

Finding a Second Jia (Home)

Language, Culture, Identity, and Belongingness from an International Student's Perspective

by Xinhang Hermione Hu

So bright a gleam on the foot of my bed
Could there have been a frost already
Lifting my head to look / I found that it was moonlight
Sinking back again / I thought suddenly of home

床前明月光 chuáng qián míng yuè guāng
疑是地上霜 yí shì dì shàng shuāng
举头望明月 jǔ tóu wàng míng yuè
低头思故乡 dī tóu sī gù xiāng
—“In the Quiet Night” 静夜思

Poem by Li Bai, Translated by Witter Bynner (Shih 2020)

“Boston is my second home.”

Tracing back the memories, I could not remember how I first came to this statement. When Boston, the city, is mentioned, I am always excited and repeatedly express how much I would like to live in Boston again. The statement has the same grammatical structure as its translation in Chinese: 波士顿Boston/是is/我的my/第二个second/家home. I was thinking about it in Chinese and then translating it into English to explain to others how I feel about the city and what it means to me.

Home in Chinese is 家(jiā). While these words are equivalent in meaning, I use them in different ways and settings. The images and memories of *jia* are always my mother country, family, house, and hometown. To me, *home* is just a vocabulary word I learned, pronounced as /hoom/ in American English. It is a single word with a superficial meaning of where one lives.

I did not realize that home or hometown mean different things across languages until I was questioned about how I drafted an English version of an interview protocol for Chinese-speaking participants. An English native speaker found the question “Where is your hometown?” vague and confusing and offered an alternative, “Where are you from?” The cross-cultural understanding of *home(town)* intrigued me. From my perspective as a native Chinese speaker and a second-language speaker of English, the question would be crystal clear in the Chinese version: 你的家乡在哪里? (nǐ de jiā xiāng zài nǎ lǐ). This question emphasizes the origin of the family more, and similar questions can be phrased as 你老家是哪里的 (nǐ lǎo jiā shì nǎ lǐ de) or 你是哪里人(nǐ shì nǎ lǐ rén). The expected answer would include the ancestral home (the origin of the father's side), birthplace (if different from the former), and current residence city (if different from the previous two). My answer to the question consists of all three different places as my family and I have been migrating within Shaanxi Province in China.



Figure 1. Night scene at Xi'an Qujiangchi Site Park, January 8, 2017. Photo by author.

My parents are first-generation college graduates and are the first in their families to migrate from rural to urban areas for postsecondary education. I became the first in my family to earn a graduate degree and to be an international student. I not only spent my first 18 years living in different cities and counties of relatives' homes, but I also crossed borders and became a voluntary transnational migrant for eight years as an international student in the U.S. I believe Xi'an (the capital city of Shaanxi Province, see Figure 1) is my home, it is where I grew up and where I belong. My roots are deeply embedded in the culture and people I am engaged with. I continue disseminating the core of a Xianese (Xi'an people)–kindness, hospitality, resilience, and adaptability. Running into Xianeses in my life abroad is always uplifting, and our connections are inseparable. Growing up in the same home city, we can communicate in Mandarin and Shaanxi dialects about the shared memories of the place we cherish with no need to provide additional contexts. Especially with Chinese international students from Xi'an, we are always amazed by how much the city has changed every time we go home during breaks. “I don't even recognize my own home!” we say. The “home” usually refers to the city, while sometimes I mean the actual house, although I have not visited the new one my family moved to after I returned to the States for graduate school.

Looking for a new location to take root again as a foreigner is a path of thorns. The fear and trouble of unsettlement caused me to live a minimalist lifestyle with no decorations in my rented room, only essentials. Even today, whenever I want to buy beautiful things, I must consider how much they weigh and how much space they take in a moving box, which is also why I do not buy books or large instruments. I do not feel like I belong if I always have to look around and check how *insiders* behave, dress, and talk. If I can only imitate others and do not dare to present myself the way I want, I feel oppressed and uncomfortable. I ask: Is it possible for me to have a second home there, or anywhere, as an international student from China?

Eager and anxious to find a place in the States where I felt I belonged and had the initiative to develop and enjoy being a full person who can just be myself, this essay is a reflection on what contributed to my sense that after four years could I regard Boston as a place that fulfilled the criteria of “home.” Through personal narrative centering my migration and identity, I retrospectively engage in self-reflection on transnational and multilingual experiences, which reshaped my understanding of home beyond a singular or physical space. I also delve into the question of whether an international student can have a second home. In my conclusion, I note implications for higher education faculty and administrators that include emphasizing the need for ongoing support for international students.

“I do have a home back in China.”

