Coming to America
By Maggie Meng Tian

Hello, I’m Maggie. I started playing table tennis at age of seven, and was a LiaoNing Province team member in China since I was nine. I was a professional for many years before I came to America in September 2009.

LiaoNing is in Northern China. In winter, the temperature can be below zero Fahrenheit. When I started at the City Athletic School, there was no heater in the training facility. I often felt my arms and ears were going to fall off. After two years of training, I drew the attention of one of the strongest province teams in China.

When I was selected to train on the LiaoNing Province team at nine years old, among these road-to-heaven types of training, jumping rope gave me the hardest time. The coach required all new players to complete 50 double jumps every day during our physical training. In the beginning, I couldn’t even do one. The coach gave me one week to catch up. If I couldn’t meet the requirement in a week, I would be sent back home – there would be no appeal. So, I stayed in the gym at 9PM when the other training sessions were over and practiced double jumps past midnight every night. I did not want to go home like that and yeah, I made it. Did I mention that there were no shoulders of mom and dad to cry on? Everyone in the team stayed in the dormitory almost all year round. I don’t even remember how many times me and other kids cried after the lights went out.

Fast forward. When I arrived at the United States as a coach retained by ICC Table Tennis Center in Milpitas, California, I was excited. (Like Eddie Murphy in the movie.) Before this job, I played for a club in Croatia. It was a small and quiet town.
This is big-time San Francisco Bay Area - the world-renowned Silicon Valley. I was ready to apply my training experience to the kids in the United States.

Wow! What a culture shock! It was not what I expected at all. You called playing four hours per week training? When I was nine, an afternoon's training probably burned more calories than most kids in the club did in a week, and we trained six and half days a week. (Morning, afternoon, and evening sessions on weekdays, morning and afternoon sessions on Saturday, and, finally, only a morning session on Sunday.) You got to be kidding me! What could I possibly do to bring up their level? It was hopeless! I was miserable for a couple of months. I felt like a babysitter, not a coach.

Gradually, as time went on, I learned more. I realized that kids had to go to school and attend other activities. As a matter of fact, I was somewhat impressed by how well some kids played with so little training, and they seemed to have fun, too.

After the initial frustration (the idea going back to China or Europe occurred to me repeatedly), I realized there was no way I could migrate the system in China to the United States. I couldn't even yell at kids here – let alone smack them as my former coaches did to me as they saw fit. Maybe I was the one who should change.

I noticed that kids here are relatively weak physically. Although the ping-pong ball is small and light, it is a physically demanding sport. Since kids here train so little already, they spend little time on fitness. It has to change before they can go to the next level. But how? With the support of Rajul Sheth, my boss - the Director of Table Tennis at ICC - we added a mandatory 30-minute fitness session after the group training on Saturdays and Sundays. It went well. We could see some results after a few months. However, it was nowhere near enough, in my opinion.
So, I went to Rajul again. Let’s have some one-hour fitness-only sessions integrated into the ICC training program. I naively proposed to do it five times a week – two times fewer than what we did in LiaoNing. Rajul supported the idea but was concerned that it could cut down the already scarce training hours. So, he and I compromised with only two one-hour sessions per week, on the premise that it wouldn’t affect their on-the-table training. The next problem was when to schedule the two one-hour sessions into kids’ already busy schedule. Why do the kids have to play piano, violin, learn painting, ballet, and etc. anyway? We seemed to be stuck.

Rajul and I did something perhaps no one in the U.S. has done before – in table tennis anyway. We coined it "The ICC Morning Boot Camp" – from 6:10AM to 7:10AM on Mondays and Wednesdays. Couldn’t do it on Saturday and Sunday, there was already group training and one-on-one lessons then. It was on a voluntary base.

Rajul was dubious how many people would sign up. He wouldn’t if he were a kid. It was freezing in Milpitas – often below 40 Fahrenheit in winter, and it would take a few minutes before the heater could warm the court. He and I agreed if there were three signups, we would start. Surprisingly, there were parents who also recognized the importance of fitness. We had eight kids in the Boot Camp, and the rest was the history. It was a good start. Table tennis has a long way to go in the United States, but I see some light at the end of the tunnel. Take a look at the YouTube clips of the training! (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExHJtEGrspQ&amp;feature=&amp;p=E27B49AC4A286854&amp;index=0&amp;playnext=1)

I haven’t been totally assimilated by American culture – and probably never will. I still get frustrated sometimes. Hey, I just turned 20 in 2010. I’m still trying to catch up with what I’ve missed outside of the world of table tennis. I would like to thank my boss, fellow colleagues, kids’ parents, and friends who have been supporting, encouraging, and perhaps putting up with me since I arrived. Without you, I probably would have gone somewhere else. I now consider Milpitas my home.