



AIEA ISSUE BRIEF

SPRING 2017

Far Beyond Recruitment: Understanding Chinese International Students and Helping Them Succeed

Jun Liu • *Stony Brook University*





INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the number of Chinese international students has exceeded 30% of all international students in the US. Along with increasing numbers, issues and concerns have been raised about these students' English abilities, communication skills, academic integrity, and career and internship opportunities. The AIEA Thematic Forum titled *Far Beyond Recruitment: Understanding Chinese International Students and Helping Them Succeed* co-organized by Stony Brook University (April 12-13, 2017) focused on this target group via plenary speeches, panel presentations, in-depth discussions, and a post-forum workshop. During the forum more than 70 university administrators, faculty and staff together with SIOs addressed the issue by sharing cutting-edge research and recommending and discussing best practices. These four themes emerged:

1. Complexities and heterogeneity of Chinese students
2. Challenges and opportunities for building intercultural communicative competence
3. Understanding and breaking Chinese silence in US classrooms
4. Life cycle of Chinese international students



COMPLEXITIES AND HETEROGENEITY OF CHINESE STUDENTS

Not all who look Chinese are Chinese international students. Some came to the United States with their parents at an early age and received the majority of their education in the US. Others were born and raised in the US while speaking Chinese at home with parents. There are fundamental differences with regard to their linguistic repertoires and learning styles; therefore, different instructional strategies may be needed for these subgroups. Regarding various Chinese-background students as a homogenous group can be problematic.

Chinese students in the US can be divided into two major categories: Chinese international students and Chinese heritage students. Chinese heritage students usually have early linguistic exposure at home, with some proficiency in Chinese. They are bilingual to a limited extent and usually dominant in English, though they have an ethnic/cultural connection to China. Chinese international students, on the other hand, who hold a student visa, are Chinese dominant with the required English proficiency for university admission. Both groups of students fall on the continuum of bilinguals, starting from **receptive/passive bilinguals** (native fluency in one language, and can understand but not speak a second language), to **dominant bilinguals** (native fluency in language one, with elementary to intermediate proficiency in language two), to **balanced bilinguals** (use both languages but do not necessarily pass for a native speaker in either language, and to **perfect bilinguals** (“gold standard:” speak two languages with natively like fluency, indistinguishable from native speakers of either language).

As more Chinese international students come to American campuses, we should differentiate them from the Chinese heritage students. Although these two subgroups often share common cultural values (modesty, diligence, respecting of authorities, and placing a high value on education), they also hold different views on the meaning of learning, process of learning, and optimal mode of learning. It may be tempting to generalize Chinese students, but any stereotype is unhelpful at least, and dangerous at most.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR BUILDING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

While language is always a challenge for Chinese international students as they learned English in a non-English environment, the intercultural communicative competence that encompasses linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences as a whole is what they are lacking. In particular, the sociolinguistic



and discourse competences fundamentally impact these students' acculturation processes and their socializing beyond their comfort zone.

We often wonder why Chinese international students who have learned English and obtained high iBT and GRE scores still fail to communicate appropriately in many social and educational settings. We also wonder why some of them seek opportunities to communicate with people in the target language, and while doing so, gradually improve their intercultural communicative competence, while others tend to avoid or passively wait for these opportunities to come to them. In order to help Chinese international students develop intercultural communicative competence, we need to provide and enable them to have culture-sensitive knowledge and mindful reflexivity, as well as social identity negotiation skills.

Culture-sensitive knowledge refers to the process of in-depth understanding of important intercultural communication concepts that really make a difference. Without such knowledge, communicators cannot become aware of the implicit "ethnocentric lenses" they use to evaluate behaviors in an intercultural situation, nor can they accurately reframe their interpretation from another's cultural standpoint. Mindful reflexivity is the type of reflexivity that allows one to see both differences and similarities between other's cultural and personal perspectives and our own. Social identity negotiation skills are skills that will allow individuals in all cultures to be competent communicators in a diverse range of interactive situations where they constantly adjust their identities to meet their communication needs.

