

I. MY FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE US

In the fall of 1957, I ventured across the ocean from Taiwan to the United States, enrolling at the University of Chicago to pursue advanced studies. Sixty years have passed since that time. From 1962 to 1970, I returned to Taiwan to work. In 1970, I settled in Pittsburgh; during my eight years in Taiwan, I also traveled back and forth between Taiwan and the United States on work assignments. When I first left Taiwan, Richard Dixie Walker, a Fulbright Visiting Professor from the United States, advised me that this journey would not only involve pursuing my degree in accordance with the curriculum, but would further require that I seize this opportunity to study a “Big Book,” a metaphor he used to refer to Americans and American society, so as to truly understand the latest chapter in this modern civilization by living through it. His recommendation guided me for several decades, and even today, I continue to pore over this great “book of life.” In the blink of an eye, 60 years have passed, during which I have stood witness to many changes.

On the whole, from 1957 to the present, I have had opportunities to observe the activities in the United States at close quarters. There are no immutable principles in the universe: there is merely the distinction between gradual and rapid changes. Looking back on the past, the developments over the last 60 years have not only emerged in the United States: since the United States is an important part of the modern world, all of the

changes that have taken place here have influenced the people of the entire world. I am in my mid-eighties now, with few tomorrows: during this time, I will take advantage of the fact that my wits are not yet befuddled to present my impressions to everyone as a slice of history.

My journey to the United States was unlike that of ordinary travelers. The vast majority of overseas students would take a chartered plane or an express liner directly to the United States, but I embarked as a “supernumerary” passenger on a cheap cargo ship: after a voyage of 57 days, I crossed the Pacific Ocean, passed through the Panama Canal, and disembarked on the Atlantic coast of the United States. The cargo ship carried iron ore from the Philippines, which was transported to the United States for the processing and manufacturing of iron and steel.

I left the docks in Keelung, in southeastern Taiwan, at dusk, bound for the Philippines. Edging along the eastern coast of Taiwan, I watched as the green mountains gradually retreated toward the evening horizon, growing ever more distant, and setting off the clouds in the twilight sky, like a tray of deep green bonsai floating above the pale grey waves of the Pacific Ocean. On the second day, we entered the waters near the Philippines. The distant islands loftily towered, while the nearer isles were flat, with reef lagoons, circles of white sand, and expanses of clear blue water at their centers; their varied topography was strewn at random, and as the ship passed through their midst, my eyes could not take in the entire scene at once.

For the first stop, we anchored offshore at a port in the Philippines to load the iron ore. The Filipino laborers were poor yet industrious, and there was an obvious master-servant relationship between the White staff of the American shipping company and the Filipino laborers; the crude living environment of the ordinary residents of the port contrasted with the arrogant attitude and distinctive clothing of the White agents. I did not find this to be surprising, as I had previously visited the foreign concessions in China: such contrasts were a part of daily life. It was only that the marked distinctions between the two cultures and two peoples in the Philippines—which had once been a dependent territory of the United States—were very difficult to understand, in that a country that claimed to

worship God would continue to impose unequal treatment on the now-independent people of a former colony.

The second stop was at Honolulu, Hawaii. Hawaii was once an independent kingdom: when the United States acquired Pearl Harbor, it came about through a treaty between two nations. However, that independent kingdom surprisingly vanished soon thereafter. At the time when I visited, Hawaii was not yet an American state: its status was midway between a colony and a territory, an ambiguous “administered territory.” When we reached Honolulu, it was already midnight: we could not approach the shore, and thus had to drop anchor at sea. The lights of the city of Honolulu did not dazzle: it was merely an urban backdrop, with a line of hills and a few arcs of lamplights along the residential streets, strung together like a necklace of pearls. The site where we had anchored offshore was quite distant from Pearl Harbor: although Honolulu had become a tourist port by that time, it was still by no means flourishing, and there were not many ships. The distance from the pier to the city proper stretched only a few hundred feet before reaching a beachside lawn. The local indigenous women welcomed visitors with hula dancing before a sparse audience.

