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## **Be Our Guest: Making Our Campuses More Welcoming to Chinese Undergraduates**

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One of the most fundamental relationships in Chinese culture – perhaps the most fundamental after parent and child – is host and guest. Anyone who has been the guest of a Chinese university has undoubtedly experienced how hosting is woven into the fabric of Chinese culture. From the moment you get off the plane until you depart, your host attends to every detail of your visit.

In this editorial, I describe eight things institutions can do to be a better host to Chinese student guests. Although Americans make top-10 lists, 8 is the most auspicious number in Chinese culture, and this is a good opportunity to demonstrate cultural awareness and appreciation. If institutions aim to meet the needs of Chinese undergraduates—and in fact all international students—they need to be strategic. The goal is simple: go beyond mere awareness or even appreciation towards actual affinity for international students and respect how they bring the world to your campus.

### **1. Involve US Students to Facilitate International Student Integration**

First, involve U.S. students to facilitate international student integration. I mention this first because it is the most often overlooked. Institutions of higher education usually have the same knee-jerk reaction to most situations: hire staff. But in the case of making a campus more welcoming to Chinese undergraduates, all of the staff in the world cannot do the job domestic students can—even if the budget allowed for hiring staff and sufficient numbers of culturally-proficient staff were available.

Domestic students are in classrooms, dining rooms, and dorm rooms with international students, and we should help domestic students build relationships with international students. This starts at orientation. Even though international students are rarely required to come to campus in the summer before fall enrollment, they can still be included virtually in orientation sessions via Skype or WeChat. Why not use Skype so international students can participate in sessions with their future

classmates? Why not have incoming students chat with a future classmate in China over WeChat? International students and domestic students can be “orientation buddies” and then meet at Welcome Week ice-breakers after they arrive. Sure, there could be technical or timing issues, but just trying sends the message that international students matter and domestic students can go home and tell their parents they made a new friend from China at orientation.

Also, involve leaders of student organizations from orientation all the way through graduation. Create opportunities for natural, not forced, cultural exchange. Instead of Halloween parties and football “watch parties” hosted by your international affairs office, provide funding to student spirit organizations to jointly organize parties with international student organizations. At a basic level, remember the goal is to involve international students, not isolate them.

## **2. Engage Domestic Undergraduates in Pre-Departure Orientations**

A new trend is that many large universities hold Pre-Departure Orientations (PDOs) for incoming Chinese students over the summer in China. For the price of one business-class plane ticket for a Vice President, your university could fly a half-dozen undergraduate orientation leaders to China and do a much better job of engaging incoming Chinese students while at the same time building affinity (and cultural competence) among the domestic students who make the trip. The truth about PDOs in China is that – even though this pricey exercise might send the right message to Chinese parents – evidence suggests that international-student-only orientations also lays the groundwork for the enclave effect. International-student-only orientations create enclaves of Chinese students that become their support network and might be the best, or only, friends they make during their four years at your institution.

## **3. Hire Experts in Chinese Culture and Encourage Staff to Learn More**

When possible, hire experts in Chinese culture and encourage current staff to learn more about it. When you hire staff, make sure it is part of a long-term strategic vision to promote awareness of and appreciation for Chinese culture. One inexpensive solution is hiring your own recent Chinese graduates. Consider their four years at your university as a long interview process. Always be on the lookout for extraordinary international student leaders and hire them during their Optional Practical Training (OPT) period. As recent graduates, they will be in the best position to help current students.

Do your best to impress upon current staff that they can enhance their careers if they develop an appreciation for Chinese culture. Something as simple as downloading a map of China for a screensaver can increase a staff member’s familiarity with the geography of China so they understand what it means when a student says they are from Harbin (in the northeast and famous for its Ice Carnival) or Xinjiang (home to most of China’s Uyghur population of Muslims).

Also, familiarizing themselves with the Chinese calendar can help them understand Chinese students. Almost invariably in September, the Mid-Autumn

Festival (aka, “Moon Festival” or even “Mooncake Festival”) is the first time when Chinese students might feel a little homesick. And then next is Chinese National Day, October 1, followed by what is called “Golden Week,” and is usually an entire week of vacation and shopping. Finally, after a long, sometimes boring Winter break, there’s the highlight of the lunar calendar—Chinese New Year—which is usually in January or February. Chinese New Year is the beginning of what is celebrated as a 15-day “Spring Festival” of visiting relatives and gorging oneself on delicious homemade dishes. Undoubtedly, this is the first-time most Chinese students have missed this festival with their family.

