

English Honors Seminar Graduation Thesis:
Chinese International Students in American Colleges:
Origin, Process, and Influence

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I. Introduction

In the context of your life experience, describe your understanding of cultural differences and how this awareness was acquired. Talk about how your experiences influenced the person you are and what you will bring to the XXXXXX community (i.e. classroom, extracurricular, future career, etc.).

Society always encourages people to be “international”/ “diverse”. The above quote, a common question from a graduate school application, is a proof of it. Talking about cultural awareness is a really popular topic these days for all kinds of applications. I loved to respond to those questions, because I thought my four years of academic experience in America, as a Chinese international student, is a rich answer. I would talk about how I conquered the language barrier, self-taught how to survive in a different country at a young age, and at the same time, maintaining a good GPA. I thought I was fulfilling my purpose of being an international student, so that I was proud to brag about my experience to the admission officers. I am a double major in Economics and English, which, I thought, enables me to see the globalized world with my own critical thinking. “International” means to me as emerging in an exotic culture, and to be the ambassador who can introduce my culture to the rest of the world.

Those are just my beautiful visions and hopes. None of us international students realized that we were lured into a whirlpool that makes us stuck with the conflict between expectations and reality. We never thought about what are the sacrifices we should make to be international. Those dreams not only belong to me, but also belong to most of the other 0.6 million (approximately) Chinese international students.¹ We thought we were the “hip” student responding to globalization, and we believed that we would make connections all around the world by studying abroad. We aimed to spread Chinese culture, and learn western

¹ By the end of 2015, there are 523,700 Chinese international students in major English speaking countries, including America, Britain, Canada, and Australia. And the number is increasing every year. My personal estimation is that the number should be approaching 0.8 million till today. A good comparison of this number is that by the end of 2016, the population in Seattle is approximately 0.7 million.

culture during our stay. At the same time, we would make connections with our peers from all around the world, and after graduation, we thought we would be the leaders of the world.

However, do we really understand the meaning of “international”? We focus on the gains we get, but what about the pain? Is the gain worth the pain?

On June 9th 2017, Yingying Zhang, age 26, a visiting scholar in the United States from China, disappeared; on June 30th 2017, law enforcement officials said they believed Zhang was no longer alive.

There are many other similar reports about young Chinese international students missing, murdered, committing suicide because of tremendous stress from study, or bullied during their study abroad.² Those young and ambitious students could have been having their best year of life, or at least a safe life, in their home country, but they chose studying abroad for various reasons. Are those reasons really worth all those young lives sacrificing their lives and health to realize?

Our problems have not received enough attention. We are potentially victimized by globalization in situations such as being taught professional terminology and advanced writing only in one language, so we don't know how to work professionally in the other language; frequent crossovers between cultures, leading to 'double' culture shock; being forced to assume independence at a young age; and difficulty finding mentors who have experienced or can at least appreciate our circumstances, and give us relevant advice. We are trying to show our best performance to the world and hide the pain, which has so far disguised our problems. However, without getting understanding from larger audiences, our hidden wound may get infected and cause unpredictable consequences. Especially because there are increasing numbers of us, the problems need to be addressed.

² The Chinese international students' community has our individual Wechat (Chinese version Facebook) groups, Podcasts channels, and other means of communication. Those social media tie us together to the community. I can read about young international students being placed at dangerous situations almost once a month.

II. Research Method

As a Chinese international student myself, who has studied abroad in America since high school graduation, I think I am qualified to speak up for international students' life in America and post-graduation in our original country. The primary subject being analyzed here is Chinese international students, like myself, who are studying abroad in American colleges. I think Chinese international students like myself face misunderstanding from both our native countries and the countries in which we study. The dilemma is that our thinking pattern is a combination of Chinese and American after graduating from American college. This duality is often appreciated, but regardless, we frequently meet cultural shock from both countries. We sacrifice a lot to survive, which makes it very painful for us to be misunderstood. The arguments raised in this project speak about my own opinions based on my own experience, and also reach to more broadly social issues suggested and reinforced by my research.

For this project, I did many studies of minority writers, including Amartya Sen Frantz Fanon and Amy Tan, to attempt to solve the mystery of why international/inter-racial cooperation is always so difficult to achieve, and people prefer to group with people similar to them. Those theorists' experiences might not relate to my thesis on the surface because of skin color and nationality, but all of them reveal the undercurrent tensions originated from colonial history and related to race, identity, and acceptance. I also did many interviews with my peer Chinese students and American students to include as many voices as possible. I collected many extreme stories from typical students, because I think it will more efficiently present the problem. I want to voice the voice for Chinese international students, and introduce to American schools and students to understand more about this increasing population. Race, language, post-colonialism, historical, and so many other factors, are influencing the life international students have in America. Those influences translate to the

daily life of international students. I structured this essay with inclusion of all those topics. I am trying to explore the meaning of international, and present their connections with post-colonial influence, which leads to the reasons for international students' struggles in the western world. The questions I proposed in this thesis might not be explained right now, and I am looking forward to learning solutions from my readers.

III. Presenting and Examining Findings of Chinese International Students' Struggles

The stories of individuals' responses I collected are extreme stories from typical students, and those can actually be counter narratives to the social narrative and expectation. We should at least pay attention to three streams of voices: the students', students' parents' (the sponsor) and educators' (the source of both positive and negative academic stress), and the societies'.³ However, the students' voices, which are the voices that should be paid most attention to, are muted and hidden under the tangible pressure from parents and educators, and intangible pressure from the society.

Most of us don't even have a choice to voice at all. We are just objectified individuals being sold and bought by organizations; we are desirable commodities because we have the "international" quality after buying and practicing this idea in response to the societies' requirement. However, the process of combining our formal Chinese identity with the new American lifestyle and turning ourselves to be international, and then making profit of this identity by commercializing our new identity and catering to the requirement of the society is painful. At the same time, no one can give an exact definition for what it means to be international. The idea we learned about "international" is spreading our culture to people and learning others' cultures, but the fact is that we are only influenced by American culture,

³ "Educators" is a broad term here including professors in America, middle/high school teachers in China, and tutors/instructors from educational companies providing study abroad counseling (Broad types of counseling include SAT/ACT test instructions, TOEFL language test instructions, and personal statements instructions).

and only a small fraction of us is spreading Chinese culture. The “international” idea institutions take is that a group of students is coming to pay for school construction in terms of paying high amount of tuition and not expecting financial support, or being a symbol to showoff their diversity. The consequence is the muted individuals suffering silently.

