society would be great improvements even if implemented into other cultures.

Figure 10: Nyhavn at Dusk

3. PART TWO: A VOYAGE TO SINGAPORE

I had not been home eleven days, when Captain Jack Donaghue, commander of the Air Canada, a stout craft of 40 tonnes, whisked me away on the next part of my journey. Since there were
no nonstop flights directly to my destination of Singapore, I decided to take the long way and made stops in Boston, Frankfurt, Bangkok, and Hong Kong, before arriving in Singapore. I had held very high hopes for this portion of the journey, for I had met some Singaporean friends whilst in Copenhagen and elsewhere. It is with deep regret though, that I must say I am somewhat disillusioned by the whole experience. However, in retrospect, I believe I would still have been disappointed even if I went to Singapore with no expectations; let me explain.

I believe my fundamental problem with Singapore lies with the local people. Many of them seem so aloof and soulless, I would dare describe them as sterile; even their gait reminds me of someone walking with neither aim nor purpose. There is also a great deal of stress and irony in the society, as if their lives are spent in the blind pursuit of pure achievement with no applicable results or practical end means. Furthermore, it seems to me that the population tries so hard to follow their myriad of rules, but once again ultimately fails to abide by even the simplest ones.

For instance, Singapore has four official languages, like Luxembourg or Switzerland. However, in reality, the majority of the population can speak at most two. In contrast, the Luxembourgish (and to a certain extent, the Swiss) citizens I have come across have no problem using all four of their official languages. They also often speak respectable amounts of English in addition to their official languages. The need to appease all political factions and ethnic backgrounds in Singapore has created the necessity for four official languages, yet this has not remotely translated over to their everyday practical usage. In addition, code-switching is rampant in their daily speech, even earning itself a name—Singlish. Parts of their English vocabulary are borrowed from Malay, Tamil, or Chinese, resulting in words like kena, lah, leh, and siao. The structure of their spoken English also often strays from conventional English syntax and
grammar, borrowing sentence structures and layouts from the other official languages. An example of a resulting spoken English sentence would sound like: “You go home and do this, can ma?” which is based directly on the Chinese sentence structure: “你回家做這件事，可以嗎?” (literally, “you come home do things, can you?”). This mixing and code-switching not only erodes at the citizens’ ability to differentiate between languages, but also devaluates the society’s understanding and use of any one of the four languages.

Another issue I have with Singapore is how closely it attempts to mimic Hong Kong in everyday matters, yet fails spectacularly in so many ways. For instance, the Singapore subway system (MRT) has glass panels that act as barriers to prevent people and things from falling over onto the tracks. There are gates that are supposed to synchronize with the train doors, much like the subway system in Hong Kong (MTR). Unfortunately, I experienced the misalignment situation in Figure 11(a) too many times to count during my short four-month stay in Singapore, whereas I never once experienced the same situation in the eight months I spent in Hong Kong.

![Figure 11: (a) Singapore MRT vs. (b) Hong Kong Platform Screen Doors](image)

One more example of the mimicry is the retention of the double yellow line on roads. This undoubtedly has its roots in British road markings, where the lines mean that there is no waiting
or stopping on that particular section of the road. Singapore and Hong Kong have both adopted this system into their own roads, but the former seems quite confused on this rule. As a result, even the locals are not sure as to the proper protocols for double yellow lines. The police do not enforce this rule either, and consequently all sorts of traffic blockages occur on narrow streets with these double yellow lines (Figure 12). In contrast with Hong Kong, the double yellow lines are always abided by, due to frequent policing and hefty fines for violations. Lastly, in Singapore there are no clear signs as to which side of an escalator a user should stand or walk—locals tend to stand on the left and walk on the right, whereas expats/tourists tend to stand on the right and walk on the left. In Hong Kong, signs are clearly posted on proper escalator etiquette; this is yet another glaring shortcoming of Singaporean society (Figure 13).

