

The Chinese International Student Experience in a Time of Increased Enrolment at the University of California, Santa Barbara

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Abstract

From 2010 to 2013, the number of degree-seeking Chinese international students at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) increased from 82 to 596. This number includes both undergraduate and graduate students. With such a controversial and much discussed topic of international student enrolment at US universities, this was the perfect time for me to interview Chinese international students in order to determine what their overall university experience is like and what challenges arise.

The interviews revealed that Chinese students had highly educated parents whose intention had been to send their children abroad from an early age. In combination with the collectivist conservative culture and the concept of filial piety (Deutsch, 2004) this creates hard-working students with a drive to attend prestigious universities for academic, cultural and social reasons. My study and previous research have shown that Chinese international students focus on academic study first and leisure second (Li & Stodolska, 2006) and that they face both academic and social challenges. Academically, challenges arose with completing academic papers on time and learning how to interact with American students in the classroom. Half of the students recommended more social activities to help build relationships with American students.

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Introduction

In a time of budget cuts, rising tuition fees and financial issues, university staff must concern themselves with how these issues may create a challenging and stressful college experience. Will increased international student enrolment further exacerbate the experience of living in a new university culture? Some of the common challenges that Chinese international students have faced in the US are well known. They range from diminished English-speaking skills, conflict between the Chinese collectivist and US individualistic cultures and discrimination (Qin, 2009). This study will address the challenges that arise with a large enrolment of Chinese international students.

The main purpose of this study is to research, identify and define the experience and impact of an increased Chinese international student population. This is important because the campus faculty, students and staff have not previously dealt with an increased number of challenges arising from a larger Chinese international student population. It is important to question what impact Chinese international students will have on the campus community and improve upon the resources that are needed in order for them to be successful both academically and socially.

Research Design

The theoretical framework for this research is based upon socio-cultural theory developed by the Russian psychologist Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky. This theory focuses on the process of learning and development (Daniels, 2001). This is practical for the international student experience which is shaped by the new educational, social and cultural environment.

Grounded theory allows for a moving between the collecting of data and analysing the research results (Charmaz, 2006). The components of grounded theory that I used are: simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis; constructing codes and categories from data; constant comparing of data; continually advancing a theory during research; memo writing; sampling aimed towards theory construction; and conducting the literature review after or during analysis (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987).

The method that I determined to cause the least interference with my interviewees' university experience was the intensive interview method. This involved one-on-one interviews with 12 undergraduate and graduate students (4 male and 8 female), follow-up interviews, and transcribing, coding, and analysing the interviews. The computer software AntConc 3.2 was shown to be useful in 'counting frequencies' and 'data display' for organisation of interview transcription (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The program extracts keywords and aids in developing theory with concordance plots and interview files.

Findings

Social and Cultural Issues

The higher enrolment of Chinese international students has had an immediate impact on the tendency and preference to interact with American students. With the low number of Chinese students enrolled at UCSB in 2010, one of my Chinese interviewees mentioned that she forced herself to interact with students from other cultures that year. This helped to improve her English and also to understand American culture. In the following years, with the increase in Chinese student enrolment, she tended not to interact with American students so often. Although more Chinese students now have a great opportunity in attending UCSB, they also have limited opportunities to improve their English if they choose to interact only with other Chinese students.

One interviewee (Sammy) mentioned that there are various groups of students who stay with their own ethnic group and often speak with one another in their first language. This creates a problem when trying to understand other ethnic groups, as there is no common language. Sammy recommended a course on which students can enrol in order to understand various cultures better. A female undergraduate interviewee (Cindy) was of the opinion that American students just go 'crazy' when they party at UCSB because the legal drinking age is late at 21 years compared to 18 years in China. She also said that socialising and drinking among friends in China takes on several different styles and is done at an earlier age. At UCSB the social lifestyle to meet other students is unique and the way Americans party is difficult for some of the Chinese students to understand. Cindy and half of the interviewees mentioned that more activities were needed to bring Chinese and American students together.

