I live in two separate worlds. The first involves my ingrained Jewish identity, the memories of celebrated holidays and Jewish education. My initial world has been everything to me since I was born: it was all I ever knew. The second world is a newer world, at least to me. It is filled with Asian culture and Chinese history. In my second world, I leave the restraints of my appearance as a simple white American. I surprise people. I surprise myself.

As a devoted Conservative Jew who speaks Chinese, I take considerable pleasure when my two worlds happen to come together, as they have on a few occasions throughout my time in China.

It was our final weekend in Beijing before we were to leave on a week-long excursion to other parts of China. My friend Miriam and I had been invited by Dini, the owner of the only kosher restaurant in Beijing, to attend Shabbat that coming Friday night. Unsure of what a Shabbat in Beijing would entail, but suffering a severe lack of Jewish influence in our lives (we had now been in China for a month), we decided to give it a try. We followed the address Dini had given us which was supposed to lead us to an apartment for Kabbalat Shabbat services. But upon arrival to the neighborhood we realized that the apartment was not so easily found. We wandered for what felt like hours before finally turning to the Chinese military guards who were serving as security for the gated community.

“You tai ren zai na er?” “Where are the Jews?” We asked them over and over, but our questions yielded little response. We were just about to give up and head back to our dorm when one of the guards made a stroking gesture, as if to show the presence of a beard. “Yes, Yes!” Miriam shouted, and soon we were on our way to services, being lead by 4 armed Chinese soldiers.

Kabbalat Shabbat was held in a tiny apartment, filled to the brim with chattering Jews. At the end of the service, the entire group walked to Dini’s restaurant for dinner. The dining room was packed with people who had come from the United States, Canada, Australia, South Africa, England, and Israel. Throughout the night we ate mountains of delicious food, sang Jewish
songs loudly (and off key), and shared the reasons which had brought us to Beijing. Miriam and I looked at each other and laughed because we knew that somehow in the world’s most populous country, we had found our home.

Though my experience at Kabbalat Shabbat services remains my favorite memory of Judaism and Chinese coming together, it is far from my only experience. In the fall of 2011, I studied abroad in Nanjing. I had been taking classes for over a month when the elevator in my dorm stopped briefly on a floor I had never been to. I caught a quick glimpse of the writing on the wall in front of my. “Nanjing University Institute for Jewish Studies” was displayed proudly in English, Hebrew, and Chinese. I was shocked. How could I have lived here for weeks and not even realized that people were studying Judaism right in my building?

So I made an appointment and went to meet with the head of the department. He showed me around their collection of Jewish artifacts and his personal photo album of the various Jewish holidays and celebrations he had attended. When I asked him how a man who had only ever lived in China and had never even met a Jew until he entered this field became interested in studying Judaism he responded, “Because you have been through so much and you are still here. You are stronger than any other people.”

I was stunned. It’s a message I had been told over and over again my entire life, and this man had picked it up entirely on his own. In that moment I was so proud to be Jewish and equally as proud to be surrounded by Chinese culture. My two worlds had come together so beautifully, they were almost indistinguishable.

It’s an amazing and comforting thing when I get to speak Chinese and simultaneously celebrate my Jewish identity. It doesn’t happen often, but when it does, I do my best to remember what it feels like to be completely at ease with both sides of myself. It feels wonderful.

Naomi Nason is currently studying Journalism and Asian and Middle Eastern History at Northwestern University. She spent extended lengths of time in China while on a summer program in Beijing in 2008 and while studying abroad in Nanjing in the Fall of 2011.