![Figure 12: (L) Singapore vs. (R) Hong Kong Double Yellow Lines](image)

However, in the interest of a well-rounded comparison, I feel it is only fair to describe the more pleasant experiences as well. I shall now make some brief observations of Singapore’s better qualities to compare with Denmark and Hong Kong.
3.1 ...In Which the Author Forages with Much Success

I lived in the Raffles Hall residence on the campus of the National University of Singapore (NUS), which was the traditional type of residence with no kitchen. Consequently, I was unable to cook or make any food during my time there. I found that my local friends who lived at home or lived in residences with kitchens also did not cook much either. This was not necessarily a bad thing, since food was so readily available throughout the campus and around the island. Furthermore, the food was probably cheaper than one could cook at home. I was often full for S$4-5 (C$3-4), which was much cheaper than any meal I could prepare in Canada, and certainly cheaper than anything I could have cooked in Denmark. The food often tasted very good, and the seafood, vegetables, and fruit were also frequently of good quality. With Singapore’s close proximity to water and the fruit-producing regions of the world, many of the dishes were noticeably fresher than ones in Canada. In addition, the large number of
immigrants from surrounding countries (India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, China, etc.) brings a wide array of expertise in authentic ethnic dishes. Many of these dishes are given their own Singaporean twist such as fish head curry and shrimp patties (Figure 14). The dishes retain a very distinct authentic flavour in contrast to the ethnic food found in Canada, where I find that some restaurants cater to “Canadian” palates by watering down the recipes or using local substitutes for ingredients.

Figure 14: Fish Head Curry (L) and Shrimp Patties (R)

Another interesting feature of the food in Singapore is the places it is served in. Restaurants, in the traditional western sense of the word, are much fewer. Instead, every neighbourhood has its own hawker centres (Figure 15), where food is served in a cafeteria-style setting and is usually open air. Although the cleanliness of these centres is questionable, they serve some of the best food I have ever tasted at some of the most wallet-friendly prices I have ever seen. Many of Singapore’s most famous dishes can be found in these centres, such as fish head curry, bak kut teh, kaya toast, laksa, chili crabs, satay, ice kacang, nasi lemak, and char kway teow. Although many of these dishes are not originally Singaporean, I feel that the locals have in most cases improved upon them.
From what I observed, Singaporeans seem to stick quite closely to their families until the children reach high school age, where they begin to shift their attention towards their social circles formed around school, clubs, and the army (for men) in the late teens. Both types of groups (families and friends) often go out for dinner, which is quite different than the Danish culture described earlier. However, I feel that dining out in Singapore is less of an “event” than it is in Copenhagen. I find that many people eat out in Singapore for the sake of eating dinner (and possibly not wanting to cook or to wash the dishes), whereas eating out in Copenhagen is a much more social event, and involves much more preparation beforehand (giving prior notice, making plans, dressing up, etc).
3.2 ...In Which the Author is Transported to Foreign Lands

Traveling to a land nearly antipodal to Toronto would have been a waste of 40 hours on the plane had I not taken the opportunity to explore around a bit. Since Singapore is technically situated on an island, traveling to neighbouring countries is much more difficult than in Europe. There are still buses to Malaysia and ferries to Indonesia, but anything further requires flights or long bus rides. In the end, I went to Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hong Kong, Bali, and Manila by air. I also had the chance to try out some of the low-cost air carriers in the region, most notably Jetstar, Cebu Air Pacific, and Air Asia. In comparison with the European low-cost carriers (Ryanair, Easyjet), the Asian versions feel much safer and (for lack of a better term,) less sleazy. There are no hidden charges, “mandatory extra fees”, or the like. Aside from the need for visas and entry documents, the flying process is much easier in Asia.

In terms of the different lands and cultures that I visited, I noticed a great disparity between the major cities and the smaller towns. In most of the major cities, a lingua franca was spoken (English, French, etc.), yet whenever I ventured to the smaller nearby towns, I was reduced to hand gestures and making animated illustrations. This was quite the opposite of what I experienced traveling in Europe, since even the smallest towns there would have had someone speaking a second language in which we could both converse in.

Being so far segregated into islands and peninsulas with such a rich and varied history, the cultures of the various countries (Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam) are very different from each other. The cuisine and the methods of food preparation are entirely different; the history that shaped their people is very diverse; and, the social customs and emphasis on certain rituals
vary significantly. For instance, much of Vietnam still shows the scars left by the US (Figure 16), though ironically her citizens hold almost no animosity towards American citizens. In Bali, Balinese offerings are scattered at virtually every doorstep (Figure 17). In Manila, jeepneys are the main form of local transportation (Figure 18). These are all things (amongst many others) that are available exclusively in each respective country, with nothing remotely similar in their neighbouring ones. However, for the sake of brevity, further examples are omitted from this report. These drastic changes from country to country are a remnant of the former feudal powers as well as responses to the peoples’ evolving needs throughout time. Due to the separation by large bodies of water, these countries do not have the “border towns” that embody a mix of the two countries’ cultures that occur prominently along land borders in Europe.

