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Chinese Students in Undergraduate Programs: Understanding and Overcoming the Challenges

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While studying at the University of Delaware (UD), he prefers that you call him Henry. His pride and love for his country, culture, family, and given Chinese name are profound, but since arriving to campus, he has become rather adept at code switching. Thus, donning a nickname helps him assume a role and rhythm that helps him dance to the beat of U.S. culture. Henry is an active member of the intercultural club on campus, where he has cultivated close friendships among U.S. students and those of other nationalities. After the tsunami struck Japan, Henry was at the forefront among student leaders in organizing a highly effective fundraising initiative. Active in service learning, he enjoys visiting the local senior center, intrigued by the life histories of its members, who, in turn, are fascinated with his description of the rapid changes that have come over China in the last three decades. Now pursuing his degree after having fulfilled his language requirements through UD's English Language Institute, Henry has good grades, but he has to spend twice as many hours as his U.S. classmates to keep up with the reading assignments, and his writing continues to be laced with occasional grammatical and syntactic imperfections. Nevertheless, his professors are impressed with the level of critical thinking and creativity revealed in Henry's papers. They believe the contrasting world view he often shares though his active class participation has enriched the educational experience for everyone.

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Henry is the kind of student that deans and provosts envisioned some five years ago when universities across the country began heavily recruiting Chinese applicants for their undergraduate programs through direct admits, conditional admissions, and so-called "pathways" programs. While a significant minority of the 40,000 Chinese students who have suddenly arrived to U.S. campuses (Bartlett 2011) fit the kind of idealized profile Henry represents, the behavior and performance of others have led to considerable hand-wringing among many college administrators and faculty. Most

NAFSA members are already familiar with recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *New York Times* articles reporting (a) widespread use of fraudulent transcripts by Chinese applicants and some (though certainly not all) of their complicit agents, (b) a spike in cases of academic dishonesty among Chinese students at U.S. schools, and (c) direct admit students arriving to campus with woefully inadequate language skills that belie the exceptional IBT or IELTS scores submitted with their applications (Melcher 2011). In addition, professors on many campuses complain of a remarkable lack of engagement by Chinese undergraduates who participate neither in class discussion nor group or problem-based learning. Student life officials echo this sentiment, reporting an unwillingness of many of these same students to live in residence halls, attend university functions, or socialize beyond their large, close-knit circle of fellow Chinese peers (Bartlett 2011).

University officials have reason to consider this last challenge, namely the lack of engagement in the curricular or extracurricular life of the campus, to trump all other concerns, as it goes to the very heart of why international students are courted by admissions offices in the first place. Although there is no doubt some truth to the charge that a few colleges responded to recent cutbacks in state funding by aggressively and cynically recruiting affluent Chinese students to bridge budget shortfalls, the vast majority of institutions of higher learning have pursued an Asian recruitment strategy out of an earnest attempt to fulfill well-considered strategic plans to globalize their campuses and curricula, with the long-term goal of preparing U.S. graduates to compete in an interconnected global economy—an economy that will be increasingly dominated by China. To this end, U.S. college officials anticipated vibrant cross-cultural interaction through an array of international festivals and programs, as well as stimulating classroom discussions infused with Chinese perspectives on a spectrum of topics from politics to philosophy to business. On many campuses, this alluring dream has not been realized. Instead, many Chinese seem segregated and alienated from their U.S. peers and professors, creating a situation frustrating to all concerned, including the Chinese students themselves.

Long-time international educators were caught off guard by this development, in part, because we thought we understood the dynamics of working with Chinese students. Indeed, major research universities have been admitting tens of thousands of Chinese to graduate programs in science, mathematics, and engineering since the early 1980s. What, then, has changed? A great many things, it seems. First, graduate programs in these fields present students with a far less linguistically demanding setting than that of undergraduate study. Master's and PhD students in science and engineering communicate using a highly specialized vocabulary in a narrowly defined discipline, and their interaction, as well as their socializing, tends to be limited to fellow Chinese graduate students. In many cases, there is little institutional expectation for these scholars to venture beyond their laboratories. In fact, it is only when they *do* step outside of the narrow realms of their research that problems arise. For this reason, the early 1980s gave rise to the development of international teaching assistant (ITA) programs on campuses across the country to help Chinese and other ITAs develop more effective language, cross-cultural, and pedagogical skills when assigned to teach introductory courses and labs to freshmen and sophomores from other disciplines.

