

CET Shanghai, Summer 2025 | Seth Baker

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Who are the intended audience(s) of your Perspective Piece? "LGBTQ people, people from rural backgrounds, and a general audience."

Small Town to Shanghai: Advice from a Rural Gay Student

Hello! My name is Seth Baker, and I'm a junior at Yale University studying economics. I grew up in a small rural town in Tennessee, and before this summer, my only "international" experience was a cruise stop in the Bahamas for a few hours. So when I decided to study abroad in China, I was nervous—about being so far from home, about adjusting to a completely different culture, and about being gay in a country that doesn't have the best reputation for LGBTQ+ rights. But after spending two months in Shanghai, I realized that I had a lot of misconceptions about the country and its view of sexuality.

Growing up, my community was very homogeneous, especially racially, and I had no exposure to Asian culture at all. At Yale, however, I met people from various backgrounds, and they encouraged me to explore more of the world. For a long time, I was set on going to Iceland for the summer, until my best friend suggested that I consider China as well (he's Chinese). I remember being a bit dumbfounded: China for my first real trip abroad? But he insisted I at least look into it, saying that although it might be a big jump, it's one he knew I could make and make well. I began researching different programs and watching a lot of videos online, and realized that maybe he was right, as it did seem like something I'd love.

Fast forward two months, and I'd applied to CET Shanghai, primarily because of its economics electives and location, as well as my recent research into studying abroad in China. I'd decided on going to China rather than Iceland, which was something I never thought I would do, and something that many people in my hometown questioned when I spoke of it. But I knew I wanted to challenge myself to explore a completely different and new culture, as well as to learn more about the world—something I'd always craved growing up, reading books about such a diverse world, yet something I rarely ever experienced myself.

My experience abroad was the best time of my life. And I didn't come in even remotely expecting it to be, as I was worried about loneliness, culture shock, and homesickness. I did think I would enjoy my time in China (or else why would I apply?), but I had never imagined I would love it as much as I did. Between the extremely friendly locals, the incredible (and cheap) food, and the vibrancy of the urban and natural environments, China was genuinely a life-changing experience for me. And this isn't to say this was the same for everyone, or that it would be the same for you—but it's incredible knowing that I went from dreaming of traveling to just Nashville when I was young to now living in China for two months.

Before arriving, I worried about governance, surveillance, censorship, and especially what it would mean to be gay in China. While those concerns aren't unfounded, I quickly learned they don't define everyday life as much as people outside the country assume. Many locals will talk about politics with you, and I felt safe holding hands with someone of the same gender. And as a foreigner, I was often treated with remarkable kindness. This isn't to deny the realities of censorship or surveillance, but rather to say that, as an American student, these issues were far less present in my daily life than I expected.

In fact, I found China more accepting of queer people than I anticipated. A recent survey by the Williams Institute (2024) found that over half of Chinese respondents believed LGBTQ people should be accepted—something that might surprise those who only hear about censorship of queer content in films. And, when I went to the movies in Shanghai, I was shocked to find *Call Me By Your Name* listed as an option. In cities like Shanghai and Chengdu (known for its cute pandas!), queer culture is not only visible but celebrated in many ways, with the sight of same-sex couples not uncommon. I came away feeling that being gay in China, particularly in larger cities, was safer and more accepted than I had been led to believe.

If you choose to study abroad in China, I'd encourage you to dive in fully. Try new foods, attend festivals, ask locals for their favorite spots, and step beyond your comfort zone. Really get to know locals and their perspectives! And don't just say yes to new opportunities—although great—make an effort to pursue opportunities you otherwise wouldn't. My roommate and I bonded over hotpot, late-night gaming sessions of *It Takes Two*, and even a trip to Anji, a town near Shanghai. His best friend taught me slang and shared perspectives on Chinese culture that I never would have encountered otherwise. And, I made an effort to seek out new foods and activities, like trying duck blood (it's incredible) and playing Chinese chess. Opportunities like this don't come around often, so make the most of them in whatever way matters to you.

For me, these two months in China were transformative—they were truly a journey of growth, discovery, and joy (not to mention plenty of duck blood), and I couldn't have imagined a better summer if I tried.