

PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS

Education Abroad



Reflections of Asian American Students

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I decided to study Chinese because of my heritage. I really liked China the first time I went, and so wanted to go again, and again, and again...

I think [my ethnic background] has made adjusting to China a lot easier, as the culture is very similar to Malaysian Chinese background. Plus my parents were very positive about my interest in *Da Lu* (China). Further, as my parents have always been in the minority in Malaysia. I think this has positively affected my ability to handle always being "in the minority"- whether it's in the US as an Asian female, or in China as an American of Chinese descent.

In China, of course, people when they can tell I'm Chinese, expect me to speak Mandarin, and when I don't, a long explanation must ensue. This is not as much the case in Beijing as it is in other areas such as Shanghai. Similar to the U.S., people have expectations of what I should have been. Fortunately I have developed a strong sense of who I am, and so identity issues are interesting rather than upsetting.

I "learned" that I am lucky to have grown up with such diverse cultural influences around me, and I thank god that I can enjoy foods from everywhere.

Malaysian Chinese American female born in Chattanooga, TN who studied abroad in China

I am Chinese, I can speak and understand Chinese at a conversational level [but] I speak Chinese differently, I cannot understand it past a certain level. I look different, and dress differently and carry myself differently. Some natives, upon first meeting me, have certain expectations and have a hard time accepting that I'm different

It was not as much as a culture shock to go there, I didn't feel like I was in a foreign country. My parents were raised in Taiwan and I relate to Taiwanese culture as well, which was sometimes looked down upon.

I feel that Asian Americans need to acquire an ability to act as a chameleon, and be completely Asian around Asian people and be completely American around Americans. As an Asian American, I'm able to relate to other Asian Americans who have felt the same pressures.

Chinese American male born in Cedar Grove, NJ who studied abroad in Taiwan and China

I have never felt Chinese until I went to China. Growing up in Hawaii, the multi-cultural community didn't allow me to see myself as Chinese other than ethnicity. Culturally, everyone shares a mix of everything from Japanese, Portuguese, Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian etc. Perhaps my socio-economic background, as well as my parent's American upbringing allowed me to assimilate closely with the benefits of American culture. To me, my motivation to study Chinese culture is out of pure curiosity for not having been familiarized as a child- even my parents are one generation removed. While in China, I found it strange that people saw me as Chinese and not as a foreigner. This surprised me because I naturally did see myself as a foreigner. I'm sure they suspected this from the way that I dressed, and most obviously from the way that I could not speak Mandarin. After coming back to the U.S. I am just beginning to learn the various perspectives of people who are ethnically Chinese. To be explicit, my friends are not initially Asian or Chinese for that matter. I admit that I have never been to an [Asian American students] meeting or an Asian event. Other than social habits, I am an art history and Asian studies major, currently focusing on modern Chinese art. I am just beginning to figure this out too. The concept of being Asian American has never really struck me for other purposes than for describing my ethnic background. And yet there is something underlying the ways that people see me--and I don't know how to describe it. The Chinese culture intrigues me primarily for curiosity's sake of studying a foreign culture, but also to legitimize the ignorance of my heritage.

Chinese American female born in Maui, Hawaii who studied abroad in Spain and China

[The reasons I chose to study abroad in China were] [h]eritage learning, language learning, wanted the experience of studying at the 'Harvard of China' and being in Beijing.

In France, complete minority. Since I was staying in a small town in Normandy, most people have never seen an Asian American (I was also with a group of American students) or Asian (except the ones who own the Chinese restaurant). Even in China and Hong Kong, it was hard to fit into the majority group because our backgrounds and styles of dress are so different.

In Taiwan and China, it was positive in that they just looked at me as another Chinese (perhaps after I tell them that I'm from Hong Kong) and would leave me alone and not cheat me when I'm shopping.

People are interested in my background and want to know my whole history. It gets annoying when you have to share your life story with everyone on the train.

I was an immigrant so I know what it's like to be the other, the weird one,... No really cut and dry in terms of similar or different. Overlapping on many issues, but overall, even experiences in the US is as challenging as ones overseas.

...I'm far from fluent in any languages (yes, not even English anymore). That it's really important to dress and look (physically) and act a certain way to fit in and not be looked at as a weirdo no matter where you are. I made more Chinese/Asian American friends while in China and Vietnam than I ever did while in US.

