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**Chinese International Students' Advice to Incoming Chinese Freshmen: Involving Students  
in Conversations *With* Them, Not About Them**

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## **Chinese International Students' Advice to Incoming Chinese Freshmen: Involving Students in Conversations *With* Them, Not About Them**

International students studying in US higher education institutions have reached a historic peak of 974,926 students, or 4.8% of US higher education enrollment, with the largest group of students from China (31%) (IIE, 2015). Amongst other reasons, this is a result of the demand for an international degree and the increasing purchasing power of a growing middle class in source countries, in addition to US higher education institutions' plans to internationalize and supplement revenue shortfalls (Garrett, 2014). In view of the rapid expansion of international students (herein called internationals), there have been increasing calls to look beyond the instrumental economic and purported cultural benefits of recruiting internationals and to better support them for success (Ramia, Marginson, & Sawir, 2013).

Internationals from countries where there is a wider cultural distance from destination countries tend to have a harder time adjusting (Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010). Asian internationals, in particular, tend to encounter more adjustment strain and acculturative stress compared to internationals from Europe (Marginson et al., 2010; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006). Linguistic differences translate to academic challenges as they cope with heavy reading loads in US colleges, writing argumentatively in English as well as speaking up in classroom discussions (Heng, 2016; Parris-Kidd & Barnett, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Diverging expectations around the purpose and process of education between China and the US also mean that internationals are unused to group work, classroom participation, self-directed learning, formative assessments, academic conventions and the role of teachers as facilitators, not transmitters, of knowledge in US colleges (Heng, 2016; Henze & Zhu, 2012; Parris-Kidd &

Barnett, 2011; Wu, 2015). Consequently, Chinese internationals are found to graduate with lower first-degree attainment in comparison with home peers and other international students (Iannelli & Huang, 2014). In addition, Asian internationals face difficulties making friends with home peers because of observed differences in attitudes towards friendship, lack of common topics for interaction, and perceived discrimination and indifference from home peers (Author, In-press; Gareis, 2012; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). As a result of academic and social adjustments, Asian internationals tend to report higher levels of loneliness, depression, and anxiety (Cheung, 2010; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008).

This study aims to find out what advice existing Chinese internationals would give to incoming Chinese international freshmen. Given that one in three internationals are from China, the US media has paid keen attention to Chinese internationals with some portraying them in an unflattering light and others declaring that institutions need to be more inclusive of and responsive to Chinese internationals (Abelmann & Kang, 2014). Acknowledging the need to better support Chinese internationals, this study co-opted peer advice as it has been found that internationals often prefer advice from upper classmen who had walked the path ahead of them and were thus perceived as more cognizant of internationals' constraints (Author, In-press). In addition, rather than assuming that internationals are passive and problematic, this study operates from a conceptual framework that assumes that internationals possess agency in shaping their own values, beliefs, and behaviors (Author, In-press) and that this agency can translate into helpful advice for others. It is hoped that findings from this study can support Chinese international freshmen, and possibly other international freshmen with similar backgrounds, in their transition to US colleges.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative research approach was adopted as it valued participants' active meaning construction around peer advice and allows for their perspectives and voices to be interpreted within their sociocultural settings (Hatch, 2002). As this study was part of a larger research agenda examining Chinese undergraduates' experiences and responses to US colleges, data collection extended beyond the purpose of this study. Eighteen participants were recruited via a snowball sampling approach—nine freshmen, nine sophomores—mostly studying business-related, mathematics, or science subjects, as more than half of Chinese internationals pursue these subjects in the U.S. (Chow & Bhandari, 2010). All students were unmarried and under 20, held student visas, and had no prior educational experience outside of China, typical characteristics of Chinese students in the U.S. To facilitate face-to-face interviews, participants were recruited from three institutions (private, four-year liberal arts universities, ranked 80<sup>th</sup> and above in the US News & World Report) in a large northeast U.S. city in which I resided.

