

Far from Home

Securing a productive academic and social experience in the United States is no sure thing for thousands of bachelor's degree seekers from China.

JING CUI, A RECENT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE, WAS BOLD. While earning her degree in supply chain management, the Chengdu native helped organize the school's homecoming parade. Through MSU's International Student Association, she volunteered at a cat shelter and helped out at campus conferences.



Chinese student Jing Cui in front of Beamount Tower on the Michigan State University campus

These steps toward integrating into campus life may seem small, but to typically shy, group-oriented undergraduates from the People's Republic of China (PRC), who rarely leave the comfort of their ethnic circle, such actions are unusually assertive.

Now working for International Paper in Memphis, Tennessee, Cui admits to "a strong personality." Among her compatriots on the Michigan campus, she felt she was the exception.

"My goal in coming to the U.S. wasn't to hang out with Chinese the whole time. I really like the American community and I wanted to learn from people around me." What her Chinese friends tell her is how hard it is to enter larger college life.

Does this matter to U.S. university officials and international student offices? You bet. At a time when many U.S. students can ill afford college costs without financial aid, a significant number of cash-strapped public institutions and private schools are looking to Chinese undergrads to help internationalize campuses while paying the full-freight tuition fees their well-off PRC families can afford.

Burgeoning numbers of Chinese undergraduates are driving the growth in foreign students attending U.S. institutions, according to *Open Doors*. In 2011–2012, total PRC students increased by 23 percent from the previous year, to 194,000. Chinese undergraduate enrollments grew by 31 percent. China is the leading sender of students to the United States, and no end to the surge is in sight.

But getting Chinese students on campus is only the beginning.

Helping them succeed academically and socially once here is "almost all I think about," says



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Peter Briggs, director of MSU's international office. With MSU's jump in Chinese undergrads from 45 in 2005 to more than 2,800 today, and Chinese applications expected to balloon from 6,000 to 9,000 between fall 2012 and fall 2013, Briggs feels the amount of time spent on Chinese students relative to other international students is justified.

"I've been in this field for 35 years. This historic sweep of Chinese students is not normal. It's an opportunity to seize."

Different From Earlier Cohorts

In the early 1980s, Chinese students coming to the United States were usually government-funded, doctoral-degree seekers—mature, patriotic, top-notch students in STEM fields who were committed to going home to strengthen a China still recovering from the devastation of the Cultural Revolution.

Today's students are more diverse in financing sources, majors, hometowns, and academic motivation. As single-children from newly affluent middle-class families, some failed China's all-important national university exam, or simply bypassed it, relying on U.S. agents in China to secure them admission to a U.S. college.

This generation of Chinese students has been coddled by parents and grandparents, observed a number of international office directors. That, and access to the Internet, says Yenbo Wu, director of international programs at San Francisco State University, has made them more liberal and independent-minded than earlier generations. Also, they are more practical and less politically ideological.

Those traits should help them succeed on U.S. campuses, but often, they don't. "There's less government control over their thinking," says Wu, who came to the United States in 1984 and earned a PhD in comparative education, "but their competence, skills, and experience aren't there." Chinese seem to require more mentoring than other international students.

According to college officials interviewed for this article who work with international students, the quality and maturity of Chinese students have slipped over the years.

Chinese students can struggle to make decisions about daily life and course selection, as do sheltered U.S. freshmen, but they are often unprepared for U.S. academic and social life.

Unlike those on university exchange programs, who've been vetted, some Chinese undergrads do not have clear goals in mind.

"Don't think you're coming here to party," Mei-Chi Chen Piletz of Mississippi College, a private Christian college in Clinton, Mississippi, that began aggressively recruiting Chinese students in 2005, says she tells Chinese students. "We're not lowering the bar for you," she informs them. During fall 2012, the college sent home two students whose GPAs were dropping and who refused school-financed tutors.

