

Engineer Moved Beyond Chaos to Build a New Life

By Gwen Pawlikowski

Since arriving in Vancouver, Penny Li has found peaceful places, like the one shown in this photo.



However, her first day in the city was one of chaos and mayhem.

She stepped off her plane from China and onto Canadian soil on June 15, 2011.

If that date doesn't ring a bell, how about this hint: it was the day for the Stanley Cup playoff game between the Vancouver Canucks and the Boston Bruins.

Li had no idea about the hockey game scheduled for the evening. She had no idea why the traffic was as heavy and slow as an oil slick as her friend drove from the airport.

But by the following day, Li had seen and heard the media coverage about the riot that left close to 150 people injured, more than 100 arrested and \$4 million in theft and property damage.

What a welcome.

There is no doubt this experience would have given her plenty of conversational subject matter for the many English classes that would take her time and attention over the next year.

Li knew she had to improve her language to work in Canada and worked hard at this goal until the autumn of 2012. That was when she started to search for a job in her field of environmental engineering. Unfortunately, she soon became frustrated with her job search.

"When you come to Canada, you find your education, your work experience, can't help you here," she recalled, sadly. Li has ample amounts of both education and experience: a Master's degree along with more than 20 years in an environmental engineering consulting office.

Getting low-skilled jobs is easy, she says, but getting a job in one's professional field proved to be much harder for her. She described her frustration after experiencing a fruitless job search.

"I tried and I [found] some very suitable (advertised) jobs for me...what the company wants you to do is exactly the same [as] I did in China," she relates.

"I thought, 'wow, this job is for me!'"

But Li's enthusiasm started to decline after sending around 20 applications and receiving no response. After that, she felt doomed.

"I started to accept that it was impossible for me to get the same level of position, or that kind of job."

Regardless, she picked herself up and kept trying. She began to broaden her job search. A contact at another immigrant-serving agency

suggested she try the MAPLE 2.0 internship through ISS of BC. He showed her a posting for a lab technician in a microbiology setting. “Not exactly what I did in China, but I had some similar background,” she says of the position.

Quickly, she contacted ISS and quickly, the agency responded. This dramatic change from Li’s earlier experience with the local labour market must have given her new hope. Very soon, she was interviewed and by October of 2012, she was interning three days per week for two months in an environmental lab doing a fluoride analysis.

“My colleagues were very good to me,” she says of her co-workers those days, “I really liked them. They are willing to help newcomers.”

She said they answered her questions patiently and with lots of detail.

Li was feeling comfortable in her new organization and she valued the opportunity so she asked her supervisor about any additional openings that she might be able to fill. He alerted her to an open position in the Acid Rock Drainage department; of course, she applied and was hired for another (this time, paid) internship position which continued into the summer of 2013. By this time, another position had opened after a co-worker transferred. Li applied and was hired for that permanent, full-time position in which she currently works.

“I was very excited,” she said, adding that there were many factors that made her a good match for the job, including her friendly relationships with other members of the team and her demonstrated diligence in work at the lab. “I am the right person for them!”

Now that she has settled in to her permanent position, she has no plans to pursue environmental engineering consulting. She believes the task would be monumental and involve years of re-education. She prefers to stay where she is, in the job that she does now. “No more any headache!” she says about

the consulting work that occasionally caused some head pain and stress.

“I’m enjoying my job now,” Li says, “It’s not only making money; I also make friends.”

The relationships have helped her to understand the Canadian experience concerns that employers face when they hire staff. “I find it’s very important for you to get along with your colleagues,” she says, “Sometimes, this is even more important than your language level.”

Because so much work is done by teams, communicating and cooperating with others is critical, Li says.

“You cannot do it by yourself so you must learn how to cooperate with others, how to help them, and how to make your workplace pleasant for everybody.”

Li finds that she is experiencing a totally different life from her previous time in China. She is also happy that her high-school-aged son is adapting. During her early struggles, she thought about going back to China, but now she is determined to stay. “I’m satisfied with my job now,” she says.

She still doesn’t feel a sense of belonging in Canada; she thinks her time here (since 2011) may just be too short. But she is patient and believes it will grow as time goes on.

“I’ve just gotten into the Canadian workplace. I can support myself now. It’s only the first stage,” she reflects.

MAPLE 2.0 connected her to the workplace that determined whether she stayed or returned to China. Without having a way to contribute, Li says she would have felt no value here. The work has made all the difference.

From her first day in Canada, this environmental engineer has moved through chaotic times. Finally, the difficulties are clearing and the chaos is just a memory.