

## **It's a Long and Painful Process for Chinese Immigrants to Move to New Zealand.**

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Kiwis often wonder why Chinese immigrants take off their shoes when they go inside a house while Chinese are stunned to see Kiwis walk into a bank with their bare feet. Mind you, cultural differences are never skin deep.

Ten years ago, I went to school in Philadelphia, USA and stayed there for a year. I learned to cut the food and fork it into my mouth with only my right hand. Last year when I moved to Auckland, New Zealand, on one occasion it was pointed out that I should use my left hand to fork the food and that I was holding the fork incorrectly. Then I started to observe how people eat in a café or western restaurant, especially those of my own ethnic background from Taiwan. Some ignored knives and used forks exactly the same way as they used chopsticks. Others held knives in their left hand with forks in their right hands. Bizarre? While they were eating, I came to realize that a vigorous battle was carrying on between the east and the west. These immigrants were trying to survive in a western society with their Chinese-oriented mind.

The struggle also took place in a swimming pool. Back in Taiwan, the pools are often crowded and there are no divided lanes for slow, medium, and fast swimmers as well as water walkers. Naturally there is no rule that even in a lane, one should go out on the left side and come back on the right. I still recalled the first time I went swimming in a pool in Auckland. It was a chilly day in winter, and I couldn't wait to get into the water to warm myself up. I found the slow lane and immediately started my backstroke. I did not even know what was going on when I bumped into someone and heard him shouting "Fxxk off". When I was shaking to come to my senses, I realized how painful these lessons on cultural differences could be. For quite a while I did not want to go back into the water again.

Driving is another overwhelming battlefield for Taiwan immigrants who used to drive on the left side. It was a horrifying experience trying to keep reminding oneself to keep to the left. Roundabouts are a nightmare for those who used to follow traffic lights. The worst of all is to learn

to gauge safe distance as well as to interact with fellow drivers. Coming from a densely populated country, Taiwanese have a different perception as to how close is too close. It's a killer lesson to learn exactly how Romans do in Rome, not to mention the language barrier that often gets in the way. I can't recall how many times I wondered whether I should wait or just go ahead when I was trying to change lanes or make turns. Quite a few times I was so scared that I had to stop the car to catch my breath. Even a year later, I still feel shaky to explore unknown territory because it's too demanding to watch out for street names on top of all these.

It does take a toll on both Kiwis and Taiwanese immigrants when the east meets the west or vice versa. However, at times the experience could be rewarding to learn to appreciate the cultural differences and the stimulation they arouse. While we admire the Kiwis being so nice, helpful and friendly in many ways, we cannot help wish for them to be more tolerant and understanding in others. It's a long and painful process for immigrants to learn about another culture and comfortably follow suit. I know most of us are working hard on this track and we just need a bit more time and practice to get the hang of it. So please bear with the new arrivals and give them a chance to really enjoy this country.

By Yu, Chi-fang, published in Central Times, New Zealand, 1999