### **Data Collection**

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire to allow me to better understand their personal circumstances. Each participant was interviewed thrice, at the beginning, middle and end of their academic year. The first interview focused on learning about the participants and understanding their schooling in China, and the second and third on their U.S. college experiences and changes they experienced, with questions about what advice would they give to incoming freshmen embedded in the third interview. To reduce memory recall bias, give participants more time to reflect, and support data triangulation, I also engaged them in four journal entries to complement the interviews, with the fourth asking participants for advice to incoming freshmen.

## **Data Analysis**

During data analysis, I iteratively analyzed the data using LeCompte and Schensul's (1999) data analysis approach. Item-level data was tagged (e.g. read English books), categorized, and regrouped within patterns (e.g. openness), by examining items for similarities, co-occurrence, and corroboration with other data sources. To enhance credibility, I triangulated data between interviews and journals, and searched for discrepant evidence, negative cases, and recurring ideas.

## **Findings**

Participants' thoughtful and serious responses to the solicitation of advice have been grouped into three themes below.

### **Prepare Yourself Linguistically and Culturally**

Three quarters of participants raised the need to be as linguistically and culturally prepared as possible before immersion into the distinctly different USA academic, social, and cultural environment. Participants recommended that incoming freshmen hone their reading skills and speed before arriving in the US in preparation for the heavy volume of reading assigned. They discouraged the reading of English textbooks as the content is too "old fashioned," and instead suggested reading American novels, classics or online essays, as well as emailing their professors for their courses' book lists. Participants claimed that reading ahead was helpful not only for language improvement, but for acquiring ideas that could be incorporated into written essays or classroom discussions. Participants also suggested that incoming freshmen practice their listening skills by watching open classes online, American dramas without subtitles, or talk shows (like Steven Colbert), or by listening to news channels

(like Voice of America). These forms of texts and media were conducive not simply for the purpose of language learning but for understanding American culture, which would help lubricate social interaction with home peers so that there would be “common topics for discussion” and they could “make more friends.” Simultaneously, it would support academic learning as participants shared that in class, many things that might seem like “common sense to [Americans] in daily life” took immense effort for them to understand because it was all new. Less than a handful of participants suggested practicing speaking in English before arriving in the US, perhaps in recognition of the challenges in finding appropriate forums.

### **Make More Friends**

Two thirds of participants stressed the importance of building a good relationship with others and to make more friends. They encouraged incoming freshmen to take the initiative to make friends with others and explained that “people often make friends in the freshmen year, by sophomore year, fewer people take the initiative to make friends.” One way was to interact more with one’s dorm-mate as they accredited their dorm-mates for introducing them to more friends. Other ways included participating in college activities, such as “international students’ tea”, as well as joining interest-based clubs like the orchestra. Some found more intimate settings, such as volunteering to help out with dormitory activities or volunteering their time at a local children’s after-school center. Male participants cited the helpfulness of sports, e.g. soccer or skate-boarding, as a way to meet more friends, while two female participants found joining sororities particularly fulfilling.

Participants shared that as they “meet and interact with them [American peers] often, [they] find similarities. Slowly and over time, you [they] can find better friends.” Through building relationships across different contexts, they also appreciated being part of a community

and the sense of belonging that accompanied it. This was especially important to participants as they felt that they were “alone everywhere” in a new environment with neither kin nor close friends. At the same time, participants shared that having a variety of friends was helpful in the differentiated support they found—they commiserated with compatriots or asked Chinese upper classmen for academic advice, they learned about American culture and politics from home peers, and they brainstormed ideas with program mates. Yet, a few participants also cautioned against indiscriminately making friends and giving themselves undue stress about how quickly they ought to make friends. Kelvin<sup>1</sup> advised: “Learn how to figure out what friends are most suitable for you, avoid being with Chinese friends simply because they’re Chinese, as they may not have the same values or interests as you,” while LuZhan shared that when he stopped expecting himself to make many friends quickly, he started to enjoy the quality of friendship with his closer friends.

