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Voices of Chinese International Students in USA Colleges: “I want to tell them that...”

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Abstract

As international student mobility worldwide reach new heights, there have been increasing conversations around how tertiary institutions need to rethink how they relate to and support international students for success. This study asks mainland Chinese students, the largest proportion of international students worldwide, to voice their desires about how their USA institutional communities can support their college experience. Through three interviews and four journals with 18 first and second year students, it was found that Chinese internationals wanted their professors and host peers to be cognizant of and curious about their backgrounds, as well as to show care and initiative in approaching them. They also asked for improved international student services and more academic support to decode implicit norms of the academy. Findings stress the imperative for institutions to include international students in voicing ways to enhance their college experience so that all institutional members can benefit from the internationalization of higher education.

Key words: Chinese / China, international students, satisfaction, feedback, support

Voices of Chinese International Students in USA Colleges: “I want to tell them that...”

International student mobility has reached an all-time high with over 4.1 million international students enrolled in higher education institutions worldwide in 2013, doubling from 2 million in 2000 (UNESCO 2016). Recruitment of international students is a popular way of internationalizing higher education institutions (Altbach and Knight 2007). However, the top five traditional destinations—the USA, U.K., Australia, France, and Germany (in decreasing order)—have seen their proportion of total international student enrollment fall from 56% in 2000 to 50% in 2013 (UNESCO 2016). Increasing competition from new destinations, like Singapore and the Middle East, shifting student preference for regional rather than international destinations, changing visa policies, and rapid feedback to home networks about institution quality are some of the reasons for the decline in proportion (Clotfelter 2010; Fischer 2015; Garrett 2014). In addition to the decline in the proportion of enrollment in worldwide international students, many tertiary institutions in a traditional destination country like the USA are facing retention issues arising from increased recruitment of students with less academic preparation and lower TOEFL scores, student transfers to more prestigious institutions, and unwelcoming campus environments, among other reasons (Choudaha and Schulmann 2014). Choudaha and Schulmann also suggested that the dramatic increase in international student enrollment worldwide without corresponding increase in investment in programs and services by many universities as a reason for retention issues. At the same time, scholars have observed that higher education institutions in traditional destination countries tend to adopt a neo-colonialist or ethnocentric attitude towards international students, assuming institutions have more to teach international students than learn from them and expecting students to do the bulk of work

adjusting to their new environments (Ramia, Marginson, and Sawir 2013; Ryan 2011; Trahar 2011). These scholars aver that higher education institutions need to soften their market-driven approach in relating with international students, assume more responsibility in catalyzing transculturalⁱ understanding across host and international communities, and protect international student wellbeing and rights.

For their part, students' experiences are far from homogeneous. Studies show that international students from non-predominantly White regions of the world have reported a less satisfactory experience of their education compared to those from predominantly White regions (Garrett 2014; Glass et al. 2015; Lee and Rice 2007). Students from non-predominantly White regions recounted more negative experiences—like acculturative stress, biased treatment, and difficulty with befriending host students—that reduced satisfaction with their university experience and, consequently, willingness to recommend their institutions to peers. Students from China and Saudi Arabia, in particular, were the least satisfied (Garrett 2014).

This empirical study spotlights students from mainland China, who form the largest group of international students worldwide and are the top source of international students in North America, the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand (UNESCO 2016). Though a smaller share of international students are going to the USA, the absolute number is still increasing. In particular, USA institutions have seen an eight-fold increase in undergraduate enrollment of Chinese students since 2006, with one in three international students from China in 2015 (IIE 2015). While studies have documented the dissatisfaction of Chinese international students and the challenges they face, few ask students to squarely voice their desires about how college communities can support their college experience. Thus, this study aims to answer the research question: What are Chinese international students' perspectives on how members of their USA

college community can improve their college experience? Paying attention to Chinese international students' requests towards faculty members, host peers, and institution policy-makers is important and can lead to a more equitable way of shaping their experience. At the same time, a qualitative study around Chinese international students like this may illuminate the experiences of other international students from non-predominantly White regions and complement high-level quantitative surveys on international student satisfaction (Garrett 2014; Sherry, Thomas, and Chui 2010).

Background

International students experience unique challenges navigating their education within a new socio-cultural environment, with academic and social challenges intimately intertwined with each other and gaining most prominence (Lacina 2002; Lee and Rice 2007; Marginson 2012; Ryan 2011).