![Figure 16: Leftover US Influence in Vietnam](image-url)
On the other hand, one of the things that is consistent amongst all of these Southeast Asian countries I visited is their natural beauty. All of these nations have absolutely beautiful and unspoilt countrysides, which are polar opposites of the gritty urban metropolitan cities nearby. The change between rural and urban settings is very abrupt in these countries, whereas the European countries have landscapes that tend to transform and de-urbanize more gradually. Even then, rural settings in Europe are still quite developed and connected. However, in these Southeast Asian nations, rural locales are so undeveloped that they are essentially living in a past decade, especially technologically. In the bucolic parts of these countries, it is possible to completely escape from the connected outside world and simply bask in the wonders of nature. Some of these idyllic countryside scenes are shown in Figure 19, Figure 20, and Figure 21.
Figure 18: Manila Jeepney

Figure 19: Halong Bay, Vietnam
Figure 20: Mount Arayat & Ayala Lake, Philippines

Figure 21: Rice Paddies in Bali, Indonesia
3.3 …IN WHICH THE AUTHOR NEARLY DROWNS IN THE SEA OF ACADEMIA

I had several close calls during my time in Singapore, and all were in the Sea of Academia. Never before had I experienced such intimidating situations. The Sea of Academia at NUS contains two types of indigenous species that make up the majority of the student populace: the first is the typical Singaporean I had mentioned before—sterile, and often in blind pursuit of achievement. The second type of student is caused by the disparity of prestige between NUS and the universities in neighbouring countries, resulting in most of the top students from nearby countries in Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, and Malaysia coming to study at NUS.

The result of these blindly achieving local students combined with studious top regional students is that the campus becomes very competitive. I observed many of the students comparing their extra-curricular activities, and always needing to outdo their peers. I witnessed one instance where a student asked another student what their extra-curricular activities that semester were; the second one responded cagily, and when the first student found an activity that she was not involved with, she immediately enquired about joining said activity. Marks were also compared on a daily basis, as were different types of scholarships, grants, and awards.

As I was in many fourth-year undergraduate and first-year master’s courses, I had the opportunity to talk with many final year students. Even in their last semester, most students were focused on getting good grades for their final semester, and for moot cause—there were no extra scholarships or medals to attain, and most were already on some sort of recognition or achievement list regardless of their marks in the final term (as long as they passed). Many of my classmates were half-heartedly applying for jobs, but no one seemed at all concerned about
actually securing one. When I asked them about their future, a more or less generic response was given each time: “I will graduate, find a good paying job and a spouse, settle down with two or three kids, and hopefully retire in about 30-40 years.” There was absolutely no ambition or drive to develop a career or break out of the social paradigm of the Singaporean middle-class lifestyle. When asked, most people did not even name a company or a specific industry (e.g., civil, transportation, aviation, management, structures, hydrology, foundations, etc.) in the civil engineering field that they would like to work in upon graduation.

Naturally, with all these students placing the achievement of marks as their top priority, my own marks suffered somewhat at the hands of the bell curve, and I was constantly struggling to stay on top of the material being taught. There were weekly evaluations and barely any time to learn or absorb the material, which was similar to the Canadian style of learning, but a total opposite to what I experienced in Denmark. I had also never before encountered libraries that were open 24/7, nor had I seen study areas that were constantly full. When exam time came around, I had to study with much more effort than I ever had to for other universities. In the end, even though I spent much more time studying, I felt I had learnt less in Singapore than I did in Denmark.

3.4 …IN WHICH THE AUTHOR IS COMMONLY MISTAKEN FOR A LOCAL

Given that I am of Asian descent, I was commonly mistaken for a local while in Singapore. I speak a dialect of Chinese known as Cantonese, but I do not speak the prevailing Mandarin Chinese dialect. However, as a result of being falsely assumed as a local, I was often spoken to in Mandarin Chinese. Because I often took more than a split second to process and respond, the speaker usually reverted to English (or Singlish), or asked me to hurry up and give a response. I chalked this up to the pace of the people, but it certainly took quite some time to get used to.
Another somewhat negative effect of being treated like a local was the difficulty of becoming part of a social group. From what many of my exchange friends and I observed, most of the local university students already had well-established social groups, and were hesitant to allow newcomers into their social group. I discovered later on, that the reason for this reluctance was the shared history amongst the existing members of the group. They were also not very interested in creating new connections, due to the already oversaturated schedules of their academic and social lives. Furthermore, the assumption other students made of me being a local student automatically meant that they thought I would already have social circles to interact in. This made it extra hard to break into their circles, as it seemed to them that I was “encroaching” onto their territory, as one of the local students told me after they discovered I was an exchange student. These prejudices only contribute to my perception of stress and discord within Singaporean society, and it is something I do not detect in Hong Kong society.