Chinese students can struggle to make decisions about daily life and course selection, as do sheltered U.S. freshmen, but they are often unprepared for U.S. academic and social life. Low English proficiency is a root problem—students studied it in China as a subject rather than a living tool. But larger issues are at play. Western professors expect a certain level of critical thinking that China's rote education does not encourage.

Socially, Chinese who room with U.S. students have the chance to interact and improve their English. According to several Chinese students interviewed, however, discomfort with U.S. roommates' proclivity for noise and bringing sexual partners to the room, coupled with a fear to speak out, leaves a communication gap only bridged when Chinese are willing to express their feelings about these behaviors. For the most part, the situation leads to Chinese seeking compatriot roommates, a decision sometimes couched in culinary terms. Says one George Mason University junior from Shenyang, "When Chinese people cook, the oil makes a lot of smell and smoke; Americans don't like that."

Reluctant to Integrate and Seek Outside Help

"Most Chinese students aren't motivated to become integrated here," says Yenbo Wu. "It's not a priority." The issue carries over to Chinese PhDs working in America. "They admire U.S. society and understand how it basically functions, but don't deeply participate." Few Chinese students have American friends, he observes.

Several students interviewed referenced a trajectory that rules out the need, in their minds, to network with locals or other international students. They hope to return to China after working in the United States for a few years, and expect their parents to secure jobs for them.

Cultural differences, real and perceived, insulate them from U.S. campus life in ways that can prevent them from using university services that could help them succeed. For instance, Chinese students tend to get information about where to live and what courses to take from each other, not from the university, says Wu. The information they get is not always accurate.

By training, Chinese are ace test takers, especially in large classes where the exams are multiple choice and the subject matter, say, accounting, doesn't require much writing. But as undergraduate Yeran Zhou wrote in a January 16, 2013, *Chronicle of Higher Education* blog, "Just because some Chinese students are getting good grades on paper doesn't mean they are doing well in reality."

Newfound freedom from parents who have carefully planned every detail of their lives can be overwhelming. Insomnia may afflict students new to campus, as it did a friend of George Mason University student Shengming Qu. For some Chinese students, depression and suicide may mark the dark side of campus life, according to Charles Hou, director of the Global Higher Education Academy, which helps Chinese students prepare to study abroad.

Yet when they experience psychological problems, the last place they go for help is the university. Even if U.S. schools had Chinese psychologists on hand, not sharing one's problems with strangers is a matter of face.



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“It’s not a question of language but of culture,” says Charles Hou “No one goes to a doctor for psychological problems. They go to friends.” Echoes MSU grad Jing Cui, “There aren’t counselors in Chinese schools. We’re not used to the idea,” she says, though she feels that over time Chinese students may start making use of these resources.

What Can Schools Do?

Devoting a disproportionate amount of time and resources to the needs of Chinese students can draw criticism for showing favoritism. But institutions committed to nurturing success for this population prepare Chinese students for U.S. campus life before they leave home.

In June 2011 some 500 Chinese students and their parents attended MSU China-based predeparture briefings. Chinese colleges don’t hold such meetings and provide few services to students, so families highly value the chance to meet college officials and ask questions. “It’s great to have the parents there,” says Peter Briggs. “We give students confidence that someone’s caring for them.” The goal is to build trust, which isn’t easily done at a big state school. Importantly, current MSU students from China are also on hand at the briefings.

MSU alum Jing Cui, who didn’t have the benefit of an in-China briefing before arriv-

ing in 2009, says that U.S. colleges need to alert undergrads to the very real difficulties ahead, including language. “I didn’t realize how hard it would be to talk to my American roommates or to the front desk.”

Mei-Chi Chen Piletz, director of Mississippi College’s office of global education since October 2012, is in the process of forming advisory groups in China comprising Chinese alumni who would “explain our school’s expectations so there are no surprises.” She envisions multiple advisory groups, drawing on the alumni dotted across the country. “We offer predeparture orientation for our American students going to China. The same should apply to our Chinese students,” she says.

To address U.S. academic expectations, the Global Higher Education Academy’s Charles Hou suggests in-China workshops that let students experience Western education in context.

