

EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation Portfolio



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"What happens when your comfort zone speaks one language, and the world around you speaks another?"

The question marks the beginning of a journey that is both transformative and personal, starting with Chinese learning and extending to understanding the culture. What began as merely an academic interest blossomed into a deeper engagement with identity, worldview, and cross-cultural relationship dynamics. In the past three years, the roles and responsibilities of a self-styled “student buddy” to a few international students have forced me to examine my own values and face cultural differences in a very purposeful way.

This portfolio is a collection of works that showcase that journey. It seeks to document the learning, challenge, and growing moments that I have faced both on a personal level and interculturally. It is my intention that through the reflections provided, the reader will understand the way that I have been influenced through varied cultures and the ability that I have acquired to adapt, communicate, and collaborate regardless of cultural barriers. It is undeniable that the experience and the process have deeply enriched both my academic life and personal life, serving as the basis for a life of learning and international engagement.

Building on this foundation of intercultural curiosity, my first and most formative experience came through my long-term engagement with the Confucius Institute in Rabat.

Over a period of approximately three years, I studied Chinese language and culture at the Confucius Institute in Rabat. This experience went far beyond formal classroom learning. It involved not only academic study of Mandarin and traditional customs but also real-life immersion through cultural events, personal relationships, and informal language exchange.

The program I attended offered Mandarin lessons with separate classes for grammar, vocabulary, and writing. I would argue, though, that the most impactful part of the program was the culture component. I took part in extensive cultural activities such as celebrating Mid-Autumn Festivals, Chinese New Year Celebrations, and even tea ceremonies, which allowed me to appreciate culture and consider how culture shapes values and how values are manifested through rituals, foods, and societal norms.

As I continued with the program, I formed good friendships with some of the staff graduate students from China who specialized in teaching Chinese to foreigners. Since they were in school and were closer to my age, they were very friendly, and our connection went beyond academics. We started hanging out, which helped me teach them my Moroccan culture and some basic Arabic phrases and daily living in Rabat. They taught me a lot of practical Chinese culture that was not in the books, including a lot of social norms, idioms, and habits from various Chinese regions.

This exchange was a two-way learning experience that went beyond language. It gave me a deeper understanding of how culture is lived and negotiated in daily interactions. It also pushed me to think critically about my own culture, how it is perceived by others, and how we bridge differences through empathy and communication.

Later, this openness to cultural exchange took on a new form when I connected with a German exchange student during my most recent semester.

As part of my most recent semester at university, I 'adopted' an exchange student from Germany as my informal buddy. My university lacked an official buddy or mentoring system, as well as any form of structured assistance for international students. I was curious about the international students arriving at my school, so I developed a sort of personal system of assistance that was informal, more tailored to the individual.

We forged a bond that was open enough to explore unstructured conversations, which made it possible for authentic dialogue to flow. So, in my mind, I was granted the opportunity to view German culture from a more personal angle rather than the stereotypes I was subjected to by the media. I never realized how similar the two of us were until that moment.

I was fascinated by how German culture was more straightforward than most people perceived it to be. Understanding the more nuanced traits of German personality and exuding a more direct form of communication is an element that goes unnoticed yet is slowly transforming into something I admire. My role, though, was to help the student understand the simple Moroccan lifestyle and guide him on local expressions, as well as the more informal form of social etiquette.

This mutual exchange became a safe space for **cultural curiosity, learning, and unfiltered reflection**. It also taught me that **intercultural understanding doesn't require formal settings**, it can happen organically when people are open, empathetic, and willing to learn from each other.

To better understand the depth of my learning, it is important to look closely at one of the most formative experiences that shaped my intercultural journey.

My encounter with the language and culture of China happened in a rather unusual manner. Of the many places that I could have visited, the Confucius Institute was, in fact, a destination I didn't have in mind. It was my friend who motivated me to go, and for me, it was a chance to go out, and I went simply with the thought: why not try something new? I still vividly remember the irony of it all she became a drop out and I, on the contrary, wanted to take a deep dive. Life does work in mysterious ways, and in my case, I was able to see and explore a different kind of challenge that from that moment onward became a part of my identity.

In the span of three eventful years, my life changed in so many ways. Not only did I attend the weekly Putonghua, Mandarin classes, I also participated in various culture-shaping events, for instance, the Chinese New Year Festival, Spring Festival celebrations, and tea ceremonies. Furthermore, I didn't shy away from actively attending the weekend workshops where I was taught Chinese calligraphy and the deeper meaning of luck charms. These informal classes, that transformed me from being an ordinary student into someone who was able to engage and exchange cultures, radically started transforming my life.