We spent two days at anchor, primarily to conduct repairs and replenish the supply of drinking water, and I seized this opportunity to join a small tour group, traveling by Jeep to go for an excursion outside the city. What left the deepest impression on me were the vast pineapple fields: it was then that I understood for the first time the significance of large-scale agriculture. Next to an expansive sugarcane field, I also saw a distillery producing rum. Sugarcane went in one door, and liquor came out another. The visitors all sensed the close integration of agriculture and industry! It was not until comparing this impression with traditional Chinese agriculture, involving small farmers and diversified management, that I understood the scale and nature of “agro-industry,” capitalist management, and mass production.

The third stop took place while passing through the Panama Canal, moving from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean. Crossing the canal was nearly a whole day’s affair, the most important part of which was

entering the lock on the western side: the lock is filled with water, elevating ships heavily loaded with cargo to the shore of the lake at the mountain summit, and the dock-gates are opened to enter Gatun Lake; the ships then enter another lock, and the water is released to lower them to the level of the Atlantic Ocean, whereupon the gates are opened, allowing the vessels to depart. This experience was unforgettable: it amazed me how human effort could produce efforts surpassing nature, raising up a cargo ship of 40,000–50,000 tons and its goods to a height of several hundred feet. When the ship first entered the lock and the gates closed, I looked up at the sky from the side of the ship, and felt like a frog at the bottom of a well! This was also my first personal experience of the amount of energy consumed by modern technology.

There are locks, docks, and channels at either end of the canal, and a mountainous region at the center, converging upon a narrow lake. Sluggish crocodiles rested in the waters of the lake, nearly indistinguishable from their surroundings: was that a crocodile, or driftwood? An unbroken line of wire mesh appeared for a certain distance along the canal, marking the special canal zone administered by the United States. The canal severs the professedly sovereign country of Panama into two halves. This canal is the lifeline of the United States, while also symbolizing the hegemony of the United States over the entirety of the Americas.

The final stop was at the shores of Baltimore. After entering Chesapeake Bay, we sailed for nearly an entire day before reaching the port. This inland bay was so deep and broad, and the shores were so flat that I truly felt amazed: God has been indeed generous to the United States, opening this channel with a heavenly creation; no other place in the world features such conditions. Vessels in the hundreds swarmed along the lengthy inner harbor, transporting people and goods, and sustaining demand in a variety of markets on the East Coast of the United States. Later, I saw the two great rivers of New York, skirting along the docks and pontoons, and joining in alignment such that one could not help but exclaim: The prosperity of the United States arises not only from manpower, but also from its incomparable natural conditions.

This voyage of 50-odd days at sea represented the first time that I was allowed to strike out on a long journey “on my own.” My father served in the Chinese navy until he transferred to the Customs Office, and I often heard him tell tales of his experiences at sea: how the tempestuous waves are phenomena of life, always changing, and always portentous. This was truly what I witnessed on this journey. In ordinary weather, the sea is greyish-blue in color, with white spray dotted across the surface, ceaselessly undulating. If waves are like respiration, then a great swell represents vast waves surging from a distant place, approaching ever closer. When birds suddenly appeared at sea, dry land was sure to be nearby. In the evenings at sea, flecks of fluorescent light would appear, waste matter drifting from the land. If the prow suddenly dipped during the journey, then the ship had slipped into a rip current; if the prow suddenly rose, then the ship was crossing an oceanic current. If it entered a powerful ocean current, the ship’s speed would be affected when moving either with or against the current.

The most breathtaking moment came not long after leaving the Philippines, when I encountered a “tidal wave.” The quartermaster on duty had noticed a dark black line at some distance on the horizon, and immediately called out “tidal wave,” sounding the alarm. The entire crew swiftly moved to their positions. They tied me to a seat with strips of cloth, lashed the chair to a post with rope, and then placed a life buoy around my neck. Shortly thereafter, an immense surge arrived, like a pitch-black mountain, looming over our heads; the loaded cargo ship of 40,000–50,000 tons was tossed upward and flung downward, the prow entering the water while the stern towered above; the blades of the propeller spun idly outside the water, ceaselessly coughing. After two rises and two falls, the wave passed by, and the ship gradually stabilized. A “tidal wave” is referred to in Japanese as a tsunami. Drawing on abundant experience, the Captain positioned the ship at a 90-degree angle to charge at the surging wave, allowing us to escape danger. This experience mirrored the lesson my father taught me: When facing difficulties, the only way to pass the test is by confronting them head-on!