The combination of these knowledge and skills makes intercultural communicative competence an invested outcome rather than an objective goal. When Chinese international students acquire these intercultural communicative competences in different social and cultural settings, those around them may also benefit by being open-minded and sensitive to the constant negotiation between their original and new sets of cultural beliefs, values, and habits.

We have many opportunities to make this happen on campus. We can develop new support programs to encourage dialogues, group work, problem-based learning, presentations, critical thinking, and creativity. We can redesign our orientation to include pre- and post-orientation continuum. We can emphasize peer-to-peer learning and learning cohorts, and focus on curriculum (content and delivery), and thus build intercultural communicative competence for all students and faculty. We can be clear on expectations, pay more attention to underperforming students, and be intentional about connecting domestic and international students in the classroom rather than singling out international students. Finally, we can connect students with campus resources, such as study skills, writing center, and career centers to enable academic and career success.



UNDERSTANDING AND BREAKING CHINESE SILENCE IN U.S. CLASSROOMS

Though some Chinese international students are less outspoken than their American peers, their silence cannot be attributed to any single factor. Under the stereotypical image of being invisible and quiet in class, Chinese international students face various difficulties including culture shock, language barriers, and lack of social connections. These obstacles influence their behavior in different ways.

It is understandable that Chinese international students with low English proficiency are generally more vulnerable to isolation in class. Many students identify their English proficiency as their biggest roadblock from classroom participation. As a result, many Chinese international students hesitate to share their ideas in class, concerned that they will fail to deal with conflicts or address disagreements properly. This lack of language competence has a negative impact on Chinese students' self-esteem, influences their decision-making, and ultimately restricts their class participation.

Additionally, cultural differences in educational background prevent students from speaking. While American students are very familiar with all types of presentation projects, Chinese international students are more capable of excelling in exams. In most Chinese class settings, students are told to follow classroom rules and are not encouraged to ask questions during lectures. Questions and answers occur during a designated time, and any responses can impact students' grades. The value of face has been ingrained in Chinese culture and plays an influential role in Chinese students' behavior. Students may hesitate if there is a possibility of giving an incorrect answer or if their opinion might contradict and embarrass their professor, thus resulting in a loss of face.

Interventions in helping International Chinese students break the silence are as follows:

For teachers, it is important to have proper seating arrangements to break the pattern where all Chinese international students sit together as self-formed groups in order to have group cohesion and a comfort zone. It is important for instructors to assign students from different backgrounds to groups so that they are forced to speak English and work with others. Instructors should consider structured questions or objectives for discussion so that everyone in a group has a role to play. It is also crucial to allow some wait time for Chinese international students to process information and formulate their talking points in English. Moreover, if oral classroom participation can be built into the course grade, those quiet students will be more likely to break their silence. Of course, giving positive reinforcement is always encouraging and an effective way to enliven the classroom atmosphere.



For American classmates, it is important to be good listeners, to be patient to understand ideas, and to help when elaboration or confirmation is needed. International Chinese students need friends, but due to the language barrier or cultural differences, they appreciate if their American peers reach out to them and establish friendship. Sometimes it can be done in the classroom setting, though more often this occurs outside of class, during group projects or even socializing through various activities or events.

For administrators, it is very important to host more multicultural activities and events on campus, and organize more specific orientation programs and workshops for both international students and faculty. It is equally important to provide more support to international Chinese students associations, and encourage study abroad returnees to spend time with international students and reciprocate the hospitality they received abroad. Ultimately, it is critical to streamline all resources to provide a one-stop shop to make international Chinese students feel they are not only welcomed, but also that their needs are being addressed promptly.

LIFE CYCLE OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

University offices and units tend to be siloed; therefore, it can be easy for different offices to focus on a single slice of the Chinese student experience. The admissions office, for instance, uses recruiting a student who can matriculate onto campus as its metric of success. For the international student office, it's integration in the classroom and on campus.

