

Navigating China as a Black Woman: The Blacker the Berry the Sweeter the Juice

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Who is the intended audience(s) for your Perspective Piece?: Students of Color

Studying abroad in Beijing, China for six months and not seeing anyone who shared physical resemblances to me produced a paralyzing disincentive to want to travel to China, again. During my first few months abroad, I felt the study abroad experience was not created for me. I contend with racism on a daily basis in the U.S., so during my first few months abroad, I questioned myself as to why I studied abroad in a country that I could barely understand. In China, being Black and a Woman is doubly challenging, more specifically characterized as “Double Jeopardy,” recognizing the fact that I was not only different from the people in the CET Beijing Fall & Janterm program, but also different from the Chinese locals.

My embodied experiences of racism, sexism, and in/visibility does not suggest as a Black woman I literally went unnoticed and unheard but that my presence was detectable, and in a sense, less “visible” than other groups. Particularly, as a Black woman I was made visible for exploitation yet rendered invisible at the same time because Black women held no value in comparison to white women. The dominant white race has dictated beauty, with its prejudices and stereotypes, which have pervaded American society and culture and now Chinese society and culture as well. For example, throughout my various visits to China’s historical and sacred locations, dozens of locals approached me asking for photographs, asking negative questions, such as, “Why are you in this country?”, and even saying, “You can’t be from America, your skin is too dark! You’re from Africa, your people aren’t from America!” Baffled by the dogmatic, discourteous, and overt way of thinking, I began to feel discouraged in cross-cultural, international, and comparative learning, as a result of repeatedly leaving my comfort zone and being a target of both skin-color and racial and ethnic self-categorization. Navigating American society and now Chinese society as a Black woman is to be the creation of a binary relation of self-Other between whiteness and Blackness. Therefore, my Black body was considered outside the norm of the hegemonic femininity, since femininity has historically been constructed in congruence with Whiteness. Moreover, my body was opposite: what was unacceptable for Chinese women (dripping melanin) is the norm for me as a Black woman.

“From the color of my brown skin, to the texture of my 4C hair, to the length of my nappy strands, to the breadth of my smile, to the stride of my gait, to the span of my arms, to the depth of my bosom, to the curve of my hips, to the glow of my skin...My Black Is Beautiful!”

No matter how much I’ve learned from books there is a significant difference between practical and theoretical experience. Furthermore, there are many life lessons that I was cognizant of but didn’t acquire the in-depth understanding of those life lessons until I was confronted with them directly. Reflecting back on this experience, without a doubt, I appreciate the immersive and educational experience of Study Abroad to continue blossoming into a well-rounded and understanding person of cultural humanity; while also, making

a difference in someone's life through the exposure of my intersecting identities that can exert a powerful influence on how Chinese people conceive of other racial groups. However, this experience was far from easy. I made it because I had permanence, perseverance, and persistence.

Study abroad is an amazing opportunity to become engrossed into another cultural community through an educational lens of being outside the classroom, but also pushes oneself out of one's comfort zone to witness oneself excel. With that being said, to adjust to the cultural differences of studying abroad I suggest three healthy tips that I used to assist me during my time studying abroad in Beijing, China for six months.

First, it's important to find a healthy distraction that allows oneself to take a conscious break from the day-to-day stressors and return to the emotion and process it when you're in a better position to come up with a creative resolution. In finding a healthy distraction one has to be self-aware to acknowledge the feeling of distress, and then choose to distract oneself mindfully. For example, the intersectionality of my racial and religious identity has provided a way for myself and others to take into consideration the wholeness of who I am and the path I have defined for myself. Being African-American, the pro-Black atmosphere of the Church along with Christian values has played a significant role starting in my early life and offered consistent opportunities for me to participate in the work of ministry. However, in China I was not surrounded by my familiar Baptist congregation, but staying connected to God through prayer is my time to talk to him directly by getting his word into my heart without physically being in a church setting. Therefore, I started a prayer journal as my healthy distraction to have a written record designed to help me pray intentionally. My prayer journal is a record of notes, scripture passages, a space to write down what God is teaching me through the blessings I have received but also through my trials and tribulations, a space to record answers to my prayers, etc. Finding a healthy distraction, as my prayer journal is to me, is an easy and harmless coping skill to replace unhealthy, habitual patterns with conscious efforts to safeguard one's recovery.

Secondly, it's constructive to do less political strategizing and more perspective talking – by which I mean to consider how things appear from your host country's perspective. For instance, during my time studying abroad in Beijing, China for six months, my perspective and the locals I encountered perspectives on various topics, such as The Educational System, Equality between Men and Women, and Religious Beliefs, just to name a few, were complete opposite – but each is yet completely valid in different ways. In this regard, shifting our perspectives, we can have fewer strong disagreements and more constructive responses to contentious issues. At the minimum, we can be more mindful of our actions in difficult situations to avoid escalating the negatives.

Thirdly, it's critical to set learning outcomes for your study abroad experience that through immersion in another culture you can reflect critically on the world and on yourself as a global citizen, so you can realize cultural differences, and can live comfortably in diverse environments. This also includes your awareness of your own cultural work view, your attitudes towards cultural differences, and growing knowledge of different cultural practices and world views.

Overall, study abroad is a golden opportunity to educate and to challenge the next generation of scholars, by promoting their development of self-confidence and self-reliance, having gained experience in negotiating the common personal experience of immersion in a new culture – initial euphoria, occasional irritability and hostility, gradual adjustment and adaptation.