Personality Types and Acculturation Issues

Fifty per cent of the interviewees portrayed American students as being more outgoing and outspoken, while Chinese students tended to be more conservative. The 'outgoing' personality of the American students is something interviewees had to get used to during the

first school year. One interviewee (Angie) mentioned that hanging out with American friends was just a different experience from hanging out with Chinese friends. For her this was not a negative but just the way the two cultures are different.

Relationships

According to Lin and Yi (1997), some Chinese students experience language barriers, loneliness and relationship problems. Half of the interviewees found it difficult to express themselves to Americans due to language barriers. This communication problem was true for both males and females. The language barrier created relationship problems for three of the interviewees. Loneliness was more common among graduate students than undergraduate students as the social network is smaller and they are often in the laboratory.

Recreational Activities

One aspect of recreational activities that was new to Chinese students was the amount of time American students spend at the gym and exercising. For 50 per cent of the interviewees, in China it was common to stay in one's room and study or play video games. Playing sports was common in high school and some participated in sports, but lifting weights at the gym and running were not as prevalent in their activities. For Chinese students, reasons to go to the UCSB Recreation Centre are based upon accepted cultural activities among UCSB students and access to exercise equipment. Compared to socialising, the exercising aspect of the UCSB lifestyle was more accepted by several of the interviewees.

Perceived Discrimination

Thirty-three per cent of interviewees perceived themselves to be targets of prejudice and stereotypical views. One interviewee (Wayne) recognised that Americans could view the Chinese as a threat due to their coming to the US to study and work. Wayne suggested creating social activities to improve cultural understanding.

Educational Differences and Instructional Methods

Two academic issues appeared in interviewees' testimonies with both undergraduate and graduate students. These included problems with using English for academic purposes and difficulties in adapting to the classroom environment. The first issue of using English academically arose as Chinese graduate students dealt with written assignments that had deadlines and required strong writing skills. Even after years of writing and speaking English in China, it is a challenge when students have to write and speak at a university where English is the primary language. The second issue of adaptation to the US classroom occurred due to the contrasting classroom norms in China and the US. Chinese students are used to listening to the teacher's lecture without classroom discussion, interaction or interruption by fellow students. In an American classroom two interviewees were shocked and annoyed when a student asked an unnecessary question.

'Work hard now, socialise later'

Academic milestones are prioritised over social activities for 50 per cent of interviewees. Academic assignments directly affected the social activities in which a student participated, such as clubs, sports and travel. Much of this mindset is based upon the high value placed on academic achievement for Chinese students and the pressure to complete academic tasks.

Professorial and Staff Mentorship

Three female interviewees mentioned that professors and campus staff had mentored them in their educational pursuits and had also been good friends. These students mentioned that professors introduced them to new subjects that helped open their minds to pursue new educational paths.

Discussion of Findings and Implications

Implications of the Study Findings

First, it is the university's responsibility to welcome Study Abroad students so that they feel a sense of community. By welcome I mean for Americans to invite Chinese students to their social activities and to build healthy relationships. Chinese students should feel comfortable at American social events and not feel unsafe or awkward.

Secondly, it takes an understanding of Chinese culture, history and social norms to learn to communicate properly with Chinese students. As Michael Agar mentioned in *Language Shock* (1994), communication requires knowledge of another's culture due to differences in meaning. Communication between persons of different cultures and understanding thereof requires patience and a desire to learn by the host culture.

Thirdly, when issues do arise for Chinese students, whether educational or social, it is the responsibility of the host culture to assist those students. We have seen the issues that may arise for Chinese students ranging from language shock, difficulties in social engagement and working with various cultures in the classroom. It is the professional duty of university staff to offer services to Chinese students when challenges arise.

UCSB has taken steps to improve the Chinese international student experience. First, they have hired two Mandarin-speaking psychologists to serve the students' counselling needs. Secondly, a course entitled Education 20: Introduction to the University Experience has been tailored to international students and covers student subcultures, student rights and personal growth. Thirdly, the Education Abroad Office and the Office of International Students & Scholars have created social activities for international students to socialise with American students.

Limitation of the Study

A limitation is that my research was conducted solely at UCSB and did not involve other campuses or American universities. Therefore, I am unable to make comparisons between Chinese international students throughout the UC system in which each campus culture varies.

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