

Studying Abroad in the U.S. in the Time of Covid

This essay reflects on my experience with students from Asia, mostly from China, during the initial outbreak of the Corona virus in the U.S. For extra credit at the end of the semester, I offered my classes the opportunity of submitting creative, personal work, written or visual, which explored their experience during the onset of the pandemic. I continued to correspond with some of my students over the summer. Their experiences, opinions, and artwork form the backbone of this essay. I received permission from all the students to quote them or use their work. Some of them are cited here, but most preferred to remain anonymous. In addition to the gallery of their artwork appearing later in this essay, it is illustrated by a photographic essay by Xuejing Cao, who depicts “a day in the life” of her self-quarantine.



1st begin the day



2nd get up



3rd cleaning

Any expat will tell you. Sometimes you just don't want to go out. Even if you love this new country. You could be right in the middle of the honeymoon phase where everything here sings: their bread is delicious, their street names clever; the children are charming, their national problems not yours and so merely intriguing. Still, some days it's just too tedious to be foreign, searching for words, watching for clues, asking them to repeat, and enduring the looks, at your hair, your shoes, how you carry your body through the world, what you do when you sneeze. The laughter, at so many things, what you think you said, what you actually said, how you mispronounced it, the failure of your accent. Today you're not in the mood to laugh along, to

squelch paranoia, cultivate patience, and “suck it up,” because you know it must have been you who misunderstood. It’s easier just to stay inside, drink your tea your own damn way and eat your beloved strange snacks, a culture of one, folding your towels the way you were taught, wearing your quirky at-home garb, enough of dealing with out there, where you are irretrievably other. Any expat will tell you. Even when you know tomorrow will be different; tomorrow you’ll plunge further into this foreign delight, this adventure, ready for anything. Even if you like it here. Even if, for the most part, you love this new place. Today, you’re not in the mood.

Now let’s try it during a pandemic.



4th preparing for cooking



5th sunshine



6th walking in the community

When Puyuan wore a mask into my class in February of 2020, I blurted out some expression of surprise and deprecation, realizing too late that I had embarrassed him as he pulled it off and put it away. I had acted straight out of my American cultural training that gives face masks dire connotations, if not of plague or disaster, then of mischief, deceit, and nefarious pursuit. I have been teaching mostly Asian students in my international classes for several semesters and students might wear a mask when they had a cold, but it was an infrequent occurrence. Covid was still one of those “weird viruses that happen overseas” then. From China, it had sneaked over to Seattle, but would go no further, it seemed. During the first week of the semester, I gave my students my heartfelt sympathies for the experience of their family and friends, which seemed very, very far away. When Li told us he was from Wuhan, the students on either side jokingly scooted their chairs away. In small groups they would finish their tasks, then talk about the virus. The day Dr. Li Wenliang died, some students expressed frustration with

their government, a rarity in our class discussions. Then the virus became serious in this country. Several of my 30 students, all Chinese but for one, wore masks to class and now I kept my mouth shut. We waited for the university to say something, anything, about how the semester should proceed. The American students around us continued as before, standing close together, laughing and talking, sharing drinks and smokes. But thanks to my students, I was nervous and wary, more aware of the virus than I would have been without them. When courses were moved entirely online, we breathed a sigh of relief and moved into this new phase, which would turn out to have its own dangers.



7th go back home



8th studying



9th looking out the window

The U.S. president called it “the Chinese virus,” repeatedly, blaming China for its existence, which he continues to do, and rumors flew. The virus originated in a Chinese lab; the virus was an uncontained chemical weapon; the virus was created on purpose. Asians in the U.S. and Asian-Americans were the object of vandalism, hate speech, and harassment. An old friend whose grandparents were put into internment camps for Japanese-Americans was told to “go back home,” in a stark reminder of how little progress has been made in this country since her family’s ordeal. My students did not escape this new wave of blame and harassment.

