

**EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation (EUCI)
Reflective Portfolio by Zhao Zhenqiu (CY Cergy Paris Université)**

Cover Letter

“Who are you ?” At a first glance, this question seems so simple, shouldn't the answer be simple as well ? “My name is Zhao Zhenqiu, I'm a Chinese student who came to France at the age of 6 and I'm currently studying politics at St-Germain-En-Laye's Sciences Po. I like sports, reading, bad jokes and the fact that in French, *goldfish* is “poisson rouge” which means “*red fish*”. So, if identity is so easy to define, why are there so many identity crises and why do we see the rise of identity politics these last years ? **Because it's actually not so easy to define.** And this is something that I can personally attest.

What makes this question so hard is the fact that there are actually two aspects, identity and identification. The first one characterizes the self, what you are, while the second one characterizes the external, what others think you are. And when there is a discrepancy between them, an internal conflict can emerge. Looking back at my personal experience, I was in a rather uncertain position as I was torn between my Chinese identity and my French identity, and the fact that I met people who saw me as “one of them” as well as people who just thought of me as “the Asian guy” didn't help either.

This is why when the opportunity of an exchange program arose last year, I chose to study in China so I can come back to my roots after more than 15 years and more than that, sort through my feelings about who I am and who I should be. This is why I consider this year overseas as an “identity journey”.

What's interesting about the word “journey” is that it represents the action of traveling but also a set of experiences that someone has over a period of time, which will change the person in some way. But then some people may say to themselves “Isn't it the same ? After all, traveling is an experience that will change a person, whether in a good or bad way”. Well, not exactly, and the reason is because you need **to reflect on it**. If you travel without second thought, the learning outcome will not be as great as if you put a reflective mind on it. And reflecting on things is not as obvious as someone may expect (for me at least).

This is the reason I took the Euci offer and tried to attend the Euci's seminars. But, after reflecting about it, I realized that it was more the reason **I kept** attending the next seminars, not the reason why **I took it**. After meditating on it, I found a much simpler reason : curiosity.

But isn't that wrong ? We have an old saying : “curiosity killed the cat”. Likewise, we have a similar version in French : “La curiosité est un vilain défaut”. Both mean that curiosity can lead you to undesirable situations. But I disagree (partially) as they denounce only the social aspect of curiosity, like prying too much into other people's business, but not the other aspects, as for instance intellectual curiosity. This facet values qualities such as openness to experiences, desire to learn and seeking novelty which are vastly different from being interested mainly in the secrets of other people. What I found surprising is that these qualities are also exactly what Eutopia tries to value with this certificate of Internationalization and its four learning outcomes. Above all else, putting the reflective part as the first learning outcome helped me (and definitely the other students) to become a little bit more aware of ourselves, even at the end of the very first seminar.

So after some introspection, I concluded that I first took the seminar because of an **unconscious intellectual curiosity** and I stayed because of a **conscious intellectual curiosity** that I developed throughout the weeks.

But being curious is not enough, you also need to participate in substantial international activities and then reflect on them. For me, my main activity is my exchange program in China

which I will fully develop in this essay.

Reflective Essay

Usually, when you ask people what they like to do, a common answer is “I like traveling”. Well, not me. Why ? I could just say “I don't like it, that's all” and end here, after all, everybody has different tastes, but I decided to think about why I don't like it. In brief, I decided to reflect about it.

I was born in China (Beijing) and I spent 3 years in the countryside, in a small place called Guangshui before going to live in France. Contrary to what one might expect, it was not that great : in one day, I suddenly came to a place I knew nothing of, with a language I didn't speak, among some people on the racist spectrum. Looking back at this, I think that it made me subconsciously associate traveling with this bad memory and this is probably one of the reasons I'm not fond of trips and voyages. Looking deeper at this, this definitely made me more introverted, as I preferred reading books over hanging out with friends. Nevertheless, as time passed, I became more confident in myself and I got over it, but I felt that there were still some lingering feelings there and I was still unsure about my identity. That's what I needed to work on in the future.

Luckily I had the opportunity to do this as my school sent us to study abroad, with you choosing the country. I decided to take this as a challenge as I chose the Business Chinese Program, an advanced class in East China Normal University in Shanghai. This choice was a way for me to go back to my roots, after more than 16 years in France, to improve my Chinese and in general, to improve myself. Thinking about this, I realized that I also chose this in order to comply with my parents' will, as they strongly encouraged me to pick this country, so rather than my own choice, it was more a collective one. But whether it was an individual decision or not, I started my journey on the 24th July 2021 and one year later, on the 17th June 2022, I can affirm something : this travel was worth it.

