

CET Shanghai, Spring 2024 | Zhao Gu Gammage

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

欢迎光临

As three people born in China enter an ordinary hot pot restaurant, we're greeted with a rather unordinary response: "...外国人." Why are we assumed to be foreigners, 外国人? My friends, local Chinese students, presumed that our speaking English when entering the restaurant made people assume we're foreigners, but as we ate hot pot I noticed everyone was addressed as a 外国人.

"What's wrong with being considered a foreigner," one person asked, "The term accurately describes you and it makes you popular." I couldn't find the words then to express that it means that the One Child Policy, which resulted in tens of thousands of babies (usually girls) to be adopted and an unmeasurable amount of abortions, forced me to become a foreigner. I suppose the so-called "better" life of growing up in the West trumps the cultural loss and trauma of being taken from my birth country, that trading Chinese culture and language for that of America comes at the price of becoming alienated from Chinese people.

If I don't speak, I've blended into the ordinary, something unattainable for me in the US. Rarely am I given a second look, if even a first. But looking like I belong comes with the expectation of navigating the language like a local, something less than two years of language study is unable to provide. My novice language skills have led me to be mistaken for being Korean and Malaysian by people like the aunt in my dorm or the barista at the local café. Other times, I'm asked where am I from, 你是哪里人, 你是从哪里来的, to which responding China only prompts confusion.

As a Chinese adoptee, my language learning happens in the classroom and with friends, not at home. While Chinese characters linger on posters and paintings, they remained foreign to me growing up. Learning the language in college allows me to start understanding my heritage, to interact with who many consider "my people." But if learning Mandarin was an effort to be recognized as Chinese in China, my elementary understanding has only made me a foreigner.

After the third pair of customers is greeted by the foreigner address, I must know the meaning. I've heard it too many times to ignore the meaning, to let the familiar sounds wash over me like I've let so many others. My friends tell me the characters: 欢迎光临. There is no 外国人. There never was.