Blend in or stand out in China?

BY SOH WEE LING

FEW of my friends would have expected me to relocate to China, having no other Mandarin orientation than the 10pm news and talking to my parents.

Yet, after visiting Beijing for a United Nations conference some years ago, I made up my mind to work there.

Perhaps it was the country's tempting clash of the new and the old, or maybe an unspoken desire to find out more about my roots and identity.

After landing a job in Shanghai, one of the first things I learnt was that answering the simple question “Hi, are you Chinese?” can be quite complicated.

On many occasions, I replied in the affirmative, only to realise that people had been asking about my nationality.

I soon understood that as Singaporeans of Chinese descent, we are invisible foreigners — we appear no different from the locals, that is, until we start talking.

I suppose it is the same with Indian Singaporeans in India: either way, Singlish or the lack of fluency in our mother tongues gives us away.

The good thing is that we have it a little easier when trying to integrate culturally with mainland Chinese, compared to other ethnic groups.

Yet, I do feel like a Caucasian in a Chinese body at times.

My appreciation of humour and my lifestyle differs from that of my Chinese friends, and here, I relate better to my Caucasian friends.

Let’s face it, Chinese Singaporeans do occupy a somewhat unique position in China.

Rather than shift from one side to the other, perhaps we should make the best of it as the truth is, we can never truly be either.

During National Day this year, I organised a party in a popular bar.

My aim was simple: to launch a hip version of the National Day dinners which Singaporeans are known for — minus food and tickets, and with some eclectic music instead.

Why not use our multicultural heritage to facilitate communication between different groups of people?

So I got my expatriate friends, local Chinese friends and fellow Singaporeans to interact in a fun, informal environment, without the pressure of the name-card exchange typically witnessed at the ubiquitous networking events around Shanghai.

The result was this discovery: While it is true our Singaporean identity can be amorphous, being in China is helping me solidify my own.

Honestly, I have never felt as patriotic – or drunk as much Tiger Beer in my life.

The writer, 25, graduated from Singapore Management University and is currently working in a tax consulting firm in Shanghai.