

CET Shanghai, Fall 2023 | Anonymous

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Who are the intended audience(s) of your Perspective Piece? "Chinese Americans in China."

A 6th Generation Chinese-American Experience In Shanghai: The Understanding of my Cultural Conflict and Clarification

My given Cantonese name is 黄烨爱 (Wong Sep Oye or Huang Ye Ai in Mandarin). Both my parent's families immigrated from Canton in the Guangzhou Province, so I am a 6th generation Chinese American from my dad's familial immigration lineage and 3rd generation from my mom's. I grew up in San Francisco, where there was a large Cantonese American population mainly congregated in the Sunset and Chinatown district. It was robust with community but also still separated in somewhat enclaves. Because of the generational difference in my immediate family and communities I was raised in, there was a strong disconnect from those roots.

I studied abroad in Shanghai, China, in the Fall of 2023. For more than just one reason, the experience was a broad spectrum of emotions and self-reflection. In hindsight, I confess that in the midst of a chaotic year, my intentions for studying abroad were cloudy and unresolved. The main known intentions of studying abroad in China were to learn Mandarin and more about my cultural heritage to whatever extent that may bring; I wanted to learn from Chinese people and be immersed in the environment, and I was saying yes to a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that my parents didn't get to experience in college and so going into the program I jumped in free falling.

When I got there, though, I was in awe of everything I set eyes on. It was comforting to see Chinese restaurants everywhere, people congregating around mahjong tables in the park, and people constantly living up the streets from early morning to late night. And it was refreshing to see people who looked like me and my family live as they are instead of in pockets isolated from others because of language barriers or seen as an exotic tourist spot. Shanghai, being the most international city in the country, had food that was flavorful and diverse, serving cuisines from Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Sichuan, Dong Bei, Mongolia, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, America, and more. And I had the privilege to travel to Xi'an and Chongqing that prided themselves in their own unique spices and cooking methods. On top of that, getting to learn about their unique cultural expression was captivating; the religious and cultural sites and views of both ancient and modern architecture enamored me.

Independently and through the program's excursions, I got to visit historic Buddhist and Daoist temples, gardens, water towns, and museums and learned about how they have been able to preserve or refurbish buildings and artifacts that honored their history. Simultaneously, the familiarity of massive malls and crowds of consumers amazed me. In my classes and observations, my professors expanded my perspective and taught me the skills to learn with curiosity and critical thinking outside of Eurocentric American education. It broke false narratives of capitalist vs. communist societies, which challenged my sociological brain and spurred my curiosity about

the culture of Shanghai. It allowed me to see the complexity of the past and present and how modernization has developed, fallen short, or thrived in the city.

In the three months, I built relationships I never want to take for granted because they taught me valuable lessons about social norms, dynamics, and beliefs. Within the program of both American and Chinese students, I was exposed to different views and lifestyles that opened my mind and heart that I wouldn't have had the chance to experience in my American bubble. Without being said, I am deeply grateful for the immense generosity and care those I met extended to me, but it came with challenges I often had to navigate internally as well.

Being observably Chinese American, the question "Am I really Chinese?" came to the surface frequently. I was by far the least experienced in the language and culture in my program and I was reminded that every space I was in. This lesson is not intended to be pitied; it was an incredibly humbling and informative experience to face that many ethnic minorities question while visiting their familial homeland because of the inability to practice their cultural heritage in America; many generations of assimilation and separation made this distinction clear. But it was also obvious that people from my program who could talk more elaborately in Chinese or about China's rich history and international relations would hit a nerve for me. I found myself having to self-regulate, trying not to give in to envy as I slowly learned about their history and had to reclaim an identity I felt I had neglected for most of my life.

I was told coming into the program that students may take many approaches in embracing the culture when studying abroad, either fully immersing in it, changing their style, lifestyle habits, and engaging with people and communities in Shanghai or students would maintain their identity while appreciating the knowledge they learned in class and outside as active observers and scholars. I think it was hard for me to understand which path I lived on in reflection to my identity. As an ethnically Chinese person, I walked a fine line of immersing myself in a culture I identified as my own and could piece out patterns of my family that were familiar to me while also observing the unfamiliarity within the national culture that sparked insecurities of disloyalty or shame in privilege.

On the other hand, as an American citizen in China, I also felt my Americanness and that was often shown in this dichotomous feeling of disgrace and gratitude. Feeling the internal conflict never really calmed in my three months there, and these reflections I am still trying to comprehend after returning to America. So, the answer to my initial question still wrestles with me, but I am grateful for the opportunity I got to open these questions up in my life as I explore my identity more. I take away from this experience as a privileged exposure to identity growth and the expansion of learning. Working through challenges of language and discomfort helped me lean into experiential learning and perseverance within my studies. Even just opening questions about myself gave me hope and pride in my Chinese identity and that to me is more than enough.