

Religion and Higher Education: How Does Participation in Christian Church Communities Shape Chinese and South Korean International Students' Academic and Social Experiences in an American University?

Chi Nguyen^{a,*}, Anke Li^{a,*}, and Jinhee Choi^{a,*}

^aThe Pennsylvania State University, United States

*Corresponding Authors: Email: cpn110@psu.edu (Nguyen), anke.li@psu.edu (Li), and juc332@psu.edu (Choi)
Address: The Pennsylvania State University, Pennsylvania, United States

Objective

Scholars have long argued for the role of religious institutions and communities in helping new immigrants adapt to sociocultural changes (Cao 2005; Dolan 1977; Palinkas 1988; Yang 1999). Yet, the influence of religion on the lived experience of international students, who are not immigrants, has not received enough attention. It is unclear if and how being part of a religious institution or community may help international students adjust to sociocultural and academic changes. Given the significant academic and financial contribution of international students to American higher education, it is important to understand the relationship between religion and higher education, and its impacts on international students' lives in the United States (Chapdelaine and Alexitch 2004). This knowledge will likely help American colleges and universities better serve and retain their current international students, as well as attract new ones.

This study examines the experiences of Chinese and South Korean international students in Christian church communities in a relatively small, metropolitan college town in Northeastern US. We focus on Chinese and South Korean students because they are among the top three international student nationalities in the US (IIE 2015). Although there are many similarities in the cultures of these two countries, China and South Korea have different sociopolitical systems, prompting their students' complex and nuanced experiences with religions (Kuo 2014). Our research question is: How does participation in Christian church communities shape Chinese and South Korean international students' academic and social experiences?

Theoretical frameworks

This study was informed by the social capital theory (Coleman 1988) and the informal learning theory (Leadbeater 2000). Social capital is defined as the aggregate value of social network relations among people. Social capital is the product of investment strategies; in order to establish, develop, and reproduce social capital, people need to invest time, effort, and resources in social relationships. Participating in religious communities has been considered a common way to generate social capital. From the informal learning perspective, the religious community can be considered a strong informal educational outlet for foreign students to learn the tacit knowledge of a new culture.

Method

This study is based on an ethnographic research. Our data came from participant- and non-participant observations in two Christian churches and interviews with students, pastors, and student leaders who serve in these churches. We focused our observations on a Chinese ethnic church for undergraduate students and a campus church that serves a large amount of Korean American and Korean international students. Both churches were selected as study sites based on their popularity within the Chinese and Korean Christian student community in this college town. During our interviews, we asked international students to share their church experiences and how these experiences have shaped their lives in the US. Pastors and student leaders were asked about their serving roles and the

participation of international students in their churches. At the time of writing, we have interviewed two Chinese students, two Korean students, two student leaders, and the pastor of the campus church.

Preliminary findings

Preliminary findings suggested that Christian churches provided an overall welcoming and caring environment for international students. Participating in religious communities, Chinese and South Korean students engaged with other international students, American students, and local residents in Christian holidays, local events, and family gatherings. Throughout this process, they learned more about the American culture and language as well as broadened their social networks. We also found major differences between Chinese and South Korean students' experiences in the two churches. Chinese students had more closed and exclusive experiences than South Korean students. While the Chinese church promoted a tight, family-like community, the campus church encouraged students to be open and actively participate in multi-ethnic activities. These findings reflect the similarities and differences of Chinese and South Korean students' prior religious experiences, cultural perspectives, and relations with their families.

Significance

The contribution of this study to comparative and international higher education is twofold. First, the study contributes to the scholarly understanding of the relationship between religion and higher education and its impacts on international students' academic and social experiences. Second, this study calls for more attention from educational stakeholders to enhance the lived experiences of international students through religious, community-based, and other informal learning outlets.

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