D). Origin of the problem:

1. Organizations promoting the over-exaggerated outcomes

The students are just objectified individuals subconsciously getting involved in the big social trend. Educational systems are selling the idea of “international,” and Chinese parents realize the importance of this idea and buy this idea for their children. “Being international” has different meanings. To job markets and educational systems, it means diversity and a response to the social trend/globalization. Having employees with international studying experience is a symbol of the company’s prosperity; having students from a country means a different face for the schools’ poster and a sign of diversity.

“You will be the winner of your generation! The experience of studying in another country will enrich your life! Globalization is the unavoidable trend of social progress and it has brought benefits to people from all fields! Studying abroad is the first step this generation has to take in order to keep up with the trend!” Those advertisement slogans are prevalent in China’s prosperous cities, in which there are capable dwellers who can afford to send their children to study abroad for their high school, college, master’s programs, and beyond. At the same time, many of those similar slogans also appear frequently in American schools’ studying abroad offices or departmental admission offices. Globalization is the unavoidable trend, and a growing population of people is responding to this trend. With the requirement from people to know more about this new concept, institutions see the opportunity and start

to promote its benefits. One type of industry which gains tremendously from this trend is the educational organization that helps international students to get ready for the various tests. Most of international students' initial understanding about life in other countries is from this type of organization. Due to limited understanding of America, families will actually hire agents/counselors to guide students' application and introduce American Universities to the young students. However, in order to gain more financial profit and attract more families to invest in the programs, those organizations only focusing on promoting the positive aspects of living in a different country. Many students have absolutely no idea or have a sugarcoated idea about studying abroad life before coming to America.

Those organizations' targeted student groups are students preparing to study abroad. In the year 2010, the specific Chinese high school students group planning to study abroad in America boomed, and those organizations started to provide outrageously expensive services for those students. Ms. Yi, my father's coworker, spent 400,000 RMB (around \$65,000) on one of the average packaged services in 2016. She expected to pay for the best future for her daughter. The service includes American college introduction, language test preparation, SAT/ACT preparation, and college personal statement revising. The increase rate of those organizations' income from high school students skyrocketed from year 2010 to 2012, and it is keeping an increasing trend.⁴

At the individual level, the application process is extremely important. The school that the students end up in might influence the whole family's future. However, the organizations treat their international student-customers like items, and display their application results as advertisements. They don't respect individuals' privacy and even publish their personal information like test results in forms of STUDENT XXX, GPAXXX,

⁴ I learned a lot of most current background info about Chinese international students from Ms. Yi. She wants to remain anonymous. (Ms. Yi, Interview, June 16th 2017)

LANGUAGE TEST SCORE XXX, ACT/SAT SCORE XXX, and accepted by XXX University.

2. Parents facilitating the process

The Chinese international students attending American colleges usually have to start preparing when they are in high school, which means that they make the life changing decision at around age fifteen. Young teenagers in high school barely understand who they themselves are or the country they live in, let alone critically thinking about their lives in a different country on the other side of the planet. It is clear that those students' parents are the primary reason behind those decisions; not only because the students are immature, but also because they are financially unable to afford the astonishingly high tuition. The average cost is around \$425,000 (RMB 2,762,500) when one starts calculating hired agents for the application to the end of grad school education, which includes only education and living expenses during school time.⁵ This money is almost worth the entire savings of a middle class family in China. With money getting involved in the decision-making, the motivation is somehow altered, and expectation for the outcome is increasing. The stake is getting higher because the parents are gambling the whole family wealth on their children's education.

Therefore, the question is, why is it so easy for parents to believe in the idea of "being international" as the best form of education for their children? To analyze this question, it is necessary to look back to Chinese traditional beliefs in education. Chinese, like people from all around the world, believe in the experiences/stories of successful people; but as long as one person is successful by doing something, everyone wants to copy the success's experience. The easiest way to measure "success" is by comparing incomes; and people who

⁵ Normal Chinese students who are not in IT related majors will at least get a master's degree; usually that's advised by the parents. It is also because of at least two social reasons: 1. Masters are more competitive in job markets and 2. The chance of international students with master's degrees can have 40-50% chance to get a working visa, while bachelor's diploma only brings 30%. The currency exchange rate fluctuates all the time, so the number is calculated based on the average exchange rate, which is approximately RMB 6.5 to \$1.

work in America have the natural advantage because of the currency exchange. They can multiply their salaries by around 6.5. At the same time, America is the most influential country in the world because of its political, economic, and military power; whereas China was very undeveloped during the 20th century. The contrast is like moving from a small town in Idaho to New York City in the 20th century. During that time, which is the parents' generation, only the elite of the elite can have the opportunity to study abroad or work in America. It was that generation's dream to stay in America. At the same time, every parent loves comparing their children with each other; and each normal China's family has only one child to compete with.⁶ Therefore, parents are pressuring all of their hopes and dreams to their only children. Meantime, since each family has only one kid and Chinese families have the tradition to live closely together, parents are also putting the return of their "investment" into consideration. They anticipate their children can support them back when the children are financially capable and they are unable to support themselves. They want to "invest" in their children, so that the kids can be their safety nets when they are old.

In addition, parents are threatened by the slogans from the educational organizations that are advertising "People will be left behind if they don't keep up with the globalization trend, and the first step to stay close with the trend is to by studying abroad". The dense population caused a highly competitive environment in Asia and drives parents desperately looking for solutions to help their children not to be left behind. At the same time, the middle class family in China also expanded, which results in more families being financially available to afford the high tuition in America. Therefore, the responsibility to give the best to their kids (most of the times involving imposing their ideology to their children), the expectation to live a good life when aged, and the fear of being left out by society trigger the parents to send their kids to study abroad.