For Chinese undergraduates, however, the linguistic bar has been set far higher. They must not only take courses within their degree (often business, science, or engineering) but also fulfill distribution requirements in the arts and humanities, whose courses assume a far larger and more

wide-ranging vocabulary as well as requisite knowledge of Western culture, literature, history, and government. Further, U.S. professors continue to move away from traditional teacher-centered classroom lectures to more interactive instructional settings involving clickers, problem-based learning, group discussions, and online forums, all of which place greater linguistic demands on students. Moreover, universities expect all undergraduates to participate in the life of the campus and community through activities that place all international students in a variety of complex discourse settings. And while Ivy League and first-tier universities draw Chinese applicants almost exclusively from prestigious private high schools and highly educated families, public universities are, in many cases, attracting the offspring of China's growing but nascent middle class. A large number of these applicants are the first members of their family to attend college and, thus, in addition to confronting formidable linguistic and cultural barriers, they must also cope with the same academic transitional issues facing their Gen-1 U.S. peers. For many Chinese freshmen, all of this is more than they bargained for.

Yet despite all of these difficulties, several universities are reporting that by their second or third semester most Chinese students are earning grades comparable to those of their U.S. classmates (Bartlett 2011). What remains unchanged, however, is a distinct lack of participation in classroom and extracurricular activities. The causes of this lack of engagement may be rooted in deep cultural and political differences between Chinese and U.S. students and faculty (See [Figure 1](#)). It should be noted from the outset that making any generalizations about cultures is fraught with peril because they are just that, generalizations and, as such, do not make individual distinctions. They don't take into account the Henrys who seem to move so freely across cultural boundaries that it calls into question the rationale for any cultural demarcations in the first place. That said, cultural explanations for Chinese silence in class and their reticence to become involved in campus life seem to comport with observations made by both Chinese scholars and the students themselves (Liu 2002). These explanations include allegiance to the group, Confucianism, and social harmony and obligation.

Allegiance to the Group. Self-reliance is one of the defining characteristics of U.S. culture, which promotes individualism and self-expression. China, by contrast, is a collectivist society that subordinates the individual to the group and promotes individual modesty. This trait plays out in a number of ways on U.S. campuses. First, Chinese students tend to register for classes as a group, resulting in certain sections of courses being overwhelmingly Chinese, often with the few remaining U.S. students transferring out to other sections. When Chinese students are together in class, they will seldom participate, lest they appear immodest to the other group members. Group dynamics also impact student life. Chinese groups often provide their own social programs that draw members away from university residence and student life activities. A UD professor reported that after she invited a Chinese student to a Halloween party, she was surprised to hear the student respond, "No thank you. We Chinese will have our own party, and it will be better than yours."

Although it is natural for individuals to be drawn to the familiarity, shared language, and cultural comfort derived from socializing with fellow country peers, the degree to which Chinese students avoid interaction both with U.S. students and those of other nationalities is noticeably more pronounced, even when compared to other collectivist cultures such as Japan, Korea, and even Taiwan. Some of this may stem from the deep and justifiable pride Chinese take in the unmatched economic advances of their country and the growing sense among many in the PRC

that the sun is rapidly setting on the United States' glory days: that its strength and influence in the world is fading. As leaders of the generation that they believe will usher in a new world order led first and foremost by China, students may simply be more energized in the company of other Chinese. Then, too, a lifetime of having been exposed to negative portrayals of the United States in the government-controlled media, coupled with real or perceived fears that their activities in the United States might be reported to local communist party leaders back home, may have made Chinese students understandably wary of immersing themselves in the U.S. academic culture. Finally, members of collectivist societies tend to grow silent and withdrawn when their social status appears ambiguous or their living environment is perceived as unfriendly (Liu 2002). U.S. universities need to look inward to consider whether their staff, faculty, and student body might directly or indirectly be communicating a less than welcoming message to their Chinese student scholars.

