



## On Foreign Soil in Boise

By Pat Pyke

 ne word can reveal a lot about a culture.

When Tingting Ye came from Shanghai, China, to Boise as an exchange student at Bishop Kelly High School, she was perplexed by a word that students and the teacher used repeatedly in a discussion about theology, morality and marriage. As Ye sat quietly listening, she picked up a dictionary and looked up the mystery word. When she found the meaning, she screamed out loud in class.

The word was sex.

"After I looked it up in the dictionary, I was so shocked," says Ye, a genial and frank-speaking 19-year-old who just completed her first year as an international student at Boise State. She says sexual activity among Chinese teens is much less common than among American teens, although she says she has heard the rate is rising as Western influence infiltrates the culture.

"We could never talk about anything like that [in school in China]. We had sex education, yes, but not [talks about] whether it's moral or do you

really believe it's the right thing to do.... We talked about it more technically," she says.

Since that day three years ago, Ye no longer sits quietly in class. She seems to enjoy defying the frequently encountered stereotype that all Asians are shy, overly studious scientists.

"A lot of Asian people are doing computer science and engineering," she says, careful to respect those choices. "But

I am more interested in arts and creativity," says the art major who plans to become a computer animation artist, a rare profession in China.

Ye is one of about 250 international students at Boise State who bring to the campus of mostly Idaho residents a cultural sampling of 55 nations. In February, Ye was co-master of ceremonies at the university's International Food, Song and Dance Festival, one of several events throughout the year where students share their cultural traditions.

International students generally find the university and surrounding community friendly environments in which to refine their English skills and pursue academic and personal goals. The students who adjust well to life on the foreign soil of Boise, Idaho, are the most successful.

"Part of our job is to create a sense of community for our international students, to help them get connected with each other, the university and the broader community," says Stephanie



Hunt, international programs director at Boise State.

The international programs office provides students with English proficiency assistance, camping trips and adventures, and many other services. Hunt's staff also makes sure international students have plenty of time with each other as they navigate the nuances of American culture.

Even the most basic daily activities, such as greeting people, can pose a challenge for Asian students, whose cultures generally prefer physical distance, and Latin Americans, who typically favor touching and hugging.

"When I first came here, I started greeting everyone with a kiss on the cheek," recalls Enrique Camarillo, a computer engineering major from Mexico. "Everyone was looking at me like, 'Why are you doing that? ... Is he trying to be suave or something?'"

Camarillo may not consider himself suave, but his amiable demeanor and easy smile are clues to how he moves comfortably among groups of Mexican, international and American friends.

Food can be another culture shock. Malaysian Hubert Chua's familiarity with multiple cultures, foods and customs, and his fluency in at least four languages did not prepare him for his first culinary outing in America.

"My aunt took me to Red Robin, and I was surprised," says Chua, a marketing major. "The burger was double what it would be in my country. And the soda ... and the potatoes, too — big."

"Everything is big," says Chua, who has come to appreciate not only the abundance of food but of numerous economic prospects in America. "There's opportunity here, there's freedom. If you work hard, you can make it."

Delighting in cultural differences and laughing at his English faux pas have helped Bruno Busato, a computer science major from Brazil, enjoy his years as an exchange student at Centennial High School in Meridian and an international student at Boise State.

He tells about one of his first restaurant experiences. In a loud voice he called a knife by its Portuguese word, "faca," and patrons around him thought he was uttering a profanity.

"I used to say hilarious things and I still do," says Busato. "People actually liked hanging out with us [exchange students] because we were funny."

Turning more serious, Busato emphatically expresses how much he has grown by living abroad. "Nothing compares to actually going to another country where everything is different," he says. "It totally enhances your view and the way you see things ... I just came with an open mind and I wanted to experience everything that was around me."

Winnie Tong, from Hong Kong, echoes



Busato's assertion that living abroad changes one's life and attitudes. When she returned home after her senior high school year as an exchange student in Florida, she gave her mother a big hug.

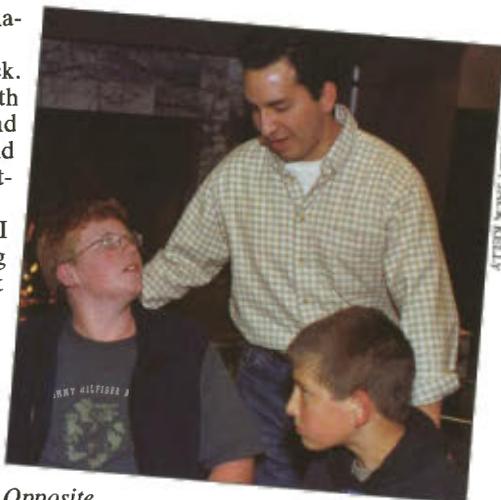
Tong said her mother was taken aback by such a physical display of affection.

"She said, 'Winnie, what happened to you? Why are you different?'" says Tong.

Tong, a junior at Boise State, has also set her sights on a profession she says is not encouraged for women in her country — medicine. "My mom went to high school, but they [women] could not go any further. They think women cannot be professional. I am proving this wrong," says the diligent pre-med student, who is working three jobs and 10 hours a day this summer.

Tong, Chua, Camarillo and Ye were among a group of students who experienced some hallmarks of American culture over spring break— Disneyland, Universal Studios, California beaches and Las Vegas.

For Ye, the 3D movies at the theme parks reaffirmed her career choice.



Opposite, Tingting Ye, Winnie Tong and Hubert Chua browse at American Collectibles, a Boise gift shop. Above, Enrique Camarillo mentors high school students at a Boise State engineering camp.

"I want to work for one of the companies such as Disney or DreamWorks," she says. "These kinds of skills are needed in my own country. We don't have a system to train animators."

Although she plans to move to San Francisco because of the animation program at the Academy of Art, she's glad she came to Boise first.

Living in Boise helped Ye find balance between the technical skills needed in her country and her creative tendencies, between traditional Chinese values and American independence. And without a large Chinese population in Boise, it was easier for her to learn English.

"I think if I went to San Francisco when I first came here I probably wouldn't speak any English now," she says in articulately fluent English. □

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