⁶ Because the population increase was so fast in the 1980s, the government executed the "one child policy", meaning one family could only have one child. In year the 2015, the policy is replaced with "two children policy", meaning each family can have two kids at most.

3. Students accepting mis-interpreted idea as the ideal

It is in parents' nature to "be responsible" for their children's choices when they are young. Parents will make the decisions for children until they are mature enough. However, to Asian parents, the definition for "mature" is usually when their kids have their own families. Since they firmly believe that it is the best choice for their children, the parents will try to resell the idea of "being international" to their kids. To naïve children who don't have opinions, or resisting children who have their own opinions, parents always persuade or even directly impose their beliefs on their children. The "marketing sessions" are not conducted based on a fair platform, because the parents are using the "parents' privilege". Young children age around fifteen don't have as much contact with society, and they still value their parents as their heroes, which makes the process much easier. It is the cause of the age of the Chinese international student decreasing.

My personal story of coming to stay abroad is a very vivid demonstration of how a typical Chinese international student would be persuaded to study abroad. Mr. M., my father's long time friend, was the first person to persuade my father to send me to study abroad.

Mr. M. has a really successful daughter, Miss M. She is six years older than me, who went to University of Washington before the study abroad trend became popular in 2008.⁷ She enjoyed her experience tremendously and she is currently working in an influential company on Wall Street. Mr. M. is very proud of his daughter and spreads word about her education in America to all his friends. My father was impressed by this alternative educational and life style. He doesn't speak English, which makes it impossible for him to get first hand materials from college websites. Therefore, he consulted his other friends who have

⁷ Year 2011 is the burst of studying abroad trend. Although learning English was the persistent requirement for Chinese students before 2011, the majority of Chinese families hadn't embraced the idea of sending their children to study abroad. Being able to send kids to study in an American University/high school is valued as a demonstration of the family's social and economic status nowadays. The kids' ability to survive in a different place is somehow overlooked.

supported their children studying abroad. Almost all of them expressed positive reflections to my father.⁸ The responses are usually: my kid enjoyed this different lifestyle; he/she discovered the meaning of their academic career; he/she makes a lot of American friends; and he/she has a mentor/professor who thinks they have great potential... On the other hand, my mom thought I was too young to live alone in a different country. She speaks fluent English, so she searched for information about American colleges online and the philosophy of welcoming international perspective persuaded her. They believed that “studying abroad” was the best choice for me.⁹

We had the conversation about choosing studying abroad in 2010 when I was fourteen. At that time, the mainstream value in Chinese schools was still that the best students would ace their college entrance exams and enter good Chinese Universities. I believed that I was a good student, and I should be classified to that category and chose that path. I didn’t want to study abroad because I thought it was a sign of me not being the elite student in China.

My parents sold the idea to me because of three reasons: 1. Globalization is the current social trend, and individuals have to respond to this trend. Your peers will leave you behind if you don’t study abroad. They will also want to study abroad to enrich their experience; 2. Most of their friends’ kids chose study abroad, and they enjoyed it greatly; 3. They will pay my tuition.¹⁰ I still remember my parents’ tone when they tell me, “You will understand us when you grow up”, and “You should believe that your parents will never mean to hurt you”. Because of the combination of their threat (being left behind was a huge disaster for me) and lure (don’t have to worry about the huge amount of tuition), I gave in. I bought their version of “being international”. During the time when I was in Chinese high

⁸ The information delivered to parents is also biased. I will elaborate this point in the later section.

⁹ Mr. Ma is one of the “pioneer parents” that realized the benefits of sending child studying abroad. I learned a lot from conversations with him. He preferred to remain anonymous. (Mr. Ma, Interview, June 2008, August 2011, August 2014)

¹⁰ Chinese college is not as expensive as it is in American. The best universities in China are public schools, and depend mainly on the government’s found. The maximum amount for college education in China is RMB 10,000 per year (around \$3,500), and most of that are living fee.

school's international department that was specifically designed for students who plan to study abroad, I also studied the American Universities' expectation for international students by discussing with my peers and consulting American instructors in my school. At that time, I loved the beautiful image on American Universities' website of people with different skin colors and cultural background holding hands tightly and laughing happily together. I thought "being international" means being the cultural ambassador who brings Chinese culture to America, and spreads American culture back to China. I looked forward to having my own face on a similar image that I always see on the websites. I thought international means making friends with people from all around the world and communicating different cultures. I thought I was prepared to be a Chinese international student in America.

Almost all high school international students age around 18 believed in all those reasons and definitions. We even understood that we are carrying the strong responsibility of the whole family's future welfare, but this idea also somehow made the young us excited. We thought that was a sign of our parents' trust, and we were willing to throw in our future to meet their expectation. We thought we were prepared, and we thought we were going to enter a bright new world.

However, little did we know what we were about to face.

II). Conflict: international students actually arrive in America:

When expectation meets reality but doesn't match.

With the misunderstood definition of "international", Chinese international students expected to be the cultural ambassador and shoulder the responsibility of the family's future. We came to America full of expectation. We remembered our "destiny" and tried to reach out to the "local community". However, not everyone wanted to get in touch with us. In fact, the majority of the local community doesn't want to communicate. Most people don't want to

investigate in new ideas. We do have positive encounters with Americans, but most of them are people who are already familiar with Chinese culture, such as international research scholars and Chinese language learning students. At those cases, international students' purpose of introducing our cultures has failed. We are not spreading our own cultures to new audiences, and we are not making friends who are really different from us. In the end, in order to find a belonging in this completely different world, we are either just hanging out with people similar to us, or we have to erase some of our original identity to fit in with the different group.