Confucianism. The influence of Confucianism on the Chinese educational system continues today and instills in students impressive virtues, such as strong self-discipline, great respect for their teachers, and a prodigious ability to memorize and recall voluminous amounts of content. These virtues, which serve Chinese students so well in their own country, can, at times, run counter to the U.S. educational goals of engendering creativity and a willingness to challenge existing precepts. For example, respect for professors can border on awe, further contributing to classroom silence. Chinese students would rarely venture to contradict their teacher or risk asking a question to which his professor might not know the answer, as this would cause a loss of face. Moreover, a predisposition toward memorization and unquestioned acceptance of widely held principles can stifle creative thought and problem solving. "Why?" is a question few Chinese have been taught to ask (Ng 2007).

Social Harmony and Obligation. One thing is clear: these students are under tremendous pressure to succeed. Because of China's "one child" policy, few have siblings. As a result, Chinese students are keenly aware that they carry the hopes and dreams of their parents, beloved grandparents, and for some, their entire hometown village. This sense of weighty obligation may compel some to contemplate cheating on exams or papers in order to avoid failing grades and the shame such failure would bring upon their families. Moreover, few choose their declared major of their own accord. Despite having gifts, aptitudes, and proclivities for other fields (such as literature, theater, or art), the vast majority of Chinese undergraduates slog away as management or finance majors, bound to parental demands that they take over the family business upon graduation. Unlike many people from the United States, who regard college as a rite of passage to adulthood involving self-discovery and experimentation, Chinese tend to take a far more utilitarian view of their U.S. education, regarding it as a means to an end, namely the securing of a diploma to launch their careers. If true, then their apparent indifference to class participation or extracurricular activities may reflect the desire of some simply to lower their heads and dutifully serve out what might feel like a four- to five-year obligatory sentence in exile to fulfill familial expectations.

For the Chinese, knowledge is not abstract but concrete. Chinese thinkers are not preoccupied with the goal of providing rational accounts of motion and change. Instead, they seek to experience the world rather than understand it (Ng 2007).

Figure 1. Some Important Differences Between the Academic Cultures of China and the United States

	China	United States	Potential Impact on Academics/Campus Life
Conception of Self	Collectivist: higher value placed in own cultural group and individual modesty.	Individualist: self-reliance, self-promotion, value freedom from imposed constraints.	Limited class participation: not wanting to appear immodest; less willing to risk behavior displeasing to group; will not respond to posted activities or even individual invitations of group members do not plan to attend.
Educational Framework	The Confucian system focuses on extensive memorization w/o any requirement to challenge or theorize on what student has memorized.	The American system emphasizes creativity, exploring new ideas challenging existing concepts or theories.	Problems in responding to “why?” Unfamiliarity with group work; discomfort with self-expression. Skill in memorizing can collide with academic honesty policies.
Social Relationships	Formal and hierarchical. Most comfortable in context in which position and rules for behavior are known.	Informal, egalitarian. Social hierarchy is present but less visible and de-emphasized.	Confucian respect for professors can severely inhibit class participation.
Harmony versus Confrontation	In keeping with Confucian and Communist Party teachings, avoid open criticism, controversial topics, or confrontation. “Saving face” important.	Willing to discuss controversial topics, criticize, confront, advance personal view regardless of status of person being challenged.	Huge impact on class dynamics and interaction. Seldom willing to admit blame when confronted.
Rule of Law	Hold greater faith in personal relationships than in written policies or regulations.	Have great faith that laws, regulations, policies lead to fair outcomes and must thus be followed or changed through rule-governed processes.	Rules can be circumvented to achieve goals.
Academic Honesty	System rewards scores on standardized exams—how ever those scores are attained. Focus on product.	A belief in a meritocracy and a cherishing of original thought. Strict belief in citing sources. Focus on process.	Willing to risk violating policies on academic honesty
Role of Silence	<i>San si er xing</i> (think twice before you speak). Meditation is encouraged; prompt speech considered hasty. Student silence is sign of respect for teacher. More pronounced in situations where student’s status appears ambiguous or if student feels unwelcome.	Silence in the presence of others is rare and uncomfortable. Focus on interactional competence in academic settings. Silence viewed as lack of preparation, competence or respect.	Seldom participate if not part of grade; seldom given time by teachers to give considered opinion (an absence of hang time or of an inclusive atmosphere to support students risking loss of face to participate.