D) New activities, new learning outcomes.

I participated in many activities but I decided to highlight only three of them with clear learning outcomes :

1) Intercultural

My class in Shanghai can easily be considered as an intercultural environment as it includes people of all ages (adults included) and of all nationalities (American, British, Russian, Turkmen, Ghanaian, Korean, Japanese and Chinese).

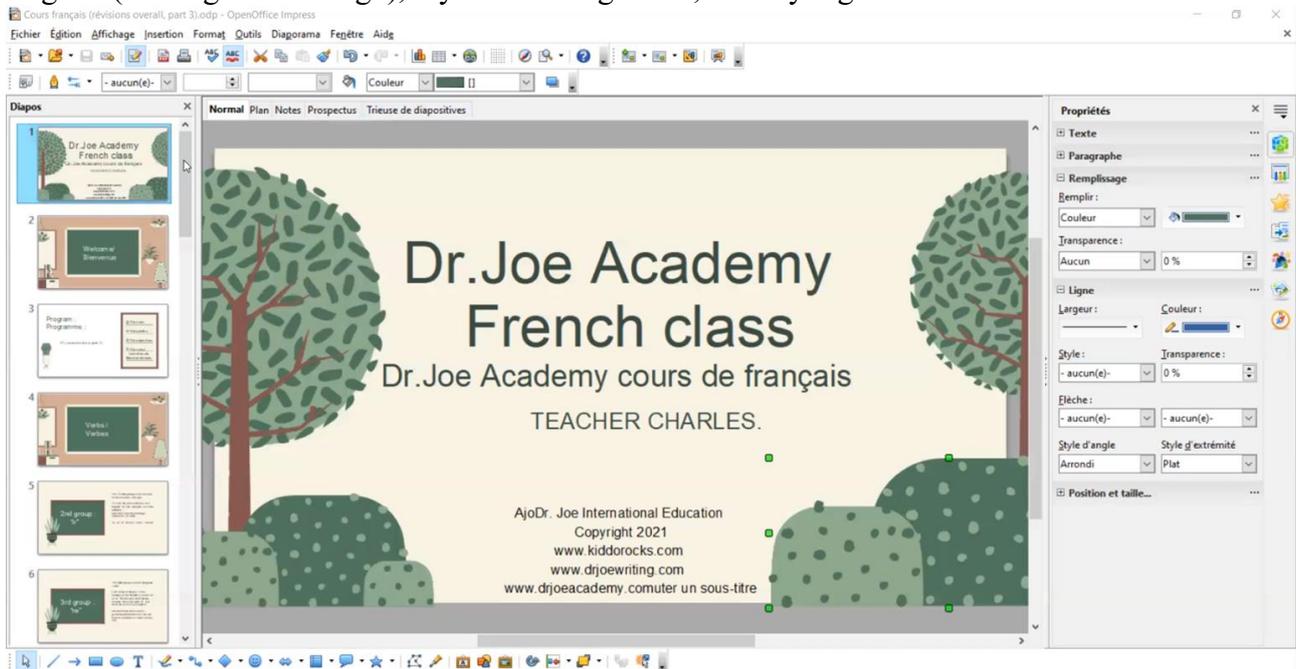


(2 photos of me and my classmates, the first and second semester, though some people were absent).

What's even more intercultural is the fact that almost all of our scholarly activities required teamwork, so we always needed to discuss and debate in Chinese about all kinds of subjects. It was definitely an enriching experience as everybody shared their own country's culture and history, and it was pretty interesting to listen to the points of view of people so far away but at the same time so close. What I learned about me after talking with them is how direct or frank I can be compared to what they are used to. That's why I tried to change the way I express myself depending on people and their culture, especially being more mild and more indirect with Chinese, Korean and Japanese people. So this class definitely developed my knowledge as well as my social skills, which I lacked.

2) Intersectoral

At the same time, I had a small job as I taught French to a young Chinese-Canadian student with Zoom. What I learned about me after this is that I need to improve my English, especially my accent and also how to stay interesting in order to keep the student focused. Overall, It was a good intersectoral lesson as it gave me experience, helped me to better my communication skills, my English (although not enough), my time management, and my digital skills.



