

The Identity Split

When overseas Chinese come to China to live and work, they find their identity stuck somewhere between the East and the West, begging the question, Who am I? by Lauren Mack



When **Liane Fong** arrived in Shanghai last September to study Chinese at Fudan University, she found herself experiencing what many foreigners go through when they arrive in China—culture shock, language barriers and getting acquainted to a new environment, but when Chinese people asked her “Where are you from?” it created another challenge.

“I tell them I’m Canadian. Then they look at me quizzically,” says Fong, whose parents are from Hong Kong.

Fong is one of thousands of “huayi,” or overseas Chinese, who come to China annually to study, work or travel. Their experience in China differs greatly from other foreign groups because returning overseas Chinese are also confronted with misunderstandings from locals and questions about their identity.

“There’s an expectation that if you look Chinese, you should be able to speak Chinese,” says **Alan Lew**, a professor at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona who studies tourism in China. “If that expectation is not met, it’s

culture shock.” So, not only do huayi have a rough time understanding what’s going on, so do the locals.

When buying produce one day, Fong was questioned about what nearly every overseas Chinese in queried about here—the quality of her Putonghua.

“I pretty much look Chinese, but didn’t have the accompanying language,” says Fong, who didn’t speak a word of Mandarin before arriving in Shanghai.

She recounts numerous times when merchants and strangers immediately talk to her, even if she’s with foreign friends whose Chinese is better than hers, because they assume she’s fluent. She notes locals are also quick to complement her friends’ Chinese skills, but not hers.

“If [my friend] said ‘ni hao,’ they’d giggle and say ‘that’s great,’ but if I struggled through a sentence, it wasn’t the same,” says Fong.

Unlike Fong, when **Eva Lipman** arrived in Beijing last November to intern at CNN, she already spoke decent Mandarin. Born in Hong Kong, she lived in Taiwan, Canada and the United States, and, as an only child, grew up speaking Mandarin and English at home.

“People here, if they haven’t seen mixed people, they’ll pass me off as Chinese. People think I’m from Xinjiang,” says Lipman, who has hazel eyes and says she has a bigger body structure than Chinese women. “It’s like an identity crisis explaining to people why you look the way you look.” Lipman, whose father is Canadian and whose mother is Hmong, Chinese and was born in Beijing, doesn’t hold it against Chinese for questioning her.

“It’s not malicious. They’re just curious,” Lipman explains from her Beijing apartment. “Until you clear up the questions they want to know, they’re blunt.”

For Lipman, her biggest challenge is identity. “I know I’m not Chinese. I know I identify more with being North American,” she says. “I’m learning about what it is to be Chinese.”

There are an estimated 34 million ethnic Chinese living outside of the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. Some 15.9 percent of all foreign visitors to China in 1990 (the last year statistics were released by the Chinese government) were overseas Chinese, says Lew, who estimates that percentage may still prevail.

The overseas Chinese experience in China has been documented and contemplated often, most recently on the Internet on Danwei TV’s *Hard Hat Show* “[Bring It All Back Home](#)” episode and on **Kaiser Kuo**’s blog, [Ich Bin Ein Beijinger](#).

Kuo, who was born in upstate New York and whose parents are Henanese, has lived in China for 13 years. He is group director of digital strategy for Ogilvy China and plays in two bands. On March 3, he posted on his blog reflections of what he calls a “watershed year” in his life when he left the Chinese metal band Tang Dynasty in 1999—sentiments that resonate with many overseas Chinese:

No matter how good my Chinese got, I was never living in the same world that the rest of the guys were. My circle of friends changed practically overnight, from preponderantly Chinese to preponderantly expatriate. I went from living with a Beijing-born singer to dating an ABC [American born Chinese] reporter. I plunged headlong into the world of the Internet. And that’s about the time I realized that for me, living in Beijing was going to be about existing normally—having a life in which I didn’t feel like a sojourner, someone observing from a dispassionate distance, where I felt like I was integral to the world around me. I ended up dating, then marrying, a Beijinger—a girl I knew from the rock scene, but who married me in spite of my affiliation with it. When I realize now how normal my life is now—a career, a family, very comfortable digs, a city that feels genuinely like home, some wonderful musical outlets, and now this blog—I gotta say I think at least it’s going in the right direction. When **Jason Lin** was growing up in California’s