Figure Sources

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In Search of Solutions

Clearly the “China problem” is complex and multifaceted. U.S. universities can do little to curtail the forces in the PRC that lead to so many fraudulent transcripts and standardized test scores, as well as ghost-written application essays. The controversial and widespread use of recruiting agents both contributes to the epidemic of fraud and offers solutions to it. That some agents incorporate the fabrication of student application documents into their business practices has been widely reported (Bartlet 2011, Melcher 2011). At the same time, U.S. admissions officers are naïve to believe that any school’s policy banning the use of agents deters individual applicants from securing on their own such services to prepare their applications. Third-party credential evaluation companies can provide admission offices with helpful interpretations of grades and test scores, but their ability to ferret out counterfeit documents is limited since some Chinese high school officials, desiring to augment their meager salaries, have been shown to be complicit in providing “authentic” school transcripts with all of the appropriate seals and signatures in place, accurate in every way except the grades and class rankings (Melcher 2011, 6).

The solution may rest with those honest agents that have earned the trust and respect of their U.S. partner institutions. How might universities separate the wheat from the chaff? They can begin by tracking the academic performance of their Chinese students, identifying those with poor grade point averages or those brought up on academic dishonesty charges and tracing them back to their sending agencies. Patterns of failure or dishonesty would result in dropping the responsible agents. By acting decisively and in concert with other schools, universities might succeed in creating sufficient disincentives to reduce the prevalence of fraud. In addition, efforts by organizations such as American International Recruitment Council (AIRC) to accredit or certify (through a rigorous process of verification) those educational agencies whose practices comport with high standards for ethical recruitment can serve to further weed out the more blatant perpetrators of fraud.

Fraud and academic dishonesty aside, the greatest challenge facing U.S. higher education is how to engage Chinese undergraduates. The way forward appears to lie in a two-pronged approach of (a) creating a more inclusive academic and social environment for Chinese students, and (b) empowering them to move beyond a near total dependency on their Chinese peers. Achieving the first will require buy-in from senior administration and all key stakeholders, as well as a financial commitment. A number of universities opened the doors to a wave of Chinese undergraduates without first putting in place the essential infrastructure in terms of orientation, support services, and faculty training. As a starting place, initiatives colleges might consider implementing include:

- Redesigning new student orientation programs to address the kind of adjustment challenges (social, academic, and psychological) that are unique to Chinese students, assigning them U.S. “ambassadors” to help them settle in and find their way around campus during the first few weeks of the first semester.

- Providing cross-cultural training for academic advisers, office staff, faculty, and students (Nassim 2011).
- Creating living-learning dormitory communities around a Sino-American theme, with U.S. residents carefully selected and trained to ensure a harmonious, welcoming, and interactive atmosphere (Nassim 2011, 121).
- Hiring bilingual (Chinese/English) counselors so that in times of personal crisis, students might articulate their concerns without fear of miscommunication.
- Tracking student performance in courses outside of their major and, in consultation with the campus intensive English program, establish a recommended sequence for taking distribution requirements based on the language demands of given courses (for example, identifying for first-year students those classes with lighter reading and writing loads and those requiring less prior schema about Western philosophy, literature, history, government, etc.)