Chinese American female born in Hong Kong who studied abroad in France, Vietnam, Taiwan, and China

I teach in a bilingual kindergarten in Chinatown and I wanted to take Chinese so I could communicate with the children when they first come to school. I started taking Mandarin Fall 2000 and felt that the fastest and best way to learn the language would be to actually study abroad in China.

In the Asian countries that I've been to, you seem to be a little of both. While shopping in China people would sometimes give me a better price than my more obvious "foreigner" friend, but then again I can never fully pass as just someone who's Chinese or Filipino. People think I'm ABC (American born Chinese) or just completely write me off as American. (which is funny because in America, Asians are forever foreigners) yet in Singapore I think it was more about class than race...

When I went to Europe - that's a different story. I was definitely a minority there, but in a different way than I am here.

People assume that since I look Chinese I should speak fluent Chinese. There was a lot of pressure to speak perfectly which took me awhile to get over.

In my home stay in Denmark people who say things like "oh, what nice black hair you have" but that wasn't really negative. I'm kind of used to being stared at when in an all white neighborhood

In Asia, just being around so many people who look like you... that's different enough.

During my Scandinavian trip, the Asian kids sort of stuck together. One time we all got caught for something dumb and our chaperones were like "you guys come from such strict backgrounds (referring to stereotypical Asian parents) why do you always get into trouble" needless to say I played my race card and shook his stereotype around... he left us alone for the rest of the trip. This idea of assumption is always there - people guessing what I am - assuming I am one thing - assume that I act a certain way because of "what I am" - what else is new?

Filipina American born in Jupiter, FL who studied abroad in Europe (Germany, London, and Scandinavia) and Beijing, China

I have recently found myself more interested in aspects of my Indian heritage than I had been previously. Living in England has been extremely conducive to my exploration of my heritage because of the large Indian-heritage population and the prevalence of Indian culture.

Indian American male born in New York City who studied abroad in England

I wanted to solidify my hold on the French Language, live in a city and experience of completely different culture. After growing up in the suburbs of Chicago, attending school in Maine and having Indian parents the European culture presented something completely different for me. I knew that I would hate cities, but I had to go because of my lack of experience.

I was definitely in the minority because of my race and ethnic background. These range from superficial to depthful. Often people would mistake me for an Arab and because of my stature (6' above the average Frenchman) the bouncers at clubs looked up a little frightened and let me into clubs without a problem. The police officers stood at attention and saluted me every time I asked a question. No other person on the program had this experience. My host parents found me more interesting to talk to than another girl from [my school] who lived in the same house. They told me that my background was a blessing when all along I had perceived it as a bane. They said I was so lucky to be brought up an American and also Indian. I always saw myself as displaced within either culture.

In France it was astonishing to see so many Indians in working class or servile positions such as street vendors or selling flowers in restaurants. In my experience the majority of Indians hold elite or professional positions in the U.S. Many people still hold Orientalist views of South Asia. They imagine a land of spirituality, beauty and peace which all exist but they often forget the realities of poverty, corruption and communal violence. In this light I had to defend against the same condescending views as in the U.S.

No matter my background or experience I will always have to deal with the race that I wear everyday. My skin color is evident, but you must be patient with those who ask questions or wish to generalize. In turn I learned about the beauty of my background.

South Asian American male born in Elmhurst, IL who studied abroad in France

I was a French major and I felt that spending time in France would enhance my language abilities and awareness of the culture.

In every country I have visited, including Korea, I considered myself to be part of the minority group because of the obvious physical differences (hair, skin, height, way of dress, body language). Even in Korea, I felt like an outsider, less as a Korean but more so as an American.

In the non-Asian countries I have visited, being Asian has actually worked to my advantage as I have not been perceived as American so people were much more welcoming and curious to find out more about me. The negative side of it has been the assumption that I am a rich Japanese tourist. Other negative traits include being harassed by men with the 'geisha' comments (though I think I hardly look like one).

I find that Europeans, no matter how much they know you, view you by your skin color/ethnicity and will never consider me an American, whereas in the States, it is less obvious, people take the time to find out who you are and frankly, make their judgment call on what I am about, not by the color of my skin.

Travelling abroad has made me realize how very American I am in my upbringing, identity, attitude, values, body language, etc but know I am not totally American -- I do feel I straddle between being Asian and being American -- I can't really articulate how for now.

Korean American female born in Chicago, IL who studied abroad in France

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