3.5 …IN WHICH THE AUTHOR EXPERIENCES LIFE BACKWARDS

In my time in Singapore, I found three things to be very different than the British roots it came from. I discovered that these three things were meant to entice expatriates from the West; unfortunately, they only serve to further my opinion of the irony present in Singaporean society. First, for all their rules and regulations, I find that they are more often in violation of their own regulations than not. Second, for a society that claims to be gender-neutral in so many aspects, I feel that they are actually biased against men. Finally, the third thing I notice is the disproportionate number of unskilled labour workers from nearby countries, and the locals’ poor attitudes towards them.
It is a well-known fact that Singapore has many rules, and the punishments for breaking them are severe. These punishments range from caning (for littering) to death (for possession of drugs). However, I notice that even with so many rules and laws, the people are not necessarily better behaved than the citizens of countries without the same rules. I did not notice much littering in Copenhagen, and there were certainly no signs prohibiting it. However, the littering situation outside the touristy areas of Singapore is quite out of control (Figure 22). In my opinion, these laws act like springs—the more pressure that the government applies to its citizens with rules and regulations, the more they will push back and rebel. This is most certainly ironic, since the main intention of implementing such laws is to prevent and deter citizens from doing these acts in the first place.

![Figure 22: Littering in Singapore](image)

In my opinion, Singapore feels like it is one of the only first-world countries to be actively biased against men. I do not say this as someone who has felt the bias firsthand, but as an observer of everyday life. Singaporean males are conscripted into National Service right out of high school, giving females a two-year advantage when entering university and subsequently into the workforce. Singaporean males are also punished more harshly for petty crimes (most
prominently caning), whereas females committing the same crime receive volunteer assignments or fines. During my four months in Singapore, I had read several editorials and articles that pointed out the numerous studies focused on the relationship between caning and physical/mental repercussions later in life. In addition, although not explicitly stated as a rule, males are expected to give up their seats on public transportation to females, regardless of their age or condition. These issues, along with many others, have not only noticed by me—these issues have been discussed on a regular basis in Singaporean newspapers and publications.

Lastly, one of the things that make me feel Singapore is moving backwards as a society is the sheer number of unskilled labour workers that are brought in from nearby countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, etc.) In addition to the in-house nannies, virtually every public space in Singapore has one or more unskilled labourers working to keep the area clean. In comparison, Hong Kong only employs nannies from overseas, and most of the public spaces are kept clean by local labourers. The cleaners in Singapore work in shifts, and often also clean during daylight and working hours, making their presence very prominent and making the number of foreign workers seem disproportionately large. This in it of itself is not particularly heinous; however, the attitude I observe from local Singaporeans is what irritates me. I have seen local Singaporeans voice their disapproval of the cleaners’ work, and even express outright disdain of these workers’ presence in the country to their faces. The Singaporeans’ attitudes heighten the economic and social disparity between the skilled and unskilled labour, and hark back to the days of servants and pronounced class systems. In addition, their critical view of such work is highly ironic: Singaporeans pride themselves on their cleanliness; yet they do not respect or appreciate the people who clean for them, nor do they realize that the people who do this job are not citizens of Singapore.
In general, I feel that Singapore is arguably at the forefront of technological developments and academic achievements, but perhaps her people have somehow lost sight of the “bigger picture”. The people are too focused on their daily needs. The competition that drives them to outdo their neighbours leads to a toxic yet simultaneously sterile environment, where no one is really clear on why they are doing what they are doing. This society reminds me of a simpler time, when people struggled just to survive and lacked the necessary resources to develop the arts, to question life, or to pursue happiness. To me, the advancement of a society is not only dependent on technology, but also on these humanities; therefore, in direct comparison with Denmark, I feel that Singapore, as a people and as a society, is not as advanced.

