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## **“Chinese Students Themselves Are Changing”: Why We Need Alternative Perspectives of Chinese International Students**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Given how China has been the top source of international students worldwide, there has been growing media and research interest in Chinese international students. However, much of the narratives tend to focus on their struggles. In this commentary, I draw upon insights from my personal experience as an international student and, consequently, research on Chinese international students to illuminate alternative ways of understanding Chinese internationals and the reasons for why these perspectives around international students are necessary.

**Keywords:** Chinese students, deficit perspectives, international students, longitudinal study, sociocultural context

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More than 20 years ago, I arrived in London, England, to pursue my undergraduate degree. My 3 years in England were no walk in the park; I had to adjust how to speak, write, listen, and learn, in a culture different from Singapore, where I grew up. Returning to graduate school in the United States. Ten years ago, I had a comparatively easier time adjusting to the culture and academic expectations since my previous experiences prepared me for these adjustments. Surrounded by international students (internationals, for short), I recognized overlapping challenges faced by internationals coming from educational systems in Confucian heritage cultures, where teachers hold great epistemic and relational authority, and students hold teachers in high regard and defer to them. For instance, in class, I observed some of my Chinese peers' tensed body language, lack of eye contact with others, and tentative half-raised hands that failed to attract the professor's attention. Further, when a U.S. friend complained to me that mainland Chinese students were selfish

because they did not participate in class discussions, I explained that having grown up in a Confucian heritage culture, they might have perceived asking questions as interrupting or being rude. In addition, speaking in a second, or even third language, is challenging as it takes time to organize their thoughts, upon which the discussions may have moved on. Having worked in China and being ethnically Chinese, I observed some common Confucian values—for instance, respect for hierarchy and valuing community over individual—and recognized that, like me, my mainland Chinese peers had to adjust to different ways of being in U.S. classrooms. Yet, I also understood that they were working hard to adapt. Whenever I observed such misunderstandings or miscommunications between Chinese/international students and host faculty/peers in class, I felt deeply for both sides and wondered what I could do to bridge understanding between them. These tensions led me to my research on Chinese internationals and, now, this commentary. This commentary reflects on insights I have gained from my research and discusses how and why we need to better understand Chinese internationals and, by extension, all internationals.

China is the top source of internationals worldwide (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2019). In 2018, for instance, one in three internationals came from China. Chinese students are also attending schools overseas at a younger age. Since 2011, the number of Chinese students enrolled in K–12 schools has more than quadrupled, with two in five internationals in American high schools coming from China (Fuchs, 2017; Gu, 2017). However, as Chinese internationals' numbers swell worldwide, ambivalence toward them appears to grow (Abelmann & Kang, 2014; Bothwell, 2018; Jin & Schneider, 2019; Zhu & Bresnahan, 2018). In an analysis of 70 U.S. newspaper articles, researchers observed that media reports of Chinese internationals as ideal students are supplanted by bleak portrayals of them as “ethically suspect and inassimilable” (Abelmann & Kang, 2014, p. 382). News headlines such as “Heavy recruitment of Chinese students sows discord on U.S. campuses” (Belkin & Jordan, 2016) highlight the blowback of large Chinese student numbers. Likewise, academic research on internationals tend to focus on “complaints and troubles talk” (Haugh, 2016), reporting predominantly on their struggles (Zhang-Wu, 2018). Haugh (2016) argued that both the media and higher education research tend to portray internationals as a problem without acknowledging the complexity of and nuances in their experiences. Such portrayals, scholars argue, reflect an ethnocentric perspective that assumes that the host culture is normalized and desired, and internationals need to “adjust to the host nation but not vice versa” (Marginson, 2012, p. 11).

One might argue that it is only natural to report on challenges. Yet, I opine that an unbalanced narrative focused only on challenges perpetuates a lop-sided and deficit perspective that portrays Chinese internationals as problematic and their experiences permanent; instead, we need to see their experiences from a sociocultural and longitudinal perspective. Without addressing these portrayals of Chinese internationals, we may inadvertently create negative stereotypes of Chinese internationals being beset with problems and, consequently, increase prejudice against them (Quinton, 2018).

What, then, should we know about Chinese international students? Why does it matter that they should be seen beyond their problems? I approach these two

questions with insights from qualitative research I have conducted on Chinese internationals' experiences in U.S. colleges (Heng, 2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2020). Eighteen undergraduates, nine each from first and second year, studying in three 4-year colleges in a large Northeast metropolitan city participated in a year-long study that explored their college experiences through three interviews and four journals (see Heng, 2018a, 2018b, 2019 for more details on methodology). Next, I share some alternative perspectives from my participants (pseudonyms used below) that we seldom encounter.

## **ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES**

### **Chinese International Students Enjoy Studying Overseas**

Amid gloomy news about their challenges, this might seem surprising. Yet, in my research, Chinese internationals shared that they relish having more “freedom” in the United States, be it in choosing their courses/schedules/assignments, extracurriculars, or how they want to live their lives. Choice, they say, is a “respectful and humanistic” approach to education. Diverse pedagogy championing authentic learning through discussion, group work, and field trips motivates them to direct their own learning. Chinese internationals also appreciate having the freedom of speech and feeling liberated to broach provocative ideas they would have previously withheld in China. Chinese teachers, they explained, value more optimistic and harmonious ideas, as do assessors in standardized Chinese exams, thus restraining students' willingness to be openly critical in their essays. Beyond the classroom, they enjoyed the “many different activities” and the emphasis on participation in extracurriculars in the United States, explaining that this helps them live “fulfilling” and “colorful” lives. Further, “meeting more people and their perspectives from all over the world” also makes them more open-minded. These insights of Chinese internationals' appreciation for their college lives in the United States offer us a more complete picture of them and their experiences, reminding us that despite initial challenges, internationals embrace new opportunities.