As mentioned in Amartya Sen's *Identity and Violence*, V.S. Naipaul expresses the worry about losing one's past and one's historical identity in the melting pot of the present. America is the melting pot of all cultures; each identity comes to the US with the sacrifice of losing some of their original identities. However, the sacrifice is necessary. Sen argues, "Belonging to each one of the membership groups can be quite important, depending on the particular context [...], a person has to make choices—explicitly or by implication —about what relative importance to attach, in a particular context, to the divergent loyalties and priorities that may compete for precedence"(Sen, 42). Chinese international students constantly face those choices. We are engaging with the new environment in the US, but our initial identity is completely different from the mainstream American identity: we have different skin color, we behave in a different way, and although all of us communicate in English, we do have Chinese accents that cannot be covered. In the recent five years, the population of Chinese internationals skyrocketed, which makes all types of Chinese international student organizations emerging in almost all American Universities. To most international student families, it is a good sign, because the students can find a sense of

belonging in a different country.¹¹ We have a choice, and we can choose which group we want to belong to. From the establishment of international student communities, such as FIUTS (Foundation for international understanding through students) in UW to the Asian student association, to Chinese international student organization, to even Beijing student club, the process is a sign of international students' increasing self-awareness and choices regarding identities.

I personally see the Chinese international student organization as a response from increasing numbers of Chinese students, who have the awareness of their own identity. We realize that we are not the same, and we don't need to push ourselves to blend in. Thanks to the circumstance of an increasing population of people similar to us, we gather together and find belonging from each other.

Why can't the beautiful image be achieved in reality? Why cannot Chinese International students have a good time with American students, but at the same time preserve their own identity?

1) Initial conflict caused by difference in Appearance (Skin color)

The beautiful ideas of "international" captured by pictures fail the test of reality. It is in human nature to interpret people we don't understand by evaluating their appearance.

"You are an English major? Wow! I thought you said Engineering. I guess I just cannot believe that an Asian international student is not here to be an engineer." "As an Asian, you look really good in red. Your yellow skin matches the red color so well." "Do you know how to cook? I know Asian women are usually good cooks." That is how conversations

¹¹ An interesting viewpoint worth noticing: Some Chinese international students feel this trend is depriving their chance to be international (don't have to force themselves). Ten years ago, there was only a very small fraction of Chinese students on American campuses, so at that time international students "had to" hang out with Americans. I personally forced myself to talk to more American students when I was in high school. There were also high-achieving Chinese students forcing themselves to hang out with Americans, so that they could practice their English.

usually start when I try to talk to new people during American parties. Some of those are supposed to be compliments, but I can never feel genuinely pleasant. I realize that my yellow-skinned body is definitely transmitting some information. The minute when people look at me, certain expectations are placed on me. She is an Asian, and she wears glasses, so she must be good at Science... Difference in appearance causes the initial conflict in international students' life in the US. The people I talked to don't have bad intentions, but it only means more hurt to the receivers. Since when it is okay to categorize people? Good stereotype/discrimination is still hurtful.

Certain assumptions are made when we are exposed to society, and engaging with the world with our physical appearance as our name-card. What factors facilitate people making their judgments to others in such a short time? Although it is often said that we should not judge a book by its cover, it is usually how society operates in reality. It is our body that leaves the first impression to people we engage with. "Body" is the form in which we appear and engage with society, and it is subjected to social rules and conventions. During the previously mentioned conversations, my body was the subject of people's judgments, and there was no way for me to control how they were going to read my body. How is this subconscious decision making process formed? And why can people feel so natural placing their racial comments on others as if it is the same as commenting on the weather? People have emotions, and our feelings are hurt or offended by different comments. However, since we are living in modern society, the necessary social exchange of information is unavoidable. At the same time, society gradually develops some standards to define what constitutes "human". Particular bodies have particular meanings, and they tell different stories of history or personal lives.

When Chinese international students come to America, we are engaging in this white

dominant society in a completely different way.¹² We are shy, we are curious, and we don't want to get ourselves into any trouble. We hide our voices. We maintain our smiles and try to be strong, tough, and independent, so that our families and friends won't worry about us.

Why do people feel so free to ask or, even worse, comment on people's racial identity?

A good example that I can think of that describes the consequence and the damage made to the subjected groups is from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon describes one of his encounters about people judging his personality because of his skin color. " 'Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!' Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible" (Fanon, 112). The kid had completely no previous interaction with Fanon, so if it were not because he was black, the kid would have no reason to be afraid of him. In this scenario, the readers can see that the child's comment is reflecting the truth of how civilized society is valuing the African American community. Adults' judgments are influencing the children's perceptions towards people around them, and the child's voice is a representation of adults' belief. The "Negro" is considered as a monstrous presence. They are dangerous, and un-human. However, why does the child, or the adults who gave them those ideas, so firmly believe that what they have seen is the reality? What gives them the power to decide that they are human, and the "Negro" is not?

Fanon also mentions a comment towards him from people, which might explain "my" previous encounter. Fanon quotes from a comment from "my" friend, "When people like me, they tell me that it is in spite of my color" (Fanon, 116). People are automatically assuming that "I" am feeling ashamed by "my" skin color. They are also placing their own skin color on a more prestigious social class. The white people liking black are showing a kind of mercy. Who makes the judgment of what is the superior skin color?

¹² Chinese international students and Chinese American students are different, and the difference can be noticed the minute when we start talking. The accent will "sell us out".

It seems that race is the reason why “I” am deprived of humanity in Fanon’s two scenarios. However, as Ta-Nehisi Coates mentions in his *Between the World and Me*, “Race is the son of Racism, not the father”. The racist attitudes towards certain groups separate and mislead the definition of human. Coates here adds questions for his readers to consider: “What is race?” “What is racism?” Who defines which race can rule over other races? Those might be questions that will never be answered, but those judgments impede international students from enjoying their experience as the way they define “international”. Then where do all those judgments come from? How do people think it is okay to place people into different racial groups?

→Historical backgrounds

History plays an influencing role in racial hierarchies. The Pearl Harbor event sets an image of “Asian” as evil, filthy, and despicable for American. Many of my American friends including Asian Americans, and European Americans tell me that their grandparents or great grandparents had always told them racial based stories about the Japanese community.¹³ At the same time, to some Americans, all Asian ethnicities have a similar appearance. Some Americans only know three Asian countries (Korea, China, and Japan), and they assume that’s all the Asian countries. Without enough historical and cultural understanding of Asian countries, it is really hard for western citizens to distinguish the differences. However, the majority of western society refuses to find out.

