

Working in Hong Kong

by Joshua Chan

Joshua Chan was born in Hong Kong and grew up in Japan as an MK. He later graduated from the University of Waterloo, Canada, with a degree in Computer Science. Playing soccer and traveling are his main passions and he hopes to continue studying International Development in the near future.

Article from Growing up Global, Cindy Loong, Shepherd International Church Limited, Hong Kong. Used with permission.



I just finished my last day of work in Hong Kong. In a few weeks, job hunting and part-time studying will start elsewhere again in Canada. Although it has only been just one year of working and living in Hong Kong after graduating from university, reflecting on this period reveals many difficulties and blessings that have come as a result of staying in this city.

I was born in Hong Kong and at the age of three, my family moved to Japan because of my parents' decision to become Christian missionaries.

I went to a local Japanese kindergarten and then an international boarding school for primary school with my older brother. While studying at Chefoo School, we only got to see our parents three times a year during the holidays.

Even though it was hard at the beginning, we soon forgot about our worries and started enjoying the freedom with the other students in the new environment! Amidst all these changes, we became used to moving around to different locations each year.

After nine long memorable years of living in Japan, my parents finished their time there and we headed back to Hong Kong. To call the first year back in Hong Kong a culture shock would be an understatement!

I remember vividly one time when it was the first day in Chinese history class and I had forgotten my textbook. The teacher found out that I did not have my textbook. She singled me out in front of the whole class, and asked a lot of questions that I did not understand. I started crying. It was only after my classmates told her that I grew up in Japan that she allowed me to sit down! Thankfully, I do not remember the classes when teacher lectured on the not so pleasant history between China and Japan!

Two years later, just when I thought I had settled into Hong Kong life, my parents found new job opportunities in Toronto, Canada. We all moved yet again. I thought studying and living in Canada would be similar to the American and British schooling system. I was familiar with those systems in Japan. In some sense it was. Many people thought that I was a normal Canadian Born Chinese (CBC). But after explaining my background, people usually became even more confused.

For my post-secondary education, I decided to stay in Canada because my family was there. In the end, I got accepted into the computer science program at the University of Waterloo. Being on campus, I enjoyed being able to interact with international students. I got involved with the Japanese club and exchange students.

The computer program was five years long and mid-way through it, I realized that I just could not stay in one place for such a long period of time. So, I decided to do a student exchange program in Germany. I felt like I just had to move on. With a year of basic German language under my belt, I tried to immerse myself into the culture by studying and working there for the whole year. It turned out to be a really unique experience, being in contact with so many cultures in Europe. I was able to have the opportunity to travel and to see many diverse lifestyles of the local populations. After spending my time there, it is fair enough to say that doors that I never knew existed have been opened. The idea of living there again sometime in the future would not be out of the question.

After returning to Canada, I somehow managed to graduate on time. Not being able to find a job in Toronto straight away, I decided to take a prolonged graduation trip with my brother by traveling from Germany to Hong Kong by land. The visit to Hong Kong was intended to merely be a destination point to visit all the relatives and friends again before returning to Canada. It could not have turned out to be more different.

Born in Hong Kong but reared in Japan, I had never seriously considered Hong Kong as a place to live or work if I had the choice. To me, it was more of a place where the family would buy inexpensive items, eat from a large selection of ridiculously delicious Chinese food, and meet relatives and church friends. Even in the two school years that I studied in Hong Kong, I felt quite out of place having to speak with my limited Cantonese and hang out with friends who had totally different interests.

So when friends and family found out that I decided to work in HK, they were needless to say somewhat surprised. The plan was to head back but after realizing that there were a lot of good reasons to stay, I decided to do just that. My cousin's wedding was in a few months; friends and relatives kept on encouraging and persuading me to stay. There was a curiosity inside of me to see how living and working full-time in Hong Kong would be like. My grandpa, one time before I left for Japan, said that I needed to remember that I was Chinese, not Japanese. There was something about the challenge of wanting to change my own unsatisfactory perception of Hong Kong, especially when I called myself Chinese.

Applying to different positions in Hong Kong was a bit harder than I thought. Depending on the position, there were different levels of Chinese reading and writing abilities required. All the positions that I found, required the ability to speak Cantonese but the local companies usually also expected one to read and write Chinese.

My parents tried to give me Chinese reading and writing lessons at an early age. But like many Chinese kids living outside Hong Kong, I tried to avoid it at all costs. That naturally led to my substandard Chinese reading and writing skills later on, which I still regret to this day. On the other hand, one thing that I have been quite grateful for is my parents' decision to keep speaking Cantonese in the family even though my brother and I were in Japan. There, we heard Japanese spoken daily and English was used in our international schools.

Despite this language inadequacy, I was able to find a suitable software developer position that matched my qualifications. It was at a relatively small web development company primarily designing and creating websites. Whenever there was anything in Chinese that I did not understand, I inquired of my colleagues who, thankfully, were very understanding. Unlike many international or larger companies in Hong Kong, none of my colleagues knew how to speak English. This posed a huge challenge toward making any meaningful connections with them. It forced me to speak up more and talk about things that they could relate to. Sometimes it was quite frustrating at lunch time when all my colleagues talked about things like Cantonese popular music (Cantopop), local pop stars, and nightly TV shows. All these topics were new to me! Other more enjoyable moments included times when we noticed and shared about the cultural differences in values and practices between Hong Kong and countries like Japan, Canada, or Germany. There is one particular activity the whole office did which I sorely miss. Every Friday, we had afternoon tea together. It is only in Hong Kong that I would eat so much on Fridays at work!

Outside of work, I recognized the need to have English-speaking friends as well to keep myself sane and connected with a group. At the beginning, I felt rather forlorn living in a new city. It took some time but perseverance paid off in the long run. By joining numerous events like church fellowships and weekly soccer games, I was able to meet a lot of new people.

Looking back, there were times where I earnestly thought it was a waste of time trying to deal with all the frustrations involved with being back in my home country that I did not grow up in. Now, I can honestly say that it was well worth it. As I head back to Canada, I'll be taking away with me many pleasant memories. My hope is that others who do stay in Hong Kong will also be able to adjust well and enjoy Hong Kong for what it truly is.