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## Culture Without Borders: Intercultural Awareness Through Interviews and Images from International Asian Students

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# **CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS**

Culture without Borders: Intercultural Awareness through Interviews and Images from  
International Asian Students

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# **CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS**

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to understand and raise awareness of international Asian students' culture and experiences at Western Michigan University. As an immigrant, I am interested in listening to personal stories about people's culture and upbringing. I want to give students an opportunity to share their narratives and a chance to help contribute to a better understanding of culture and inclusion on campus.

Through this study, I will explore the unique stories from international Asian students at Western Michigan University to encourage and bring awareness of the many dimensions of diversity. At the end of this research, I intend to exhibit my research findings as a presentation for students, staff, faculties, and community members who will be able to walk through and read about various cultural backgrounds and experiences at Western Michigan University of international students from five different Asian countries.

## **Purpose/Background Information**

As an immigrant, I am interested in listening to personal stories about people's cultures and their life stories. It is important to me to share their stories because everyone has their own story that makes them who they are today: their reasons for doing what they do, for making the decisions they make, and for leading the life they live. At first glance, it seems like all Asians are "the same" and they hang out in cliques; however, until one meets and understands them as an individual, not as an "Asian collective", it is difficult to breakdown biases and prejudices.

In 2017, Western Michigan University welcomed students from 26 foreign countries from Asia. In this study, I will explore the experiences of students from five of those countries (the countries representing the largest number of Asian students at Western Michigan University): China,

## **CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS**

Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, and Oman. Through this study, I want to break down cultural barriers so international students and local students become more welcoming and approachable to each other. “Presumably, the presence of international students would expose domestic students to different cultures, and the interaction between domestic and international students would not only lead to a deeper understanding of each other’s culture but also develop networks that would be mutually beneficial in terms of exchanges of information, ideas, and support in the future” (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013, p. 2). With more exposure of cultural differences, “U.S. participants gained new cultural perspectives, developed empathy, and became more competent in their intercultural interactions” (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013, p. 3).

**CULTURE** is a big word (conceptually) that not only includes ethnicity, but also religion, food, and spoken language. According to Loden and Rosener (1991), culture is an acquired knowledge people use to interpret experiences and generate behavior. Culture guides and enhances worldview, decision making, and it can evolve.

When people from different cultures do not understand each other’s attitudes, practice or customs, it can lead to negative stereotyping. Stereotype, “a rigid, over-simplified, positive or negative belief that is attached to all members of a particular group or social category” (Johnson, 2018, p.149). Stereotyping leads to prejudice and discrimination, and they all have strong influences on how we act and think on a daily basis. When it becomes a barrier, it gets more challenging to connect with one another because we already have an image of who they are.

We all come from different cultures with different stories; living in one space, everyone is unique. According to the “*Future Work Skills 2020*” report (2013), cross-cultural competency is ranked 4th of the top 10 work skills needed for the future. This means we must work together despite our differences in political views and religious beliefs. Organizations that are conscious

## **CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS**

about diversity and inclusion have higher performing teams, increase work process innovation, quality and outcome, promotes better culture, safety, and health. Universities have a responsibility of increasing cross-cultural competency skills of their students. Universities should encourage students to explore their own uniqueness as well as the diverse and multicultural culture experiences of others. Everyone has experienced a significant event that shaped who they are which gives them a valuable and unique perspective. The intention of this study is to present personal stories for the audience—and they can either relate to or sympathize without generalizing the population as a whole. Through this study, I will explore the unique stories from international Asian students at Western Michigan University to encourage and bring awareness to the many dimensions of diversity.

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# **CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS**

## **Results**

### **Culture without Borders: Intercultural Awareness through Interviews and Images from International Asian Students**

**CULTURE** is a big word (conceptually) that not only includes ethnicity, but also religion, food, and spoken language. Culture guides and enhances worldview, decision making, and is always evolving.

As an immigrant, I've heard of many misconceptions about me and my culture. I became interested in listening to other personal stories from students about their cultures and their life stories. This gallery highlights images from the students I interviewed; the images were chosen by the students to represent their cultures. Along with the images, I included quotes as well as information about participants' country of origin and their experiences at Western Michigan University (WMU).