Academic Challenges Chinese International Students Face

Studies show that many Chinese internationalsⁱⁱ face challenges transitioning to new academic expectations and these challenges affect their psychology and socialization (Heng 2016b; Lu and Han 2010; Wang and Shan 2007). Students struggle with different expectations of curriculum content, pedagogy, assignment formats, relationships with faculty members, and their role as learners (Gu and Brooks 2008; Heng 2016b; Holmes 2004; Kingston and Forland 2008; Lee and Rice 2007; Lu and Han 2010; Wang and Shan 2007; Zhou, Topping, and Jindal-Snape 2011). Consequently, they expend many hours working on their language and prior knowledge, preparing for lessons, and writing assignments (Heng 2016b; In-press; Holmes 2004; Kingston and Forland 2008; Wang and Shan 2007). Psychologically, a large percentage of Chinese students experience heightened anxiety, self-doubt, depression, and a drop in confidence

(Cheung 2010; Lee and Rice 2007). This “learning shock—acute frustration, confusion and anxiety” (Griffiths, Winstanley, and Gabriel 2005, 2) has been associated with unfamiliar teaching and learning approaches and disorienting cues. Specifically, Cortazzi and Jin (1996) attribute learning challenges Chinese students face to the diverging “culture of learning”—tacit expectations and attitudes around the purpose of education, how to teach or learn, and good learning—between the Chinese and their host country’s education system. They argue that schools are sites where cultural production takes place through curriculum and pedagogy, and that classroom practices are heavily influenced by dominant socio-economic-cultural structures.

However, faculty members are not always cognizant that learning environments are heavily cultured or why Chinese internationals struggle (Adrian-Taylor, Noels, and Tischler 2007; Trice 2003). Rather than acknowledge the different cultural expectations around teaching and learning, some faculty members fall back on deficit-thinking, stereotyping Chinese students as uncritical, passive, dependent, and uninterested in acculturating or improving their English (Bartlett and Fischer 2011; Gu and Brooks 2008; Ruble and Zhang 2013; Zhao and Bourne 2011; Zhou, Topping, and Jindal-Snape 2011). Further, Adrian-Taylor, Noels and Tischler’s (2007) study, found that many faculty members report their own need for diversity training much lower than international students’ rating for faculty members’ need for such training, corroborating Trice’s (2003) finding that faculty members were oblivious to the unique academic and personal issues international students face. Faculty-student interaction and understanding need to be strengthened as faculty members’ inclusion and personal ways of knowing students have a profound impact on students’ sense of selves, academic trajectory, and integration into the university community (Glass et al. 2015).

Social Challenges Chinese International Students Face

Compared with other international students, Chinese students socialized less frequently with USA peers than they did with compatriots or other internationals (Cheung 2010; Gareis 2012; Glass, Gómez, and Urzua 2014; Trice 2004). Social integration challenges have been attributed to a perceived cultural difference between Chinese internationals and host peers, with some students feeling that many of their American peers have no interest in them or their culture (Gareis 2012; Glass, Gómez, and Urzua 2014; Lacina 2002; Lee and Rice 2007; Marginson 2012; Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood 2013; Wang and Shan 2007). Furthermore, even though Chinese internationals want to interact with their American peers, discomfort with some social activities, such as heavy drinking or partying, and the cost of such activities deter them (Gareis 2012; Lee and Rice 2007; Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood 2013). On the other hand, scholars have argued that some international students' preference for socialization with compatriots/internationals over host peers is due to better support from the former group and a pragmatic goal of building a social network they can access upon their return home (Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood 2013; Trice 2004). Interestingly, while Chinese internationals are isolated from host peers, they also express the strongest concern about this isolation compared to other equally isolated internationals (Trice 2004).

While 81% of international students want local friends and 67% made the effort, only 46% of locals wanted more international friends and 37% made the effort (Marginson 2012). The persistence of stereotypes of Chinese internationals by American students that ranged from favorable (i.e., nice/friendly, smart/hardworking) to highly unfavorable (i.e., oblivious/annoying, bad at English/not assimilated, shy/not social) (Ruble and Zhang 2013) may partially explain the gap as host students are less willing to communicate with Chinese internationals whom they imagine to be less assimilated (Imamura and Zhang 2014). Similarly, scholars observed that host

students have a more parochial attitude and are less patient towards different languages and accents (Lacina 2002); host students also find communicating with internationals tedious and high in risk as they fear causing unintentional offense (Harrison and Peacock 2009). While host students acknowledge the benefits of intercultural interactions, they are less willing to participate in group work with internationals because of perceived extra effort (Dunne 2013; Harrison and Peacock 2009), thus creating an invisible barrier to internationals joining their groups .

What Do Chinese International Students Want?

