

China has an old saying: “It is better to travel ten thousand miles than read ten thousand books.” Apparently, this proverb has traveled beyond our borders. United States First Lady Michelle Obama reiterated it in a speech she recently gave at Peking University in China. She said, “Studying abroad is about so much more than improving your own future, it’s also about shaping the future of your country and of the world you share.”

I was 20 years old when I packed my luggage and left for studying abroad. The world I knew then was illustrated through movies, news, school, and my own parents’ worldview. I personally thought studying abroad was all about having fun. However, two things happened to me which helped me realize that this experience was about more than just having fun or improving my resume. I began to see that my experience was shaping – and changing – the way I viewed the world and my own place in it.

My first experience changed the way I viewed and interacted with people from different backgrounds. I had just arrived in the US to attend the University of Pittsburgh. On my second day here, I found a local map and decided to walk to school from my temporary housing. I walked 20 minutes and got lost. An Asian girl walked by me and I decided to ask her for help. I told her I was a new student from China and was trying to find my way to school. She replied, “Oh, I’m from Taiwan. It’s a long walk from here. You can take the bus with me and I’ll show you where to get off.” For a second, I was speechless. For many this encounter would seem uneventful, but the independence of Taiwan is a controversial topic in China. Many Chinese, including my parents and some teachers, believe that it is a part of our country. However, many people from Taiwan want independence. Was I going to accept help from a person who has different political opinions? My teacher and my dad might say no, but I decided to get on the bus with her. I was glad I did. We talked about each other’s hometown and laughed a lot that day.

I learned how severely politics can affect our lives and how we see other people. If you use it as a measure of who you make friends with, you will only restrain yourself to a small circle of sometimes close-minded ideas. For the first time, I had the chance to view an alternate opinion on the China-Taiwan situation. It opened my eyes to a new way of viewing the life of the people of Taiwan, and it showed me how similar we really were. I never would have seen this viewpoint had I not branched out and made a friend with a person from Taiwan. Since this time I have made friends with people from all over the world; the US, Japan, Malaysia, Turkey, India, and more. We can sincerely share our opinions about everything, with an openness that I don’t seem to find anywhere else. The more I converse with them, the more I realize that beyond gender, race, religion, or political background we all deep down are curious about each other’s culture and our own place in the world. When I watch the news, I understand how this lack of openness can cause serious problems. There are misunderstandings when people can’t sit down as equals and listen to each other.

My second experience helped me understand that while my upbringing made me believe Chinese culture was better, this also made me blind to its shortcomings. The biggest surprise to me was that someone from my own culture would show this to me. In one of my last classes in Pittsburgh I asked the teacher why our textbook described Hong Kong as a separate territory. Shortly after, a mainland Chinese student confronted me. He said I was stupid to ask that question and I ashamed all

the Chinese students in the class. At first I felt angry at him. Then I began to think about why he would say this. On reflection, I realized that China's collectivist culture contributed to his outburst. He didn't see us as two independent individuals, but instead as connected through our nationality. He felt that I was speaking my opinions too loudly and that this would reflect badly upon him. Eventually I forgave him and am glad he confronted me because he mirrored the imperfections in myself and our own society. Was I being judgmental when I talked to people? Did I see the world as it was or just the one I thought it was? These questions helped me to evaluate my place in the world and eventually see myself as a true individual that is living side-by-side with everyone else. The world is bigger than just China.

In conclusion, while I thought that studying abroad would just be fun, it actually forced me to confront difficult experiences that have made me a stronger person who is more adept at living in a diverse world. I am now working on a Master's degree at UNCC, and still have to confront difficult issues. I have seen students from the US and other countries make harmful jokes about Asians. On the other hand, I see some of these same deficiencies in our own culture. I have developed close friendships with people from all around the world. I see that while sometimes it is difficult to live around those that are different, it is also very important to our global society. There's no doubt about it, the world is changing me... but maybe one day I can change the world.