“It’s a question of learning in the way Westerners teach,” says the McGill University PhD. In the undergrad workshops he used to give in China, he taught “how to learn”—how to deal with assignments and communicate with peers and professors. Hou gave them U.S.-style assignments that required choosing a research topic and collecting data. He taught them how to com-

pose papers, and he explained copyright. “Talking about plagiarism is a must,” he says.

Most for-profit language training schools in China only help students pass standardized tests says Hou. “Very few students are aware that after they get good TOEFL scores, they still have a long way to go” to secure a successful academic experience abroad.

Aligning Goals and Taking Concrete Actions

Once Chinese undergrads arrive on a U.S. quad, finding a welcoming environment where they feel supported requires a larger effort beyond what any one international office can do.

U.S. schools, from top to bottom, need to align their goals in serving Chinese students, says San Francisco State’s Yenbo Wu. Some parts of campus want them for their tuition dollars, others for the diversity they bring. Many institutions don’t speak with one voice about Chinese students, he says.

Others argue that in order for Chinese students to better fit into campus life, colleges need to educate students and faculty about Chinese culture. “Many students may not even know where China is,” says Christopher Tong, director of the Center for China-American Business Studies at Westminster College in Salt Lake City.

Mississippi College’s Piletz finds her whole campus working to support international students (over half of whom are Chinese)—the writing center; residence life; student life; the Baptist Student Union; the Office of Christian Development, which hosts a free monthly lunch for international students. “Our administration from the president down—everybody’s on board. Our office couldn’t do what we do without all this help,” she says.

Useful approaches to creating a warm climate for Chinese students involve reaching out, building trust, and being proactive to preempt problems. Project Explore, an MSU international office initiative begun in fall 2010, is an innovative way to do all three.

Project Explore, according to Peter Briggs, makes Chinese students “insiders to the issues that affect them.” The project is staffed by seven Chinese students hired by

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the university to be a bridge between MSU and the Chinese campus community. Briggs meets with them weekly for two hours, time well spent, he feels.

The project has become a leadership training ground for students who might not otherwise get involved with the university. With Briggs, they discuss academic honesty and lack of Chinese classroom participation. They've created a page on Renren (China's Facebook equivalent) that has become a channel for the international office to see what's brewing within the Chinese campus community and to get word out about university events and services.

Through Renren, for instance, Briggs says he learned about students' unhappiness with how a local apartment complex was handling theft of Chinese student belongings—a tense situation that his subsequent intervention was able to help diffuse. It was Project Explore members who suggested MSU provide in-China predeparture briefings.

Other proactive steps schools can take? Universities should not assume that Chinese students will take advantage of school services and activities on their own, says Yenbo Wu. Schools could work more closely with Chinese organizations such as the Chinese Student and Scholars Association. According to Madelyn Ross, George Mason University's China coordinator, that national group is very active on her campus, where it helps fill a service gap for the international office by fetching students at the airport and providing a rental housing board. GMU student Qu Shengming feels campuses could provide mentors to Chinese students, perhaps focusing on China-born upperclassmen or U.S. students interested in China. Schools also could rely more on Chinese faculty as a resource in advising students from China, who respect authority figures, according to Yenbo Wu. Charles Hou says that Chinese students are naturally inclined toward membership and groups. Colleges could proactively encourage them to join honor societies and spring break activities off campus, according to several international office heads. Chinese students interviewed say their campus writer center was helpful in helping them get through freshman English and other writing-based classes.

To compel Chinese students to improve their English, universities could require them to have U.S. roommates. Piletz had some success doing this while at Jackson State University. In her current post, she bans students from speaking Chinese in her office, even though she is a native Chinese speaker. Universities could also encourage local families to host foreign students for the holidays, as they do at Mississippi College.

Seasoned foreign student advisers know what to do to support Chinese and other international students. It's not rocket science, says Yenbo Wu. "It's a question of how much time and energy schools spend on dealing with the challenges and the intentionality to do it." **IE**

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