It is more appropriate to think of the Chinese student experience more holistically, as part of a three-part life cycle: recruitment, the on-campus experience, and post-graduate and work outcomes. Success is defined across the three parts and all the parts are interrelated. Stumbles during the recruiting process, for one, can determine a student's success on campus. A student who is academically ill-prepared or who does not have sufficient English proficiency may not be able to do well in the classroom and may feel left out of campus social life. Not appropriately recruiting and vetting a student during the admissions process can set that student up for failure both inside and outside the classroom. Likewise, how well colleges do in readying students to find jobs after college, whether in the United States or back in China, can undermine recruiting efforts. Chinese students and their families are practically minded and expect that their investment – financially and personally – in an American degree will yield returns. If a student struggles to find work and perceives that the college is ill-equipped to help in the job search that could send the message that the college's degree is not worth the expense. Ensuring Chinese student success takes intentionality and dedication from multiple university offices and units.



CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

US higher education is facing challenges in diversifying the international student population due to the increasing number of Chinese international students. The enormous population of China, the Chinese belief in American education, and the financial capability of Chinese families mean Chinese students will continue to enroll in American colleges and universities in large numbers. However, this trend has caused much excitement as well as anxiety for university administrators, and SIOs in particular. This Issue Brief, based on the recent AIEA Thematic Forum, highlights four recurring themes about Chinese international students. The brief discussions of each, together with recommendations for institutional and pedagogical interventions, are meant to shed light on a broader discussion of international student success as we deal with complexities, dilemmas, and challenges on a daily basis. It is imperative that SIOs consider international student success as an integral part of their campus' comprehensive internationalization, and integrate strategies to ensure their success far beyond recruitment.

REFERENCES

- Deardorff, D.K. & Ararasatnam-Smith, L. (forthcoming). *Intercultural Competence in International Higher Education*. (Routledge)
- Deardorff, D.K. (2015). *Demystifying Outcomes Assessment for International Educators: A Practical Approach*. (Stylus)
- Fischer, K. (2017). "Colleges' use of a foreign-worker program draws mixed reviews." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 12, <http://www.chronicle.com/article/Colleges-Use-of-a/239854>
- Fischer, K. (2015). "Want to value Chinese students? Say their names right." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 27, 2015, <http://www.chronicle.com/article/Want-to-Value-Your-Chinese/230399>
- He, A. W. (2015). "Chinese as a heritage language." In William Wang & Chaofen Sun (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Chinese Linguistics* (pp. 578 -589). Oxford University Press.
- He, A. W. and Xiao, Y. (Eds.) (2008). *Chinese as a Heritage Language: Fostering Rooted World Citizenry*. Honolulu: NFLRC/University of Hawaii Press
- Liu, J. (2015). "Communicative Competence." In J. Liu and C. Berger, *TESOL: A Guide* (pp122-27). Bloomsbury Academic
- Liu, J. (2002). "Negotiating silence in American classrooms: Three Chinese cases." *Language and Intercultural Communication*. 2(1), 37-54, June 2002.



Liu, J. (2001). "Constructing Chinese faces in American classrooms." *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 11, 1-18, October

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Issue Brief is synthesized based on the four plenaries at the AIEA Thematic Forum, *Far Beyond Recruitment: Understanding Chinese International Students and Helping Them Succeed* organized by Stony Brook University on April 12-13, 2017. I want to thank the other three plenary speakers: Darla Deardorff, Executive Director of AIEA and faculty at Duke University; Agnes He, Professor and Chair of Asian and Asian American Studies and Director of the Office of Multilingual and Intercultural Communication at Stony Brook University; and Karin Fischer, Senior Reporter for The Chronicle of Higher Education. I would also thank the invited panelists who shared their original research to the participants: Jeff Wang, Assistant Vice President for International Education at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, Shyam Sharma, Assistant Professor in Writing and Rhetoric at Stony Brook University, and Soyon Kim, Doctoral candidate in Department of Sociology at Stony Brook University.

The **Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA)**, a membership organization formed in November 1982, is composed of institutional leaders engaged in advancing the international dimensions of higher education. The purposes of the Association are to:

- Provide an effective voice on significant issues within international education at all levels,
- Improve and promote international education programming and administration within institutions of higher education,
- Establish and maintain a professional network among international education institutional leaders,
- Cooperate in appropriate ways with other national and international groups having similar interests.

ASSOCIATION OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS
PO Box 90404, Duke University
Durham, NC 27708, 919.668.1928
aiea@duke.edu • www.aieaworld.org