### **Be Open and Unafraid**

Two thirds of participants encouraged incoming freshmen to “be open-minded to different people and opportunities.” Sophia shared that changing one’s own mindset could help with keeping an open attitude:

Don’t think of yourself as a Chinese or international student, just think of yourself as a student like all the others in your school. Avoid focusing on your difference and you will be able to participate in school more naturally.

Others recommended that incoming freshmen “step out of [their] comfort zone, to avoid mixing only with Chinese students” or spending all their time studying. Participants felt that the latter “defeats the purpose of studying overseas” as they were not simply in the US to pursue a degree but to understand a different culture. As Jane advised, “don’t stay in the room complaining or



crying to your parents, go out and do more things,” and one way in which participants stepped out of their comfort zone was to join school activities and clubs to meet different people.

Participants also stressed the need to not be afraid and to ask questions especially since the new environment will be disorienting in the beginning:

Do not be afraid to ask people for help, or to ask questions. You need to express your own needs before others can help you. If you feel that you are in the right, pursue your own rights, rather than giving in. (MinDeng)

Participants shared that in asking upper classmen, compatriots, professors, and home peers questions, they were able to overcome their confusion and reduce anxiety.

### **Discussion and Implications**

This study examined what advice Chinese internationals would give to incoming Chinese international freshmen to ease their US college transitions. While the study was limited to 18 students who all appeared to be coping adequately with their transitions (struggling students may have shied from participating in this study) and some may argue that peer advice is not the most accurate or efficacious source of help, findings were nonetheless instructive. Participants suggested incoming freshmen needed to prepare themselves linguistically and culturally, make more friends, and be open and unafraid. The suggestion to be linguistically and culturally proficient was unsurprising given scholars' observations on how these aspects pose academic and social challenges (Gareis, 2012; Heng, 2016; Parris-Kidd & Barnett, 2011; Sawir et al., 2008). However, participants' suggestions were interesting by virtue of the range of concrete examples and reasons given. Participants downplayed English textbooks, proposed contemporary digital and non-digital media, and stressed that cultural familiarity was as critical as linguistic proficiency.

Cultural familiarity was essential as it also supported participants' second recommendation of making more friends. As HeFeng shared, "you can't catch up when they [American peers] are talking about the US, be it terms or culture." Thus, participants were acutely aware of the need to create opportunities for experiences to overlap with US peers' and took the initiative to participate in various college academic and extracurricular activities. All but one participant expressed interest in making friends with non-compatriots, contradicting media portrayals of Chinese internationals as uninterested in socializing (Abelmann & Kang, 2014). Further, participants' suggestion of "making more friends" corroborates scholars' finding that social support is an important predictor of acculturation success and that a new social network has to be established in place of the one left behind (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

Participants stressed the psychological need to be open and unafraid in the new environment and encouraged freshmen to step out of their comfort zone. In quantitative studies of international student acculturation, extroversion and hardiness were found to be predictors of international students' adjustment success (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). This study complements quantitative studies by revealing the qualitative ways of successful college adjustment through internationals' observations, personal experiences, and suggestions for peers. At the same time, the advice given by Chinese internationals reveals that they are agents who actively engage in as well as contest the demands expected of them in their new sociocultural environment. Long has scholarship around international students silenced them, and thus failed to acknowledge their agency and incorporate their voices in discussions around how international student experiences can be improved (Author, In-press). Findings from this research offer pragmatic implications for incoming Chinese internationals (and freshmen who share similar contextual backgrounds) as

well as international student offices and student services that attend to international students' pastoral and academic needs. But, above and beyond, this study urges scholars in the international student field to consider how our conversations about international students should not only be about them, but *with* them.

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<sup>i</sup> Names are pseudonyms chosen by participants themselves.