

CET Taiwan, Spring 2023 | Anonymous

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Who are the intended audience(s) of your Perspective Piece? "Black students"

A Black Student's Quest for Radical Love and Understanding Abroad

Before studying in Taiwan, I was told I would probably be one of the first Black people that people had ever seen. This was misleading— especially in a cosmopolitan city such as Taipei. Black folks are a visible piece of the Taiwanese experience. Black citizens of Taipei are its students, tourists, musicians, storeowners, professionals, athletes, and more. You will have no trouble running into dozens of strangers from every corner of the African diaspora in Taiwan.

Despite this, the constant staring persists. Citizens of Taiwan will take more pictures of you than the national park they traveled miles to visit. Waiters will be so stunned you speak Mandarin that it is all they talk to you about— all while possibly forgetting your order. You may be approached by hip-hop fans and asked for a fist bump or have others copy the exact way you dance to certain songs. The prevalence and diversity of Taiwan's African diaspora does not reflect the Taiwanese popular perception of blackness. I came to Taiwan as a student but ended up teaching with every interaction I had with Taiwanese people. Hair texture can be genetic, so my curls have not been permed. Black people can also come from outside of Africa, like Colombia. Racism is still a glaring problem abroad no matter what that U.S. ad said.

I found myself talking openly about my experiences as Black, queer, and neurodivergent in the United States and abroad. These conversations provided invaluable experiences that are not always readily accessible in popular media or education. These conversations helped to bridge my lived experiences with dynamics repeated in Taiwanese history, such as colocalization, indigenous displacement, and the constant search for identity under hegemonic systems. It allowed us to see the extent of the shared realities among people and histories around the world.

As a foreigner, I crave to feel not only welcomed but understood. Having difficult conversations about police brutality, gentrification, and institutionalized racism has been an essential step in feeling closer to Taiwanese people and culture. Unlike hip-hop and movie representation, having authentic conversations about my experiences opened the doors to fundamental understanding and radical love that I eventually achieved with Taiwanese friends and strangers.

At times my identity stood in the way of blending in with Taiwanese culture and truly immersing myself linguistically. I am lucky to have found genuine friends who took the chance to know me deeply and, in turn, learn cultures and histories that are seldom introduced in Taiwanese media. I will encourage you to be adamant about speaking Mandarin no matter how fluently others may already speak English. I encourage you to be yourself and interpret the stares as a chance to change how a person sees the world they live in.