The term “homeplace” coined by bell hooks (1990) references how Black women cultivate homeplace for resistance and renewal, but the idea resonates with my own quest for groundedness and belongingness—albeit in different ways. Swarts (2018) analyzes that “homeplace” and “home-making” allow for narratives of healing power to take place. This positions home as a societal narrative that reflects oppression, spirit, and resistance (81). Homeplace has been applied and extended to explore diverse populations and fields. Player et al. (2022) examine Black, Latina, and Asian identities of Girls and Femmes of Color (GFoC) in literacy studies by constructing a homeplace. Brant (2023) employs an Indigenous perspective of the homeplace in Indigenous women’s literature to call for safer communities. James Robertson (2023) studies Black and Asian women’s refuges as a homeplace of safety and healing from abuse and racism in the late 1970s. Recognizing that the concept was applied to the experiences and agency of Black women who were displaced during the period of enslavement (hooks 1990), I questioned my application of homeplace to me as a Chinese international student. After all, using homeplace is not comparable to describing my own quest or that of any group of people who cross borders to study, work, live, and go back and forth between their home and host countries. Yet notions of homeplace and, specifically, the word “home” haunted me in my self-reflection about transnational migration.

Compared with the domestic migration experience (Cuba and Hummon 1993), the transnational migration experience is far more complicated because of linguistic and cultural differences (Yao 2016) and detachment from traditional social networks (Zhao 2019). Communication with my family and social networks back in China became online and less frequent. Translating and explaining my progress and struggles with my studies to my parents and friends in Chinese is difficult and frustrating. It is not because I cannot use Chinese to express my feelings; instead, certain vocabulary and phrases are hard for my parents to understand, along with cultural differences. For instance, there is no equivalent word for presentation (e.g., in-class presentation) in Chinese. I have to replace it with a more complicated expression, “a speech with slides.” In addition, colleges in China still divide students into fixed groups based on their majors, where the same faculty and administrators supervise them. In contrast, undergraduate students in the U.S. choose and build their schedules and are assigned different academic advisors. Most of my friends in China do not have study-abroad experience, and my parents are not proficient in English. They are unfamiliar with U.S. higher education and my major, linguistics. Being grateful for their selfless and continual support, I am reluctant to admit that the physical distance partially detaches me emotionally from my close personal connections back in China. I find myself considering that home can be multiple places. Still, at the same time, I struggle with whether having a second home means uprooting from my original home.

Independence and Self-awareness

When I landed at Boston Logan International Airport in 2016, I was nervous and scared waiting in lines at customs, holding my passport, arrival card, and a bag of all my paperwork. It was not only because of the excitement and fright of starting a new life in a foreign country but also because my ears were clogged by air pressure on the airplane. I was afraid that I could not hear or understand the customs officers. There was no one I could turn to, and I had to be my sole spokesperson from now on.

Long-term study abroad challenges the adaptation to differences in cultures, languages, and values, and it drives the transition to independence and self-awareness. Growing up, I heard families and teachers reassuring middle and high school students who are pressured and burdened with test-oriented studies that “when you enter college, you can play whatever you want.” The Gaokao, college entrance exam, symbolizes a watershed between struggle and freedom for Chinese young people. On the other hand, Chinese international students face increased insecurity and uncertainty when they arrive in the host country. Usually just reaching adulthood, with two large suitcases in hand and a backpack on the back, Chinese international students start the journey of emotional and physical independence.

Living in another country can equal putting down roots and building an entirely new life. As a Chinese international student, my sense of security and belonging in the U.S. is based on my immigration status and academic excellence. To be legally allowed in the U.S., I checked in at the International Students & Scholars Office. I also applied for phone and bank cards, which I did not need to care about when I was in China—my parents were responsible for everything, and I was only asked to stay well and study hard. Despite having good grades in TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and my previous short-term study-abroad experiences in the U.S. and U.K., using a second language to survive and study in a real environment every day was tough and stressful at the beginning. Additionally, critical-thinking and discussion-based curriculum design were not the focus of my K-12 education, and it proved difficult to adapt to this pedagogy and develop needed learning skills in the short academic terms. Retrospectively, my first semester’s comparatively low GPA reflects the start of the adjustment process that continued throughout the first three years of my study-abroad experience.

