

# **Culture: From Perception to Experience**

*By Adrija Jana*

To me, culture is a way of life. Culture is a defining aspect of our personality and plays an important role in making us who we are. It is an integral part of our growing up and shapes our thoughts, beliefs, morals and values to a large extent.

There are various aspects of my culture that I respect and believe strongly in. One of them is respect for elders and the elderly. Till now, no matter the situation, I live by this ideal. Another one is "Atithi Devo Bhava," the larger meaning of which is the message of social service and selflessness. Both these aspects have hugely influenced my future goals, and I have made a place for them in everything I have tried to achieve till today and will try to achieve in future.

Again, there are certain aspects of my culture which have influenced me in a different way. These are certain regressive superstitions and stigma that are obstacles to the progress of my community. These have led me to realize that we need to protest and raise our voice against any aspect or practice that is detrimental or discriminatory, even if it has been followed and passed down since times immemorial. I have been fighting against such aspects, like discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community and the stigma around menstruation, which are probably the most imminent problems facing my community today.

I didn't know the importance of intercultural interaction till an experience in Grade 9. Because of some painful historical events every Indian is aware of, two countries (India and China) that started off on a very friendly note, now tend to regard each other with more hostility than diplomacy.

However, in 2018, my school, with the help of the Chinese embassy in India, succeeded in arranging a reciprocal exchange programme with Kunming No. 8 High School, China, and I was one of the selected participants. I was to travel to China for a week and stay with a Chinese family in their house. I got off the plane with a lot of apprehensions and a fair amount of anxiety, but from the moment I met my partner and her parents, I realized how considerate and warm they truly were. Being accustomed to India's warm weather, I hadn't expected bone-chilling cold weather in China in May. But they had thought of that too. The first thing they gave me the moment we stepped out of the airport was a warm traditional Chinese style sweater. I have it with me even now, more than three years later.

Just within a few days, I started my partner's parents "Papa" and "Mama", just like my partner. Mama would cook for me every day, and not a single day did I have any problem with any meal.

They were non-vegetarians, while I was a vegetarian. For that entire week, they did not even touch anything non-veg, even though I would not have been bothered much even if they did.

I wanted to familiarize myself with their culture, so I tried to learn to eat with a chopstick. In a restaurant, while trying to pick up a piece of food with chopsticks, I dropped them on the table by mistake with a loud clatter. I was embarrassed, as everyone was looking at me. But not a single person in there laughed, nor did I see a single mocking smile. Many of them, in fact, came over to try to patiently teach me how to properly grip chopsticks. I was very touched that day.

My partner also took me to visit her grandparents, and they were equally warm. They were all on good terms too. I realised that respect towards elders and "Atithi Devo Bhava" were aspects of Chinese culture too, albeit explained in a different way.

In the family, only my partner could understand English, but the language barrier posed no obstacle, as I had no problem feeling their warmth and sincere concern towards me. I laid on Mama's lap as we shed tears over sad scenes from Indian Bollywood movies with Chinese subtitles. She handmade beautiful accessories for me with the best Chinese silk. They did not let me spend a single cent in China. Every gift or souvenir I brought back to India, was given to me by my Chinese family, with love. They left no stone unturned to make me feel welcome. I remember that while we were returning home on bikes once, cherry blossoms from trees on the way started falling on me. Mama said, "They're happy to see you, so they're welcoming you."

Over the one week, I was exposed to Chinese Classical music, tribal dance and their ink and water form of artwork. Papa and Mama cheered us on, as Sun Si Ye (my partner) and I performed a dress exchange, she wearing an Indian saree, and I wearing the traditional Chinese Hanfu suit. I grew close to their culture as I slowly found similarities with Indian culture. Before Christianity came to China, their colour of marriage was red, and of bereavement, white. Bowing before elders was and is still an important part of their culture. This is true, to a large extent, of traditional Indian culture too.

Another aspect that I particularly liked that I think India has a lot to learn from, is the attention to cleanliness. There are dustbins on the streets every 2-3 kilometres, and I did not come across a single person who was inclined to throw anything on the streets.

The day I was to return home, they sent me off with heavy hearts as if they were parting with a piece of themselves.

Two months later, when my partner came to India to live with my family, she approached our culture with genuine curiosity and an interest to learn and endeared herself to everyone with her simple honesty and caring nature.

I came back to India with a new awareness and even self-realisation. Awareness of the fact that not everything might be as black and white as we see them, and that I had been harbouring many misconceptions for a long time. I was deeply pained by the world's attitude towards China during the Covid 19 situation, as I knew that the worst sufferers were common people, simple people like my neighbours and me, who are probably not even aware of the intricacies of world politics.

The most important lesson I learned from this experience was that we should be quick to judge, especially in a situation where nothing can be verified firsthand. Even today, when I remember the softness of the cherry blossoms on my face, or the taste of home-cooked Chinese food on my tongue, the love and hospitality I had known in a country I was hardly familiar with brings tears to my eyes. My Chinese family and I are still in touch and share a very strong bond. I even have a Chinese name given by Mama, "He Chen Xi" (meaning rays of the sun) and have now learnt to carry out a basic conversation in Mandarin.

My visit to China was as much of an eye-opening experience as it was emotionally awakening. I realised that intercultural interaction can bring about a revolutionary change in the way one perceives international relations. Maybe this is the way forward, the way to prevent strife and conflict and war. Maybe if we persevered on this path and made an effort to understand each other, all the citizens of the world could one day exist peacefully.