

CET Shanghai, Summer 2025 | Anonymous Student

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Who are the intended audience(s) of your Perspective Piece? "Prospective and Incoming Study Abroad Students of Color in China."

Navigating Identity and Spontaneity: My Study Abroad Journey in China

My study abroad experience was a profound journey of professional and personal discovery, framed by the unique lens of my identity as an American Vietnamese student. While nervous about the financial, logistical, and cultural challenges of living abroad for the first time, I consciously chose to forgo rigid expectations and embrace a "go with the flow" mentality. This approach became the cornerstone of my most positive experiences, allowing me to find balance and reduce stress by spontaneously joining my Chinese roommate and friends on their weekend excursions.

My identity, however, presented its unique nuances. My Asian appearance often led to me being mistaken for a local, but more specifically, for Chinese. This came with a set of assumptions and stereotypes, from perceptions about my body type to my expected familiarity with local customs. I often navigated a choice: to explain my Vietnamese-American heritage or to simply let the moment pass. Traveling primarily with my Chinese friends likely shielded me from some challenges faced by non-Asian looking foreigners, such as being overcharged or struggling to get a vendor's attention, but it also sometimes blurred the lines of my distinct cultural background.

The most transformative aspect of my time abroad was my internship. Though I began with significant trepidation, it became an invaluable period of growth. It served as a real-world laboratory, providing crystal-clear clarity on which career fields I was compatible with and, just as importantly, which I was not. This professional discernment was a gift that defined my overall experience as overwhelmingly positive and purposeful.

My advice to future students is twofold. First, release the pressure to have every moment planned. Some of the richest cultural immersion comes from saying "yes" to spontaneous invitations from local friends. Second, understand that your identity will be perceived differently abroad. Prepare to navigate these perceptions—whether through gentle correction, quiet observation, or personal reflection. Ultimately, studying abroad is less about meticulously scripting an adventure and more about opening yourself to the lessons it offers, especially those about yourself.