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I arrived at the final stop in the United States in mid-August, and enrolled at the University of Chicago. Two other major events that are worth mentioning took place around that time. The first occurred in late September: while passing through Panama, I had learned from a local newspaper that a great riot was taking place in Little Rock, Arkansas, in relation to desegregation for Black children, inciting tensions and nearing the brink of explosion. In September and October, not long after I reached Chicago, major confrontations predictably broke out in Arkansas. This represented one of the first publicized incidents since the Civil War in which the government had used armed forces to quell protests by the Black community. This also marked the first time that the federal government had “nationalized” state troopers under the command of a state government, placing them under federal control, which was tantamount to dissolving the armed forces of the state government. This incident was a milestone in American civil rights history. Federal rights versus local rights, state sovereignty versus the people’s civil rights: the twofold conflict shocked the world, while giving rise to serious divisions in American society, signs of which are still apparent even today.

The other major event took place in October 1957, when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, sending humanity’s first artificial satellite into outer space. This was an earthshaking event! Just imagine: if humans were fish in the sea, and one fish were to suddenly jump out of the water and leap up a few dozen feet into the air, where it could both see the dry land and look back at the water. It was rather like that. This was the first time since the rise of humanity that such a thing had been attempted, and it succeeded, briefly leaping out of the upper atmosphere.

For the United States, this shocking provocation spurred sudden vigilance: the United States was no longer the most powerful and advanced country in the world. The first response by the United States was to strive to catch up, and in terms of national defense, they also began developing technology for space warfare. From then on, the arms race between the

great powers was no longer limited to weapons, but rather involved holistic scientific and technological development, almost always revolving around the next level of war preparedness, which is often sparked by science and technology. Since that time, American higher education and scientific research has gradually turned away from knowledge for knowledge's sake, instead shifting toward scientific exploration driven by the practical needs of security or profit. As the English expression goes, this reverse transformation is a situation of "putting the cart before the horse."

I lived in Chicago for five years, and thanks to my advisor Herlee G. Creel (1905–1994), who allowed me to study freely, I was able to dabble in other disciplines apart from Sinology. Creel himself was a distinguished scholar of ancient history, and in our one-on-one discussion class, he frequently shared his opinions on American society. Through these chats, I learned of the liberal socialism of the British Fabian Society, and recognized his concern for society outside his specialized discipline. Creel was physically energetic, and outside his special field of research, he dedicated significant efforts to writing works on general education: I have benefited from each piece of advice he gave for a lifetime, and here I give thanks to him.

Out of consideration for my disability, the school allowed me to reside at the Chicago Theological Seminary; the majority of my classes took place at the Oriental Institute across the street, which focused on Mesopotamian and Egyptian archaeology. However, those researching the ancient history of other cultures were also found there, making use of the library with its many materials on ancient history. Our cafeteria was the dining hall of the Theological Seminary, across the street from the dormitory on the left side. These three locations encompassed my day-to-day life: yet the things with which I came in contact at the three places were quite different. The Theological Seminary was filled with seminary students and faculty, and clergy from an array of denominations engaged in advanced studies there: not only were there clergy from Christian denominations, but also students of many other religions studying comparative theology. Since the dining hall offered cheap prices and excellent quality, many faculty members, administrators, and graduate students at the University

of Chicago also took their meals there. In the special atmosphere at the University of Chicago, as one balanced a tray, looking for an open seat, it did not matter if one was acquainted with those sitting across the table or to either side—indeed, one would often choose to sit next to an unfamiliar face. On sitting down, the first comment would be: “What subject are you studying?” In such an academic environment, the sphere of interpersonal contact and the topics of discussion were both scholarly and wide-ranging.

