

WORK TO PLAY

BY REBECCA WONG

Most people prefer to spend their holidays as tourists, visiting famous landmarks, luxuriating in lush resorts or staying in cosy hotels. But some young people in Hong Kong are deciding to spend a year working abroad, trying to experience the world and learn more about life. For them, both happy and bitter memories are the real fruits of a meaningful journey.

Shalan Wan Yee-yan is one such young person. She put aside her work in Hong Kong and went to the United Kingdom in May 2007. There, she worked as an interpreter in a London hospital, and also translated for Chinese people in medical institutions and even prisons. It was a world away from her work environment in Hong Kong, where Wan worked in corporate communications.

“I wanted to jump out of my comfort zone and explore a different environment,” says Wan, who is in her 20s. During the six months she spent working in the

hospital, she witnessed births, saw the pain patients endured before their operations, and heard the stories of refugees from different countries. The experience opened her eyes and helped her discover more about herself and what she wanted to do in life.

“I wanted to jump out of my comfort zone.”

Wan became clearer about her career path. She decided to choose something that really interests her, instead of a well-paid

prestigious job. She is now working as an event planner in Hong Kong.

Wan’s experience abroad was facilitated by the Working Holiday Scheme. The Scheme, which started in 2001, allows Hong Kong residents aged from 18 to 30 years to work legally in eight countries in Asia and Europe. More than 9,000 people have joined the scheme since its inception. Australia and New Zealand are the most popular destinations as they have the earliest working holiday agreements with Hong Kong.

“A working holiday is supposed to be (a chance to) taste life.”

Since each country has a different economic environment, it is likely that participants have to take up work they have never encountered before.

Like Wan, Dennis Tse Kai-pang also did jobs he would never have thought of doing when he left home for the Republic of Ireland a year after graduating from the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2008.

The graduate in economics worked as a waiter in one Chinese restaurant and then another. During those two months his daily routine consisted of cleaning the restaurant, washing toilets and doing odds and ends. While some might think this is a waste of a well-educated person’s talents, Tse himself was prepared for menial work before he started his journey.

“I told myself I wouldn’t do this kind of work in Hong Kong. Why don’t I just treat it as a learning experience? A working holiday is supposed to be (a chance to) taste life,” says the 23-year-old.

Tse learned more about people from other cultures when he worked for an international fast food chain, alongside colleagues from France, Poland, Bangladesh and Mauritius. The multicultural environment allowed him to have a glimpse of some of the quirks of different cultures.

“The French love to sing when they are working,” says Tse. “They would suddenly sing ‘Boom-boom-ba-la’. It was so loud that even customers outside the kitchen could hear the singing,” says Tse.

In Tse’s eyes, the French are singers, and Irish people love to wink. “When I was working, my customers would wink at me for no

reason, even the males,” he says. Tse says he found the winking strange because in Hong Kong, it implies admiration. “Though in the end, I winked back too,” he says, laughing.

He says the Irish love to tell jokes. They always pepper their daily conversations with jokes, “They can even joke when throwing out the rubbish.”

Looking back, it seems Tse had a great experience, but he faced hardships when he first arrived in Ireland. Although a working holiday should encompass both “working” and “holiday”, Tse says it was difficult for him to find a job in Ireland. Visa restrictions meant he could only do any one job for a maximum of three months. He sent over 100 emails looking for work, but only got a handful of replies. One of his friends gave up and returned to Hong Kong after a fruitless two-month job hunt in Ireland.

Tse had also thought about going back, but he chose to stay because it was his only chance to work and travel in a foreign country for an entire year. “I had to persist, no matter how hard the life (in Ireland) was,” says Tse.

The problem was, the Irish knew very little about the working holiday scheme, says Tse.

When he tried to apply for a job as a



Shalan Wan Yee-yan is showing the postcards she bought in different countries during her working holiday.



Wan (front second left) and her Brazilian flatmates



Dennis Tse Kai-pang (front first left) and his colleagues from France and Italy in a fast food chain



Tse made hamburgers for his customers.

warehouse keeper for a book publisher, the employer said “I have never seen such a (working) visa before” and questioned its validity.

Ignorance about the scheme was not the only difficulty. Ireland’s membership of the European Union also makes available jobs scarcer. European Union (EU) citizens can work freely within the member states and the intense competition from European labour made it difficult for working holiday participants to secure a job in Ireland.

Even when they managed to find jobs, working holiday participants could be exploited by their employers. Tse says this is more common in companies run by the Chinese, as they usually do not observe the local labour laws. They would hire people without a legal working visa. Workers in Chinese-owned businesses usually work 60 hours a week, for €280. Those working for non-Chinese businesses can earn about €360 in a 40-hour week. Many working holiday participants

work for the Chinese because they cannot find any other jobs.

Tse was not the only working holiday participant who encountered harsh treatment at the hands of other Chinese overseas. Alissa Chau Mung-hang worked for Chinese bosses at a Japanese fast food shop in Melbourne, Australia. She says they always talked to her in a rude manner, and never said “please” or “sorry” when asking someone to work.

Later on, Chau found a farm job in Mildura, a city famous for grape production. The 25-year-old says the job was “extremely tough, extremely boring and extremely hot”.



Tse (right) rides donkey on a Greek island.

COURTESY OF DENNIS TSE KAI-PANG



Alissa Chau Mung-hang says working holiday has brought her a fruitful experience that regular travel cannot bring.

REBECCA WONG

“If you merely travel, you would probably only see the prosperous side of a place.”

“If you take Hong Kong’s values there, you will achieve nothing. But if you put all these aside, you can discover that the country is truly good,” she says.

Chau’s hard work was rewarded when she met a warm-hearted old man in Canberra, the capital of Australia. The man offered to take her on a bicycle tour around the city when he found her looking lost on the street. Chau says she has been infected by the kindness of the Australians. Now she is back to Hong Kong, she tries to help others as much as she can.

Chau’s days in Australia brought her joy and hardship. She looks back on them as a fruitful experience that regular travel alone could not have brought. “If you merely travel, you would probably only see the prosperous side of a place,” she says.



Chau harvests grapes in a vineyard in Mildura, Australia.

COURTESY OF ALISSA CHAU MUNG-HANG



Wan visited the Jungfrau in Switzerland.

COURTESY OF DENNIS TSE KAI-PANG



Tse (left) and his Malaysian colleague in the Chinese restaurant where he worked in Ireland.

COURTESY OF DENNIS TSE KAI-PANG

Information of Working Holiday Scheme

	Australia	New Zealand	Ireland	Germany	Japan	Canada	Singapore	United Kingdom
Eligible applicants	18 to 30 years old; travelling without any children; HKSAR resident						University students	17 to 30 years old; BN(O) Passport holders
Quota offered to Hong Kong every year	1000	200	100	100	250	200	2000 for students all over the world	unlimited
Visa wait time (days)	14	24	42	14	31	7	21	3
Duration one single job can last (month)	6	3	3	6	No restriction	No restriction	N/A	No restriction (no longer than a year)
Duration staying in the country	one year						6 months	2 years

Source : Consulates of respective countries