In view of the extent of literature around Chinese internationals' experience and the gap in understanding them, it is striking how few studies directly ask students to voice their opinions about how they would like their institutional community to support their college experience. Whether this gap provides evidence to support a neo-colonialist mindset (Trahar 2011), the othering of international students (Marginson 2012), a mono-culturalist attitude (Ryan 2011), “passive xenophobia” (Harrison and Peacock 2009, 135), or “institutionalist perspective” (Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood 2013, 413) (i.e., holding the institution as the standard against which to measure student adaptation), it is important to highlight international student voices so that their needs can be addressed. The common assumption that Chinese internationals are passive, inscrutable, and that their silence can be dismissed is troubling (Bartlett and Fischer 2011; Ruble and Zhang 2013). Rather than assuming Chinese internationals do not have an opinion, do not know how to express it, or do not want to be heard, this study gives voice to Chinese internationals by asking them how various college community members can improve their college experience so that transcultural understanding can be enhanced, students are involved in the change-making process and college experience improved.

Conceptual Framework

As this study was a subset of a larger one around Chinese international student experience, it utilized a hybrid sociocultural framework as its conceptual lens. The hybrid sociocultural framework integrates concepts and principles from psychological, anthropological, and postmodern work around culture, with three out of the four key tenetsⁱⁱⁱ being most relevant to this study. The first tenet—that humans are embedded within and shaped by their sociocultural contexts—suggests that human learning, behavior, and development are interwoven with their socio-cultural milieu, which is in turn shaped by transformations in human behavior and phenomena across history (Nasir and Hand 2006; Rogoff 2003; Vygotsky 1978). The second tenet—that humans participate in more than one sociocultural context, and their participation, motivations, attitudes, and behaviors may change across context and across time—stresses the multi-dimensionality and intersectionality of human experience as humans cross different boundaries (e.g. school, home, country) in their lives (Abu-Lugbod 1991; Erickson 2011; Gutiérrez and Rogoff 2003). The third tenet—that humans possess agency in improvising, interacting, or contesting the values, beliefs, and behavior associated with different sociocultural contexts—privileges humans as “active appropriators” (Willis 1981, 175), not passive agents, who play a part in shaping social structures and behaviors.

Method of Inquiry and Analysis

As the privileging of context in the hybrid sociocultural framework mirrors qualitative research’s emphasis on finding meaning within authentic context, this study adopted qualitative research methods in data collection. Doing so allowed rich, holistic details of Chinese international student voices to emerge in a naturalistic manner (Hatch 2002).

Participants

This research was advertised through International Students' Offices, friends, social media websites of Chinese student associations, as well as flyers distributed during Chinese student association events and bulletin board postings in five different institutions. Using initial respondents to the recruitment advertisements, a snowball sampling approach was adopted to locate 18 participants who satisfied criteria typical of Chinese international students: single, under 20, first or second year student, on student visas, without prior educational experiences outside mainland China, studying engineering, mathematics, or business-related subjects (Chow and Bhandari 2010). To facilitate face-to-face interviews so that paralanguage can be observed and stronger rapport with interviewees built, students were recruited from institutions based in the city the author was located. Initial students responded from three institutions—urban, private, four-year liberal arts colleges ranked 80th and above by U.S. News & World Report—and the number recruited from each institution is generally reflective of the population of Chinese internationals in that school. While the intention was to include participants from public colleges, at the time of study, public colleges in the city this author was located tended to enroll large numbers of Chinese students who were recent immigrants or had prior educational experience in the USA.

[Table 1]

Data Collection

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire and were interviewed thrice—at the beginning, middle, and end of their academic year—for about 90 minutes each time. These semi-structured interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language (mostly Mandarin) to aid articulation of difficult or culturally-embedded ideas (Davies 2008). Participants also

completed four journal entries, responding to prompts about their education experience, to allow them to reflect at length and reduce memory bias. During the final interview, participants were first asked a generic question about how they ought to have better prepared themselves for their USA college experience, followed by a more in-depth probe asking participants for their opinions on what their teachers / the college / host peers could have done to help them. In the fourth journal entry (completed after the final interview), students were asked for additional opinions on how their teachers, the college, and host peers could better support their educational journey.

Data Analysis

Using Atlas.ti data analysis software, interview and journal data were first broadly sorted using etic codes from the conceptual framework and research questions (e.g. challenges, suggestions, teachers, host peers). Within these categories, LeCompte and Preissle's (1993) approach was applied by first identifying high frequency item-level data (e.g. repeating words like "patient," "impatient," "encourage," "friendly," "tell us," "discriminate", "culture," "ask us"). Where item-level data overlapped (e.g. "patient," "impatient," "encourage,"), they were grouped and then regrouped into patterns (e.g. "be patient and show care"). These patterns were hosted under broad structures that comprised participants' target groups—"teachers," "host peers", and "school administrators." When patterns were sorted by sub-groups using Atlas.ti (e.g. males vs. females, first vs. second year students), no clear trends emerged (other than that second year students requested more career-related help), hence all participants were predominantly grouped together as a unit of analysis. Interview data were analyzed separately from journal data with the interview data serving as primary data and journal data as a form of triangulation. To

further enhance credibility, member checks during the interview process and search for contradictory evidence took place.