### **Chinese Internationals' Challenges Diminish or Evolve Over Time**

Troubled by a lack of longitudinal perspectives around Chinese internationals, I investigated how their experiences change with time. By the end of their first or second year, students gain more fluency in speaking and writing in English, grasp academic norms and expectations, and sustain friendships with American peers (Heng, 2018b). Rather than feeling like “passengers in transit,” sophomores shared about feeling more settled having made friends with American students via extracurricular activities, semesters abroad, and structured academic interactions (Heng, 2019), echoing other scholars' findings of Chinese internationals' challenges diminishing over time (Quan et al., 2016; Wu & Hammond, 2011; Wu, 2015). Internationals also shared their pride in having more “individuality” and leading “interesting” lives as they experimented with different activities, like summer internships, Study Abroad in Europe, and film-making. As old challenges wane, new

ones surface (Heng, 2019). For instance, sophomores worry about finding summer jobs in the United States and about graduation plans. YaNing's comment—"Chinese students are always changing... one is always influenced by their environment"—was particularly prescient in reminding me that we are never static, especially when we cross different sociocultural milieus.

### **Chinese International Students Exhibit Agency and Resourcefulness**

While Chinese internationals are often perceived as passive (Abelmann & Kang, 2014; Zhu & Bresnahan, 2018), I found them exhibiting agency and resourcefulness when overcoming challenges (Heng, 2018a). They spend more time studying, use different learning techniques, and develop self-help and psychological strategies. Dan, a freshman from Beijing, told me that she goes to bed daily telling herself that her struggles are only temporary, while Joy, a sophomore from Liaoning, lived by a "just-do-it-don't-overthink" mindset and joined a sorority. Chinese international students also differ in how they seek help. They make appointments at the writing center, form study groups, consult seniors on course selection and career advice, and approach professors with questions. Internationals went so far as to differentiate the process and people from whom they sought help, as HeFeng explained, "We'll ask Americans who're really good at humanities [for help with essay editing]... [in turn] we teach them math or science!" Google, they explained, became their "new best friend," while social media expanded their academic, personal, and professional networks. As these examples reveal, internationals are active (and creative) in finding ways to adapt—just like those in Wu's (2015) and Xu's (2012) research—drawing on their personal, peer, and institutional resources, overturning assumptions around their passivity and deficiency.

### **Chinese International Students Are Navigating Different Sociocultural Contexts**

How can we avoid falling into the trap of judging Chinese internationals as deficient? One way is by understanding the sociocultural contexts they traverse. Chinese international students explained: Writing in the United States favors argumentation and novel ideas. In contrast, writing in China privileges narratives and beautiful language. History in the United States emphasizes perspective taking and critical thinking. In contrast, history in China emphasizes memorization because there is 4,000 years' worth to remember. Chinese students told me that they would love to befriend American peers. However, they often shied away, because of fear of fellow Chinese judging them as disloyal, the mental strain of communicating in English, perceived discrimination, and uncertainty over socially appropriate ways to engage their American peers; these mirror concerns raised by Chinese participants in other studies (Wu, 2015; Yao, 2016). Sociocultural issues extend beyond the confines of this commentary. What I urge is the recognition that societies shape us, and societies are in turn shaped by larger historical, cultural, political, and economic forces: What we think is normal in one context may not be so in another.

## **Why Alternative Perspectives Matter**

Critics may say that the above perspectives of Chinese internationals that I have shared is too rosy. However, I argue that I do not aim to paint a rosy image of all Chinese internationals, but an alternative image of *some*, as the qualitative nature of this study limits findings to a specific and small group of participants. Further, the strictures of word limit prevents inclusion of extended quotations to add richness to the findings above. Yet, in sharing narratives around some Chinese internationals' enjoyment of their U.S. college experience and how they adapted/changed over time, I hope to offer a more balanced view of them. This is all the more critical in a COVID19-stricken world where racism against Chinese or Asians has reportedly increased (Larsson, 2020; Liu, 2020).

Social psychologists caution that in-group bias tends to develop when intergroup contact occurs (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010). We often assume more positive qualities of in-group members and enlarge negative qualities of out-group members. The overportrayal of internationals' problems may, likewise, enlarge their negative qualities, fuel stereotypes, and jeopardize intercultural understanding and relationships. As evident, recent research reports that negative stereotypes held by domestic students predicted higher negative attitudes towards international students (Quinton, 2018). Thus, in offering alternative perspectives of Chinese international students, I hope to counter stereotypes and bridge intercultural understanding. Higher education has often been acknowledged as a platform for strengthening diplomatic ties across all international students' countries of origins and their recipient countries (Clotfelter, 2010). That many of China's top political leaders and, now, their children, are educated in the United States (Dobson, 2012), suggests large implications of their U.S. experiences on diplomatic ties now and in future.

Just as I had benefited from cross-cultural understanding as an international student, I hope that, likewise, communities receiving large numbers of Chinese, or international students, can begin to establish more nuanced perspectives of us. Just as I had grown from my research on Chinese international students, I hope that as researchers we can further epistemological and knowledge diversity in how we approach our work and findings around international students. Some ways include being explicit about our positionalities in research, diversifying research methods (e.g., using more mixed methods or participatory action research), engaging more in theory, as well as leveraging a wider range of theoretical framings, beyond the oft-used ones (Heng, 2020). As Stein (2017) urged, in growing our imaginations beyond our ethnocentric assumptions and being self-reflexive in how we approach research, we can construct new ways of living, being, and relating that are more ethical and equitable.

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