One month ago, I got a message from my friend saying that he was treated horribly by two white males. While parking, two white males approached him and started to throw eggs to his car. This was real thing that happened to my friend. Yongze Chen

Unfortunately, while overall the locals do not show any unfriendly sign to me when I wear a face mask, I have seen some white teenagers showing unfriendly signs to me like pretending to cough and the middle-finger hand signal. One of them who was biking when I met [them] even said "I'm gonna rip your head off." Hongyi Jiang

It can be seen from a lot of news that many people have a great prejudice against China and even Chinese people. But there was a lot of misunderstanding. I just hope that people to get a good sense of the process, the development and what's going on, then evaluate it or make comments, and I want people to stop being so biased by what others are saying which [is] carelessly mixed with prejudice.
Anonymous

As an international student under this dangerous and depressed situation, I feel stressful sometimes [being] in [an]other country. The worst news I heard during this issue is that many Americans even the government said COVID-19 is Chinese Virus. It is so ridiculous! As a Chinese, I confirm that this virus appeared in China at first all over the world. But Chinese government and people achieve[d] the defense and control, and did not lead to a major outbreak, but also restricted people to go out of China. There are many doctors and staff on the front line who have died of the virus in order to help sick patients. They are all heroes! However, some foreign media fabricated facts, created lies and even initiated racial discrimination. It seems to me to be highly immoral. Xuejing Cao

When COVID started breaking out in China, my mom feared that America would experience the same thing very soon, so she advised me to wear a mask. One day I was on my way to school and I was about to be late, so I called an Uber. The driver saw me wearing that mask, and perhaps me being an Asian as well, she refused to drive me. She said, and I quote, "I don't feel safe. You're wearing that mask, and it makes me think that there's something wrong." Anonymous

I was relieved to also hear from my students about gestures of empathy they had received.

I was afraid I would be targeted because of the coronavirus. Fortunately, students and professors here are really nice. I don't meet any prejudice. I still remember when I took flu-shot on February at Wardenburg, the nurse there was really kind and asking me whether my parents are safe in China. Yanhui Xi

Unfortunately, however, the bigotry-fueled incidents endured by their acquaintances and Asians and Asian-Americans nationwide, together with the nasty tone of some official discourse, have made it more difficult to feel comfortable as an international guest of our country. Nevertheless, what has struck me most about my students' responses to discrimination against their ethnicity while they are in the fragile position of being a student abroad during these critical times is the level of self-awareness and social analysis they have brought to the situation.

My feeling to that white guy at the market [who continuously glared at the student] was mixed. I think he was hostile, angry while fearful. Anyway, it was my personal experience and I can't [re]present the whole Asian people. There is one thing that I want to point out and that is the ineradicable race culture in US. I believe that most white people are not racists but there are still racist phenomena. People get negative information from various websites and sometimes they treat it like nothing happened and just forget it. However, things like pandemic is able to trigger racism in the society. ... For myself, as long as there is even a little bit of negative information, I would try not to make things worse because I really don't want to meet anyone whose hate[ful] emotion has been triggered by pandemic. Yongze Chen

In my point of view, the reason for the public obedience [regarding mask-wearing] may [be]related to China's history. In the long history of China's society, it usually be a monarchy society. People are used to obey the superiors. Even after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, people still prefer obedience instead of being a special case in the crowd. So after the government propagandizes to wear masks, most people will do it. Anonymous

In addition, collectivism in Chinese culture is also a key factor for this difference. The collectivism culture makes Chinese people more disciplined and are willing to follow no matter whether the government policies and rules are one-size-fits-all or not, while in western culture the individual is more valued. Hongyi Jiang

[W]hen the COVID-19 outbreak in the US, most of my Chinese friends wore the mask immediately while ... in the public because we want to protect ourselves and others (social distance). However, this behavior causes many misunderstand[ing]s by some Americans. I remembered that I wore the mask in the Safeway around March 20, and many people gave me strange looks, and some even walked around me. That made me feel depressed and surprised. In contrast, the warmest thing for me is that I received a short letter from my neighbor who is [an] American girl. She said,

“during this stressful moment, if anyone have any problems or help, feel free to find her” and she gave her telephone number as well. In a word, from COVID-19 issues, I notice different behaviors and moralities between various group of human being.
Xuejing Cao

These cross-cultural differences in perceptions of quarantining and mask-wearing have become stark as the virus expands in the United States. Incidents of Americans becoming belligerent or violent at the prospect of wearing a mask are commonplace. Videos capture visitors to restaurants or stores exploding in rants which repeat similar refrains, referring to freedom, the Constitution, Christianity, and expressions of xenophobia: wearing the mask is compared to the Muslim hijab, communism, and other “foreign” behaviors. Protests against mask-wearing have become larger and more frequent. My students have responded to this America attitude with wonder and concern.

