

Japanese-American experience in Shanghai/China

Written by Anonymous Contributor, CET Shanghai | Summer 2019

Who is the intended audience(s) for your Perspective Piece?: Japanese (Japanese/American) in China

Overall, my experience in Shanghai over the summer has been an empowering and exciting one. I feel that I have grown as a person in terms of ability to communicate, assimilating into a completely different culture, working in a Chinese working environment, and most of all meeting some amazing people throughout the entire experience. However, it was slightly difficult navigating the waters between how or to whom I should tell people I am half Japanese and when not to.

History has caused the relationship between Japan and China into a complicated and fragile one. In Shanghai, especially when interacting with fellow students and other members of the younger generation, my background caused no problems. In fact, people were often curious about what it was like growing up in Japan, and asked about popular Japanese products and Japanese celebrities they often see in China. I had many interesting conversations, especially with my Chinese roommate and cultural differences and similarities between China, Japan and the United States.

For example, one interesting conversation we had was what it is like to be, what they call in China, a "mixed blood". At first, I was thrown off by this term they use for people like myself, with mixed ethnicities. In my case, my father is Japanese and my mother American. It sounded derogatory and I was slightly offended. But after a few encounters with this term, I began to realize that the intention was not to be derogatory at all, that was just the term they used to describe people like myself.

After realizing they did not have any malicious intentions, my roommate and I had a conversation about what it is like being a "mixed blood" in China and what my experience was growing up in Japan. My roommate described that in China, these people are often idealized and seen as unique and beautiful, in a positive light. I then described to my roommate that in Japan, "mix bloods" are often bullied in school for being different from everyone else. Like this conversation, once we got over the misperceptions, we were able to have very interesting conversations.

However, when interacting with the older generation of Chinese people, I had to be more careful. This was especially the case when I was traveling outside of Shanghai. A group of us took a trip to the Yellow Mountains one weekend. Everyone I went with looked like the "typical white American" that Chinese people would imagine. Because foreigners are still unusual in these more rural areas, many locals came up to us to take pictures and asked us where we were from. Every time we would say we are American, and every time they would point at me and say "but you're not, there's no way you are". I am in fact American, but I am also Japanese. In these situations they would often proceed to guess where I was "really" from. They would start with ethnically Chinese, then Korean and so on without ever mentioning Japanese. Finally, when they ask where I am from and I say I'm half Japanese they would stop talking to me.

During all of these encounters, especially when the person asking was older, I would try to stay in the back and not attract too much attention, while letting my friends speak. However, once they noticed me, it was impossible to avoid saying that I was half Japanese because they were very persistent with their questioning and would not give up until I told them "what I am". Although nothing serious came out of these encounters, it was always slightly uncomfortable and the thought of "what if they really don't like me" would cross my mind.

Like I mentioned in the beginning, overall, my experience in Shanghai was amazing and I would not trade it in to go anywhere else. Even being a Japanese-American in China, I took as a positive experience that allowed me to feel first-hand the various attitudes and ways of interacting they had in China regarding Japanese people. I am actually glad that I decided to study abroad in China, being a Japanese-American, because it provided me with a more unique experience and widened my view, opening up new perspectives.