Silicon Valley, his family members were the only Chinese on the block. Lin was born in Taiwan and later moved to the U.S., where he spoke Mandarin at home and went to Chinese classes on the weekends. Three years ago, he moved to Shanghai to be Jet Li's assistant. Identity was something Lin tackled from an early age.

"I was always shifting. I think I always wanted to be American, but it was hard to be perceived that way," says Lin, by phone from Hengdian where he is on the set of "The Forbidden Kingdom," a Jet Li / Jackie Chan movie loosely based on "The Journey to West," due to be released in 2008.

As he got older, Lin embraced his Chinese roots. "Now I would say I definitely appreciate being from Taiwan," says Lin, who when asked, usually tells people he is from Taiwan.

Many of Lin's friends are ABC and CBC (Canadian born Chinese), but he notices he's treated differently from his non-Chinese friends.

"Never would I get approached by people asking for money until I went out with my non-Asian friends. You definitely get treated differently," says Lin.

"No matter how hard I try, I'm never going to be American. [Chinese people] are going to speak Chinese with me. You learn to live with it."

Originally planning to live in China for two years, Lin continues to stay because he likes his job and has gained an insider's perspective on Chinese culture.

"A lot of things were question marks in my childhood and have been answered," says Lin. Even with the extra questioning and hassling, nearly all overseas Chinese find positives in their China experience.

"I think it's a good experience when they come back because it invigorates their sense of identity and makes them more confident with who they are," says Lew, whose father was born in China. Fong echoes this statement: "I still have culture shock, but I'm more open to understanding the differences. I owed it to myself and my family to immerse myself in a more Chinese environment. Seeing Chinese culture now, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else but here right now."

Irene Ngan

Let me tell you, speaking Cantonese or understanding spoken Mandarin doesn't help at all. Total strangers are always telling me that I don't respect my culture, blah, blah blah. I almost couldn't get my visa renewed because the Chinese official in Australia starting lecturing me about respecting my history.

The banana factor:

I try to laugh it off, but I really don't like it. Some of my friends like to use it, just to see how I react. I think it's just as rude as calling someone an "oreo." Would you call your friend an oreo?

Brian Wong

The best thing about being Chinese-American in China is being able to be incognito. I can do things without being hassled as a foreigner. I can go to the country side without being stared at, and shop without being ripped off.

The banana factor:

I prefer to be called a watermelon. Really, I don't care. I don't use it because it is derogatory, but it doesn't bother me personally. I'm not that existential about my identity.

Jenny Chu

Whether it's engaging in the art of bargaining or eating at a banquet while wooing a potential client, I find that my tacit knowledge of the "Chinese way" of doing things is quite a useful thing to have here!

The banana factor:

I personally don't think I am a banana, but if someone wants to label me as one, so be it.

Andy Tian

The longer I'm in China, the more Western I feel. When you speak fluent Chinese, people automatically assume that you share their values and views, then they are very surprised when you don't act according to their assumptions.

The banana factor:

If there is any fruit I would like to bear a resemblance to, a large banana is not a bad one. Joking aside, the term itself is harmless, and how I feel about it depends entirely on how it's used and who is using it.

Naudia Lou

I'm in a mental and cultural space that's in between America and China. It's like I experience and observe at the same time. I can never quite stop seeing China or the U.S. as an outsider; sometimes it would just be nice to be one or the other.

The banana factor:

It doesn't apply to me; I spent every summer here since I was a kid. I'm just a little of both. What happens when you mix yellow paint and red paint? You get orange. It's not red, not yellow, just orange. Sometimes I feel like that's me.