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Dear Colleague:

I was at the Food Mart on University Avenue one Sunday and found it packed with Chinese youngsters enjoying their late morning bowl of pork-liver porridge--a traditional Chinese breakfast dish. They spoke a dialect, interspersed with English phrases, that I could not understand. But obviously they were enjoying themselves. They needed the familiar food and the familiar company of their own kind, away from the friendly but distant world of the Anglos. When I was about their age, I too enjoyed the company of my fellow Chinese students, and we used to go to Chinatown in San Francisco for its delicious dim sum.

The interesting question for me is, When did I first realize that I could be at home in the USA--insofar as "at-homeness" is possible for someone like me at all? Answer: around 6 a.m., 1955, at a bus station. I used to travel a great deal around the country via Greyhound, being too poor to travel by other means. Moreover, I wanted not only to see America but to rub shoulders (literally) with Americans in lines of work different from my own. And you sure could do that on a packed Greyhound bus! Over long hours on the road, in the middle of the night, we were--I felt--fused into one gently heaving glob of humanity. The driver announced, "Breakfast stop!" It was still dark outside. We tumbled out of the bus, bleary eyed and stiff-limbed. I ate a hearty breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, and hash browns, washed down with two cups of coffee. I stepped out of the restaurant into the cool desert air. We were somewhere in southern California. I could see a few scraggly palms, still dark silhouettes against the brightening horizon. Was it just youthful vitality or what? I breathed deeply and felt great to be alive. More specifically, I felt great to be alive in this part of the earth, savoring the bit of marmalade lodged somewhere at the back of my mouth, loving the stark landscape, loving my fellow passengers in the bus, loving even the faint odor of gas fumes. Yup. I probably decided there and then that I could feel at home here... if anywhere.

Patriotism, in its emotional root, is the love of a particular kind of landscape and food, isn't it?

Happy New Year!

*J. Lu*