4. **PART THREE: A VOYAGE TO HONG KONG**

I continued at home with my family about 30 hours, in a very happy condition, if I could have learned the lesson of knowing when I was well. I left my parents to their retirement, and accepted a prestigious offer made me, to the position of Sandwich Student at Ove Arup and Partners, Ltd., in Hong Kong, for a period of seven months. This journey was highly anticipated, as I had relations and roots in Hong Kong; this time, I would be able to live there, and experience all aspects of life, including work, holidays, and festivals.

What I learned and experienced on this part of the journey was far beyond anything I expected. It surpassed anything I could have experienced on a work term in Canada or learnt in a classroom. I was able to connect and create relationships with relatives there, as well as forge friendships and make industry connections that will last me a lifetime. I also managed to discover a lot about myself, and the overseas Chinese culture in which I had been raised for twenty years of my life.
Although I felt that Hong Kong was similar to Singapore in many ways, it seemed better in almost every aspect. The people in Hong Kong are driven to excel and achieve perhaps even more than in Singapore, but they have clear motivations and goals for doing so. Most people abide by the laws and adhere to common sense as the result of regulation by public shaming, which I feel is far more effective than any type of regulatory enforcement. Everything runs with precision and accuracy (most notably the platform screen doors on subways). Lastly, locals have a healthy respect for each other and for foreign workers, and do not give off the sense of superiority and irony that the people of Singapore seem to emanate. However, I would be lying if I said that the citizens of Hong Kong were as nice as the Danes; while I feel that the people of Hong Kong are significantly nicer than Singaporeans, they still fall considerably short when compared to Danish and European peoples. Perhaps it is a cultural paradigm for Asians to tend to congregate with their own little cliques, and being accepted into a group or making friends outside their own circles is much harder than in European cultures like Denmark.

4.1 …In Which the Author Finds Family

I stayed with my aunt during my tenure at Arup, and was able to become much closer with my relatives in Hong Kong. I had the opportunity to be part of their lives: help them with English and math homework, go to the beach, have dinner, bake cookies, and generally interact with them the way I normally interact with my relations in Canada (Figure 23). I was able to develop lasting relationships with relatives I had never really gotten to know before.
Most importantly, I was able to spend time with my relatives, and in particular, my grandparents—two have already passed on, so any time spent with the remaining two is very precious to me. I also got to see my parents in a completely different light, which I found very insightful. Although subconsciously I knew that they were young at one point in time, it was fascinating to hear stories from my parents’ siblings of their triumphs, their successes, their failures, their mistakes, and their terrifyingly embarrassing moments.

4.2 …In Which the Author Lives in the City of Endless Work

It is a well-established fact that working hours in Hong Kong are longer than in most Western countries. The regular “official” work hours are 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., although many work an extra hour or two per day. However, when one works as a consultant in Hong Kong, the working
hours rise dramatically. I knew this going in, and on average my usual working hours were around 8:30 a.m. to 10 p.m., although I did pull a number of all-nighters during my time there in addition to coming in on weekends and holidays (Figure 24). My coworkers worked similar hours, but that is more or less the norm of a top engineering consulting firm in Hong Kong.

![Drawing Ready for Submission]

Figure 24: 24 December 2013, 3:56 AM: 328 Drawings Ready for Submission!

In this complete opposite to Danish society, work towards a career is one of life’s primary goals, so a work-life balance can either be seen as perfectly balanced or non-existent. In comparison, one time the father of my host family in Denmark called home around 4:30 p.m. to say that he would be “working really late” and not to wait for him to start dinner. He was home by 7 p.m., completely drained of energy, and could only manage to complain about his “extremely long workday”. This drastic difference in work hours highlights a fundamental difference in the
cultural attitude towards work. To people in Hong Kong and China, their social circles and work circles are essentially one and the same. People work at jobs they like, or they find ways to humour and entertain themselves while at work (Figure 25).

![Figure 25: 18 October 2013, 4:51 AM: Karaoke in Meeting Room #63 with Coworkers While Correcting Drawings](image)

Despite the chronic long hours and the endless amount of work (Figure 26), I am extremely grateful for this opportunity afforded me. I was tasked with looking after most aspects of a $1B HKD (~C$130M) school campus redevelopment project, from the foundation design up to the superstructure trusses. Since my superiors were always busy with other projects, I also gained experience in attending meetings with consultants, contractors, and even the client. Normally, this is not allowed for entry-level (much less student-level) positions. I was also assigned more
design work than my previous four co-op terms combined, and learnt more about real-world engineering while there than I could ever have learnt in an academic setting.