... on the day all the classes were switched to online classes, many students at the school started holding parties. I heard from a student, “If we did not need to have classes on campus, then why not have an overnight party?” To be honest, I was wondering why the people who [had a] party could not understand the seriousness of the situation if the school had made such a big decision.
Anonymous

Westerners think it is everyone’s freedom to make their own decisions without government intervention. The value orientation of the West is therefore you are in charge of your own affairs and you are responsible for yourself. Yongze Chen

I think the key factor is the people's awareness about asymptomatic agents. If a single asymptomatic infected individual in the crowded public area can easily become a ground zero of an epidemic if people around him/her do not wear face masks. ... After experiencing several epidemics like SARS and influenza virus, when the government alerts about a virus outbreak, it has become common for Chinese people to wear face masks since nobody knows if the person next to you is asymptomatic. But ... I heard that western children are taught that "only wearing a face mask when you are sick". ... The virus does not spread when the infected person realizes that he/she is infected. Depending on the infected agents' physiological situation, the virus can start spreading even if there is no symptom. The opinion "only wearing a face mask when you are sick" is evidence of a lack [of] awareness of asymptomatic agents. Hongyi Jiang

For us, wearing masks is not that big of a deal. Anonymous



(AP)



(Joseph Prezioso/AFP via Getty Images)

How did the countries' differing attitude toward and understanding of mask-wearing evolve? According to my students and other sources, mask-wearing has a long history in China and in Asia generally. Emperors wore them in court to maintain hygiene. After the Spanish flu, their use in the West against spreading illness virtually disappeared, but in Asia it has carried on to the present. If people are sick, they wear them. In cities with heavy air pollution such as Beijing and Bangkok, they are worn in the street to protect the wearer's lungs. Beijing designer Yin Peng launched a fashion line complete with masks in 2014, entitled "Smog Couture." The outbreak of SARS in 2003 and ongoing concern about avian flu reinforce this trend of mask-wearing. Trust in and adherence to government mandates in the health arena are standard practice for the most part in Asian countries. As one of my students pointed out, masks are ubiquitously available at any corner store or pharmacy in Japan and China. Interestingly, a pop cultural aspect strengthens the acceptance of masks; Asian celebrities such as K-POP band members and media stars have modeled wearing them to maintain privacy in public. In some contexts, masks are seen as enhancing one's appearance, for example by masking acne or the absence of make-up. They have come to be considered a fun and flexible fashion accessory.



K-Pop Star Jungkook in Korea, 2016
Soompi



Taiwanese star Ouyang Nana in China, 2019
Codipop.com

Meanwhile, in the U.S., many of us struggle to understand our fellow citizens' opposition to mask-wearing. Historians have documented that there was resistance to wearing a mask during the 1918 Spanish Flu, and mask-wearing was quickly abandoned once that epidemic came under control. Although there have been severe outbreaks of flu, the U.S. hasn't experienced an immediate epidemiological scare such as SARS or avian flu since that time. Here, there is a lack of enforcement or even trust in government mandates, which current top-level national officials have reinforced with their own refusal to don masks. Culturally, in everyday life we express our emotions with our faces, often with more abandon than would be considered appropriate in some Asian contexts. (Consider the recently ubiquitous wide open-mouthed selfie, much less popular abroad.) It is hard to imagine the face mask catching on as a fashion accessory in the U.S., though major fashion houses are now designing decorative masks which showcase their brands and pundits have recommended the manufacture of masks with popular sports team or patriotic logos to increase their appeal. Thanks to its politicization during a time of deep partisan division, the peculiarities of the American psyche, and one might argue a willful ignorance which has

fueled this misplaced urge to rebel, the mask has become for many non-wearers a symbol of governmental oppression.



Jeremy Hogan / SOPA Images/Sipa USA



Mark Makela/Getty Images

I have always known that Americans love freedom, but for the first time I have known that many people are willing to sacrifice their and others' health for freedom. I have seen in the news of Colorado that citizens are demonstrating ... because the community has enforced a shutting down order, even though it is for their health. I have also seen people say, "I'd rather die of illness than have my freedom restricted." Anonymous

I think when an American see you wearing a mask, they would automatically assume that you're sick, instead of thinking that maybe you're just being careful.... I think they don't know that masks don't just keep the virus from spreading from a sick person, but also they can keep a healthy person from being affected. Anonymous

The bizarre, globally out-of-step American response to the prospect of quarantine and masking, exacerbated by the racist anti-Asian responses that my students have heard of or experienced, has strengthened the desire of those who have stayed here to remain strictly inside.