Many of the theology students at the seminary, particularly the young priests, came from far and wide, and belonged to different denominations of the Christian church. In the history of Christianity in the United States, Chicago has a rather special tradition: many nascent sects grew dissatisfied with the bureaucratic and patriarchal practices of the powerful and wealthy older denominations, thus young theologians would often settle down in Chicago to found independent sects. The young ministers of these fledgling denominations worshiped freedom, even to great extremes. However, once their sects became established, the fervent revolutionaries were themselves transformed into patriarchal authorities, who then faced revolution by another new sect. The young theology students and priests at the Chicago Theological Seminary were thus alike in their zeal and freedoms.

In the postwar period of the 1950s and 1960s, the youth of America returned from battlefields in Europe and East Asia having witnessed another world, wholly unlike the United States. Europe and East Asia are both rooted in ancient cultures, but following the conclusion of the Great War, both saw the rise of fanatical communist movements. The American youth responded by launching an ideological liberation movement in the 50s and 60s, reaching a peak in the 1960s, with one faction tending toward nihilism, while the other marched toward socialist revolution. Under the influence of this atmosphere, the young priests in Chicago often served as the vanguard for community reforms and social revolution. I came into contact with such individuals on a daily basis. We ate at the same table, engaging in group discussions, indifferent to disagreements. During the day, the students from the dormitory attended their respective classes, and the common rooms were deserted. After dusk, everyone returned to the

dormitory from far and near, and the common rooms became scenes of general debate. Since everyone belonged to different denominations, and even different religions, these debates were not strictly limited to theology. The values and concepts of many different cultures also became topics of popular debate. Even late at night, while bathing in the bathrooms on each floor, an argument arising from a certain topic would become deadlocked, and others would join the debate. The “bathroom symposia” were many and varied, and more passionate than the mood in the formal academic seminars. It was often a struggle for everyone to return to their rooms before midnight.

Within this atmosphere, I absorbed information with wide-open eyes and ears: truly, no other place could compare in terms of complexity and eccentricity. At the Seminary dormitory, I had the good fortune of becoming acquainted with a young man named Bill (William Lyell), who helped me understand many liberal ideas and improved my familiarity with the United States, offering an important perspective.

By mingling with the theology students, I was also unavoidably drawn into their political activities. From the campus of the University of Chicago, one crossed a vast greenway to reach 63rd Street, which was then a notably complex area of Chicago. The I.C. train station on 63rd Street was the gateway to Chicago from the south; nearby lay the “Stony Island” Greyhound Bus Station, which was also in the vicinity of the University of Chicago. African American laborers from the South came by bus and train en masse, converging on Chicago to seek employment. Recent arrivals to the city were drawn into the three-way competition between employment agencies, labor union personnel and local underworld gangs vying over the fresh labor force. Outraged by the rivalry over the inexperienced new laborers between the labor unions, gangs, and the employment agencies (whom we referred to as “swine”), the young students at the Chicago Theological Seminary formed a task force to aid the newcomers in breaking free of the clutches of each faction.

The University of Chicago was also surrounded by disadvantaged minority communities: the young ministers took part in civil rights

campaigns and actively organized the public to resist exploitation by various malign forces. Since I was a CTS dorm resident and friend of these young ministers, and I also drove a small golf cart with enough room in the back to carry a load of promotional flyers, pamphlets and other useful things, they would often borrow my cart to head out for various activities. Sometimes I myself would drive, helping them transport the supplies they needed. In this way, I was inadvertently drawn into their activities, witnessing many things I had never seen before, and learning many things that could not be found in books. In particular, as part of their civil rights activities, this group of theology students mobilized young fellow believers from all around to stand up against the actions and behavior of the local politicians who dominated the city government; expose their schemes to steal votes and capture supporters; and free voters from the politicians' control. These activities were in fact quite dangerous, but I was still young: like to the newborn calf who does not fear the tiger, I was simply unaware that danger lurked by my side, and could erupt at any moment. As for my experiences during this period, looking around, it is likely that few Chinese international students had such opportunities to witness in such detail the struggles of a cross-section of society.

