# Capstone Project

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1711055

Winter 2026

Word Count: 1204

*"Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards" — Søren Kierkegaard*

As a second-generation Canadian of Chinese descent, I was born with more elements of a foreign land than the place of my birth. I realized early on that there is no erasing that part of me, and yet for a long time I had no real tools to understand it. My early attempts to make sense of this heritage — completely removed from its source — were akin to watching television at 320p resolution: you can make out the general shapes but cannot see anything in detail. I went through the motions of customs, memorized the taboos, and knew I must wear slippers in the house — but there was never an answer to why. Eventually, it also became clear that understanding would not come to me passively, and so, motivated to resolve that discomfort, I set out to go looking for it myself.

There is a certain irony in learning Chinese as a Chinese kid. And yet that is what I found myself doing during the latter part of high school and into university. My Chinese had been backsliding since my early developmental years, and what remained were mostly household phrases. Having not received adequate formal language education, it was safe to say my foundation was wobbly. To rectify this, I aimed for maximum immersion — within the constraints of the anglosphere. Outside the classroom, I supplemented my learning with various forms of media. I read books where I had to pause every few seconds to look up a new character. I watched shows with only Chinese subtitles, despite not understanding a thing. In retrospect, I am not sure what came over me, but I can only describe that period as obsessive. Through the pockets of history, pop culture, and literature I consumed, the culture began to reveal itself to me. I found untranslatable words and phrases encoded specifically for Chinese culture — for example, *卷 (juǎn)*, which literally means "roll," but has evolved to reference the societal phenomenon of involution in Chinese society. Similarly, *"躺平"* ("lying flat") is a phrase coined to define the counter-involution movement of doing absolutely nothing. Phrases like these required me to learn about society and culture before I could even begin to grasp their connotations. When I became able to carry myself in Chinese, I also noticed that the Chinese linguistic framework led me down different logical pathways. Here is a simple example: Chinese culture places great value on humility, which meant there were more words for associated mannerisms — and so my Chinese way of

speaking became more tactful and restrained. As I learned the language and embraced the culture, I also evolved in both thought and action.

My first year of university fell at the latter end of COVID, and there was no Chinese cultural club on campus. With my newfound cultural understanding, I realized the campus community might benefit from a Chinese cultural organization, given the sizable local Chinese diaspora population and the likely curiosity of many non-Chinese students. And so, in my second year, I decided to start one and ran it for two years. Being the founder and president of such a club was a great privilege, but also an incredibly humbling experience. Before my tenure, I had few solid opportunities to engage in discussions about culture — my ideas were mostly fabrications in my own head. As president, I constantly weighed different perspectives on what culture actually was. The Chinese community is extremely diverse, and often at odds with itself. I noticed that the degree of integration into Canadian society largely shaped the extent and form of a person's cultural engagement. Seeing the full spectrum of "Chinese-ness" allowed me to situate myself as an odd in-betweener: more engaged in Chinese language and culture than many of my Canadian-born peers, yet not "Chinese enough" compared to international students from China. As an in-betweener president, I walked along a strange, invisible line of cultural appropriation. While I am ethnically Chinese, I am also removed from the origins of Chinese culture and customs — in many ways, I am still just going through the motions. As a born-and-raised Canadian, there were certain dimensions of customs that I could never fully embody. During my time as president, I often pondered what the most appropriate way to present and experience culture was. I strove hard to find a universal rule that would satisfy everyone, but eventually realized it was a fruitless pursuit. Culture is as much a personal experience as it is collective knowledge. There is no way a fifth-generation Chinese immigrant and a recently arrived Chinese national will see culture the same way — and perhaps that is precisely what makes culture such a rich, vibrant tapestry.

I decided to go on exchange at a time when I was feeling quite nihilistic about identity, career, and self. Serving as president of the Chinese cultural club provided an intensive crash course where my language and cultural learning had reached a plateau. While I was not confident that going abroad would change anything, it was the most natural next step. And so I went, for a year. My most meaningful experiences were not tourist destinations or curated exchange student events, but came from daily immersion in local culture. Equipped with passable Chinese and a

moderate understanding of Chinese society, I inserted myself into everyday life. I took classes entirely in Chinese, ate almost exclusively in canteens, and followed a course load similar to local students. To the best of my ability, I wanted to experience the Chinese day-to-day I had only read about. A crucial catalyst for surviving what would otherwise have been a gruelling challenge was joining the school soccer team. Because I had to show up nearly every day for scrimmages or practice, I became close friends with local students from various majors and backgrounds. During countless late-night walks back to the dorms, we had conversations about society, people, and the world. In my moments of cultural confusion, they provided context and insight. In China, I was able to fill the gaping holes in my cultural understanding — for instance, I felt the tonal shift of an entire nation during the days surrounding Chinese New Year. Compared to Canada, the performance and decoration were tangible evidence of a fervour that pulsed through the country. It was by living through these experiences on the ground that I moved from feeling like an appropriator to feeling like an active participant in the culture.

At the beginning of my degree, I had no plans to complete a Certificate of International Learning. However, I had great opportunities to lean into intercultural experiences throughout my university years. I am not sure how "intercultural" my experience truly is, given that my journey follows a fairly linear progression centred on a single cultural heritage. But perhaps intercultural learning does not always mean crossing into an entirely foreign world — sometimes it means excavating the one that was always partially yours. While I may not have gained fluency in many cultures, what I gained instead was fluency in the discomfort of not fully belonging — and the quiet understanding that most people, in one way or another, are navigating the same.