

## **From Isolation to Inclusion: Learning of the Experiences of Chinese International Students in U.S.**

Nancy Li Will

*University of Washington, USA*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*I examined the experiences of Chinese international students in higher education and inquire about American domestic students' perspectives on the trend of increasing numbers of Chinese international students in their institutions. In this paper, I also aim to provide suggestions on encouraging multiculturalism and inclusive academic settings within higher education.*

**Keywords:** diversity, higher education, Chinese international students, American domestic students, inclusion, integration, multiculturalism

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**I**nternational student enrollment in the U.S. has drastically grown over the past few years. “Despite the negative impact of the 2008 financial crisis, the total enrollment of international students in the U.S. increased 42 percent between 2008 and 2014” (Ortiz & Fang, 2015). This increase was most likely created by institutions accepting more international students as a means of keeping up the budget during a time when domestic support (i.e. state/federal funds, donations, etc.) were comparatively low due to the economic downturn. During the 2010-2011 academic year, the international student population contributed \$20.23 billion to the U.S. economy and, during the 2014-2015 academic year, it increased to \$30.5 billion, which came from international students paying for their living expenses, shopping, school tuition, traveling, etc. Out of these international students, Chinese international students represented the majority. In fact, China has been the largest source of international students studying in the United States (Open Doors Report, 2015). In the 2014-2015 academic year, Chinese international students escalated to 304,040 (out of 974,926 total international students).

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Besides economic benefits, an increased international presence represents a sign for diversity, which is usually considered to be a highly positive aspect of an institution of higher education. From this aspect, an increasing number of Chinese student enrollment helps these institutions accomplish this goal. However, there can be both positive and negative impacts on various aspects of an institution. For instance, a higher Chinese international presence can put a strain on employee workload, lead to cultural or language-related misunderstanding in classrooms, make student demographics appear lopsided, or even make other student populations feel intimidated by the overwhelming Chinese population on campus. With the increasing numbers of international students appearing in American institutions, especially the influx of Chinese international students, are these institutions considering whether its institutional employees (faculty, staff/administrators) and American domestic students are really ready for this phenomenon? Can Chinese international students seamlessly fit in and be accepted into their host institutions? What challenges do these international students encounter? How do their American domestic peers view the influx of Chinese students on campus? In an effort to answer these research questions, this study intends to hear the experiences of Chinese international students in U.S. higher education and inquire about the American domestic students' perspectives on the trend of increasing numbers of Chinese international students at their institutions.

There are a number of publications that have detailed Chinese students' experiences in American higher education and how their expectations had or had not been met (Yuan, 2011; Valdez, 2015; Barg, 2013; Yan & Berliner, 2010; Griner & Sobol, 2014; Wan, 2001; Wei et al., 2007). Yuan (2011) stresses that "most Chinese reported that they did not have much interaction with Americans. This may be due to their insufficient English and cultural differences, which consequently increases their uncertainty and anxiety when interacting with Americans" (p. 153). This finding connects to that of Valdez (2015) in which Chinese students "also struggled with identity. The concept of double consciousness helps to illustrate the internal identity conflict of being Chinese and being 'Americanized'" (p. 198). However, these studies are only taking into account the perspectives of the Chinese international students but neglect the opinions and perspectives of domestic students.

Another group of studies highlight the interactions between Chinese international and domestic American students (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Cruickshank et al., 2012; Leask, 2009; Arkoudis et al., 2012). For instance, Hail (2015) asserted that "Some Chinese students complained that host country students want to talk with them about China but exhibit misinformed, prejudiced and offensive views of Chinese current events" (p.

319). Both of these two groups of literature have their limitations of not looking at the phenomenon holistically.

## **METHOD**

For this study, I interviewed selected Chinese and American students. Interviewees of the first group were male and female Chinese international students who were enrolled in academic programs in U.S. higher education, born and raised in mainland China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan, and came to study in the U.S. The second group of interviewees was domestic American students, both male and female, in U.S. higher education. A smaller-sized snowballing method of participant recruitment was used. Sixteen Chinese international students from three different institutions were recruited. Eight are female, of which five were undergraduate students and three were graduate students; and eight were male, of which four were from a community college, one was an undergraduate student, and three were graduate students. For the second group, seven American students from one institution were secured, two female and five males.

Each interview was conducted for about 30 to 60 minutes. Some short follow-up phone interviews or email inquiries occurred when additional information was needed. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed for further use and analysis.

## **FINDINGS**

### **From Chinese International Students**

**Motivations and Expectations.** Chinese students reported a variety of reasons to study abroad in U.S. higher education. First and foremost is the quality of higher education in the U.S. compared to that of China. The interviewees believed that the U.S. would provide a better academic environment, with more academic freedom and independence (i.e. the ability to openly choose a field of study), more resources for their studies, as well as more academic maturity. Tied with this, the reputations and rankings of U.S. institutions as well as the potential opportunities that would be presented after receiving degrees from the U.S. is another major reason that Chinese students are seeking higher education in the U.S. In addition, students wanted to experience life abroad and American culture; they wanted to see how the 'real' America compared to their preconceptions; they wanted to experience a place with cultural diversity to which they had not been previously exposed. Pursuing an education in the U.S. represented an opportunity to broaden their world view, another great advantage besides the education that they would receive. Moreover, other motivators for studying

abroad included parental pressure, which is perhaps more amplified in China compared to the U.S. Finally, more than half of the interviewees mentioned that they wanted to eventually immigrate to the U.S. in the future. All in all, the interviewees felt that the advantages of studying abroad in the U.S. certainly made the complicated admissions process and comparatively high cost well worth it.