This journey, however, was not only about what I did it was also about how I felt while doing it.

Initially, I was indifferent, perhaps even a little skeptical. I didn't have a clearly defined destination with the Institute, and the idea of studying Chinese struck me as incoherent at best. My motivational curve was shifting the indifference I felt was rapidly replaced with a much more positive form of motivation. I remember how proud I felt the first time I was able to read a complete sentence or

recognize a festival tradition during an event. With familiarization, I felt more comfortable, connected, and eager to actually engage, to have more meaningful conversations, and to try and understand the teachers who were more or less my age and were also trying to settle into Moroccan life.

There also were some rough patches for me, discomfort, like the way all positive discomfort is growth is uncomfortable. Sometimes, I was really blocked trying to read between the lines of the culture or felt hesitant to pose some of the questions that could be reasonably considered ignorant. But all discomfort eventually subsided, and was replaced with ever-increasing positive regard

Reflecting on these emotions helped me see clearly what aspects of the experience worked well for me, and where I initially struggled.

What I remember going particularly well was how smoothly I blended into the sociocultural setting, not simply attending classes, but participating in an active learning exchange. The change from formal lessons to more casual chats with the teachers made a big difference on how much I was soaking in, not to mention how deeply I understood the culture. It was also nice to see the culture in events incorporated into lessons; everything was labeled, thus making everything contextualized and meaningful.

What did not work at first was the passive approach I was taking. Classes were to me “something to try” like, on a whim, a coffee shop I figured I could just stroll into. I also regret not taking more notes about my early experiences, particularly the feelings in the different phases I was going through. For some time, I did not want to bring up anything because of the fear of being labeled impolite. Much later, I discovered that asking questions was not just normal; it was quite welcomed, and I wished I had taken the plunge.

Considering these successes and challenges naturally led me to examine what they revealed about myself, others, and the intercultural process as a whole.

Looking back, I now see that this experience helped me move from being a passive observer of culture to an active participant. Using Edward T. Hall’s Cultural Iceberg model, I became aware of how much of Chinese culture exists below the surface gestures, silence, symbolism, and values like harmony and modesty. These are things you don’t learn from a textbook; you feel them when you share tea, when you attend a festival, or when someone explains the meaning behind a red envelope or a charm.

It also helped me to reflect on my own cultural framework how Moroccan hospitality, for example, is both similar and different from Chinese forms of welcoming. I recognized that even if we both valued community and respect for seniors, we might not show those beliefs in the same manner.

Moreover, forming friendships with the teachers blurred the lines between “foreigner” and “local.” We were all navigating unfamiliar spaces me in their culture, them in mine. It made me feel like the experience was reciprocal and it showed me that true intercultural learning frequently happens in unplanned personal moments.

My prior intercultural experiences organized through the Confucius Institute prepared me for my role as an unofficial student buddy for a German exchange student. The relationships I had already established within the Asian community made me more engaging and open to connecting across

cultures. At first, we were just classmates, and only interacted during group work. Later, we had a casual friendship and started talking more outside of the class, which now included sharing glimpses into our lives.

While our primary mode of communication was English sessions, he had an interest in learning some basic Arabic words and phrases. This motivated me to refresh my memory on some German that I had learned in middle school. This was not easy for me, but I was willing to try because it reminded me that we should always take advantage of learning opportunities, no matter their size.

There were moments of cultural surprise for both of us. For example, a greeting would simply be saying the words in English, but in Morocco, the first greeting is followed by handshake and cheek kissing. Whereas for him, this level of contact is rare.



A stand-out incident was when we met a group of Irish men during one of our excursions. An easy-going chat over beer became a friendly rivalry between the Germans and the Irish. It was both funny and revealing about cultural pride and identity. It was a comical yet insightful glimpse of culture and identity.

For example, both cultures do not verbalize emotions in the family, but rather express love and affection through actions. Moreover, the most unexpected finding was that the traditional jewelry from both cultures was strikingly similar in design and meaning. This made me explore more about the cultural relationships that exist beyond geographical boundaries.

Considering this, I realized that the prior experiences I had with other cultures made me more flexible, inquisitive, and open-minded. I understood that the greetings, food, and beer that were commonplace in most cultures were merely the surface, the visible elements of the culture. Using Hall's **Cultural Iceberg model**, I was able to delve deeper to the family structures, and pride in the traditions of the culture which are the underlying elements.

If I were to do another similar experience, I'd shift the focus to cultural sharing from the onset, rather than waiting for it to come spontaneously. Also, I would record more conversations as I learned a great deal from their rich discourse.

