

## **CET Shanghai, Summer 2024 | Esther Torres**

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**Who are the intended audience(s) of your Perspective Piece?** "For Latina/Latino and Latinx Students, as well as Anyone Interested in Studying in China."

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### **My Experience and Insights as a Latina Student in Shanghai, China**

Going to Shanghai was an incredible experience, but it was also pretty intimidating, especially since I didn't know the language. Being the only beginner in the program made it feel overwhelming at first. But honestly, the support I got from my professor, the staff, my local roommate, and even the other CET students was a game-changer. They really helped me navigate the language barrier and made me feel included and capable of thriving in this new environment. Before I applied to the CET Program, I did a lot of research, hoping to find stories or advice from other Latina/o students who had studied in China. I was disappointed to find barely any information about being Latin in China on the CET website or other identity abroad pages.

Growing up in Mexico and then moving to the U.S., I've always been in predominantly Latin communities near the border. I get why there isn't much interest in studying or moving to China in my community—it's just not a common path. This lack of representation really struck me, especially with the growing relationship between Latin America and China. It motivated me to share my story so that others like me can feel more informed and confident about taking this step.

When I first got to Shanghai, I wanted to share a bit of my culture with my local roommate, who had never experienced anything from Mexico before. I brought her a handmade bag from Oaxaca, along with some artisanal goods like earrings and bracelets made by artisan women from Oaxaca. I explained how these traditions are often passed down from mother to daughter and brought Mexican candies to open up a conversation about our different cultures.

Despite my efforts to connect and share my heritage, I noticed there was very little representation of Latin culture in Shanghai. This underrepresentation is a reflection of the broader trend where there's limited Latino interest in traveling to or studying in China. One memorable moment was when I met a group of Argentinians—seeing them was a rare and exciting reminder of home even if they weren't from Mexico, as I hadn't heard anyone speak Spanish throughout my trip.

Another challenge I faced was related to how I identify myself. Growing up in Mexico and then in a predominantly Latin town in the U.S., where Spanish was the main language, I've always strongly identified as Latin American. But in Shanghai, people often introduced me as American. Unless I pointed it out, my Latin heritage would go unnoticed. This was a bit disheartening because I really cherish my Latin roots. My father is an immigrant, and my mother, though born in the U.S., grew up in Mexico. Not being able to fully express this part of myself while abroad made me feel somewhat disconnected.

I also had a culture shock when it came to family dynamics. I would call my parents every night to share about my day, which is a routine deeply ingrained in my family life. My roommate was surprised by this, as she only talked to her parents once a month. This difference highlighted how central family is to my identity and how our cultural norms can vary significantly.

Overall, going to Shanghai was a fantastic experience that helped me grow personally. It made me reflect on how much I value my Latin roots, which I hadn't fully appreciated before. While I didn't face major challenges, the experience highlighted how people might see me as just American, rather than recognizing the rich Latin heritage that's a huge part of who I am.

One of the best parts of the program was building relationships with local roommates. This aspect of the program was invaluable. Having someone to guide me and share insights into Chinese culture made my time in Shanghai much more enjoyable and educational. Learning about Chinese culture from my roommate and the other local students was something I wouldn't trade for anything. If I could do it again, I'd jump at the chance. The experience deepened my understanding of both Chinese and Latin cultures and showed me the beauty of cultural diversity and connection.

To future CET students, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds: Go for it! Studying abroad might seem daunting, especially if you don't know the language, but it's so worth it. The experience will broaden your perspective and offer personal growth that's hard to find elsewhere. Don't let the initial challenges or lack of representation discourage you. Instead, see it as a chance to make a difference and share your own unique perspective. This program exceeded my expectations, and I truly hope that others, particularly those from Latin backgrounds, will take the leap. You will not only gain a deeper understanding of the world but also of yourself. It might be tough at times, but the rewards are definitely worth it!