Findings

During the interviews, participants^{iv} expressed appreciation for being able to voice their opinions (explaining that rarely did anyone express interest in their predicaments) and found the interviews therapeutic. Participants' responses have been organized into three broad categories—what they would say to their teachers, host peers, and school administrators—with repeating narratives highlighted under each category.

To Teachers

Consider our backgrounds when you teach. One third of participants requested for teachers to take their backgrounds into consideration in teaching and assessment. As participants were new to the USA context, they suggested that teachers could help by giving additional information to terms, ideas, and anecdotes used in class. “Tell us more about US culture. For example in areas that international students will not be familiar with the first time they encounter them, like US history” (HeFeng). What seemed like “common sense to them [Americans] in their daily lives” (Kelvin) required extended effort for participants to understand. As reading, understanding and participating in classroom discussions were onerous tasks in the beginning, some participants found that asking teachers for pre-lesson guiding questions and referring to course materials uploaded to online portals post-lesson supported their understanding and classroom contributions.

When I first started, I told my teacher that because of my second language I may not be able to participate as well in discussion.... I asked if there's anything I can do to improve my English. She sent me some websites and had me read some books.
(MinDeng)

About one quarter of participants requested that their teachers appreciate their language difficulties, especially during their first semester. Participants clarified that while they may have met TOEFL standards, having to write long essays in English presented different demands. They welcomed the chance to draft essays and receive feedback prior to submitting their final essay and felt empowered when given choices in assignments. Additionally, they hoped for teachers to grade them on their ideas, understanding, and attitude, over language, and to avoid conflating language inadequacies with cognitive deficiency.

I hope that they can tell us, whether or not your language is good will not affect your grades. It is whether or not you're serious in learning, your thoughts are clear, if they said this, I'll feel much better....I keep worrying that my language is not good enough and they'd deduct marks. (Dan)

Notably, participants shared that in China, teachers value students' learning attitude and effort over talent, and participants appeared to seek similar reassurance and assessment in the USA.

Several participants highlighted needing greater clarity and flexibility in classroom and assessment expectations. They struggled with uncertainty, particularly in social sciences/humanities and mandatory writing classes where requirements were perceived as nebulous. They were often unsure if their grades were dependent on grammar, ideas, logical development, or correct format, and felt that it "all depends on your professor" (Wen).

Participants explained that they were more used to writing narrative essays in China and, even then, argumentative essays privileged beautiful language over step-wise idea development like in the USA. JieYing inferred that the diverse practices in the USA and participants' unfamiliarity with the academic context called for a heightened desire for more explicit articulation of expectations:

In China, I feel like there's a road, and everyone is walking in the same direction, so it's easy to reach consensus with those around you.... In the USA it feels like being in an ocean, you have different directions, you're seeing different things and because of this difference, you need to explain a lot more to each other.

Be patient with and caring to us. A quarter of participants wished that teachers were more patient with their initial adjustments, particularly with communication. They explained that any sign of impatience or displeasure would intimidate them and dampen their desire to speak or ask questions. For instance, SiWan mentioned that her “math teacher gets impatient if we[they] ask him the same question repeatedly.” Instead, participants recommend that teachers show patience and empathy.

First and foremost is to be patient, they must know we're from another country, we're speaking a second or even third language.... If I were talking to a professor in the first semester my language cannot convey my idea clearly so the professor may not understand my point. If the professor is annoyed, I feel like I don't want to talk to him anymore. (Kelvin)

Participants asked for teachers to encourage and “nod and reassure” (Dan) participants when they speak, as this made them less afraid. Participants were also appreciative when teachers spoke slowly as it aided their understanding and signified teacher empathy.

Half of participants also requested for teachers to take the initiative to attend to international students who just arrived as their first year experience will shape their future trajectory. Participants felt that if teachers were proactive, they would be touched by the show of care, feel less anxious, and be more motivated to achieve.

I wished they [teachers] could be more warm-hearted and take the initiative to ask me if I need help. A lot of students don't realize they can ask the professor. So if teachers take the initiative to ask students they would appreciate it. (Wen)

Jane, for instance, asked for teachers to “please be friendly to me during office hours, like encourage me to go for office hours, because I’m a little afraid.” She explained that students in China perceive their teachers as authority figures and are hesitant about how to relate to US teachers.

In addition, participants hoped that teachers could include them in class as Chinese students tended to be more timid and unsure of classroom discussion protocols. Actively involving Chinese students in class acknowledges their presence and makes them feel welcomed.