Based on that logic, the whole Asian country is somehow classified as greedy invaders by the older generation. And the older generation passes on the racial comments to the younger generations. Generations after generations, the racialized image of Asian is created.

¹³ During WWII, Japan invaded many Asian countries, and the Japanese army caused huge disturbances in Asia. E.g., in the holocaust of Nanking (China’s city), 30,000 innocent citizens were massacred, most of those women and children; and all women/young girls were raped and killed.

On the other hand, WWII also demonstrated America's strength. This power makes the relatively underdeveloped Asian countries feel awed and afraid. This fear also gives rise to respect and worship.

The post-colonial influence is changing greatly on how different countries value each other. To Asian countries, students are required to study English because it is considered as the skill to have so that the whole country won't be left out in the globalization process. With more people being able to speak English, more international cooperation opportunity will be offered to the country. In some of China's cities, the English test score of high school entrance exam takes up a higher percentage than the Chinese test. ¹⁴

II. Conflicts and changing when students are in the US

→Outfit

Granted, there are some international students having a good time with American students, but there are some usual comments on those students: You look like an American, or you don't have any accent. I am still subconsciously desiring for those comments.

There was a time when I was late for class and I just put on whatever I saw in the morning, and one of my American friends told me that I looked American that day. Subconsciously, I replied, "thank you". I always identify myself as Chinese, and I am very proud for that identity. That moment made me confused. I have already accepted the American mainstream standard of beauty subconsciously, even though my conscience tells me to resist it. Studying abroad changes a part of my identity.

Hoodies, yoga pants, and sneakers were usually not my "to go" outfit when I was still in China, but those clothes are the easiest to purchase in America. In addition, I don't want to stand out in a classroom with my different outfit. The majority of the classroom wears hoodies and jeans. So I followed the majority's preference. This is the external change.

¹⁴ The government is working on rebalancing the test scores, but English Language education is somehow valued higher than Chinese Literature education. It is true because English is most of our second language, but it is also because it is seen as the tool to participate in international society.

Also, my response surprised me. Why do I have to say “thank you” to this comment? Is that because I have already subconsciously wanted to be American? I have also heard comments from my Chinese friends about how “Americanized” I have become after studying abroad for almost four years.

→Language

Along with appearance, language is also a main reason that explains international students’ life in America. It seems that the better English you can speak, the easier you can live in America. Language makes people feel easier to take you in and recognize you as someone from their group. It is the number one survival tool an international person needs to possess.

I talked with my friend Dewi Ali, a Brunei international student, who can speak perfect English without any accent. She shared a really disturbing conversation with her friend. He told her that he loved to study with her and he hated to work on the same project with an international student. He thought international students were stupid, slow, and their rich parents made them lazy. Dewi, at that time, told him what I would invite all my audience to remember: Being an international student is not the reason why those students have those personalities; there are also American students who have similar traits. I am also an international student, and it is not making me stupid. You said that you enjoy studying with me yourself. There might be sometimes when we have to take some time and translate the language, but we are trying our best to improve. Please be patient with us or you try to speak your second language every minute in an academic environment. ¹⁵

In addition to hurtful comments from individuals, language is also a major reason for institutions to discriminate against immigrants. In Amy Tan’s memoir *Mother Tongue*, Tan

¹⁵ Dewi Ali is a very independent and inspiring. She also has a firm stance on her own identity. She provides me many stories of her interactions with international students. (Dewi, Interview, April 22nd 2018)

depicts a scenario of her mum answering the phone call with her stockbroker. Since “my mother has long realized the limitations of her English,” she has to “stand in the back whispering loudly” and wait till her fifteen-year-old daughter translates her sentences into “perfect English”. (Tan, 42) Apparently, this is a really hilarious scenario. A mad woman is whispering in a loud voice, while her young daughter is deliberately trying to act like an adult and translate her “impeccable broken English” into a more sophisticated and better-articulated way of expression.

Reading this scenario makes readers feel sad for the mother, because she cannot even let her anger out without her daughter’s help. She tries so hard to speak English with native speakers, but she cannot communicate as fluently as she is expected to. Therefore, as a non-native English speaker who lacks communication skills, she endures the institutionalized discrimination from organizations like banks. On the other side, the readers can see how awkward Tan is during this conversation. As a fifteen-year-old kid, she is not only helping her mother to solve the problem, but also acting mature beyond her age. What’s more, it is embarrassing to have a mad lady “instructing” loudly to you about how to solve her problem when you are already busily dealing with it. It’s not hard to imagine how Tan is desperately hoping her mother could be a real American, or at least speak fluent English.

Tan also sets up an example about the trouble her mother and herself go through during a CAT scan. The hospital refuses to apologize for losing the CAT scan until Tan speaks perfect English to them. “[...] We had assurances that CAT scan would be found, promises that a conference call on Monday would be held, and apologies for any suffering [...]” (Tan, 43) The readers could see the exact opposite attitude from the hospital towards their patients only because of the way they speak English. If the bank was just an important organization that immigrants had to keep contact with, institutions like hospitals were vital to an individual’s health and survival. I could not imagine how many other Asian American

immigrants may have been deprived of the opportunity to visit a doctor just because of the way they spoke English, and some of them are probably still suffering from their illness at the present day.

From Tan's two stories, we can see that America's institutionalized discrimination by banks and hospitals makes judgments and decisions on how to serve their customers based on whether the customer is a native English speaker, which was impossible for immigrants. As long as someone who can speak "perfect English" is communicating with them, their attitudes change completely. Therefore, as the daughter who can communicate perfectly with Americans, Tan is required by her mother to solve the speaking problems ever since she was a girl. It is natural that this daughter may feel annoyed by her duty, and may expect her mother to be able to solve those problems on her own. However, it is impossible for her mother to become an American no matter how hard she tries, and the discrimination from different organizations will always remain because she is an Asian immigrant.