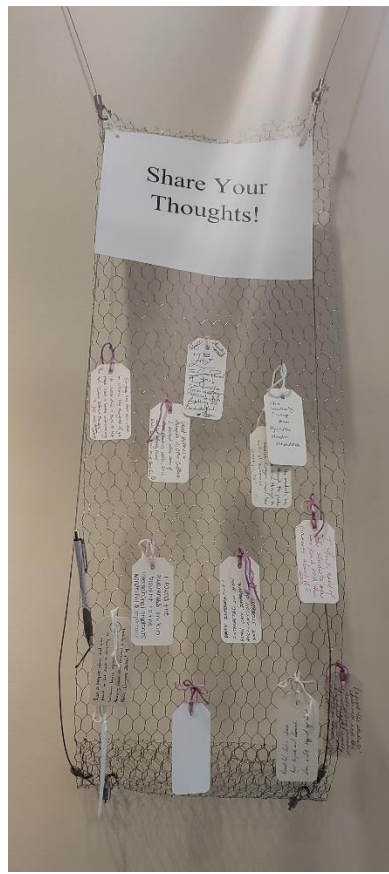
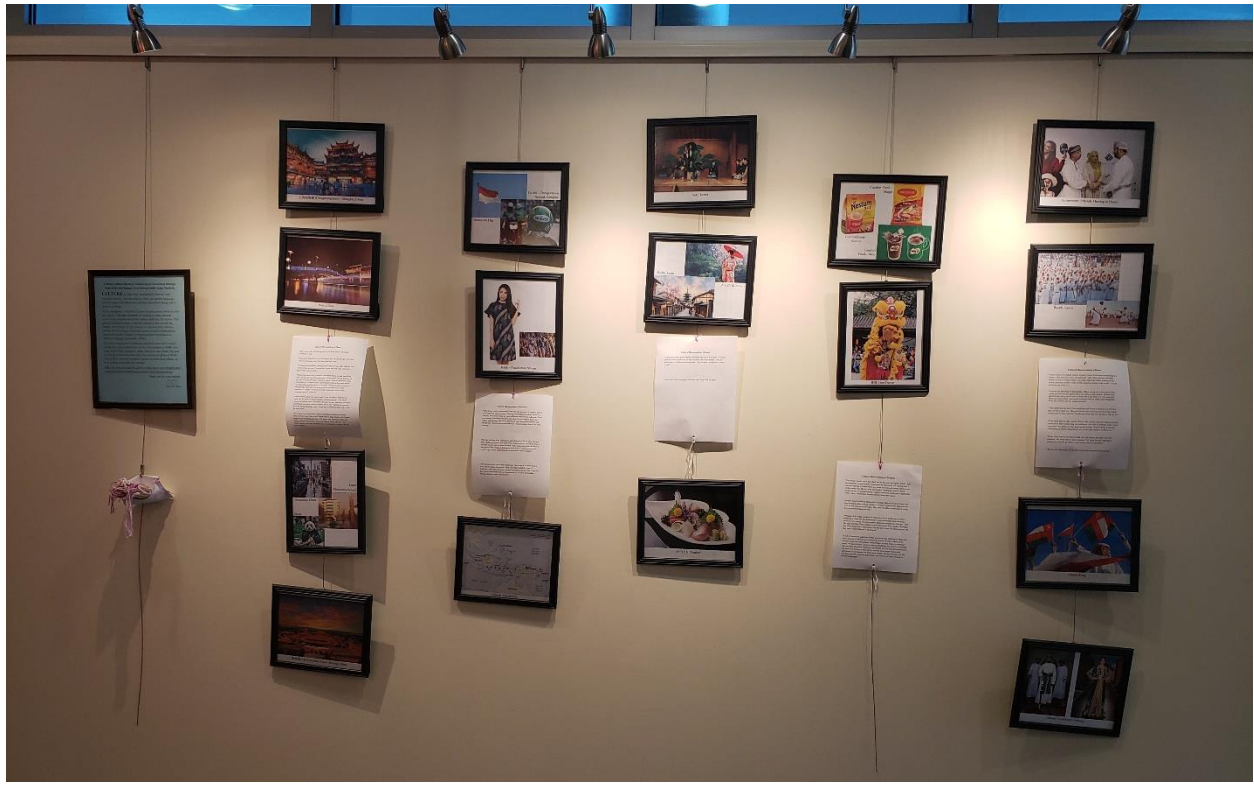
All of the images and information presented came from a study I conducted which explored the stories from students at WMU who came from China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, and Oman. My goal is to bring awareness to the many dimensions of culture at WMU. This gallery represents students' narratives about their culture, as well as their experiences on campus.