I have been staying at my apartment for a very long time now except when I need to dump the trash. It is all because I just feel unsafe outside, after reading all negative news about how Asian people are treated and experiencing [this] personally. Yongze Chen

I try to avoid any physical contact with strangers, so I just buy a lot of supplies and stay at my apartment for a long time. ... Besides my philosophy course and aggressive white teenagers, the Sino-US relationship really makes me super worried. Hongyi Jiang

As I depicted at the beginning of this essay, living in another country brings moments of intense isolation and loneliness, however positive the overarching experience. Language and culture, carriers of graceful human connection, also harbor the power to exclude and alienate. All of us in self-quarantine have struggled with anxiety, fear, and boredom. Knowing my students has made me wonder how I would cope with self-quarantine in another country. What if that country was flouting global health norms? Worst of all, what if that country was blaming people like me for its woes? As an American abroad, I have been cursed and spit at. I have been verbally accosted, perceived to be a living symbol of my government. As a Western woman, I have experienced discomfort and aggression in a handful of the scores of countries in which I have traveled. I was in Istanbul during the unsuccessful coup attempt of 2016 (subsequently surmised by many to have been faked by the government in order to consolidate power and suppress opposition). As I walked beside the Bosphorus, honking cars whizzed by on the coastal road, women in hijab hanging out of the windows, singing and waving flags, celebrating the reinforcement of a retrograde national vision, including correlative anger and blame for the U.S. But my Turkish friends and family were as dismayed by this development as I was. Staying inside, away from the alienating mayhem, I shared my seclusion, physically and emotionally, with sympathetic companions, a luxury many of my students, living by themselves, do not have.



10th shower



11th clock



12th midnight

Many of them have turned to artistic endeavors to pass the time and comfort themselves. Of her photo essay interspersed through this essay, Xuejing Cao says, “As an art person, I prefer to use some ways related to fine arts to express my mood during COVID-19 events. The main elements for my photographs are shooting with lines, shadow and shape, and using abstract method. [W]ith this stressful situation, I use the black & white effect for all of my 12 photographs ... a storytelling about what am I doing for a day under the COVID-19 issues. For example, the first picture [is of] the part of the shadow reflected on the refrigerator, which looks so visual, and looks like when I just got out of bed.”

My students tell me that they have deepened their culinary arts, learning how to bake scones, make noodles, or replicate their mothers’ recipes. “In the past one month I have tried lobster, risotto, casserole, seafood, beets and many other recipes. I think [risotto] is actually a pretty hard recipe for me, because I’ve never used white wine before” (Yongze Chen). “Indeed, I get more life skills, like [how to] bake cakes and roast chickens” (Shuhui Wu).

Some have taken up or returned to musical instruments they studied in their childhoods, composing songs and making videos.

[Song.MOV](#) by Qifan Jiang



Others have turned to the visual arts, taking photographs, painting, and drawing.



The only thing seems advantage to me is I have more spare time during quarantine. I began to paint. Before the quarantine, I think the study is the most important thing. But the boring life in quarantine makes me try to paint. I find out I actually can keep a balance between my study and my hobby. I enjoy myself when I focus on that. Shuhui Wu

Their art expresses yearning for normalcy and homesickness for the familiar places, experiences, and communities that wait to welcome them.

Due to the COVID-19 situation, most public areas have been closed off indefinitely in Thailand. Ever since I was a child, I am used to going to the beach with my family during the weekends or holidays. Now that I am back..., it makes me want to go to the beach and not be stuck at home under social isolation.

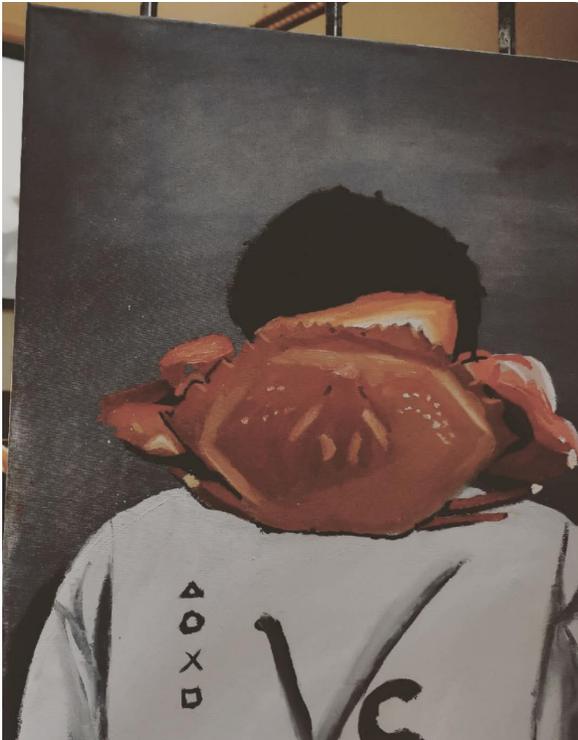
I wanted this artwork to represent my mental emotion when I think of a calm ocean wave rolling into the beach throughout day and night.