**Challenges.** Despite the benefits of studying abroad, the challenges that international students experience are worthwhile to be addressed. As for the Chinese undergraduate students I interviewed, they reported homesickness. In China, they were used to “obeying” their parents and life was “designed” by the parents’ visions; in school, they were taught to listen to and closely follow what their teachers said. All they had to do was memorize class content and there was no need for discussions. In fact, open classroom discussions were not encouraged at all by teachers. Therefore, it took them quite a while to get used to openly speaking up in the American classrooms. One of the most prominent challenges faced by both undergraduate and graduate students is the linguistic/language barrier. Their English is good enough to pass the TOEFL or the GRE tests and receive good scores, but they found numerous times that they were not able to be articulate when they tried to express some deeper thoughts during class discussions as there had been many instances of meanings being lost in translation or they had found themselves unable to deliver what they really wanted to express.

However, social challenges the interviewees have encountered made many of them feel that no matter how much they try, the issues still exist. Some participants stated that they had experienced some of their American domestic peers positioning themselves with superior or prevailed attitudes. For example, multiple Chinese international students who were interviewed reported that they were not being taken seriously by some of their American peers in classroom discussions. The interviewees felt that there was a rift or divide between themselves and their American peers. They desired to interact with American students, but found it challenging to do so due to a lack of knowledge regarding American cultural references and how to start a conversation with American students. For example, one of the Chinese international students shared a specific classroom experience:

It’s really divided by the race line... They are grouped together...native speaking people. And when we do projects, we have different groups to do projects. Normally, we have people from different background[s]...they inform the same project. And I guess one thing is they have better communication. And the other is

they just like people who look like themselves. So for me, when I took class, when we have [had] to form a small group, almost everyone in my group are [was] from China. (Interview transcript)

They also reported that most American students had little to no interest in getting to know Chinese international students unless there were some domestic students who wanted to learn Chinese. Additionally, on numerous occasions, a few Chinese interviewees would be asked "curiosity questions", by their American peers, often consisting of overly exaggerated preconceptions and stereotypes of China and Chinese mainlanders that are frequently expressed by the U.S. media and/or news. Some of the participants were bothered by such questions as the "inquirers" seemed to be spreading misinformation as if it were factual. For example, one of them said:

...But what made me feel uncomfortable is that I found out they have certain stereotypes; that what I share surprised them...I do feel that Americans appear... I do feel like they sometimes hold a slightly more negative image or perception of China. (Interview transcript)

Some of the Chinese interviewees reported that "perfect English" is overly powerful; that when they speak English with a foreign accent, they were wondering if their experiences would be much different if they had "perfect English". One of my interviewees shared her unforgettable experiences.

Something...I don't think it's accent itself, but it's discrimination. There was once in the library...there was a man who was literally use [using] all his books and paper to use the seats for four. So, I was like, 'Excuse me, do you mind move [moving] your stuff a little bit?' And then he look[ed] at me and has [had] a weird smile and say [said], 'I don't understand your English'. He was looking at me to my eyes, with that smile, but it is [was] not a happy smile I think. (Interview transcript)

### **American Domestic Students' Perspectives**

While interviewing American students regarding the trend of increasing Chinese international student presence on campus, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. They believed that it added to the diversity of the campus. They also said that having more Chinese international students on campus helps others to have an international perspective, creates more opportunities, and increases competition in the classroom, leading others to

strive to work harder. One of the interviewees pointed out that the school can "probably make a lot of money".

On the other hand, these interviewees also pointed out challenges that they had experienced with international students on campus. One student claimed that "it was hard to adjust" to the fact that about half of their peers were international students; that "it's hard for the department to adjust as well". Another interviewee explained how difficult it is to adjust to the accents of international students and that American students need more patience in order to "get used to it after a while". Another student said that some American domestic students like him were concerned about the limited time available for group discussions and that "not everyone has the patience to wait for the answer (from international students)". Another interviewee said that "a lot of students don't want to interact with international students" most likely due to hesitance of interacting with "the unknown".

### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

Emphasizing diversity in U.S. higher education is important; however, what does diversity really mean to students, faculty, staff, and the institution? Diversity should not just stay at the surface level, but it is the first step we take in order to promote multiculturalism and further advocate for inclusion and social equity in education. There is no superior or inferior culture. We should all be proud of who we are, while at the same time, not demeaning other cultures. Multicultural education ought to be added to American school curriculum and/or college common core for all student populations as "multicultural education is a set of beliefs and explanations that recognizes and values the importance of ethnic and cultural diversity in shaping lifestyles, social experiences, personal identities, and education opportunities of individuals, groups, and nations" (Gay, 1995, p. 28). Diversity is not our ultimate goal; rather, we should use diversity as a pathway to foster multiculturalism and advocate for inclusion in higher education.

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**NANCY LI WILL** is a doctoral student in the Multicultural Education program in the College of Education at the University of Washington. Her research interests include how intersectionality impacts the educational experiences of international students as well as first-generation immigrant students in U.S. higher education and how to best promote multiculturalism and social equality to form more inclusive and integrated environments of higher education. Email: [nancyli@uw.edu](mailto:nancyli@uw.edu)

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