

## Black in Beijing

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Have you ever wanted to be famous? Experience the day-to-day life of a celebrity? Well, if you're black and choose to visit mainland China, you'll soon find that stardom is within your grasp. Ask a black person about life in Asia, and they typically tell you stories of, for lack of a better term, their own personal paparazzi. Imagine this: going out in public and having your picture taken wherever you go, or having to duck around enthusiastic crowds clamoring to get a feel of your hand (or your hair) - sounds like a day in L.A., right? Having been to four countries in Asia already (China, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore), I can absolutely attest that this does happen. Before coming to China, I had read the stories of other black expats in Asia and had watched (with some amusement) their videos and blogs documenting their similar experiences. But nothing really prepares you for the first time you're out in public in China, hear the click of a camera shutter and realize that someone was taking pictures of you (with or without your consent).

Honestly speaking, it wasn't all bad. There were a few incidents with these personal paparazzi that I actually found to be quite entertaining (that I still laugh about now). Let me take you back to a few months ago when I was perusing Tiananmen Square. I was stopped by a local who wanted to know where I was from. Before I could answer, he stopped me. "Hold on," he goes. "Let me guess."

He puts a finger to his temple, thinking. "Zimbabwe."

*Haha, what?* I laugh and shake my head. "Nope."

Now he's really perplexed. "Nigeria?" Again, no.

He looks at me again closer, squinting his eyes as if my skin would reveal the answer upon closer glance. "Ghana?"

I decide to put him out of his misery. "Nope! Actually, I'm from the States." His jaw drops. "The States? Like... of America?"

Other times, I had conversations with people who asked me questions where I could tell they were expecting a certain response. As one of our language excursions with CET, we spent an afternoon at a local high school where we gave presentations on life in the USA and answered whatever questions they had. After ending my presentation, I waited for questions. Sure enough, I got them. (For context, my presentation's topic was student life for international students in the states.)

One kid raised his hand. "Do you like Kanye West?"

Taken aback, I hesitate to respond. "Um... his music's alright, I guess." Another student asks a question. "Do you own any Yeezys?"

*What even are those?* "Nope."

Another question. "Can you play basketball? Do you like Kobe Bryant?"

At this point, I'm struggling not to laugh. "No, I can't. But I guess Kobe's ok. I'm actually his little sister."

They stare at me.

"No! Oh gosh, that was a joke. *I'm kidding.* Really - we're not related."

But, as everything has ups and downs, there were also some not-so-funny incidents that occurred during my time in Beijing. Some were more memorable than others. For instance, after a while, people's insistence that I must be from Africa because of my dark skin became really annoying. It was also quite irritating when I'd go out with my classmates and locals would look at their blond hair and blue eyes and call them 漂亮 (pretty) and then look at me and say nothing. And my personal paparazzi? They began to really try my patience. Almost every single time I went out, I'd see people taking my picture without having asked me first, or worse, continuing to take my picture even after I'd asked them to stop.

One of these times occurred during a weekend in Xi'an - when I was exploring the Muslim Quarter with a friend. We had been moving from food stall to food stall trying a series of local delicacies when I noticed that someone had been following us for quite some time... aimed with a tripod. For a while, I convinced myself that it was coincidence. But when we got to the fifth food stall and she was still right behind us, I snapped.

I turned around. "Are you taking my picture?" I asked her in Chinese.

She replied, unfazed. "No, it's a video."

Let me stop right there. What are you even supposed to say in situations like this? I can give you a look of what was going through my head: anger? Yes. Frustration? Most definitely. But through that brew of emotions, the logical side of me, cultivated through years of similar frustrations of living in the States, kept me in check. "*Do NOT become 'that angry black woman'.*" I told myself. So I took a breath. In and out. *Calm down, calm down, calm... down.*

With difficulty, I swallowed my anger. "Next time, you should really ask people if they want to be videoed first." Then my friend and I walked away.

Did tripod lady apologize? No. But at least she didn't follow my friend and I anymore. And that was a small victory, I suppose. Sometimes, being black in Asia is accepting that you can't change a system that has been rooted against you from the beginning of time. Sometimes, it's just getting away from a situation

where you feel uncomfortable and putting it behind you as best you can.