On the other hand, we can also interpret from Tan's story that living in America is much easier for her generation, because language is not a problem for them. As long as Tan starts to use her "perfect English" to talk with people, her mom's problems are all fixed. Nonetheless, in order to become an American, they still have to sacrifice something. The basic communication is not a problem for them, but in order to be an American, they have to abandon their tradition, which is speaking Chinese.

As English learning students, we were taught that speaking English without an accent is the perfect English.¹⁶ However, none of them thought about why British/American accent is considered as the "good" accent. Since when there is a hierarchy of accents if English language's main purpose is supposed to be to communicate? Especially for English, since it is used as the worldwide communication method. Everyone speaks English, but why can

¹⁶ The "mainstream" schools in China encourage students to speak English in British accent (specifically London accent). We used to practice "English pronunciations" after cassette with British English record. The more British accent a student can speak, the better he/she is regarded as a good English student.

French/Irish accents be placed as the sexiest accents, whereas Asian countries' accents are considered as inferior and need to be erased? Shouldn't the ideas matter more than just pronunciation?

During my study in America, I encountered many situations when Americans were telling me my English is good. However, their standard of judging my "English speaking skill" is on the basic level: accent. My ideas are hidden beneath the most apparent accent. People don't see me as a person with interesting ideas, but as a second language speaker who can communicate in English. My intellectual ability is underestimated.

However, in order to have my voice be heard, I need to speak "good" English. Therefore, I practiced hard to erase my Chinese accent. In high school, I would feel honored to have someone say, "your accent sound just like British." This feeling of "pleasing" native speakers last is troubling, and I still subconsciously say "thank you" to people when they compliment my "English speaking skill".

I absolutely understand that all those people mean well. However, is it okay to ignore the undercurrent discrimination only because people have nice intentions? Good racial stereotypes are still stereotypes.

Meanwhile, as a writing tutor on campus, I have heard my Chinese co-worker Annie telling me that her TA asks her to check the grammar of her paper. According to Annie, her TA's facial expression was as if her grammar was so bad for normal people to understand. He instructed her to check the grammar at a writing center. How ironic is that? She works in a writing center. I have talked to my English native speaker co-workers about international students' grammar issues all the time. They reflect that the writers are worrying too much about it, and that worrisomeness is usually deviating them from noticing the most important thing, which should be organization and ideas. There were international students being sent to the writing center because their instructors require them to check their grammar when there

are actually no serious mistakes in the paper. How can those instructors just see a non-American last name and assume the students' grammar is bad? Even if there are some language-using mistakes, how can professors assume the students' paper's quality is low? Intelligence doesn't only equal to language-using skills.

→Family relationship:

In addition to Dewi's response, I also want to add to the American student she had conversation with: our parents work so hard to support us, but it doesn't make us lazy.¹⁷ We appreciate the fact that they pay our tuition so that we can focus on our studies. They work so hard and some of those parents even invest their lifesavings or go deeply in debt. However, it doesn't make our stress lighter than yours. The feeling of being deeply in debt to your parents is devouring; and getting the investment means we have to behave according to the investors. It causes major conflicts between students and their parents, and that conflict cannot be resolved easily. In addition, we live alone in a different country far away from our parents and childhood friends starting at a really young age, usually starting year 18. We barely have around 65 days together in 365 days of a year. The majority of us haven't spent the Chinese New Year since the time we start studying abroad.¹⁸ Some of us haven't even seen our parents for years. Life is hard to us, but we are trying really hard to stay strong and facing everything alone because we don't want people who love us to worry.

¹⁷ International students' tuition is 3 times higher than in-state students. The half rumor and half fact is that international students' tuition has been used on University reformations such as renovating buildings and equipment. It is also one of the reasons for Universities to welcome more international students to apply. Some American students have multiple feelings about this situation. There are also comments about international students being proud and arrogant because "they" think they are the founder of the University.

¹⁸ Chinese New Year, also known as China's spring festival, is as important as western Christmas and Thanksgiving combined together. It is on the New Year of the lunar calendar. It is the time when families are supposed to enjoy together reflecting losses and gains in the past year and anticipating the New Year.

At the same time, lack of communication is causing tensions within international students' families. As I mentioned above, our parents are investing a lot on our education, so naturally, we feel obliged to listen to our investors' suggestions on major decisions. For example, when we choose our majors, our parents naturally want us to learn something practical. Therefore, a lot of international students are advised to major in Business/Economics, Engineering, Bio-Chemistry, or Law... Those majors are getting gradually more competitive to apply to with the increasing demand of Chinese international student applicants.¹⁹ Therefore, Chinese international students are trapped between the major their parents want them to get in and the resulting competitive major that they cannot get in. We feel bad and disgraced for not getting in the major, but we are not happy when studying in the major. At the same time, if we cannot get into the major during the first application round, we would apply again, usually not because of pursuing our dreams, but also because we want to use the money invested by our parents wisely.

As a writing tutor on campus, I know a couple writers who have kept trying to apply for Business school for around two years, and when I asked their real reason of pursuing a Business degree, the answers are usually the same: because my parents think it is a good choice for me. However, life changes greatly in college, and parents cannot experience what students have. They do have a better understanding of what kind of people the society is requiring, but the students are the only judge for deciding what is the best for themselves. Those students who have been rejected by Foster have also kept taking "unpractical" classes such as art history and photography, and those classes make them feel happy. They are scared for not loving the major their parents/investor chose for them, and feel afraid to pursue their own passion.

¹⁹ Take University of Washington as an example, 10 years ago, programs in Foster Business School were not competitive. Domestic student applicants have not increased much, so the only factor that makes this change is because of international student applicants.

There is another kind of student like me. We pressure ourselves to fulfill our parents' expectation so that we can use the residual time to pursue the major we love. However, the pressure is really intense. My parents "instructed" me to study 4 years in college, therefore if I study really hard, I can take both majors, one for our parents, and one for myself. So I decided to major in Economics so that my parents will be assured that I am using their investment "wisely". During one sophomore quarter, I took three 400 level Economics classes, and the class pressure almost devoured me. I survived, and I earned my time to major in English, the major I am passionate about.