Leaving my home country provided the opportunity for me to understand myself better—who I really am. Identity was not a topic that was commonly discussed when I was younger. Collectivism was valued and taught in society and schools, and little time was left for self-reflection and self-awareness. In my region and city, one would less commonly meet and socialize with people from different races or countries. While I had several English teachers from other countries in an after-school program, the setting was limited and did not apply to daily life. Being around people of the same race, ethnicity, and nationality, I had not consciously considered myself as Asian or East Asian. Racial issues are discussed daily in the U.S., and you often have to check the box indicating your race when filling out background information. As a minority on campus and in society here, I am constantly aware of my own existence and perceive myself as a representation of a Chinese international student. Against the stereotypes, I am not good at math, and I do speak up in class. Moreover, I not only ponder my status as an “other” and minority in the U.S. but also reflect on the privileges that I have that uplifted me to my current position. Independence and critical self-awareness acquired in studying abroad in Boston highlight my multifaceted coming-of-age as a person and a Chinese international student in the U.S. The growth and enlightenment are vividly stamped on my identity and memories of Boston. By relying on myself, I built an entirely new life here using the English name Hermione. It is a new piece of my identity in U.S. academic settings, which started in Boston. Having all family members living overseas, I learned to depend on myself. The study-abroad experience extends beyond academics. I began to realize that a sense of belonging and being at home stems from resilience and adaptability. As a second home, Boston witnessed the first four years of my transnational migration life, where I overcame complicated barriers and refined self-understanding.

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Multilingualism and Multiculturalism

Apart from self-growth, Boston offered the nutritional soil for me to flourish in developing multilingualism and multiculturalism. Language has always been my endless passion, and it is a critical part of who I am.

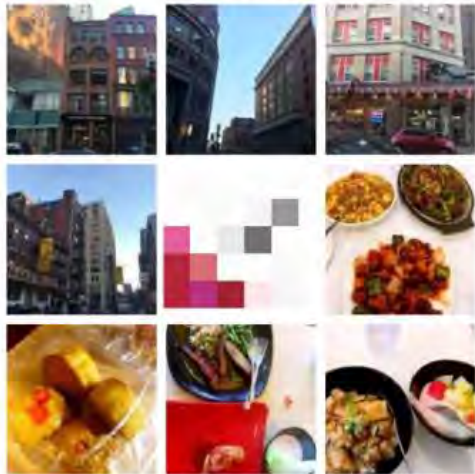
Before the second year of high school, I could only speak Mandarin and English, or I had only been exposed to these two in school. English was my favorite subject, and I excelled in it. English is my first foreign language, but my enthusiasm for language learning did not stop at the second. K-pop and K-dramas invited me to appreciate and study Korean language and culture.

Attending college in Boston allowed me to engage in constant intercultural communication using different languages. The more languages I learned, the more fulfilled my life and connection to the world became. Acquiring one new language equals developing another piece of identity on top of the others I already have. In both Korean and Spanish language classes, I made good friends who share and understand my multiple identities. I felt inner joy when I connected the West and East through language and culture as a foreigner in the space. The meaningful moments of sharing personal interests with peers provided a sense of belonging and acceptance. Home is not just a physical place but also a network of relationships and shared moments.

Reflecting on this experience, I have always been actively engaging in translanguaging (García and Li Wei 2014), which refers to one using their entire linguistic repertoire instead of narrowly focusing on one named language. Thinking about the interlocutors, I would adjust my words and languages. We would code-switch in all the languages we knew in conversation. We would text multilingual jokes that others could not understand, such as when "soy milk" amusingly translates to "I am milk" in Spanish, playing on the bilingual homophone. I enjoyed the progress of broadening my perspectives and world through learning languages. Boston has become more than just a city to me; it is a space where I can fully embrace and express my linguistic repertoire. Initially, home was synonymous with a physical place, but through my journey in Boston, I have come to see it as more fluid—a state of being where I feel comfortable, accepted, and able to thrive. This understanding of home is deeply intertwined with my multilayered, transnational identities as I navigate different cultures, languages, and experiences. In Boston, I have found a sense of belonging that transcends geographical boundaries, shaping my concept of home into something more profound and inclusive.

The foreign languages and cultures I encountered and practiced in Boston were only one side of the numerous experiences contributing to building a sense of home. My Chinese heritage found deep roots in Boston. When applying to undergraduate schools, I did not know much about Boston besides its history and great universities. After spending time on campus and in the city, I realized that the Chinese language and culture are part of the city. Boston's Chinatown is one of the city's most densely populated neighborhoods and ranks third largest in the U.S. (*BU Today* 2008). While I recognized the many ways this Chinatown does not represent the current China, the simple actions of eating the food, reading the Chinese characters on the signs, listening to various accents of Chinese, and seeing Chinese faces were all calling from home. The variety of Chinese food from different regions offered great comfort and relieved my nostalgia for my home in Xi'an.

「记第一次到 Chinatown」没吃上
 还有五分钟下班的“老西安”😞(下
 次一定吃! 油泼扯面!) - 咕嚕肉 +
 牛仔骨 + 麻婆豆腐 - 月饼不解释 -
 学校食堂的“糖醋鱼”+ 以为是豆腐
 的鸡肉😞 今天谢谢 和学长
 啦~ 😊 下次一定请学长吃



September 13, 2016 20:05 删除 ..