#### **4. Work with the Faculty Because They are the Leaders**

Make sure faculty know they are also expected to create a welcoming environment for Chinese undergraduates on campus. Domestic students take cues from their professors. If professors are cynical about your university plugging a budget deficit with international tuition money, they are likely to joke about it during office hours or in sidebar conversations. Imagine you were a faculty member at Ohio State University’s highly-ranked Fisher College of Business. In 2004, most of your students were white, middle-class kids from the suburbs. Ten years later, 20% of business major undergraduates were international students, mainly Chinese. One OSU faculty member joked that walking through the main undergraduate classroom building at the business school was like walking through Shanghai Pudong Airport.

Faculty members are suddenly faced with unfamiliar faces and cultures in the classroom. Chinese high school students typically have almost zero opportunities to show leadership in the classroom or participate in groups, but faculty at OSU and around the country expect active participation in class. Chinese students are also known for sitting in groups and talking or texting during class, which is commonplace in Chinese classrooms...as is sleeping. In fact, it is not at all uncommon or disrespectful for students in China to put their heads down on the desk for 5-10 minutes and take a short rest during a long class, whereas US students will try not to fall asleep and do the head-bob thing we have all seen. Of course, it is reasonable to expect Chinese students to conform to US classroom standards, but professors can also expand their awareness of Chinese student classroom behaviors. After all, isn’t it better to have a student sleep for 5 minutes and be alert for the second half of class than bob their head for an hour and miss everything?

#### **5. Return 100% of the Value of International Student Fees in Services**

Many colleges and universities now charge an international student fee. These fees are not new, but they should be returned dollar-for-dollar in the value provided to international students. A university would never collect a computer fee from computer science students and use it for a language lab for French majors. However, this is exactly what some universities have done with international student fees. Revenue from fees sometimes goes straight into the general fund and is used to underwrite initiatives that provide little or no benefit to international students. International students know this and it causes resentment. If your institution charges

an international student fee, make sure how these funds are used is absolutely transparent. Invest in little things that make a difference to Chinese students like hot water taps on water fountains, Chinese translations of important university publications, and Chinese staple foods, such as noodles and fried rice, in the dining commons.

## **6. Do the Little Things**

Making sure hot drinking water is available in campus buildings isn't difficult. It seems minor but in most buildings the air conditioning is so cold that it makes Chinese undergraduates uncomfortable, and they are not accustomed to drinking cold water. Chinese undergraduates have been taught for their entire lives to avoid cold water ("it is bad for your health"), and they need hot water the same way US undergraduates need cold water. Small things, like faculty and staff going out of their way to say Happy Mid-Autumn Festival or Happy Chinese New Year, go a long way. Encouraging faculty and staff to watch videos on YouTube about pronouncing Chinese names also makes a big difference to Chinese students and doesn't cost a penny.

## **7. Respect Differences in Upbringing and Background**

Realize that almost all students in the Chinese K-12 system have had every aspect of their lives regulated by their parents, teachers, or principals. For example, undergraduate Chinese students have often told me that their high school principals forbid them from dating. I recently read an account of a Chinese high school principal who levied fines against students caught holding hands. This was their reality.

Once they arrive on a US campus, Chinese students have more freedom than they have ever had and they may not have the slightest idea how to do anything other than study, since it is all they have ever been allowed—or expected—to do their entire lives. As soon as they arrive, they are encouraged to attend elaborate student activity fairs with hundreds of tables of literature about student organizations to join. However, for the most part, Chinese students never had any free time and never chose their own extracurricular activities. As one Chinese student told me, "most of us don't even know how to kill time."

If you think domestic students are "highly-scheduled," imagine a life where almost every second of every day of your school life is dictated by your parents or principal. Many, if not all, Chinese junior high schools expect students to be there until 9 or 10 pm every night, and it does not get any easier in high school. It is true that some Chinese students attended international schools geared towards a US-based university education, but this is not the norm, especially for Chinese students enrolling in our universities after transferring from Chinese universities.

## **8. Build Capacity by Sending People to China**

Finally, send as many faculty, staff, and domestic students to China as possible. Only a trip like this can truly help people understand the fundamental host and guest

relationship in Chinese culture and develop affinity for Chinese students. Just think how much it would help the director of your campus dining services – and the entire staff – to go to China even for a week and learn about the food culture and tastes of Chinese people. Slowly but surely, we can build capacity in our institutions if we have the will to do so. It does not have to cost an arm and a leg either. Flights in off-peak times are less than \$1,000 and costs in-country are minimal–this is a small investment to become great hosts to international student guests.

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