I am the relatively fortunate student. No fatal consequences happened to me yet. I have a high achieving friend who got a heart attack because of drinking. She was drinking because of her academic pressure. However, instead of having conversations about her stress, her parents only condemned her for drinking and hurting her health. Our parents don't understand our life in America, and they think taking an extra major is putting pressure on ourselves. According to this logic, we "deserve" our pressure.

Long distance video chatting is not as efficient as in-person conversation. Due to long time lack of communication, international students are psychologically vulnerable to misunderstanding and pressure. The son of my mother's friend killed himself during the first quarter as an international student. He was only eighteen. I heard about this story in high school during a family friend gather together party, and the parents discussed this child as psychologically weak and didn't appreciate his parents. Granted, he was taking an extreme reaction, but now I understand what he was going through. Because of young age and lack of mentor's conciliation, international students don't know how to react.

→Inter-cultural conflict resolution→ avoid

Looking at international students' life from the individuals' level, we met cultural shocks all the time. Some of those shocks are not as easy to pay attention to as it is recorded on tourists' guides since international students are living with Americans.

One of my good friends Tom was bullied when he was in high school in America because he fulfilled all the "criteria" of an Asian nerd: quiet and reserved, didn't do sports, skinny, had really good grades...²⁰ The leader of the swimming team stepped over his wrist and broke his bone only because he thought Tom is a pushover.

Tom didn't do anything, because he and his parents didn't want to get involved in any troubles. They agreed that he was not able to handle a following lawsuit, if it was going to happen, alone. In addition, the international students' primary mission in America is supposed to be studying. We silence ourselves because we just believe that we cannot win our rights back.

Similar situations are happening almost daily on campus.

A good example can be choosing your roommates. Most international students like me are advised to live with an American roommate, because our beautiful expectation tells us that living with an American will facilitate the cultural exchange. It is not how it happens in reality. Roommate problems are the worst, because you cannot get rid of the issues in a short time. Two most common issues are holding parties in the dorm and having boyfriend/girlfriend stay overnight. The majority of Chinese students don't like parties three nights a week, because we think our mission here is to "study", and we have nothing in common to talk about with people attending the party. At the same time, the on-campus housing rooms are relatively crowded, and it feels really awkward and hard for you to concentrate on your work when you know there are people kissing two meters away.

²⁰ I am only using American names to protect people's privacy.

A little interesting fact is that most international students have an English name before coming to America. We were "required" to get ourselves an English name for English classes when we were in China. Tom is this interviewee's English name. He has been using this name since high school. (Tom, interview, March 28th, 2018)

Those conflicts are not as easy to be reconciled as it is promoted. Firstly, it is not easy to erase the habit of diligent study we have kept for almost twenty years in a couple days. It is not that easy to just put up with. Secondly, vice versa, American roommates don't understand why you are taking so much care on those minor issues. At the same time, no one thinks that they are wrong, and no one wants to compromise. Even when things get out of hand, no one wants to have a room swap, because everyone thinks the other people should be responsible. In the end, because of the consistent tension, international students are always the people choosing to step behind and move. However, those experiences left an almost traumatic impression on international students, and only one of thirty Chinese international students I interviewed replied that they would recommend living with American students. The cultures just won't "agree" with each other, no matter how hard each individual tries.

From all those micro-aggressions and troubles in daily lives, conflicts are actually building up. The expected international cultural exchange is actually causing more troubles.

At the higher social level, the conflict is actually more intense. Most of the universities in the US charge an "international student fee" quarterly, as if we should be apologetic to be "international". Although it is just a small fraction of the whole tuition, the cause of the fee is skeptical.²¹ Many international students tell me that they feel that this fee is similar to a "pet fee" for apartments, but this time we are the "pet".

The most popular age of studying abroad is in college, and after four years, most of us are Americanized in some ways. However, none of the American students are "Chinesed". The accepted exchanging process is not reciprocal, while Chinese learn a lot about American culture, none of the American students want to know more about Chinese culture. The idea of "international" is not realized.

²¹ For America's public universities, international students pay the same tuition fee as out-of-state students, which is three times the in-state student fee, and an extra \$50 (usually) for "international student fee"; for private universities, the tuition is the same for in-state and out-of-state, but the "international student fee" is around \$80.

→Nationality and post graduation

China is not the old and closed up country the western world used to believe it was. Most Chinese international students do want to go back to their original country if it is possible. Then it comes to the question: What is the point of studying abroad if we have to come back to China eventually?

By continuing living in America, the problem seems to be solved. However, it is still not as easy as just finding a job. Not all Chinese International students can have the most necessary requirement to stay: a legal identity. The possibility of getting a working visa is 30% for undergraduates, while it is about 40-50% for graduate students. “It is like waiting to win the lottery”, said by my friend Kelly, who has been waiting to get her working visa and delaying her graduation for two years.

Kelly is one of the most high-achieving Chinese international students I have ever known. She keeps an almost 4.0 GPA and majored in Accounting. During her undergrad years, she almost got first place of her class all the time, and all her professors and classmates think that she is going to have a bright future. However, most American firms won't offer her jobs because of her nationality. They would even hire people with much lower academic performance than Kelly. After she finished her first degree and was equipped with all the skills to work, she couldn't get her visa. Therefore, she had to stay in school and get another degree while waiting for another round, during which, she had to register for another major to maintain her legal status in America.²² She majored in Finance just to stay in America. It is a complete waste of time for her, because the only purpose is to stay in America. After two

²² Every year, there are two chances for people to get their working visa; and the “unlucky” people who cannot get the visa have to wait for the next round; but they cannot wait without a “legal identity” in America, so some people would work and at the same time maintain their full student schedule by registering for full time classes.

years, she still hasn't won her lottery. Meantime, she has to graduate and come back to China and build all her social networks from scratch.²³

From a higher level to look at nationality and Chinese international students' life in a different country, the power of China matters. During the late 19th century and early 20th century, China was a weak country because of internal division and westerners' and Japan's colonization; hence Chinese had an international name called "the sick man of Asia". Chinese couldn't even dare to dream about international respect during that era. In the recent decades, the development of Chinese economy and military power bring its citizens respect and equality.