After you walk through the gallery, please leave your thoughts and comments about something you learned that was interesting.

Thank you for your interest,

Zhi Xin Wee

## CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS





## CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS

### China



“I brought a picture of my city, Guangzhou. In the front, it’s the old China, but in the back, they have new buildings. This picture represents my city and Chinese people well because we keep the good things and traditions for generations while they keep innovating. I don’t want to lose the old traditions and buildings, it’s good to keep them.”



“I took a few pictures of my city. It’s really beautiful. About 50 years ago, my hometown was like Venice. We have canals and traveled by boat. But it’s been expanding over the years, so they destroy the water

canals and make roads. Some places are protected, so the buildings are still original, traditional buildings.”

## CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS



“I brought an image of a City Temple in Shanghai. It is a must-see attraction in Shanghai.

Regardless of size, numerous walled cities in antique China had a temple devoted to one or more immortal or god as the spirit or

guard of the city. As the city expands, the temple got more popular.”



“I brought a picture of pandas! They are the national treasure of China. Most pandas live in Szechuan, China.

## CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS



“I brought a picture of the Forbidden City in Beijing. It’s the center of Beijing. In the old times, we have a wall to distinguish the Beijing in-city and

Beijing over-city. Inside of the wall, they have king’s family, a lot of powerful people and families, and they live inside the wall. Every night, they shut the doors, so people from inside can’t go outside and outside can’t go inside. Outside the wall, it’s for normal people to live. I feel that it’s the center of China, not just Beijing. At the end of the second war, that’s where they announced that we win the war. The first time the last King say that our Kingdom war ended, we begin the mortem war was also in the Forbidden City. The Forbidden City have been the center in China for more than 500 years. All the buildings are very old. They have a lot of artist and famous painting. Now it’s a national museum and everyone can go inside. When I was a child, before 2008, we could go really inside of the building and touch the things, but now, there are millions of people each day that goes through, we can’t touch them, so they close the inside of the buildings, so we can only see the outside. The first president’s portrait is hung at Tiananmen Square. Tiananmen square is the front of the Forbidden City. After we enter Tiananmen Square, we will pass 2 more doors to go into the Forbidden City. Tiananmen Square is the door to Forbidden City—two big doors, one in the front, and one in the back.”

## CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS



“I brought a picture of my elementary school.

Education is very important. Outside of the school, there is a sculpture, tree, and our school logo. The logo has two saplings on both sides representing that we are the future of the country, China. The torch is made of three letters, CCJ, which is an acronym for my school.”

### Cultural Misconceptions of China

- “They assume that all Chinese people is rich, but it doesn’t mean that everybody is rich.”
- “They don’t think China is well developed, they still think of the “old China”. China is developing really fast, faster than they know.”
- “If I watch the news here, some say that Chinese are rich, rude, and loud. Just like how there are part of America that’s good and bad, some Chinese is good, some Chinese is bad.”
- “When I first came to my American’s roommate home, her dad was telling jokes, but he said ‘Lots of people say that China people eat dog. Will you eat my dog? If you eat my dog, I will not let you in.’ I said no and then he said, ‘Just kidding!’ I’ve never seen a dog restaurant in China, but many people say that Chinese people eat dog. I know that American people loves dog. In the past, they might eat it, but majority of the population don’t eat it anymore—it’s freaky. You know how the media works, it will keep spreading even if it’s not true.
- Another time he joked was when he said ‘In the fall season, there are too much fish. We think we should sell them to Chinese people.’ That’s how people feel of have bias in their

## **CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS**

minds. We can't say any bad things about our government, we can say that we disagree, but we can't fight the government. If we are saying things that what's happening, so something close to it, it will be taken down."

- "Now, there is an increased on Chinese international students and people think everyone from China is rich. People want to make friends with Chinese people to get something from them. The family who send their children to study must have some money, but not all Chinese family are rich. Most Chinese people who study abroad are just normal people, not poor, but just above average."



## CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS

### Indonesia



“A piece of clothing with traditional Indonesian patterns is called Batik. Back at home, I don’t wear batik a lot unless it’s for special events, like flag ceremony or Independence Day. Now that I am here, I like to wear it a lot more. I only brought one here for the first semester, but when I went home for the summer, I asked my mom to buy more batik because I want to wear it more often. I begin

appreciating it more, the beauty of it, the color choices, and the patterns. Many people have also complimented, and I get to explain my culture.”



“I brought the Indonesian flag. There are two colors, red and white. Red represents bravery and white represents purity. I feel like that represent me and my time here because I am brave enough to move to the States alone without my parents and I am able to keep my values pure.”

## CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS



“There are 17,000 islands across Indonesia. We have a lot of Islands!”



“I brought a picture of a Go-jek. It’s a commonly used public transportation in Indonesia. It is very similar to Uber, but Uber uses a car, but Go-jek uses a motorbike. Not only can Go-jek take you from point A to point B, there are many other features. I can order food, like Uber eats, buy groceries for

you and bring it to your house, send someone to clean your house, and more.”

### Cultural Misconceptions of Indonesia

- “What I have mostly encountered is that they do not know, it’s more a lack of knowledge than misconception. The only misconception is that Chinese is a majority, but it’s not. There

## **CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS**

are many different ethnicities in Indonesia. There are Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese, and more. Each island has their own culture and language. One of my professors met Chinese Indonesians and thought that Chinese Indonesian makes up a big population, but no, we are a minority.”

- “The fact that they think Indonesians and Malaysians are the same. We are from a different country. We share some similar cultures, but we are from a different country and we have different values. Some also think that Bali is only place worth visiting in Indonesia, but it’s not. I would recommend people to go to Raja Ampat Islands, an untouched version of Bali.”
- “Most people don’t know where Indonesia. They know it is somewhere in Asia, but not where it is exactly. They know Bali, but Bali is part of Indonesia, a province. However, people think Indonesia is in Bali. They also don’t know that Jakarta is a very developed city, we have tall buildings, business districts, and so much more.”



## CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS

### Japan



“Otsukuri is like sashimi. Japanese chef cares about how they display their food. They focus on how they want to show their customers something beautiful on their dish. How they display the dish shows Japanese values.”



“Noh is a classical Japanese musical theater. At the back, people narrate a story and the person in the center dance and move around. The stories told are based on very old tales. It’s the oldest theater.”



“This is a picture of Kyoto, the most traditional city in Japan. The typical image of Japan everyone has of Japan is Kyoto—not only to Japanese, but also foreigners. I think if they go to

Kyoto, they can understand our culture. Kyoto also have many shrines and temple, it’s historical.

Japanese have a religion called Shinto and they go to shrines. Kyoto is great to visit!”

## CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS



“Kimono is a traditional wear that we wear on special occasions and event. A time when we would wear a kimono is when we turn 20 years old, to celebrate coming of age. We also wear it during wedding ceremony. If you go to Kyoto, you will see many people wearing

kimono for fun. Many people from other countries would rent a kimono and walk around Kyoto.”

### Cultural Misconceptions of Japan

- “Americans think Japanese people are really shy, but it’s not true. Of course, there are some people who are shy to others, but not all people. They are polite, but it’s different from being shy. They are polite compared to other people.”
- “Americans have an image of samurais when they think of Japan.”

## CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS

### Malaysia



“The first picture shows the celebration of Deepavali. The individual small candles/lamp light

up in big amounts and we use it to decorate around the house, inside and outside. You can see it everywhere during Deepavali. What this symbolizes is it means to light up the darkness, to drive out the darkness away from wherever you are staying and important places in your heart. We light as many lamps as we can. To me, that’s a beautiful thing and more beautiful in person.”



“The second image is kolam. A kolam is a form of drawing with colored rice and we use it as a decoration. We make really nice pictures

with kolam, and around kolam, we put the lights around. It’s a really big decoration it was thought to bring prosperity to homes. My mom and aunt would decorate kolams and my dad and I would light up the lights.”



## CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS



“I brought images of food like Maggi, Milo, and Nestum. Maggi is an instant noodle that we have in Malaysia. Milo is something I drink in Malaysia almost every morning. Those 3 things reminded me of home.”