(The power point I made for the classes. As you can see, I was given the nickname Charles)

3) And why not both ?

Finally, I had the opportunity to help people harvesting rice in Fengxian, a small rice-farming town demarcated with paddy fields. It was an instructive experience first for the intersectoral part and the know-how (I didn't know that rice is harvested when the grains' moisture is around 25%, nor that you need to first drain the paddy, cut the plants with a sickle and then smash it against a big container in order to separate the grain from the stalk),



(An example of the smash)



(The harvest starts after draining all the paddy)

and second for the testimony of the people working here daily. I got to know their working conditions and their own opinions, which showed how hard it is for them but also how grateful they are because they saw by themselves how their living conditions are improving. However, they are still doing everything by hand. What I learned here is that I'm not interested enough in how food (or anything else) is made. In other words, I tended to focus on the result and forget or ignore the process behind, and forgetting the process takes you away from reality. Talking with people who are in touch with this very reality everyday, and helping them, made me more aware of the difficulties that other people undergo and that we don't see.

Talking to them also shed a light on an intercultural subject, the language. When chatting among themselves, they use their very own dialect, but when they talk to people they don't know, they switch to mandarin. It reminds you how rich and diverse Chinese language can be and how it is not just an uniform and homogeneous language (for instance there are dialects, especially in the North, that I can't even understand even though it is Chinese).

These activities are among the ones I planned beforehand. But a thrilling part of life is also the unanticipated.

II) Some unexpected surprises

What do I mean by unexpected ? For instance, I never imagined that in my year in China, I would train boxing with a Ghanaian and then wrestling with Turkmens and Koreans.



(The Wrestling enjoyers)

I didn't even plan to train either of these sports, the opportunity just came by and I took it. And I regret nothing. What I learned about me here is that I can put in a lot of effort and dedication in an activity that I like as I trained (and still train) alone everyday in addition to the collective lessons in order to catch up with the more experienced people. Furthermore, I learned a lot about Ghanaian and Turkmen culture and way of thinking and it was uplifting to see perspectives that different from mine. It was a sort of “reality check” about what should be considered as normal or not.

One of the most enlightening “reality checks” I had was with one of my Chinese teachers : just to give a piece of context, we had a listening exercise in Chinese and she gave us some questions to focus on. The first one was “when was the reform and opening up in China ?”. I said almost mechanically “Teacher, it's the reform of 1978 by Deng Xiaoping” and she responded with a smile “No”. At first I couldn't understand why. After all, at school I was always taught that it was in 1978. What's interesting is that at that time, my mind couldn't accept the fact that my answer is wrong; I thought *“it's the textbook answer, so I should be right”*.

But I'm wrong, and I'm wrong exactly because it's “the textbook answer”. My teacher explained to me that in 1978, China had the reform applied only in Shenzhen (in Guangdong). The reason is that the authority needed to try it on a city before applying it throughout all China which makes sense : for a change this big, you need to test it on a smaller scale in order to see if it works or not. And we need to wait until 1992 for the reform to be active throughout all China. That's why the Chinese people who lived outside Shenzhen do not consider that China's opening up reform is in 1978, but rather in 1992, because they didn't have it implemented in their province until then : **the textbook answer just does not match the reality of those people.**

This blew my mind : what I thought was a common and well established knowledge was actually deeper than expected and it reminded me to always be careful about history because nothing is unquestionable (even this sentence). In brief, take information with a grain of salt.

It was also one of the first times I witnessed the link between theory and reality. What I mean by that is that in school, I always felt that history is something far away. All the historical figures, the stories and even recent events like the end of the Cold War felt to me like a distant past.

So having people who lived in China and who can testify about these historical facts that we learned in school was exciting and thought-provoking.

Last but not least, the biggest surprise I had was the Chinese New Year. As you may expect, the New Year is arguably the most important holiday in China. It is a familial celebration, that's why all the Chinese workers return to their loved ones once in a year. It is also why I was astonished when one of my Chinese teachers invited me (and other students) to enjoy the New Year together. What astonished me even more was the amount of dedication she showed for this day : she called the taxi and prepared a lot of activities, like Chinese paper cutting, calligraphy, a little trip to a town nearby, making dumplings, shooting fireworks, the infamous red packet and of course, a big meal.