Be aware of the fact that Chinese students might be shy to speak in class. And, maybe pay a tiny bit more attention to them, like asking for their opinions: Do you have any interesting ideas you want to share with others? (YaNing)

Outside of class, participants hoped for teachers to show their interest and care by communicating “a little bit about personal life, for example, explaining how can a student fit in the campus, or asking what a student think about America” (Kelvin). They explained that teachers’ attention to both academic and non-academic issues helped them feel included in an otherwise alienating environment.

To Host Peers

Be more open-minded and curious. Half of participants wished that more of their host peers would “be a little interested in Chinese culture” and “develop more intimate and equal relationship... based on mutual interest, not self-interest” (LuZhan).

I hope that they [USA peers] are more warm. I do try to take initiative to speak with them, but often I feel that they don’t take the initiative to speak with me, even though I’ve done the initiating with them.... In China, when meeting an overseas person, Chinese tends to be warmer, but not here. Perhaps it has to do with a more vs. less

developed country status. Here, they feel that they don't receive an equal return, so they don't bother. (SiWan)

Participants attributed the aloofness of their host peers to negative perceptions their peers held of them and China. Stereotypes they observed their host peers held included "America's enemy or engineering students", "more quiet", "timid", and "very smart". Dan went as far as to highlight that "Some Americans are not nice. They dislike Chinese people, they see you as having yellow skin and black hair". Participants felt that some host peers were "not very open-minded" (Wen) and attributed their misunderstandings and prejudices to the media:

I feel that many of the students only see what's on the news... they have no basic understanding of China's past, their conclusions are based on their own thoughts and prejudices. They'll hear from news and media that the Chinese is using a very closed and restrained attitude to control people, so they'd refute all policies that the Chinese do....I feel very annoyed. (April)

Invite us to join in your culture and activities. While participants hoped for their host peers to be more curious about them, one third also appealed to peers to share the USA culture with them to promote bi-directional understanding and their own academic and social transition.

Participants wanted to learn about the socio-political-cultural landscape as they were in the USA "to study, not simply for a degree, but to understand the culture" (Dan). Hence, they hoped that when they asked "very rudimentary questions, they [USA peers] will answer in more details" (HeFeng). In addition, participants wished that their peers would be more culturally inviting:

During events invite us to their homes, that'll make us feel warm and welcome.

Everyone enjoys Christmas, but as an international student, you're merely sitting in a dark room watching a movie, I feel that it's very sad. (Dan)

Participants explained that overseas guests in China are usually welcomed with open arms and were thus struck by the different practice in the USA.

More than half of participants longed for their host peers to make the first move in inviting them out. Some said that the “people [peers] here ignore me when I greet them” (YunJing), others stated that many of their peers tended only to “ask their own friends when hanging out” (HeFeng). They hoped that peers would “bring [them] out to attend their activities ...for example, eating, clubbing, going to school societies” (MinDeng). In addition, participants hoped for “more communication and interaction” (YuWan) with peers and remarked that they would be thrilled if peers simply asked them to join in for dinner or chat with them during meals in the dormitory cafeteria.

Participants explained that given their unfamiliarity with behavioral norms in a new environment, they were often hesitant to make the first move. As Jane confided, “often times, we are really shy and afraid of a new environment, and we do not know how to initiate a conversation. If people can take the initiative, that would be really helpful”. YunJing also explained that her reservation in asking host peers out stemmed from a fear of rejection: “I do not know what are Americans’ thoughts of Chinese. They may think your English is bad so communicating with you is hard....They may wonder: Why should I play with you, Asians?”

To School Administrators and Student Service Staff

Provide better academic support. One third of participants underscored the importance of a well-run academic orientation that included, for instance, greater clarity on course availability/selection, facilities/classroom locations, as well as services and protocols for seeking academic and non-academic help. Participants explained that “advisors are slow” (YaNing) in getting back and that they did not know how and where to start asking their questions.

In the beginning, when the teacher said to post information on the “Black Board,” out of ten international students, nine were confused. They had no idea where the

blackboard was (laughs). I even asked friends “Where is the blackboard? What is that?!” many international students may not have done some of these things, so they need more instructions. (April)

Participants explained that growing up in China, they were not used to the new learning expectations and facilities available for learning. They suggested that their international student office could organize an academic orientation explaining USA classroom expectations or help set up study groups with mentorship for international students. Dan shared that she was offended when she asked the international office for academic help and was directed to the student disability office instead: “I don’t have a learning disability, why should I go?! And I don’t want to pretend to be disabled! [agitated tone and frowning]” This incident highlights how, possibly, a lack of awareness, deficit-thinking, or cultural-insensitivity on the part of the international student office personnel can unconsciously cause student grievance. It also bolsters evidence that students’ desires for better academic support are not uncalled for.

A few participants suggested that the school could require teachers to include more group work. They felt that by “encouraging groupwork and discussion, there’ll be more chances to interact” (LeXin). They also mentioned that school staff and teachers needed to be more cognizant of group configuration.

