

# From Number Two to Fearless: Embracing Change and Identity Far From Home

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*This chapter presents a reflective narrative on the impact of studying abroad in China as an American university student of Ecuadorian heritage. This chapter will also examine how cross-cultural immersion, academic adaptation, and intercultural relationships fostered personal and intellectual growth. The narrative traces the author's journey from initial apprehensions that were shaped by obsessive compulsive disorder and cultural hesitations, to self confidence, intercultural competence, and resilience. Central themes include identity negotiation, the growth of cultural empathy, and the psychological effects of adaptation in a foreign environment. By connecting individual experience to broader issues in an international space, this reflection contributes to understanding how U.S. and China study abroad programs promote global awareness, personal transformation, and a redefinition of independence and belonging among students.*

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter will trace my journey that led me to study abroad in China as an American university student and the cultural, emotional, and intellectual transformations that followed. This story begins with the perspective and mindset I had before

considering the idea of studying abroad and what led me to make the decisions that would change my life. I then reflect on my early experiences in China, moments of discovery, wonder, admiration, and how they all planted the seeds of change within me. This reflection does not end with the experiences I had while in China but continues far ahead to the new experiences and perspectives I have in my daily life now back in America.

Throughout, I will explore the connections I have made, the lessons they given me, and the internal and external challenges I faced, all while discovering the shifting perspectives that I developed about Chinese culture, and diversity, and myself. Each section will be built upon the last, and not only will they paint a picture of a study abroad trip, but hopefully one that pictures a deeper encounter with myself. This is the story of how I left my small world behind and stepped into a country I never imagined myself in, with people I would have never expected to meet, and speaking a language I would have never thought to learn. My story is one about the fears I faced, stereotypes that have been broken down, mistakes that were made, and beauty that was found in the unfamiliar. This is about being a young, curious woman who took a chance on a place that not many others would, where I knew nothing would mirror the life I came from, yet found out it offered much more than I knew I needed.

## **BORDERLESS: A LIFE BEYOND LABELS**

Before leaving the comfort and routine of the life I knew for a completely new experience in China, my world was small and unexciting, following the same schedule and routine of school and work, where the only events to fill up my calendar were class days, assignment due dates, and the days I had to work at my mall job. In several ways, I was running on the same hamster wheel, yet yearning for my curiosity and bravery to take control and push me to see the world that I knew was always outside and waiting to be explored.

From the moment I was born, I would never know the feeling of being alone, for I was given my partner for life, my twin sister, Amira. And although we share most of our life experiences, we couldn't be more different in terms of personality. I was born in Guayaquil, Ecuador, but I was raised in New Jersey since the age of three. Although I was raised in America, my Hispanic culture was still prominently alive in me. Before I learned how to love hamburgers and pizza, all I knew was my mother's Ecuadorian homemade foods. As much as I love the different seasons that New Jersey has to offer, for me, the summers I spent in Ecuador were what mattered most of all. It was easy to fall in love with the small portion of the world that I was shown. In my younger years, I was a timid girl, and between my twin

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