

A Foreign Familiarity, Learning Belonging Where I Look Local: A Journey of Identity, Culture, and Connection Across Borders

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter explores how studying abroad in China can transform a student's sense of identity, belonging, and cultural understanding. Through experiences at Wenzhou-Kean University, interactions with local communities, and reflections on family heritage, the narrative shows how living in a new environment reveals deeper lessons about home and self-discovery. It highlights how identity is not defined by appearance or others' assumptions, but by the values and experiences that shape growth. The chapter emphasizes that belonging can exist anywhere when built through empathy, curiosity, and appreciation for diverse perspectives. Ultimately, it demonstrates that "home" is not a single place, but rather a feeling created through connection, understanding, and gratitude.

WAIT, ARE YOU CHINESE?

At a glance, my looks would lead you to assume I am Chinese. If you were to come up to me and have a conversation with me on a surface level, you would be certain I am Chinese. And when you finally gather the courage, you would ask me

the question that had started haunting you since the moment you saw me: “Wait, are you Chinese?” My favorite part is the answer to that question: Am I Chinese? A sly and knowing smile.

For the longest time, that question had been a moment of realization. I realized how. I realized why. I realized that people are and will always be quick to assume and believe whatever, whether true or not. But what we do not realize is that with those actions, whether done deliberately or unconsciously, comes judgment. But it is what we do after that that counts: do we accept it, let it be, or question it, and ask ourselves why?

I have been told I look Chinese, which I find captivating. It is a secret of mine, while I look Chinese, I am not Chinese. Depending on who asks I either tell them the truth or tell them two of my favorite made-up stories: my parents are of Asian descent, but coincidentally both of their families moved to South America, where my parents they grew up speaking Spanish instead of Mandarin, which is why I do not know Mandarin but know Spanish or I say my father is Chinese, as he also looks Chinese, but he was born and raised in America, so his parents never bothered teaching him how to speak the language, which is why I do not know the language, but am Chinese.

From a young age, I learned not to let assumptions shape my choices or define who I am. People often assumed I was Chinese because of how I looked, but that never bothered me. Instead, I let looking Chinese become part of who I am and came to understand that identity is not something others can decide. It is something you experience for yourself. And it was not until I stood in China, surrounded by a culture and a language I was not too familiar with, that the question, “Wait, are you Chinese?” which had once been a moment of realization, in which people are quick to assume and judge, shifted to one of clarity, as to why that is so.

In February 2025, I did something I never thought would forever impact my life in many extraordinary ways. I got on an eighteen-hour flight to China to study abroad at Wenzhou-Kean University for a semester. If one were to tell me at a young age that I would study and live in my unofficial motherland for four months, I would be in awe and disbelief. Being mistaken for Chinese, I knew early on that I would have to visit China at least once in my lifetime. After returning home, being in China had felt so surreal. While my time in China flew by, I hold on to countless memories with a sense of nostalgia, reflecting on my life before boarding the plane, while walking its streets, and now that I have returned home.

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