Such first steps might go a long way toward conveying to arriving Chinese undergraduates that the institution is invested in their success and well-being.

Yet academic changes are necessary, as well. Dr. David Pong, a renowned professor of nineteenth and twentieth century Chinese history and editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopedia of Modern China*, has argued that if universities are serious about globalizing their campuses, they must first globalize their curriculum and approaches to teaching. “We want our undergraduates to benefit from and be changed by interacting with classmates from many countries and cultures, but we have not asked our faculty colleagues to reexamine their approaches or reconceptualize their courses to reflect this shift in demographics without in any way compromising the intellectual challenges of what they teach.” (Pong, private conversation). Internationalizing the academy might include:

- Teaching faculty how to adapt their speaking, rendering their discourse more comprehensible to first-year Chinese students struggling to adjust to the accents and rapid pace of their university classes (for example, limiting use of reduced/linked forms, idiomatic expressions, and particle verbs), and how to provide other forms of scaffolding to facilitate comprehension of content (such as posting lecture notes on course Web sites prior to class, providing handouts with key vocabulary and lesson objectives, organizing lessons in a consistent pattern, and spiraling content).
- Providing extra credit for native speakers in class to help their Chinese classmates better understand assignments and participate in group work.
- Using Chinese class members as resources to offer different cultural, political, or even technological perspectives on the course content.
- Introduce new Sino-themed courses, not simply in the expected areas of history and political science but also in business/economics, sociology/psychology, and science/engineering.
- Revising syllabi of current courses to incorporate graded assignments based on class members viewing Chinese films or attending talks and performances organized by the campus Chinese student organization or Confucius Institute.

Once faculty begin to view and treat the presence of Chinese undergraduates as a source of academic enrichment, rather than a classroom problem to be addressed or removed, then they

may begin to see these students reward such trust and respect with greater efforts to participate and engage.

Creating a New Type of Group: A Look at One Model

Perhaps the most daunting task for universities with growing numbers of Chinese is in competing with the irresistible lure of their cultural group and effecting a degree of campus integration. To this end, UD is launching a new initiative that holds some promise for success. The Cohort Model targets conditionally admitted international students meeting their language requirement through UD's English Language Institute (ELI). Each cohort will consist of eight to nine students: four or five conditionally admitted Chinese, two or three academically bound students from other countries, and one U.S. undergraduate working ten to fifteen hours per week as the group's paid mentor. In addition, an ELI faculty member will serve as adviser for each cohort. The expressed intent of this model is to use intensive and personal experiential learning to transfer student dependency from the larger external group of fellow Chinese to their fellow cohort members. In collaboration with a broad spectrum of UD offices and departments (admissions, residential life, counseling, office for international students and scholars, Institute for Global Studies, foreign languages and literature department, and the Academic Enrichment Center), ELI will offer a series of progressively challenging academic, social, and service tasks that will increasingly immerse cohort students in all dimensions of student life.

Within two weeks of arriving to campus, cohort members and their faculty adviser will participate in an overnight retreat with tasks and challenges designed to help them bond as a group. Thereafter, they will spend much of their time together, taking the same ESL classes and participating in a variety of extracurricular activities: attending UD sports and cultural events, joining a club or intramural team together, selecting a novel to read and discuss with their faculty adviser, and completing a community-service learning project. In addition, they will attend leadership and study-skill development electives taught by their faculty adviser. The cohort's mentor will regularly invite fellow group members to events or parties where they might meet his or her U.S. friends.

By the time cohort members have fulfilled ELI's language requirements and are ready to matriculate, they will be active members in the life of the campus, have a network of U.S. and international friends among members of the student body, have cultivated study skills more appropriate to the U.S. academic context, and have become more independent and self-directed learners. Scheduled to launch in March 2012, its success is far from assured. Nevertheless, UD, like all universities confronting these challenges, is committed to making its Chinese students feel welcome and supported.

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