Figure 26: My Work Desk After Three Months

4.3 …In Which the Author Creates Probable Memories

While work consumed the greater part of my time in Hong Kong, I nevertheless found the time to form social bonds with my coworkers outside the office as well as with the friends of my relatives. My work friends, having discovered my rather unique situation in which I knew all about life as a local, but had no first-hand experience, endeavoured to help me make up for lost time by creating the memories of a typical Hong Kong teenager. We ended up at all the usual
I found that social groups in Hong Kong are very different compared to what I had experienced in Denmark and Singapore. In Denmark, everyone has many circles of friends, although they are not too close with any one of them. In Singapore, social groups are divided into very tight-knit cliques based on long-established relationships and friendships. However, in Hong Kong, deep friendships are made based on the current environment (e.g. work, school). If one happens to leave, they go on to join a new social group at their new environment, although many still often go out for drinks or meals with their old social groups to catch up with each other.

It is also interesting to note the difference in social constructs of family and friends in the three countries. In Denmark, family is an important part of social life throughout one’s time on earth, and one would never think to spend time off (especially holidays) with anyone but their family. In Singapore, children are very close to their parents up until the end of high school, but often spend holidays and celebrations with their family. However, in Hong Kong, children drift away from family beginning in middle school and are completely detached by junior high. It is not at
all uncommon to see a group of pre-teens or even middle school children in Hong Kong hanging out at the mall without adult supervision. People in Hong Kong tend to celebrate events (birthdays, promotions, etc.) and “Western holidays” (Christmas, Easter, etc.) with friends, but Chinese holidays (Spring Festival, New Year, etc.) are strictly reserved for family.

4.4 **In Which the Author is Still Not Quite Local**

I had always considered myself to be more knowledgeable about Hong Kong and her culture than my peers with similar backgrounds, since I had an active interest in keeping with current events and would frequently talk to my parents about their time in Hong Kong. However, after spending 7 months there, I found out just how much I did not know. Even though I spoke Cantonese on a daily basis, I did not know much of the slang and often used extremely antiquated terms. These were idioms and slang that were popular (or at least still in use) when my parents first moved to Canada. Thus, I frequently gave myself away as an expatriate in this manner, especially when speaking to members of the younger generation who may never have heard these old-fashioned terms.

In terms of popular culture, my knowledge was lagging behind by a period of about four to six months; this was approximately the amount of time it took for movies, dramas, songs, and memes to trickle overseas, even with the ubiquity of the internet and smart phones. I also found myself quite clueless on political matters, since it did not directly affect me whilst in Canada.

Aside from keeping with current events, my life in Hong Kong moved at a pace so brisk that it far outstripped anything I had experienced in Canada, Denmark, or even Singapore. This is typical of the lives of Hong Kong citizens. People spend so much time and energy at their work
and pour so many resources into it, that it is virtually impossible not to have one of the world’s most influential economies. Stores rarely close before 9 p.m., and restaurants are usually open until at least midnight. With such hectic schedules, I cannot help but wonder sometimes if life is just passing by the citizens of Hong Kong, and that they could benefit from adopting a bit of a balance.

5. PART FOUR: THE DAWN OF A NEW ERA

Thus, gentle reader, I have given thee a faithful history of my sixteen months; wherein I have not been so studious of ornament as truth. I could, perhaps, like others, have astonished thee with strange, impossible tales and rosy lies; but I rather choose to relate plain matter of fact, in the simplest manner and style, because my principal design was to inform, and not to amuse.

It is easy for us who travel into countries, to form descriptions of wonderful food, both from sea and land. Whereas a traveler’s chief aim should be to make wiser and better, and to improve their minds by the bad, as well as good example, of what they deliver concerning foreign places. Given the opportunity, I would love to develop my technical skills and the initial stages of my career in Asia, where the work productivity is extremely high; I would then settle into Europe to further develop a career and family under a more balanced work-life paradigm. Finally, I would love to retire in Canada, for although I have grown up in it, I simply cannot tolerate the speed at which work is accomplished here as I have witnessed during my various Canadian co-op terms—I simply know that I would not be able to accomplish much in my lifetime.

I here take a final leave of all my courteous readers, and return to enjoy my own speculations in my little residence at Waterloo, and to apply those excellent lessons of virtue which I learned in sixteen months abroad. As this portion of my journey concludes, I here entreat those who have
any tincture of the urge to travel, that they will not presume to take my word for it, but to go into the world and experience it for themselves.