(The Chinese paper cutting)



(Making dumplings with the kids)



(Calligraphy)



(The small trip)



(Fireworks)



(Intercultural family)

It was really heart-warming, especially because the teacher knew that we were alone and far away from our family for the new year, so she decided to gather us so we could enjoy an authentic Chinese New Year like a family despite living in different countries. It was at this time that I

realized how important the family is in Chinese culture and how generous some people can be.

III) National and personal challenges.

Although China has a lot of undeniable qualities, it also faces many challenges, one of the most important being the environmental issue. With more than a billion people, in a country which still uses a large amount of fossil fuels, we can already see the consequences in the big cities. One thing that stumped me when I came to Shanghai was the fact that the sky is always grey due to pollution. Having a blue sky is actually a rare occurrence.

But that's a challenge that China tries to undertake with its new “green policy”. Just to give some examples that I saw, the price of the plastic bag went from free to 0,1 yuan. Even though it doesn't seem much, it is here to prevent the overuse of plastic bags, because they were free before, so people could take as many as they wanted, and throw them away like nothing. Another thing they did was to implement selective sorting, with 4 kinds of trash can.



(Like these)

What's interesting is that it is something new in China as Shanghai is the first city to apply this : the government used Shanghai as a “test” in order to see if it works or not, just like with Shenzhen and the reform. And again, this challenged my views, as I thought that selective sorting was pretty common and normal. But it is not, and looking back at this, I underlined 2 important factors of why I thought it was normal : education (I had multiple classes on environmental awareness, which was not the case for a lot of Chinese people) and priority (for instance, in France, people give more importance to ecology than in China). But it slowly changes as Chinese people (especially the students) are starting to shift their priorities.

However, the greatest challenge China and more especially Shanghai faced this year was the Coronavirus, as the increase in Covid-19 infections forced the government to put the whole city in quarantine. At first, I honestly thought that it would be nothing and it would only last a week, maybe two before the end. Once again, I was dead wrong.

The quarantine started on the 19th March 2022 and was still on (partially) the day I left China (17 June). Again, this blew my expectations (in a bad way this time) as everything I planned for the second semester was for naught. As for now, I am still a little bit disappointed about the things that I couldn't do in China but in exchange, I learned new things about the country and about me. First, what I learned about the country is how fast its measures are implemented and how efficiency-oriented they are. In one day, we literally went from a normal day of school to full quarantine with the need for everyone to do PCR tests. Of course, this goes for the classes too, which switched online.

Second, what I learned about me is how fast I can adapt to a situation. I never thought (actually, nobody thought) that the quarantine would be this long and the conditions this harsh.



(The fridge of one of my friends during the quarantine)

This event even changed a part of culture : before, in China, a common way to greet someone was “did you eat ?”, which is the equivalent to “hello, how are you ?” but during the quarantine, it changed to “did you do your PCR test ?”.

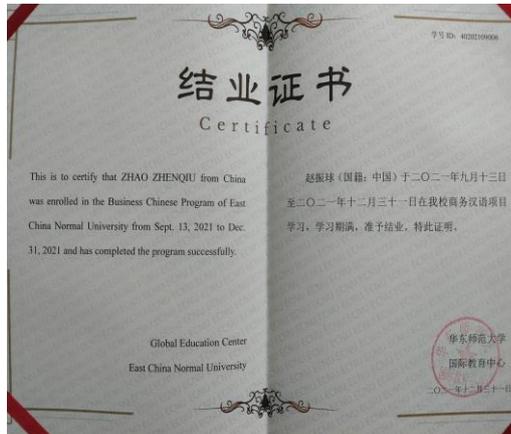


(I even started a collection of Covid tests)

Conclusion.

So, what did I gain during this year ? The short answer is : a lot.

The longer answer is : from a scholarly point of view, I greatly improved my Chinese, I expanded my knowledge in Chinese business, I improved my digital skills and I became more organized.



(The certificate of the first semester)



(Of the second semester)

From a more personal point of view, it helped me to see more clearly about my own identity as I was torn between my 2 nationalities. Now I became aware that I'm more French than Chinese, both in culture and way of thinking, but I hold these two pieces of identity as a part of me. This is also why I kept my Chinese given name in this portfolio. Additionally, I refined my speech and my social skills, I became more aware of how different but also how similar others are, and finally, I became more open minded (or at least, I'm trying to be).

At the end of the day, I came to terms with my deprecation towards traveling. Now, if someone asks me what I like to do, I can give this common answer : "I like traveling".