Split them up so that no Chinese will be with another Chinese.... If I’m thrown into this school with no Chinese, I’m sure I’ll hang out with Americans... . In the beginning, I did think of meeting more Americans, but Chinese friends find me daily. I can’t simply say: I can’t play with you. (YunJing)

Participants explained that as the Chinese culture values collectivism more, they yielded to the pressure of being with their compatriots but secretly wished they could use institutional requirement to justify spending less time with them.

A few participants shared that when they encountered academic problems—such as irresponsible teachers or inappropriate mandatory course assignments—they were unsure about how to seek help. Often, their only recourse was to withdraw mid-semester and incur a financial loss to avoid penalizing their grade point average.

Kelvin: I dropped statistics. Prior to dropping, I was quite stressed out... I had a mediocre first midterm result... The teacher has a strong accent and read through the PDF, he doesn't teach.

Interviewer: What policy can the school put in place to prevent this again?

Kelvin: Nothing. I don't know what the school can do to help.... In terms of learning, regardless of how the teacher teaches, you're supposed to learn things yourself.

When probed why they did not give feedback to the school about poor teaching or course assignment, participants explained that learning was their personal responsibility, they “don't know who to tell” (YunJing), “it's best to avoid trouble” (JieYing), and “it's useless giving the teacher feedback, they treat you the same” (Ming).

Improve international student services support. More than half of participants acknowledged their school's effort in organizing social activities. Most preferred attending activities—like theater performances, international student coffee hour or going out for meals—over dance parties. Dan explained that “to party, you have to wear sexy clothes and put on makeup... when you're dancing the men grab you. I feel that it challenges my value”. Others shared that makeup and clothing were costly and conversations at parties shallow. They also disclosed that they preferred to attend international student events at first as they had more in common with attendees and were able to practice their English. Participants also recommended the school to host activities that helped them “understand more about the USA culture” (HeFeng), like a “culture shock introduction class” (JieYing). Others wished that the school could organize host

families whom they could visit during holidays such as Thanksgiving to enhance cultural and emotional bonding.

Second year participants requested more support in making decisions around their future. “Because you’re in year two, you have to think about your job prospects...your major...the choices...you’ll feel a source of stress.” (April) Participants were especially anxious about work-related matters like finding summer internships, managing interviews, crafting resumes, and work visa issues. They explained that the absence of a large social network, that otherwise exist in China, meant they were on their own.

A quarter of participants approved of their school’s dormitory room policy that mixed students from different backgrounds. “With my roommate, I can better understand what an ordinary American usually does when they’re not in class...what they like to eat, or do, or what they chat about” (YuWan). In particular, they appreciated having dorm-mates who were interested in Asian culture or willing to act as a cultural broker. However, some participants were less satisfied about their dormitory experience, suggesting that their school should keep the dormitory open during vacations:

Let us stay at a place during winter and spring break... we’re forced to go home, they shut the entire school down. I had to find my parents’ friends. There was no place to stay. (YunJing)

Other participants advocated for better quality of food explaining that food was something close to their hearts.

Most participants appreciated the support provided by their international student offices. For instance, they liked the assignment of a mentor/buddy whom they could contact. Yet, few approached their buddy as they were not sure how or feared imposing on their buddy. Instead,

most sought the help of Chinese upper classmen or international students as they felt these students empathized more. While students were grateful for the international student office, they wished there was greater clarity regarding administrative information, for instance with tax and immigration matters, to ease the stress of their international student status.

Discussion

This study privileges the voices of Chinese international students from another perspective by investigating their desires about how institutional communities can better support their schooling experience. Simultaneously, the study complements findings from large-scale student experience and satisfaction surveys (Garrett 2014; Sherry, Thomas, and Chui 2010) by illuminating how changes in sociocultural contexts interact with students' motivations and desires. Institutions may be inclined to dismiss these participants' academic needs on the basis of their strong grade point averages; however, the voices of these Chinese internationals illustrate that academic uncertainty exists as they navigate new expectations and can be emotionally distressing as they yearned for teacher patience and reassurance. Further, findings reveal that regardless of their language competencies or academic achievements, Chinese internationals want their teachers and peers to take an initiative to connect with them, particularly when they first arrive. The show of care for and inclusion of Chinese internationals would also improve their motivation, self-esteem and psycho-emotional well-being. This extends research around international and minority students' need for proactive inclusion by their teachers (Glass et al. 2015) and host peers (Glass, Gómez, and Urzua 2014; Marginson 2012; Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood 2013; Trice 2004), and highlights that ordinary acts of care enhance students' socioemotional satisfaction and sense of selves. As Baumeister and Leary (1995) observe, the need to belong is a fundamental motivation and has an impact on emotional well-being and

cognitive processes. Given a choice, many Chinese internationals prefer not to self-segregate, contradicting stereotypes of them being unsocial and unassimilated (Imamura and Zhang 2014; Ruble and Zhang 2013). They are eager to understand the local culture, make local friends and become part of a larger community. Thus, it comes as no surprise when participants request for staff and student services to increase the frequency and quality of social activities or create policies, like mixed group work, to enhance interactions with host peers and their inclusion in the school community.