III. Twisted "product" coming back to China²⁴

After living in America since adulthood, Chinese international students are already equipped with all the skills necessary to live in America. For most of us, it might be the easiest way. We have never learned how to live as an adult in China, because we have been sent to America at a very young age. We also have not participated in China during its fast development. Going back to China means we have to learn every living skill including traffic rules and ordering food from scratch. At the same time, all of our academic/potential career connections are made in America, which means we have to build our new connections in China from the very beginning. In addition, international students don't have the skills to survive in China's working environment. We learned our skills in English, not Chinese. When I was having an internship in China, I was asked to get the "amortization chart", and I was confused. So I asked for help from my coworkers. They explained to me about the concept in Chinese, and I understood what they mean. I felt a little embarrassed, so I tried to explain that it is because I learned this word in English so I didn't realize it when people first

²³ Kelly is a typical hardworking and high-achieving Chinese student. I learned a lot about post-graduation stories of international students from her. (Kelly, interview, April 8th 2018)

²⁴ It's a notion of pain, not dehumanization.

said it. The consequence was that I heard someone saying “that intern is just bragging she studied abroad in America” behind my back. In order to avoid similar situations from happening, we have to retrain ourselves back to Chinese thinking pattern.

In China, the number of students trying to study abroad is still increasing, and the fantasy towards the beautiful image of people with different colors holding hands and laughing is still attracting more people. I had the same expectation before coming to America. I thought I would be an exception to all the stereotypes. However, there is no exception for anyone.

Except for the previously mentioned troubles and micro-aggressions, the original harmonious family relationship is also twisted by the studying abroad situation. All those changes originate from financial struggles.

I remember there was a time when I called my parents because I was really stressed and I thought that the payoff of studying abroad is not worth it. I could not meet their expectation. My mom was very understanding and tried to comfort me over video chat. She said: “Every investment is risky, but investing in your education is going to have a positive outcome in the long run. It is the safest and the best investment. We are willing to invest in you.” I was so moved at first, but then realized, my parents objectified me. Our parents don’t understand us anymore, and vice versa. Only a small number of us could convince our parents to think from our point of view. It is still easier for us to take in, because we know our family still has positive intention.

One awkward situation for all international students is when we are coming back home, our family might demand us to “perform speaking English”. Then there will either be other people complimenting us on “taking advantage of the experience”, or there will be a “competition” for who can speak better English if more than one international student is present.

The micro-aggressions at the social level is much more fierce and brutal than these family interactions. Misunderstanding towards Chinese international students is also prevalent in our original country. There are people judging international students only because we have studied abroad. There are also Chinese phrases sometimes being used to diminish us.²⁵ There are phrases like “fake American want to be”, and “ungrateful rats who forget their hometown just because of eating foreign food for a couple years”...

There was a situation encountered by my friend Julie. She landed in China and was trying to get home by herself from the airport by subway. She accidentally bumped someone while dragging her luggage and wobbling on the subway. She immediately said sorry to the passenger, and apparently, he was in a bad mood and replied: “don’t take a subway and interfere with our normal people’s life if you are rich enough to study abroad.” (Maybe he made his “right” assumption that Julie had studied abroad based on her outfit and behavior.) Then he walked away. Julie was tired and under jetlag, so she didn’t respond. Similar situations happen all the time.

When we talked about this encounter later, we both stuck at this question: where is international students’ place? Based on the literal definition of “international”, we are supposed to be accepted by multiple nations; but neither our original country nor the country we studied abroad in accepts us.

Conclusion

Granted, the idea of “studying abroad” and “international identity” is not overall wrong or delusional, but the outcome and importance have been exaggerated and commodified. There is no guarantee for everyone to get their expected success and live a happy life in the future just by studying abroad. People only see focus on reporting the

²⁵ 假洋鬼子，崇洋媚外...

glorious side of this experience without looking at the harsh struggles. Although international living and studying enrich individuals' experience under the circumstance that those experiences are all mind opening and not fatal, there is no guarantee that international experience is the key for individuals to be the "winner".

If we already know "international" is still a controversial idea, why does society still expect everyone to get such experience? My personal experience and almost 30 interviewees participating in this research reflect that almost all of us come to America full of expectations because we think this experience is a promise for our futures and the start of a chapter of new life; yet we discover the hidden sacrifice this term encloses, which makes us question our motivations and our own identity of being "international".

At the social level, the explanation of "International" is limited to "inter-racial". As a Chinese international student with yellow skin, I am a face for American school image. The university can use the photos with yellow faces to advertise its "diversity"; vice versa, in any English learning countries in Asia, the schools would post the pictures with "westerner looking" teachers to advertise the "fact" that this school can teach "good English". On the other hand, when individuals, especially when students become new employees, have or seem like having the "international experience" by getting diplomas from a different country or stressing the fact of being born in a different country, they will focus advertising this experience on their application to sell "international" back to society.

After playing the role of "international student" for four years, I still don't know what the meaning of this term is; but I have understood what are the sacrifices I have to sustain. I used to think "international" meant equality and opportunity, yet my current perception about this concept is just hierarchy, race, and reflection deeply rooted in racial colonization. However, the apparent explanation for this term remains as a beautiful utopian image of acceptance and enjoyment. Those appearances are not strong enough to be interpreted,

because people will discover the hidden codes of a colonial past and realize that certain actions are just afterlife of history.

In a perfectly Utopian world, it would be really good to live as the way those beautiful advertisements portray. However, in reality, individuals still need to be careful to tell the difference between reality and what is ideal. By re-telling some stories of people living in this trend, I hope I will raise people's attention on this issue and start to think about possible remedies. I want call the attention from majorities to think about who gives the right to you to place yourself higher than other people; while the minorities to stop hiding your identities and question yourself who are you really running away from?

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