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In 1962, I returned to Taiwan, and in 1970, I came back to the United States once again. During my second long-term stay in the US, I settled in Pittsburgh, and remained there for nearly half a century. Having been there for so many years, I have come to think of this city as my second home. In the last 50 years, I have witnessed profound changes in this country, observations on which I share here with my readers.

At the University of Pittsburgh, I was a faculty member in the Department of History, led by Sam Hays, who steered the department toward a new direction of emphasizing the sociocultural histories of regions in the world, a mission that I fully supported. Sam was a member of the Quakers and a scholar with a firm belief in liberalism: in his hands,

the Department of History was entirely remolded, directing the focus of teaching and research toward the field of socioeconomic and cultural history. Of the 28 colleagues in the department, roughly half studied agriculture and rural areas, while the other half studied industry and labor, and all had a strong inclination toward socialism. Hays himself was a naturalist in the environmental protection movement: the bent toward such ideas caused others to regard those at the Department of History as “radicals.” In fact, we were a group of people espousing liberal ideas and practicing tolerance.

In terms of their specializations, the 28 members of our department were distributed fairly evenly among the United States, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, South America, and the Far East; in addition, a small number were focused on research on African Americans, especially Caribbean islanders of African descent. This spectrum of scholarly interests deviated from many mainstream American universities, which were often dominated by historians of the United States itself, or even concentrated entirely on United States history. My colleagues did, of course, include some extremely radical old guard communists, even surpassing contemporary Russian and Chinese communists in their subversiveness, who carried on the faith of the Communist International. One of our colleagues had joined the Spanish Volunteer Division, and was involved in the civil war against Spain’s Francisco Franco. His leftward lean stood in contrast to another colleague who was a rightist historian and a fundamentalist Catholic.

In my second year at the University of Pittsburgh, my colleagues organized a forum on two parallel subjects—the labor movement and rural areas—which ran for three years. We all joined one of the two groups, while some participated in both groups. I belonged to the rural group, but whenever I had time, I would listen in on the labor movement group. This represented a rare opportunity to gain greater comprehension of American society through discussions with expert scholars.

I moved five times while living in Pittsburgh, and each time, I encountered a different composition of neighborhoods: through these five moves, I profoundly realized how neighborly relationships in the US

have gradually been weakened over the last 50 years. I currently reside in a condo complex, and despite the weakening of neighborly ties, due to our group participation in meetings on building management, during, before and after meetings to discuss building affairs, I have been able to observe the ideas and styles of people of different professions, ethnic groups and classes at close quarters. Throughout these five moves, we have generally had good relationships with our neighbors.

Outside my place of residence, I naturally had fairly close interactions with the local Chinese American community in Pittsburgh. I also personally witnessed how the large-scale steel industry, which had arisen in the golden era of the previous century as a fundamental industry, passed through its prime and gradually began to decline, and how emerging technologies, including medicine and computer science, took root, sprouted and grew in Pittsburgh. Many of my Chinese American friends worked in these industries. Each year, a group would arrive and another group would depart, the latter suddenly faced with the prospects of leaving a once-stable life to move for a new job, or else losing their employment due to factory retrenchment or even closure. These experiences were extremely poignant.

For almost 60 years, I have observed the pleasures, sorrows, frustrations and joys of human life, and the ceaseless mutability of fate. More importantly, through the fate of individuals, I was able to perceive the tremendous changes to the natural environment around us, which seem to have mirrored the gradual erosion of social and cultural structures in the United States as a whole.

In this chapter, I am merely offering my impressions on first arriving in the United States, as a prologue; the following chapters will provide an account of the changes in the United States over the last 60 years, focusing on different topics. These changes have not only affected our own lives, but have also had an impact on the course of development of human civilization, and even the future prospects of humanity: will it be good fortune, or bad? Who can say?