Findings also reveal that Chinese internationals want teachers and peers to remain open-minded and consider their backgrounds during interaction with them. Echoing other research (Lacina 2002; Lee and Rice 2007; Trice 2003), internationals perceive discrimination, ignorance, and impatience from teachers and host peers and are intimidated or turned off. Participants ask teachers and host peers to shed pre-existing stereotypes, understand how contextual differences contribute to their challenges and remain patient during interactions. Participants' requests suggest that a neo-colonialist, mono-culturalist, or xenophobic mindset still perpetuates the academy unconsciously and imply that host school members need to bear more responsibility in understanding international students' needs (Harrison and Peacock 2009; Ryan 2011; Trahar 2011). When unequal status exists across two groups, intergroup contact and understanding are compromised, especially if the lower status group is the minority (Stephan 1999). *Ipsa facto*, Chinese internationals—seen as minorities from an economically less developed country—have strong desires for host communities to understand their backgrounds and predicaments.

Critics, failing to recognize the influence of sociocultural differences, may argue that Chinese internationals in this study appear needy and passive, expecting host communities to be proactive. To begin with, this is untrue as participants mention and research reiterates that many

students initiate interactions with teachers and host peers (Heng In-press; Lacina 2002; Marginson 2012). Yet, many hesitate to initiate interactions possibly because new environments or situations challenge minority students' identity, create stress, and lower self-esteem, particularly when faced with perceptions of threats like discrimination (Ethier and Deaux 1994). Participants' hesitance may also have arose from unfamiliar circumstances that are associated with different expectations of behavior, attitude, and values around classroom norms, faculty-student and peer relationship that are legacies of history, economics, politics, and culture (Cortazzi and Jin 1996; Heng 2016b). These expectations are often implicit, forming an invisible barrier to outsiders decoding norms of the dominant culture, possibly resulting in internationals asking for explicit support, like "culture shock introduction class", to decode hidden norms. To further illustrate, participants rarely give feedback when encountering academic problems as they do not know if the problem lies with them or the institution, who to approach, and the efficacy of feedback. International students' silence is often perceived as disinterest or inscrutability with their needs dismissed as their own problem. Yet, higher education institutions may inadvertently be oppressing international students into silence by not asking for feedback on how institutional communities can better support their schooling and not responding to the feedback.

Implications

Chinese internationals contributed US\$9.8 billion to the USA economy in 2015 mirroring similar economic boosts to countries like the U.K. and Australia (US Department of Commerce as quoted in IIE 2015). Garrett (2014) asserts that higher education institutions should use income from international student fees to innovate, rather than subsidize income shortfalls. Expected soft benefits from international students such as enhanced transcultural communication for all institutional members and improved future diplomatic and trade relationships (Clotfelter

2010; Dunne 2013; Ryan 2011) will remain elusive if higher education institutions turn a blind eye to the needs not only of international students but faculty members and domestic students.

To begin, higher education institutions need to increase transcultural or diversity awareness across *all* members of the institutional community. Intergroup understanding does not happen naturally as humans are predisposed to use existing stereotypes, to self-identify with in-groups or discriminate against out-groups, out of survival and cognitive necessity (Yzerbyt and Demoulin 2010). Diversity and transcultural courses that provide opportunities to place one in another person's shoes or include recategorization awareness—i.e., adjusting mindsets from “us vs. them” to “we”—have been found to reduce stereotypical thinking (Dovidio and Gaertner 2010). Mandating students to take at least one social science course, that provides historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural contexts to human behaviors and practices, is also helpful (Harman and Briggs 1991). Given both domestic and international students' reticence to interact with the other group for fear of offence, diversity training can reduce their anxieties and stimulate interaction.

Higher education institutions also need to increase meaningful interaction across unfamiliar groups. This helps to decrease bias and interrupt stereotypical thinking as well as break down intergroup barriers and promote inclusion (Dovidio and Gaertner 2010). Training buddies or peer counsellors, clarifying program goals, including systematic processes, and providing follow-up support to both host and international students can promote transcultural understanding across both groups (Yakushko, Davidson, and Sanford-Martens 2008).