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There's a video done by the news group Asian Boss on YouTube called "What Do The Chinese Think of Black People". In it, a journalist interviews an African-American expat living in Shanghai. After asking her about her experiences as a black woman in China, he then asks, "How do you process these experiences compared to racism or prejudices in your home country? Like - is it any different?"

She responds, "Oh yeah, it's much different. A lot of black people you'll talk to will say that they prefer the racism in China over back in the States. And that's just because... some people perceive the...prejudices here as different because here, they see it more as ignorance. Whereas in the states it's more like hate. Like... people want to kill you or... may threaten you violently. But in China, it's just different. It doesn't seem like they hate you."

I mostly agree with this sentiment. A lot of what I experienced in China was rooted out of ignorance of black people and culture as opposed to hatred of it. But this ignorance can still be very painful sometimes. Less than a month after I'd arrived in Beijing, the predominate television network of China (China Central Television or CCTV) -, hosted their annual New Year's Gala which featured a skit that included a Chinese woman wearing a fake butt, fake boobs, and... blackface. To express my frustration, I took to WeChat (China's most widely used social networking platform) and wrote a brief post on what had happened, why it was offensive, and how I hoped this mistake wouldn't happen again.

I got two types of responses from some of my Chinese friends and acquaintances. The vast majority were as infuriated as I was. "You're right, this shouldn't have happened." some wrote. Others said, "This is totally unacceptable. I hope this won't badly influence your perception of China." But then there were others who just didn't seem to get it. "It's not offensive, China and Africa are friends!" said one. I argued that regardless of international relations, skin color is not something that showed be used to comedic effect. Another friend completely dismissed my point of view. "Why'd you even bring this up? It's actually really funny! You're just being too sensitive."

There's a grammar point that we learned during Janterm that sums up this situation: 这个问题不是一个人所能解决的。(This problem is not one that can be solved by one person). This event in particular reminded me that I couldn't solve issues of prejudices, racism and colorism by myself. It also made me wonder if, maybe these types of issues couldn't be solved at all.

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At times, I'd play a game of "would you rather" with myself. It went like this. Would I rather experience racism in the United States or ignorance in Asia? Would I rather receive the affections of the *personal paparazzi*, no matter how annoying, or the blatant hatred of U.S. white supremacists or daily microaggressions from well-meaning friends? To get to the point - being in

Asia made me arrive at a rather depressing realization that there's not a single place on earth that I can go to to escape these prejudices, and that they would follow me for the rest of my life. But hey, what else is new, right?

Typically at this point in my writing, I like to transition to a happy ending to reassure readers that everything's ok. But to be frank, that's not possible here. After all, there are no clear solutions to issues like prejudice and racism. I'd be lying if I were to attempt to make anyone believe otherwise. So instead, I'll end this piece with my largest takeaway.

Hey, you! Are you black and looking to study or travel in Asia? Here's what you need to know: that old cliché of "with great power comes great responsibility" will never have been more applicable to your life than it will be when you come to this side of the world. You may be the first black person that someone has ever met in their life. So, being black in Asia puts you in a unique position where you have the power to alter people's perceptions of black culture and black people for the better. This is, in the words of a previous CET correspondent, an honor, "but also a lot of responsibility." So, when someone touches your hair or takes your picture without asking first, the way you respond to these sorts of situations can directly influence what they think of black people or culture. Talk about pressure, right?

But if you're willing to respond to these incidents with patience and grace, there are rewards. For example, after hearing one of my Chinese friends off-handedly use the n-word when reciting a rap, it led to a conversation on the history of the word and why his use of it was offensive. To hear him say, "Oh, I'm sorry - I never realized that could be offensive, and I'll be more careful in the future" - it felt good. Like, *really* good.

So yes, being black in China is many things. Being the first black person that a local meets - it can be an honor. Having the opportunity to change their perceptions on the black race—that's a lot of power. Attempting to change their perceptions to something more positive, it's a huge responsibility. But that sort of power is something that you could never receive again elsewhere.

And besides, wouldn't you rather that power be in your hands than in someone else's?