

**CET Shanghai, Fall 2025 | Mariam Fofana**

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**Who are the intended audience(s) of your Perspective Piece?** "Black diasporic students in China"

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### **American, Sierra Leonean, Something More: Being Black in China**

I first felt it in late September, inside a paper-scented library in Suzhou. The air was cool, the tables neatly arranged, and I was settling into the kind of stillness that travel rarely allows. A young boy approached my desk, stared for a long second, and asked, "你是从非洲来的吗?" or "Are you from Africa?"

The question startled me, not because it was offensive, but because it showed me just how differently identity registers across borders. In truth, he wasn't wrong: my parents are Sierra Leonean refugees, and that heritage is a living part of who I am. But I could tell he meant nationality, not lineage. And in that instant, I felt something all too familiar: a sudden hypervisibility that made me, paradoxically, feel invisible.

That moment stayed with me. But, it became only one thread in a much larger web of experiences, many of them affirming, that made my time in China. The boy's question pushed me to think more intentionally about my identity across oceans, but so did countless moments of connection, delight, and joy. Living in China meant living at the crossroads of assumptions and self-definition, but it also meant finding unexpected moments of recognition that helped me stitch together a fuller sense of myself.

Some of my favorite memories come from sharing pieces of myself with others. I introduced my roommate to my favorite West African dishes, like jollof, plasas, pepper chicken, watching her eyes widen at the description of flavors she had never tasted before. Those kitchen conversations were small in scale but huge in meaning: she shared her comfort foods, I shared mine, and somewhere between jars of black sesame powder and seasonings, we built a home together that held both of our histories.

I also met African migrants in Shanghai and Yiwu—Ethiopian restaurateurs, Ghanaian barbers, and Senegalese traders—people whose lives form their own maps of belonging. Speaking with them reified that diaspora is incredibly active. We traded stories about language, family, border crossings, and belonging; I saw myself in their self-reinvention and their humor. Meeting other Black diasporic subjects helped me feel seen in ways that transcended nationality. In their presence, I was part of a lineage of global movement and becoming. Their stories helped me see my own more clearly: how being the daughter of Sierra Leonean refugees, a Black woman from the Bronx, and an American traveling China are mutually reinforcing identities.

Still, the question "Where are you from?" followed me everywhere. On the metro. In cafés. Even on college campuses. "我是美国人," I would answer. But I soon realized that saying I was

American was chock-full with assumptions of privilege, access, and a singular national identity that never quite fit me. So I added, "My parents are from Sierra Leone, so I am also Sierra Leonean."

It mattered to clarify this. Here, my American-ness spoke louder than my Sierra Leonean heritage, and my Blackness became the first thing people tried to interpret. But instead of shrinking under those interpretations, I learned to expand them. Ironically, learning how others understood "America" helped me better understand what it means to be Chinese as well. Seeing what nationality meant for local people, often manifesting in cultural pride, made me also think about my own national attachments with greater nuance.

As such, China encouraged me to articulate all parts of myself more boldly. It made me consider how race travels globally, how nationality gets misread, and how diaspora can both confuse and connect people. And in many ways, it helped me better realize that identity is a practice that responds to place, to language, and to the people who ask the questions that make us think differently about ourselves.

There were moments of discomfort, yes: moments when I felt watched, misread, or flattened into a category. But there were also moments of surprise and generosity that made my heart smile. There were the high-speed trains where strangers asked genuine questions about my background. There were the shopkeepers who practiced English with me and cheered when I responded in Chinese. There were the African traders in Yiwu whose accents felt like home. Most importantly, there were countless tiny interactions, smiles, shared meals, swapped WeChat contacts, that illustrated to me that the heart of cross-cultural life is connection.

Being in China has changed how I think about identity in the best way possible. It made me more intentional about carrying every part of myself—American, Sierra Leonean, Black, diasporic, and curious—without apology and without simplification. It taught me that I can be legible on my own terms, even if others' interpretations falter. It also reminded me that part of entering a new cultural world is learning how people name themselves, how they tell their own histories, and how they take pride in those that came before them. This awareness strengthened my respect for Chinese culture and helped me understand the beauty of local traditions, values, and forms of belonging.

If the boy in the Suzhou library asked me again today, I would answer with the confidence of someone who has lived the question, because I have.

I am from America.

I am from Sierra Leone.

I am from every story my family survived and every space I have learned to inhabit.

And I wear my complex identities with pride.

All the while, I came to appreciate an old saying that now feels like a firm truth of my time abroad: 入乡随俗, meaning when you enter a village, follow its customs. Yet even as I adapted, I brought my whole self with me. That balance, between belonging and becoming, will stay with me long after I return home.