Participants' suggestions of maximizing student interactions through carefully constructed policies (e.g. around dormitory rooming arrangements), cultural exchange programs, academic groupwork, and culturally/financially-appropriate social activities also corroborate other studies'

suggestions for enhancing socialization (Croese 2011; Roberts and Dunworth 2012). Attention to interaction and social activities is critical as increased interaction with host nationals is correlated with fewer academic problems, enhanced communication skills, smoother acculturation, and greater student satisfaction (Garrett 2014; Zhou, Topping, and Jindal-Snape 2011).

Teachers ought to pay more attention to international students' circumstances and needs as their personal ways of knowing students shape international students' academic path (Glass et al. 2015; Museus and Ravello 2010). Embracing culturally relevant pedagogy—an approach that values student resources, privileges equitable and reciprocal social relationships, and recognizes careful scaffolding in teaching—can help to create a safe and inclusive learning environment that supports student transition and achievement (Ladson-Billings 1995). To hold teachers solely responsible, though, is unfair. Institutions need to provide supportive resources for teachers, on top of structures that value and reward quality teaching (not just research) to enhance faculty-student relationship. Familiarizing staff with the types of student services available is also necessary for staff to provide more holistic advice to international students (Roberts and Dunworth 2012).

Continued improvement of international student services is paramount. Some ideas to enhance international student support include: running comprehensive orientation, establishing writing centers, providing acculturation workshops, educating students about support channels and feedback processes, and informing students of administrative requirements. At the same time, paying close attention to student awareness/use of and access/barriers to these services is equally critical (Roberts and Dunworth 2012). Student services also need to differentiate their services according to student needs. As evident in this study, many students acknowledged they needed more help and patience at the onset of their studies, and second year students wanted more career

counseling help. International students are a heterogeneous group with changing needs that require further understanding and differentiated support.

Yet, the above are only suggestions. Most importantly, institutions themselves have to shed their imperious mindsets and include international students in the decision-making process for more targeted and equitable change. Rather than judging international students from a deficit perspective, institutions need to recognize how sociocultural contexts influence international student behavior and that students possess agency. Given that findings from this qualitative study are not meant to be generalized because of the snowball sampling process, small participant number, and specific participant contexts (e.g., Chinese nationalities, good TOEFL/GPA, urban liberal arts colleges), more research needs to be done around internationals' voices from diverse backgrounds. While some findings can be transferable to similar contexts, institutions need to distinguish for themselves what are *their* international students' specific needs and how their needs evolve. This way, institutions are involving international students in conversations with them, not about them (Heng 2016a). Without intellectual and financial commitment from higher education institutions, the full benefits of internationalizing higher education remain elusive.

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Table 1

Summary of Participants

Name*	Year	Subject	Institution	Gender	TOEFL	GPA ^s
Sophia Zhang	1st	Undeclared	A	Female	117	3.8
Dan Yan	1st	Undeclared	B	Female	105	3.7
GangNan Liu	1st	Mathematics	B	Male	108	3.8
HeFeng Zeng	1st	Business	B	Male	103	3.7
LuZhan Zhao	1st	Undeclared	A	Male	119	4.0
SiWan Zhou	1st	Undeclared	B	Female	103	3.7
Wen Yu	1st	Mathematics	B	Female	108	3.9
YaNing Lu	1st	Undeclared	B	Female	104	3.5
YunJing Zhuo	1st	Business	C	Female	100	4.0
JieYing Wu	2nd	Business	B	Female	107	No info
Jane Zhen	2nd	Business	C	Female	98	3.8
April Cheng	2nd	Film	B	Female	105	4.0
LeXin Song	2nd	Mathematics/Economics	B	Male	101	3.6
Ming Ding	2nd	Business	C	Male	92	3.3
MinDeng Lin	2nd	Business	C	Female	96	3.5
Lisa Wang	2nd	Mathematics	B	Female	107	3.5
Kelvin Hong	2nd	Business	C	Male	84	3.5
YuWan Bing	2nd	Mathematics/ Economics	B	Female	103	3.5

* Pseudonyms were chosen by participants

[§] Grade Point Average (GPA) reported by participants at the end of their academic year. GPA is an average of student achievement across all their classes. Higher education institutions in the USA compute a final score, based on all student grades, at the end of a student's academic journey. The final GPA is used to compare results across students for post-studies activities, like graduate school or job applications.

ⁱ This study uses the term transcultural to recognize the fluidity of cultural exchanges and possible formation of new cultures through interactions. A transcultural approach to internationalization in higher education aims to innovate knowledge and approaches in higher education institutions and sees international students as assets, not problems, in the process (Ryan, 2011).

ⁱⁱ For expediency purposes, Chinese international students will be referred to as Chinese internationals in the rest of the article.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information about the remaining tenets and details of the conceptual framework, refer to Heng (In-press).

^{iv} Pseudonyms have been used throughout the article.