

Thomas Ryde is an exchange student at California Institute of Technology in Pasadena and “loves wearing shorts all the time in November!”

BY THERESA NGUYEN, JOURNALIST · PHOTO: PRIVATE

NO PLACE LIKE HOME?

What is it like to move to Denmark and start in upper secondary school when you’ve spent most of your life growing up in China and the United States? DANES met with Thomas and Matilde to find out.

It’s Thursday afternoon and the last class of the day is over. Now the lively students of “first g” can get on with the rest of the day, indulging in beer and other forms of alcohol on their way over to Virum Park, enjoying the sweet life as first-year students in a Danish upper secondary school.

That’s how Thomas Ryde largely recalls his first year in upper secondary school, which was also his first year back in Denmark after 14 years in Turkey and China, where the norms for youth alcohol consumption are radically different from those in Denmark.

“On one of our first days of school, we were already down in Virum Park at three in the afternoon buying beer – and people were already pretty drunk by that time – and I was just shocked that this was how they did things, just out in the open, and all the teachers knew that we were drinking. Back in Shanghai, kids had to lie to their parents about what they were doing if they were going out to drink or party. It was really strange,” says Thomas, who is now 22 years old.

FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH DANISH DRINKING

Thomas was just two years old when his dad accepted an offer to work for Lundbeck in Turkey. After six years in Turkey, the family lived in Beijing for six years and then in Shanghai for two years before returning home to Denmark, just as Thomas reached the age to start in upper secondary school. The transi-





Matilde Thorsen, on holiday in New York with family and some friends in 2016.

tional period was culturally challenging for 16-year-old Thomas, who until then had only been in his home country on holidays.

“The first six months were pretty difficult. In China, you couldn’t even leave the school campus without a guard, while here in Denmark you’re treated like an adult when you start in upper secondary school,” says Thomas, who explains why the Danish drinking culture took him some time to get accustomed to:

“We probably drank about as much in China, where I was in the group of kids who drank – but we kept it secret from the teachers because it would make a bad impression and they might give you lower marks. It wasn’t something that you flaunted in the open. And very, very few kids actually drank. In my class, I would guess that it was less than ten percent. In Shanghai, if we partied on Friday then we didn’t party on Saturday. But here in Denmark, it’s back up on the horse on Saturday. It was actually really hard, but you if you don’t say ‘yes’ then people won’t ask again, and you want to be a part of the social group. In my circle of friends, it didn’t matter as much if you didn’t drink, but I know of other circles where the others might have thought you were a downer if you didn’t drink.”

Matilde Thorsen, who returned to Denmark with her family three years ago and now attends upper secondary school, was similarly startled by the alcohol consumption of her peers in Denmark while she was still living in the United States.

“I kept up on social media and saw that all of my friends started drinking around the age of 14 or 15. In the US, only the bad kids would start that early. I don’t have a problem with it, but I think it’s disappointing sometimes that a beer has to be a part of all social events. You can definitely have a fun time without alcohol,” says Matilde, who lived in the United States for a total of seven years on two different stays – one in California and one in North Carolina – when her dad was posted abroad by Novo Nordisk.

ACADEMICS LAGGING BEHIND IN DENMARK

But the differences between youth life in the US and Denmark do not stop at alcohol.

Matilde points to a maths class on the day of our interview in “second g”, where the level was comparable to something she had learned in an American school in fifth or sixth grade.

“Today we learned about box plots and medians – for the first time in second g. I remember that I learned about that the first time in fifth or sixth grade in the US, while some of the kids in my class hadn’t heard about these things before today.”

Although she sounds amazed as she recalls this situation, it’s clearly far from the first time that Matilde noticed academic differences between the Danish and American school systems.

“There are big differences between the American and Danish primary schools. In the US, everything is disciplined and students listen to what the teacher says, while in Denmark students >



Shanghai, October 2012: "I'm 15 years old [pictured centre] and attending an Asian Pacific Activities Conference on rugby at Shanghai American School. A number of international schools from places such as Manila, Seoul, and Hong Kong also participated."

have less respect for the teachers. Academically, they're also further ahead in the US – especially in maths. Generally speaking, students are divided into tracks in the US, so that some have maths at university level while they are still in high school, for example."

Thomas also noted the lower academic level compared to his schooling in China, where he first attended an American school and later an international school.

"The academic level was much easier in the Danish upper secondary school compared to the international school. In my first year of upper secondary school, I didn't learn anything in maths, and almost never had homework – and if I did, we only had to read five pages. Basically, I didn't have any homework in upper secondary school, while everyone complained about having to read five pages! I was used to doing written assignments as homework every day. In general, there's probably less school discipline here in Denmark," says Thomas.

He is enrolled at the Technical University of Denmark (DTU), but is currently on an exchange semester at California Institute of Technology in the US. Here, too, the academic level is significantly higher than at DTU.

"DTU gives me challenges, but I can definitely get away with not studying – for a whole week, even. Here it would be unthinkable not to study every day. It's insanely difficult. So I really don't have any free time while I'm over here."