“What I brought was my religion. I am exposed to both Christianity and Buddhism. For Buddhist, we celebrate Chinese New Year. Celebrating back at home, it is way grander, everyone wears red, traditional clothes like cheongsam and samfu, and we are not allowed to wear black because it represents bad luck. We eat a lot, go to relative’s houses, and collect angpaos. There is also lion dance, eat Chinese style cookies, mandarin oranges. In the States, we gathered and ate steamboat, play Chinese New Year songs, and play various mahjong and card games.”

## **CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS**

### **Cultural Misconceptions of Malaysia**

- “One thing I would say is they think we are not good in English. Which I feel is completely wrong because I remember the first time I was coming here. I was moving into my dorm and a guy came up to me and started talking to me in this weird way, like in a way that I didn’t understand English. When I spoke, he was so shocked saying ‘I didn’t know you could speak English that well.’ I don’t blame them because most of them don’t know.
- Another thing is thinking Malaysia is in China. When I tell people that I am from Malaysia, they will ask ‘Is that in China?’. Culture wise, Malaysia and U.S. we are not exactly the same. They won’t be able to understand it unless they experience Malaysian life.”
- “Because of the flight incidents in Malaysia, a lot of people know where Malaysia is. They feel like Kalamazoo is more developed than Malaysia, which is very wrong. For some reason, Malaysia compared to Chicago, I feel like big cities like Kuala Lumpur is more developed. They used to stereotype that Malaysians live in the jungles, but they don’t think like that anymore, but they don’t think Malaysia is developed.”
- “A lot of Americans asked me if there are houses and buildings in Malaysian. Some also ask if there are air conditioners because it’s hot. Some ask if I listen to American artist and are shocked that I actually listen to American music. We have all that, we have super tall buildings like KLCC (a landmark that was once the tallest building in the world). We also have air conditioners. We don’t live in trees or huts and we actually have proper houses and apartments. In our houses, we don’t have carpets, but tiles to keep cool. We also keep up with American pop culture and listen to all kinds of music in different languages.”

## CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS

### Oman



“This picture is part of a meeting that includes the government, private sector, and a woman. This meeting is about the Omani culture and how the Omani is represented in the media. The focused on including women in the government and other life

aspects, like healthcare. They discussed about equality between men and women in terms of rights, salaries, and more. They want to employee more citizens no matter what their gender is.”



“It’s a dance that people celebrate it on special occasion like Eid, marriages, a

newborn baby, and more. People gather and line up. Poets would bring a passage they chant. In the center, there will be two people battling with a sword and shield. They would all follow the beat to the drums. Historically, it represents when people went to battle, and it showed that we won.”



## CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS



“The flag, which represents Oman’s history and how we protected it over the years. On the top left side, there is a dagger and two swords, which symbolizes traditions and protection, and masculinity over time. Oman have nice climates, because we have mountains, seas, and desserts. We use these tools in order to farm and fish. Mostly, the flag represents home.”



“Women’s traditional clothes. There are many different colors and designs and each city have their own different touch. They are made of stones. We only wear this for special occasions like

weddings and very formal occasions. The men only wear shal, khanjar (dagger), masir (headscarf) and bakorah or asah during weddings. On a normal day, men usually wear dishdasha (white robe) and a cap.”

## **CULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS**

### **Cultural Misconceptions of Oman**

- “Since Oman is a middle eastern country, some Americans assume that it’s chaotic, like there are wars, and terrorist—that’s their picture of middle eastern country. Online, there is an index about the safest country in the world, peaceful country in the world, happiest people in the world—we are listed on top of the list.”
- “I would say their lack of knowledge. When people do know much, they would just assume and guess about my culture and country. People have asked if there are a lot of war in Oman, but I tell them it’s very peaceful. There are times when I encounter someone who is really knowledgeable about my country and its’ current events.”
- “They think that we don’t have anything and live in a dessert. It’s not like that, we have malls too. They also think that we cover our faces like Saudi Arabia, but we don’t do that. People also asked me if I can drive, but we do.”
- “They think that we ride camels. We do ride camels, but only during specific celebrations that would bring our traditions. Just like St. Patrick’s Day when everyone wear green, it’s the same as our culture. When we have specific celebration or camel competitions, we would ride camels, we have car.”
- “Some think that we are here to take over the States, but that’s not our intention. We came here to learn because U.S. have the best education system, but we will go back to our country after we graduate.”
- “We are not barbarians, we are like every other normal human being.”