This exchange reminded me that intercultural understanding often develops organically, and that curiosity, humor, and shared humanity are powerful tools for bridging cultural differences.

Together, these two experiences rooted in very different cultural contexts but united by the same principles of openness and exchange form the backbone of my progression toward greater intercultural understanding.

Having interacted with the Confucius Institute, along with serving as an unofficial buddy to a German exchange student, marked the beginning stage of my progression along the path of greater

intercultural understanding. Spiraling from a drag to a first Chinese class, a curiosity first looked like weekend cultural sessions, tea ceremonies, and calligraphy workshops which only culminated for me much later. Toward the end, a single semester of friendship with a German exchange student provided me with an opportunity to cram a lot of learning into these months. Over the course of these years, my worldviews have been altered fundamentally and multilaterally.

If I approach the problem from a shift in measurable impact, my progression suddenly becomes increasingly clear. In this case, the first marked my beginning was a passive and tentative approach. Classes were to be “tested” and I was not only uncomfortable with “embarrassing” questions, I was solely dependent on literature. Opposite approach to the one mentioned earlier is mine right now. Along the lines of everything mentioned above, I have now taken the effort to organize informal learning sessions with my colleagues and teachers, in addition, I have started providing “easy” practical aid, and most importantly for the purposes of this essay, a return to learning German. The actions mentioned above are a form of moving away from passive to actively participating in the exchange of culture.

This development shows up across several competencies:

- Empathy: I began to appreciate a teacher’s reserved approach to criticism and my German friend’s appreciation for straightforwardness, attempting to appreciate these actions from their perspectives.
- Communication: I began to observe my German classmates with a level of frankness, and with my Chinese teachers, I respected their more indirect ways of communicating with a degree of formality and took a more candid approach in my interactions with German peers.
- Adaptability: I developed the ability to shift my style of etiquette to include greeting, humor, and personal space and began viewing ambiguity as an opportunity to learn rather than a challenge.
- Cultural self-awareness: I began to reflect more on my Moroccan cultural background and how it informs the social norms I anticipate and how I reacts.

I reasoned in these situations from the peers and teachers perspectives. From the standpoint of the Chinese teachers, importance placed on patience and fostering group harmony influenced their teaching style. The German student interpretation of the world around him placed significance on norms of directness and practice. My peers and occasional visitors to my classroom sparked my realization on how appreciation of one’s culture, for instance, beer, and traditions, ‘hostility’. When I took these perspectives into account, I was forced to unlearn simplistic stereotypes and learn that completely different societies can share the same values like family loyalty and pride in tradition.

Theoretical models assisted me in understanding my observations. Hall’s Cultural Iceberg highlights that visible actions such as greetings, food, and ceremonies are but the tip of the iceberg; the deeper layer of values, assumptions, and unspoken rules is often what surprises us. Recognizing that helped me practice curiosity instead of judgement.

I still face some challenges that I need to overcome. I struggle with putting lived experiences to words, particularly translating them to analytical terms that draw on intercultural theory. I often lose patience when communication is hindered by a lack of common language. These are all clearly

definable growth opportunities: more precise in documenting utterances, linking observations to theoretical frameworks, and exercising more patience when meaning unfolds over time.

In sum, my journey moved me from accidental participant to intentional intercultural actor. I can now measure that growth by what I do differently: I ask questions earlier, create spaces for exchange, and balance teaching with learning.

With these lessons and personal transformations as my foundation, I now turn toward the next chapter of my intercultural journey one that will take me beyond Morocco and into a new cultural and academic environment.

Looking ahead, I am about to begin my first exchange abroad in Évry, France, while living in Paris. This next chapter feels like both a challenge and an opportunity: a chance to apply the skills I have been developing and to push them further. I expect to encounter a new academic environment, with different teaching styles and expectations, as well as the rich cultural mix that Paris is known for. Having grown up in an environment where French was the primary language of communication, I already feel confident in my ability to navigate daily life linguistically. This fluency will help ease my transition, allowing me to focus more on cultural adaptation and academic integration.

I anticipate challenges navigating bureaucracy, adjusting to a new rhythm of life, and finding balance between study and exploration but my past experiences have taught me to see such challenges as part of the learning process. While I have specific goals for greater independence, resilience, and deeper intercultural understanding, I am also leaving space for the unexpected. Often, the most valuable lessons emerge from unplanned, human moments. Recording these expectations now will allow me to revisit them at the end of the exchange, comparing what I imagined with what I experienced, and reflecting on how much further I have grown.

I step into this exchange not as a blank page, but as a story in progress ready to add new chapters shaped by people, cultures, and moments I have yet to meet.