

CET Shanghai, Summer 2024 | Anonymous

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

Studying Abroad as a Heritage Student

One of the classes I took in the CET Shanghai program was a Chinese Literature class. Though we read many great works of Chinese literature, one of my favorites was a short story by Ken Liu, *Paper Menagerie*. This story is about a Chinese-American who rejected his Chinese heritage because he wanted to fit in. It wasn't until he was older that he understood that being Chinese is a part of who he is, and it's important for him to embrace it.

This story resonated with me a lot; the community I grew up in wasn't very diverse, and I felt pressure to fit in with my peers. When I was signing up for college courses, I was excited that Chinese was offered and wanted to have the chance to learn more about the culture that I had once disregarded.

It was through the Chinese department at my college, too, that I had this amazing opportunity to study abroad in Shanghai. My experience enriched my life in so many ways, allowing me to form amazing relationships with my fellow classmates, explore not only Shanghai but other towns and cities in China as well, and fall in love with Chinese culture.

In a modern city like Shanghai, it didn't feel strange to be an American because there were so many other international students and visitors that either lived there or came to visit. However, I encountered many instances where I was out with my classmates, whether we were shopping or eating, and the workers would directly speak to me, assuming that I was Chinese. This surprised me at first because I'd forgotten that looks wise, so I blended right in. However, if I acted confused or didn't understand what they were saying, my identity as a foreigner would be revealed.

When I visited places where there weren't a lot of foreigners, it was harder for the locals to understand how I could look Chinese yet be a foreigner. One memory that highlights this was when I went to Nanjing and checked into my hotel with a classmate and my roommate. Assuming we were locals, the hotel staff asked to see our Chinese identification cards at first until we told them we were foreigners. Then, while we were waiting for them to process our information, another group of people came to check in. Upon seeing that we were holding passports, one of the women stared at us in confusion, even telling us how surprised she was that we looked Chinese but had foreign passports. Moments like these felt awkward and made my identity as an American so obvious.

These moments, though, are only a blip in what was otherwise an amazing experience. CET Shanghai has a great option where you can live with a Chinese roommate who is an actual student at the host university, Donghua. I highly recommend everyone choose this option if possible. My roommate and I learned a lot about each other's cultures from observing each other's living habits and through the late-night conversations we'd have.

For my Chinese class, our professor often assigned Co-Curricular assignments where we had to discuss or interview various topics we learned in class with our roommates. These allowed me to learn more about Chinese society and what people my age think about topics such as cyberbullying or marriage. From my talks with my roommate, we both observed the similarities and differences between American culture and Chinese culture. I realized how little I understood Chinese culture before I came to Shanghai, and I'm so glad that I could open my eyes to how amazing and diverse it is.

My time in Shanghai fueled my desire to embrace my Chinese heritage and made me realize how important it is to immerse myself fully in Chinese culture. By living in China and constantly learning things every day, I felt my identity as a Chinese, something that had often felt invisible to me, growing and becoming a large part of who I am.