Thomas still has his study discipline. While in his first year of upper secondary school, he and four schoolmates were selected to participate in the Academy for Talented Youth, an organisation whose vision is "to make talent development an integral part of all schools and to create the framework for personal and academic development, so that all talented youth have the

opportunity and help to realise their full potential." Throughout his time in upper secondary school as a former expat Dane, Thomas attended extra lectures and workshops in Copenhagen with 100 other young people.

"I noticed that there was an overweight of participants who grew up abroad or had a non-Danish ethnic background. Over half of us – probably around 60% – weren't 'ordinary Danes'. I think it's because people from abroad are more ambitious and have a different degree of school discipline and drive to do well. Academically speaking, I have no doubts that the Danish primary school is nowhere near the same level as other places in the world."

THE DANISH LANGUAGE AND SENSE OF HUMOUR

Despite his strong school discipline from the international schools in Beijing and Shanghai, Thomas did not voluntarily do extra Danish homework at home in his childhood. Since he had never attended a Danish school, his parents felt that it was important for him to keep up his Danish language skills through distance learning courses.

"My spoken Danish was fluent because I spoke Danish with my parents, but my written Danish wasn't very good. I used Danes Worldwide's online instruction for many years – ever since second grade, I think. And for a time there was a Danish teacher in Beijing, so I tried to keep my skills up – or my parents forced me to. I really wasn't crazy about it, because it was really hard having to sit all alone and do those Danish assignments. But my parents were very happy that I did, and in retrospect I am too."

For the first period of time after returning to Denmark, Thomas could also tell that his Danish was different from that spoken by his peers. His friends would tease him about the

words he used because they were old-fashioned or outdated. But those words and phrases were quickly replaced with more up-to-date vocabulary. Now his written Danish is much better – although he still reads and counts in English. But he has wholeheartedly embraced the Danish sense of humour.

“Danes have a macabre sense of humour and often tell racist jokes. When I had just returned home, I didn’t find this blunt humour funny at all, but now I understand it and laugh along.”

For Matilde, who attended Danish schools until she turned 11 years old, Danish grammar proved particularly challenging when she returned from four years in the US and enrolled in an efterskole, a boarding school traditionally attended for one or two years between lower and upper secondary schooling.

“I have lived in the US for a total of seven and a half years, so I was behind in terms of language when I returned home for the second time at the age of 15. My Danish teacher told me that I was making the same grammatical mistakes as his 11-year-old daughter. But my stay at the efterskole really helped a lot, and now I’m pretty much up to speed here at the upper secondary school.

Matilde considered California home after living there for three and a half years during her first stay. But during the latest stint in the US, she was older and more aware that the four years in North Carolina were temporary.

FREEDOM IN DENMARK

Although Denmark is now home for Matilde, she has friends that can’t wait to grow up so that they can move back to the US.

“I have friends who have also returned home from the US, but their way of looking at it has been ‘oh, I miss the States’, and they’ve been hesitant to open up to Danish culture. So they spend all their time talking about how they want to go back, and how much they look forward to growing up so that they can move. While I lived over there, I probably would have said that I wanted to stay, but now that I’m back in Denmark, I want to stay in Denmark. You have much freer rein than in the US. You have so much more freedom as a young person. There is so much trust that you can take care of yourself even though you’re a child. For example, when I was ten years old, we just ran around in downtown Hillerød with all of our friends and would hang out, but that would be a total no-go in the US. You practically have to have your parents with you all the time until you’re 18.”

Matilde says that the cultural differences never changed her family’s view of themselves as Danes.

“My parents are Danes no matter where they live, but they adapt to the surroundings, of course. For example, here in Denmark they would say: ‘Yeah, you can go down into town and shop’, but in the States they would say: ‘You can, but we’re going to go with you because the neighbours don’t want a 12-year-old running around on her own.’”

The sense of security in Danish society and liberated Danish disposition are values that Matilde holds dear. She just recently turned 18, so she was unable to vote in the recent round of parlia-

mentary elections on Denmark’s Constitution Day, 5 June. Nonetheless, she is aware that Denmark has many small political parties unlike the two-party American system.

“The US is a really great country, but although people talk about the American Dream, you have a lot more opportunity in Denmark. You’ve got free education, you have a greater voice in the political process, and you can vote for many more candidates and political parties. The American Dream is envisioned as something that everyone can achieve, but that’s not how it is in reality. If you look at the impoverished areas, it’s not possible – or, it is, but without the resources it is very, very difficult.”

Denmark also proved to be the land of opportunity for Thomas, as he quickly discovered upon his return to the country in 2013.

“I was psyched that, as a 16-year-old, you could get a job, earn your own money, and enjoy the freedom that comes with it. In China, I couldn’t get a job. Without speaking fluent Chinese, I could only teach English, which I was paid 200 kroner a week for. That made me financially dependent on my parents. Therefore, when I landed in Denmark, I had my first shift at Fætter BR toy store less than a week later.”

Despite a multicultural upbringing in their respective homes away from home, both Thomas and Matilde are happy to regard Denmark as their home. ●



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