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Exploring the Land of Dracula: Personal Reflections on the Romanian Experience

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Cover Page Footnote

I wish to acknowledge the generous support from KSU's Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, Institute of Global Initiative and College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

One of the main objectives of the annual Country Study Program at Kennesaw State University, according to the descriptions on its website (Year of Program, 2012), is to “take a wide-ranging look at a specific country or region under study from its earliest history right up to current events” (para. 1). The scope of the program is broad and it encompasses all aspects of a country’s culture on different levels. Through the year-long activities, the program aims to educate faculty, students and community members to break down stereotypes and better connect with other cultures.

As part of the program, a group of selected faculty members forms the Faculty Learning Community (FLC), who meets regularly to discuss a variety of topics based on the assigned readings and movies. These materials include literature, art, history, economics, politics, geography, education, religion and contemporary issues (Boia, 2011; Kast & Rosapepe, 2009; Marzower, 2002). The selected faculty members come from different academic disciplines to share and exchange their thoughts. At the end of the program, the members are expected to have gained a deeper understanding of the studied country and culture. The highlight of the FLC is a two-week Faculty Seminar conducted in the target country. This affords an opportunity for the participants to observe the culture first-hand and to meet colleagues in the country and network for future collaborations. These trips contribute a great deal to the overall FLC learning experience.

2011 was the Year of Romania. I applied to join the Year of Romania Faculty Learning Community (YOR FLC) for two main reasons, one professional and the other personal. My professional interests were two-fold: teaching and research. As a professor of psychology, one of my primary courses at KSU has been Cross-Cultural Psychology and I have been teaching it for over a decade now. Generally speaking, most of the research in European countries covered in the textbook seems to be conducted in Western European countries. There is very little coverage on countries in Eastern part of the continent. Therefore I viewed this learning community as a great opportunity for me to be educated about a culture to which I had not had a lot of exposure. Romania, rich in its cultural traditions, would be a wonderful culture to study and hopefully I would be able to add it to the course materials already abundant with information on western European cultures.

Second, one of my primary research interests as a developmental psychologist has always been cultural value systems in socialization of children. The YOR FLC experience would no doubt create an excellent research opportunity for me to pursue psychological topics related to value systems of socialization during Romania’s political and economic transition.

My personal interest in Romania was related to my background of growing up in Communist China. Even as a child I knew Romania had a close

relationship with China. At the time, China did not enjoy having many close friends in the world, but Romania was one of the few Communist allies that were still standing by China. I remember watching with great enthusiasm Romanian revolutionary movies that exalted their leader Nicolae Ceausescu, and Chinese documentaries about Romanian dignitaries visiting China and received by Chinese Communist leaders. I also remember the time I was attending graduate school in upstate New York when the Ceausescus were executed during the 1989 Romanian revolution. I wondered briefly what would happen to Romania now that the Communist era was coming to an end.

Having observed how Chinese society progressed after China opened its door to the outside world in the late 70s and early 80s and how Chinese people struggled, adjusted and adapted to a new reality, I was very curious to know what the contemporary Romanian society was like, and how different generations of Romanian people felt about its past Communist rule. The YOR FLC would provide opportunities for me to find out the answers first hand.

Looking back, I am happy to say that participation in the yearlong YOR FLC has enabled me to understand today's Romania much better than when I started. The readings on Balkan/Romanian history provided useful background information for me to understand where the culture came from, but the two-week trip to Romania in spring 2011 provided a wonderful opportunity for me to take a peek at the country. Everywhere we went, I tried to talk to people of all ages and tried to gain a real sense of what people thought about their country and its future. Due to my professional as well as personal interests, I found myself gravitating towards understanding its contemporary issues such as youth's identity and value system. Inevitably, the conversation I had with Romanian people tended to revolve around those two topics.

The young people we met in Bucharest universities spoke excellent English, were open-minded, and were very receptive to new ideas. They seemed to be energetic and optimistic. So I was surprised when a professor in Bucharest told me that a recent survey showed that given the chance, about 70% of the Romanian college students would choose to leave Romania and go abroad, usually Spain or Italy, among other European destinations. The main stated reason seemed to be disappointment in the educational system and lack of employment opportunities after graduation. Upon further reading and interacting with college students, I observed that among today's Romanian youth, many were experiencing something akin to an identity crisis when young people were trying to find their place in the ever-changing society. They were trying to find a niche for themselves in an increasingly competitive society. I also found when talking to middle-aged and older people that some were quite nostalgic about "the good old days" when the government had planned their lives for them and rewarded them for loyalty to the Party. One older gentleman I met at a university said to me

that he missed the Communist days, and felt lost now that he had to be responsible for everything himself.