Figure 2. First time in Boston's Chinatown.

← *Caption translated:* 「Remembering the first time I went to Chinatown」 Didn't get to eat at the Xi'an food place, which closes in five minutes (Must eat the Oily Noodles next time!)- Sweet and Sour pork+Braised Beef Ribs+Mapo tofu-Mooncakes, need no more explanation- The "sweet and sour fish" in the cafeteria+the chicken I thought was tofu. Thanks XX and XX~ Next time will be my treat.



Figure 3. First time performing Xiangsheng at Boston University. Photo by Jessica Zhou.

The first time I went to Chinatown was September 13, 2016, less than a month after I came to the U.S. I documented the experience in WeChat (see Figure 2). I was not as homesick as later in my study-abroad life. The food and store signs in Chinese took me back to China. Besides being outdated and appearing shabby to me, Chinatown represented the Cantonese-speaking community and culture more than the Mandarin-speaking ones, making the connection between the place and me weaker than expected. However, as I trace back the memories, I realize the same-ethnic friends I made in Boston, most of whom were also Chinese international students, were one critical reason I feel like I belong to the city. They were the ones who made me feel at home there. Regardless of our different “home” languages and dialects, we talked about missing Chinese food and our families and friends in Mandarin together.

In my senior year I joined the Xianshang (crosstalk) Club, Fuyun. Xiangsheng is a Chinese traditional duo stand-up comedy show. When I performed Xiangsheng using my mother tongue Chinese, I also wore a Da Gua (Chinese traditional gown) (see Figure 3). This cherished experience of joining the club and performing made me feel at home, deepening my bond with the Chinese language, culture, clothing, and fellow international students. Being immersed in a group of Chinese students with the same interests allowed me to experience a sense of belonging and acceptance in a foreign city. This group became more than friends; being *in group* made me feel embraced and gave me a comforting sense of familiarity in Boston. The space and people within

this community nurtured an environment where I could find echoes of my own culture while exploring new horizons.

Finale


I am a native speaker of Chinese, a fluent speaker of English and Korean, and a conversational speaker of Spanish. Recently, I have started learning Japanese and Indonesian. I am grateful for my previous language learning experiences, which laid a strong foundation, enhancing my ability to embrace new languages and cultures with confidence and passion. Along with my academic identity in U.S. higher education, my multilingual and multicultural identity blossomed in Boston. My time in Boston reshaped my notion of home, transitioning it from a sole physical location to a dynamic space and fluid state defined by resilience and adaptability, comfort, acceptance, and thriving. This evolved perception underscores my multilayered identities and the fluidity of the understanding of home, shaped not only by physical environments but also by emotional and social connections that transcend geographical boundaries.

Now, all the languages I speak add to an invaluable piece of who I am as a person, Chinese, and an international student in the U.S. International students like myself may often face doubts: May I declare that Boston is my second home, a home away from home? Who has the say in this decision? Do I need confirmation from someone local? Can I simply make this statement because of my residency status? These questions are amplified because of my immigration status as an international student: With no family or relatives in the country, my only attachment is to the school that admitted me. Having good academic standing and building up my academic identity was the sole goal of my life, especially in the first two years of studying abroad.

While drafting this manuscript, I initially divided the stories of the Chinese language and culture into a separate section. I may have unconsciously wanted to show readers and myself that China is still my root, which can never be eradicated, even if I have another home here. Upon revising, I realized that my Chinese heritage is the foundation of my multilingual and multicultural identity. Speaking Chinese makes it possible for me to learn other languages. For the same reason, having my home in Xi'an makes it possible for me to have a second home in Boston. I did not just develop and practice foreign languages and cultures, but I also had the opportunity to continue nurturing my mother tongue and native cultures at my home away from home.

The unique blend of the familiar and the novel found in Boston gradually made it my second home. Surrounded by individuals who understand my cultural background and are equally eager to share my experiences, I have discovered the elements of my original home that are also contained in this new one. This mixture of cultures, interests, and shared experiences has enriched my understanding of belonging, demonstrating that home is not just a place but also a feeling created by connections and shared understanding. I recognize that the stories I share here are limited to my own migration experiences. Reflecting on my study-abroad journey, I want to call for continued academic and emotional support from faculty members, administrators, programs, and institutions specifically for international students who may face unique cultural adjustments, language barriers, and feelings of isolation, often struggling to feel at home in their new environment. Our narratives and stories should be told and heard because they carry the essence of home, connecting us to a sense of belonging and understanding that resonates deeply within us all.

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