

Becoming Whole: Lessons of Identity and Belonging in China

Aileen Naa Ayele Aryeetey

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5417-0281>

Kean University, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter explores how my intercultural experiences in China shaped my understanding of identity, belonging, and personal transformation. It traces my journey from Ghana to the United States and then to China, showing how each transition broadened my view of myself and the world. The chapter reflects on the challenges of adjusting to a new environment, including language barriers, cultural differences, and feelings of isolation, while also highlighting the relationships and moments that helped me grow and feel connected. Through personal experiences, conversations, and reflection, I show how living in China changed the way I understood culture, community, and myself. Ultimately, this chapter argues that belonging is not defined only by place or culture but can be built through openness, resilience, and a willingness to learn from difference.

If someone had told me years ago that I would be preparing to study in China, I probably would have smiled politely and kept walking. Growing up in Ghana, I knew what it meant to dream big, but like many people around me, I also knew how often dreams had to compete with real life. My life has not followed a straight route, but looking back, every twist and turn, every country, classroom, and late-night decision has led me here.

This is the story of the journey I began before I ever packed my luggage. This is not a story about traveling to another country, but a story about traveling outside of myself. Before I even set foot in China, the decision to go on an exchange program had already begun shaping me. I had crossed one major border already when I came

to the United States for school, but something about this next step felt different. China was not just another place on the map; it was not a decision made for me by my parents. It was my own decision, and it was a place where I hoped to grow into the person I had only started to imagine myself becoming.

I begin by considering who I was before the exchange: a girl raised in the rich cultural environment of Ghana, whose curiosity was stimulated by drama, languages, and stories from far away. Next, I move into my time in the United States, a time in my life that was not necessarily “studying abroad” in the traditional sense but changed my outlook, nonetheless. That transition tested me, taught me, and made me brave enough to dream bigger for myself.

Then, I reflect on the day I decided to study abroad in China. It was not a plan. I was sitting in Cougar’s Den, just reading emails, and for some reason, I clicked “apply.” But that one random click was built on years of quiet interest, language classes, cultural pursuits, and an increasing desire to do something entirely new.

I will explain why I decided on this exchange, what I was looking for, and what I wanted to find. I then take you to my earliest moments in China, those first few days and weeks when everything was exciting and new: the smells, the pace, the gestures I did not yet recognize. I remember the details of culture shock and the even more subtle instances when something just did not seem right and later did.

The center of the chapter follows the transformation that started to unfold within me. Some of these changes were gradual shifts in my values and a broadening of my perspective. Some of it was subtle but intense, such as the realization that my identity did not have to remain limited to one culture or category. I reflect on how I began to see myself differently, not just as a Ghanaian or an American-based student, but as someone becoming a member of something greater.

I also share tales of the people I got to know, teachers and even strangers, whose words, deeds, and compassion left lasting marks on me. These were not superficial interactions. They were lessons in learning, patience, humility, empathy, and humor.

Of course, it was not always easy. I write candidly about times when I faced language barriers, homesickness, and misunderstandings that left me confused or uncomfortable. But I also explored how those challenges shaped me. They did not simply teach me about China; they taught me about myself, and about what it means to travel between worlds.

Later in the chapter, I step back and consider how this experience has changed my understanding of diversity and culture. I had entered the exchange thinking I had an open-minded view of the world. But to encounter it day after day to learn to listen another way, look another way, even stop another way, opened that view in ways no book ever could.

In conclusion, I find myself asking: What do I carry with me now? What will stay with me from this journey, not just as recollections but as part of my thought

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