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Mihretabe Gizaw
Linfield College

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Mihretabe Gizaw
Beijing, China
April 28th, 2018



Today Can Say a Lot About the Future

In my blog post entitled “Visiting Nanjing,” I wrote about how I came to understand an important philosophical outlook Chinese people had and may continue to have toward foreigners. In this one, I will discuss how I, as a foreigner in China, have experienced another aspect of Chinese outlook toward foreigners.

It was about three days into my arrival in China that a person at the Bird’s Nest, Beijing’s famous Olympic Center, pointed at me and, by referring to me as Obama, asked to take a picture with me. This would not be the only time someone would request to take a picture of, or with, me. This would not be the last time someone would refer to me as Obama, either. People would take pictures of me, sometimes without asking, and at other times come up to me so excited for the opportunity to take a selfie. The most evident reason, and probably the only reason, this happened so often is because I am black.

Before my trip to China, some of my friends would send me videos of how some Chinese people reacted when they encountered a black person on the street. I remember one particular video that had a group of at least 10 men gathering around two black people in China, recording videos of them. My initial reaction was to say to myself “that won’t happen to me.” Oh, how quickly that would change. Surprisingly, however, it was not all negative. For example, on the first day, after our teachers had taken us to get Chinese SIM-cards, as I was leaving the store, the person guarding the store waved to get my attention, walked towards me, and shook my hand with a huge smile on his face, and saluted me as if I was a President. I guess those Obama comments make sense now.

And this is not to say that I resemble the former American President in any way. Nor is it to claim that my white peers don't get the same attention either. People take pictures of and with them as frequently as they do with me. At times, especially when I would see more and more Chinese people take pictures with my white classmates, I would think that the notion that black people get a different treatment in China compared to white people was all in my head. Until one day, as some classmates and I were walking around exploring new places to eat, one of my friends said, "Hey Mihretabe, you get a different look from these guys than we do! Have you noticed that?" I nodded. This affirmed my thoughts on the matter and sort of put my mind at ease as well.

So, what is the difference? Why do Chinese people view black people differently than they view white people? I think I can make a few educated guesses. To start with, mostly due to a large exclusion from the incredibly globalized world, there is a fundamental assumption that all black people are from Africa and all white people are from America. This is not to say that Chinese people don't take geography classes. In fact, we visited an elementary school with our program and I'm ashamed to say that those kids could name more countries around the world than I could. But the Chinese word for America ("meiguo") literally translates into beautiful country. And that reveals some significant differences. White people are revered, while black people are a mystery. White people are beautiful, while the skin of black people is truly an enigma to the Chinese.

In China, there is a great desire to look like white people, whereas dark skin is regarded as a bad thing. And this does not come from a place of anger, frustration, or disappointment. I am just sharing my observations. I still remember the day that my Chinese teacher told me that almost all make-up and skin care products are whitening, people photoshop pictures to make themselves look whiter, and there is a saying that roughly translates into "one white can cover a thousand 'ugliness.'" So why I am telling you all this?

Beijing, along with several other cities in China, is very international. But the sentiments and outlooks I have shared above are still held by the countless people I have encountered. And at the same time, when people looked and stared at me like an animal in a zoo, I subtly and carefully observed them as well. By doing so, I was blown away by the similarities we have. There are so many of them and each time I learn about one, I am awestruck. My favorite has to be the instrument with one string played kind of like a violin. I have told this to almost everyone that would listen. We have, basically, the exact same thing back in Ethiopia!!! How crazy is that? In addition, the way we make some foods, the way we twist and turn words in our respective languages to express how we feel, the way we write poems, and the way we treat guests are all incredibly similar. I could go on and on. And I am dumbfounded by each similarity I discover. So, what do I do with this knowledge? How does knowing this benefit me? For now, it serves as the reason I began a quest to demystify the black person to the Chinese individuals I encounter.

I know it seems ambitious and almost impossible to achieve. How do I even go about this? Above is a picture of a Chinese kid on my shoulders. His dad asked me to take a picture with him while his mom pulled out her camera to take the photo. At this moment, instead of awkwardly trying to stand next to the little guy, I picked him up and held him on my shoulders kind of like his dad was holding the boy's younger brother. With every chance I get I perform little gestures like this in hopes of emphasizing how similar we are as a people. The color of our skin means close to nothing.

As more foreigners flood into China every year, and as China and the world become more and more connected through the internet and other remarkable advancements, I hope this is

a message that people can see and understand. I've had a wonderful time here and I've learned a lot about myself, about China, and about the world. I think we're coming close to living in a world weirdly kind of like Pangea. As we become increasingly connected, I hope we can focus less on the differences that separate us and more on the similarities that bring us together.