

Between Worlds: How China Taught Me to Belong

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter, per the authors, explores the transformative impact of a semester-long study abroad experience in Wenzhou, China, on the development of intercultural competence, identity formation, and global citizenship. Drawing on lived experiences as a “Third Culture Kid” and later as an exchange student, the chapter examines how immersion in a culturally distinct environment fosters empathy, adaptability, and self-awareness. Through the lenses of established intercultural frameworks, including Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity and Byram’s Intercultural Communicative Competence, the chapter analyzes the emotional, social, and cognitive processes that occur as individuals navigate cultural differences. Key themes include the negotiation of belonging, the role of host-country friendships in cultural learning, the challenges and growth associated with culture shock, and the redefinition of culture and diversity beyond surface-level understandings.

FROM NOWHERE AND EVERYWHERE: MY CULTURAL BACKGROUND

I was born into a life of constant movement, a diplomat's kid. My early years unfolded across continents, from Greece to Mexico and beyond. These formative experiences made the world feel both vast and oddly familiar. Pollock and Van Reken have noted that children like me, so-called “Third Culture Kids” who grow up in many places, often end up feeling as if they belong everywhere and nowhere at

once (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). I certainly felt that rootlessness. With my family relocating every few years for my father's career, my cultural identity became a patchwork quilt of different places. My mother is Puerto Rican, and my father is African American, but with my father often posted abroad, we had few strong cultural traditions anchoring us at home. I sometimes joked that I was “from nowhere and everywhere” all at once. And indeed, as Pollock and Van Reken describe, I often struggled with the question of where home really was, primarily through my adolescence.

In high school, some of that ambiguity about my identity began to resolve. I attended a diverse boarding school in Pennsylvania called George School, where I lived and studied alongside peers from all over the U.S. and the world. For the first time, people around me were genuinely curious about my background. Through late conversations in the dorm and the supportive environment of our Black Student Union, I gradually came to embrace my identity as both Black and Puerto Rican. I realized that being a mix of two cultures wasn't a liability or a matter of “not fitting in” – it was a unique asset. I carried two rich heritages within me, and that realization filled me with a confidence and pride I hadn't felt before. I went from avoiding the topic of my background to leading cultural club meetings, eager to share my story. My worldview expanded during those years as well. I began to see myself not just as a kid shaped by many cultures, but as my own person who could draw strength from all those influences.

Beyond grappling with identity, I had developed a deep love for exploration and nature. Because of all the travel in my childhood, unfamiliar environments energized me rather than intimidated me. I loved wandering through new cities and hiking unknown trails, experiences that taught me early on how to be comfortable with uncertainty. I remember watching a sunset from a hilltop in Greece once and feeling a profound connection to the broader world. Moments like that nurtured a spirit of curiosity about people and places. By the time I entered college at Kean University, I already carried a sort of “global lens” that helped me adapt to new settings with relative ease. I believe I was open-minded culturally; after all, I had seen so much of the world. In hindsight, I realize I might have been operating under what Bennett describes as a “Minimization” mindset, assuming that deep down, people everywhere were essentially the same (Bennett). That comforting belief gave me the confidence that I could get along anywhere. It would soon be tested in reality.

Ironically, my early university years did not showcase the confident explorer I thought I was. After the excitement of my boarding school days, I drifted into a slump when I started college. I was living on campus but felt strangely disconnected and unmotivated. My grades slipped; at one point, my GPA dropped below 2.8, and I slogged through classes without the passion I'd once had. It was as if I'd lost my spark. The turning point came in my sophomore year when I met Tatyani, a fellow

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