I am reminded of similar experiences of the so-called “lost generation” in China about three decades ago when the country was opening up to the outside world and the traditional central economy was transitioning into a market economy.¹ At the time, young people found themselves thrust into a situation where they were exposed to ideologies different from those they had been taught, different ways of looking at the world, and realized that the Communist ideology was no longer the guiding principle of life as it had been taught all their lives. Yet the economy was only at the very beginning of taking off and college students found it hard to see themselves thriving in it. As a result, many college graduates, myself included, chose to leave China. To use the “push” and “pull” lingos from immigration literature, the “pull” from the United States seemed very strong and appealing and the sense of disorientation and hopelessness experienced by many Chinese people at the time contributed to the “push” from China. Actually the college-educated were considered lucky because we at least had the chance to leave. For the majority of the populace, it was either facing the new reality and trying to adapt to it or risk becoming irrelevant. Many people described this experience as a boat floating around without an anchor, so to speak. It took a long time for many people to finally find the anchor they needed to live in a changing Chinese society, embracing it and finally succeeding in it.

However, despite somewhat similar circumstances of change and transition between China and Romania, there is a crucial difference. Romania has a rich and robust tradition of religion. Most people in the country identify themselves as religious, unlike in China where most people are atheists. Once the Communist value system was no longer the prevailing principle, Romanian people were free to embrace their religious beliefs and gain strength from them. Their religion gives them moral guidance and faith so they don’t feel “lost” like the Chinese people did because they still have their moral anchors in life. While in Bucharest and traveling up north through Transylvania and Moldavia, we witnessed several church services and monastery activities and saw upfront how salient religion was to the Romanian people.

On the other hand, I do believe the young generation in Romania, just like in many other countries including the United States, is also very practical. They need to see an economic system that will generously reward them in accordance with their intelligence, hard work and contributions. Before that becomes a reality, young people will try to seek opportunities elsewhere to feel fully appreciated and reach their potential. A term I heard often among college students

¹ A review of the major literary materials in China from the 80s and early 90s will reveal that young people were going through a period of feeling disoriented and lost, hence the term “lost generation.”

and faculty members in Romania was “Europeanization.” It was pointed out to me that this term specifically referred to Western Europe. Young people want to emulate Western European countries and would like their country to reclaim its place in Europe, as it once was before the Second World War. Whereas the country is still in the process of integrating itself into the European Union, many youth are also busy trying to redefine themselves and prepare themselves in the best way they can amid the social and political transformation of the nation to meet the challenges lying ahead.

I truly believe that in due time, Romania will find its rightful place in Europe and in the world, and when that time comes the young generation will choose to stay put and participate in building a bright future. Look at China today. Many young people may still come to the United States and other nations for college and graduate school, but most of them choose to return to China to work and live. The economic reality has made it possible for educated young people to live a life way exceeding what their parents could ever imagined in their youth. In other words, the “push” is hardly there anymore, and the “pull” has also lost some of its force given the declining economy in the United States and European countries.

I am glad that my participation in the YOR FLC greatly enhanced my understanding of the country, its history, religion, and contemporary culture. I have incorporated some of the materials on Romania into my Cross-Cultural Psychology class and shared with students what I had learned. For example, I explained the China – Romanian comparison and linked it to the psychology of change. Students were intrigued by the Communist system and its implications on education and careers and they appreciated the psychological adjustment needed to adapt to post-Communism. We also discussed how Romanian society in general can be classified as a collectivistic culture where the family is of paramount importance. Another interesting topic to students was the status of the Roma (Gypsy) communities in Romania. The students were very interested in the pictures of the Roma communities we visited (a school and a residential compound) and the information I shared with them. Using the cultural assimilation status model, we critically examined this issue in class. It was noteworthy that many students made comparisons between Native American communities and the Roma population in Romania, suggesting they were able to make connections between different yet similar situations.

I have plans to further incorporate Romania into my course content. Specifically I would like to discuss their changing educational system, particularly higher education, and its effect on the youth. These discussions will again include comparisons with contemporary Chinese society. If possible, I would also like to pursue research opportunities, collecting data from Romanian

college students on their value system and from parents on their socialization goals and practices.

Overall, the YOR FLC was an excellent learning experience for me, personally and professionally. It has and will continue to benefit students in my classes as well.

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