Since each color was painted in a wave-like form but oriented differently, each section represented how the waves looked during the time of each day. Using my memories and imagination of when I was on the beach, orange represented the morning period where the sun had just risen, blue represented the late evening time where the skies were clear, and lastly green represented the shift from day to the night-time where light slowly disappears and the ocean becomes darker.

The use of watercolor made it very easy for me to create long and curved brushstrokes within the art piece, creating this very continuous flow pattern from the middle of the canvas. Having no bold or sharp turns within the artwork gives me a strong sense of peace and serenity when I look at it. Overall, this artwork allowed me to express my desires

for the world to become normal again, so that we can all live life as usual and I can go back to the beach once again. Napass Masathienvong

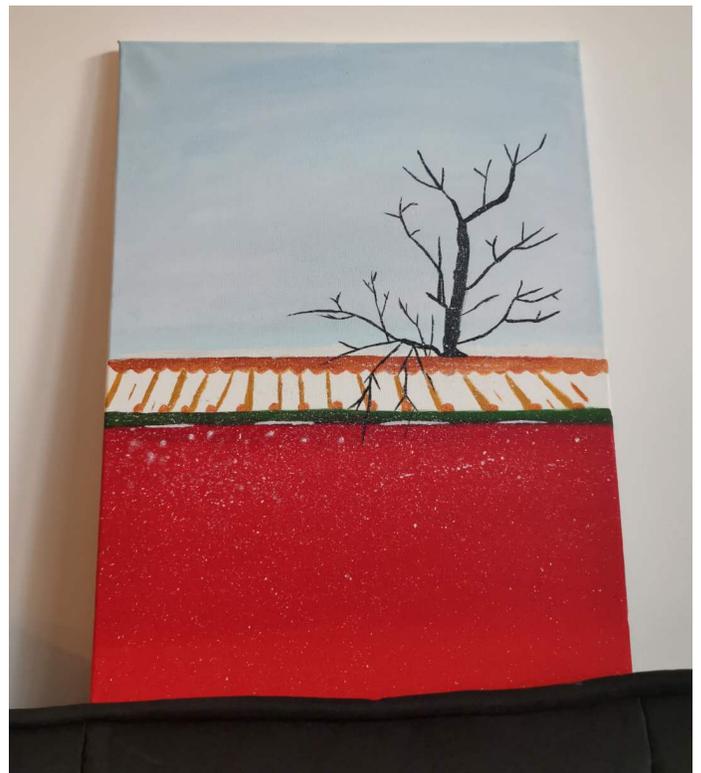


[L]ongtime-living abroad made me feel lonely.... People in my hometown always like to use the number 8 and red to express their wishes for a better life. Crabs with eight legs have become a substitute for this idea. I like photography and painting, but these two hobbies have different meanings to me. Photography allows me to capture the beauty of the moment, and painting helps me through the lonely period. I often forget the passage of time when drawing.

Mingze Sun

Whenever I see this picture, I feel like I'm going home. This is the best season for the Forbidden City. I am sorry that I didn't see the first snow in Beijing this year, so I would like to use this painting to express my yearning for my hometown. The Forbidden City is not only the center of Beijing, but also the core of the historical and cultural city of Beijing. I will always miss [it]. This picture I drew is the Forbidden City when it snows. I draw during this unusual time.

Ning Zhang



Several of my students who returned to Asia when the Covid crisis deepened in the U.S. now fear they will not be able to return to finish their degrees. Most chose to remain here, in part due to that very warranted fear, and so are making their way through an extended sojourn, far from their loved ones and home culture. With this essay, I have intended to celebrate the powers of art and analysis which are carrying all of them through the frustration and alienation of this time, whatever the global politics that swirl over all our heads. Undoubtedly, these students now well know the bitter risks of expatriate life. But they have also deepened their self-awareness, resilience, and capacity for self-care, valuable lessons which perhaps are only learned through adversity and which will serve them brilliantly as their lives unfold. As their teacher, I have in turn learned from the grace and equanimity these students have shown in dealing with this unprecedented situation. They are role models for us all.