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The China Conundrum

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This article is a collaboration between The New York Times and The Chronicle of Higher Education, a daily source of news, opinion and commentary for professors, administrators and others interested in academe. Tom Bartlett is a senior writer at The Chronicle covering ideas and research; Karin Fischer is a senior reporter covering international education.

DOZENS of new students crowded into a lobby of the University of Delaware's student center at the start of the school year. Many were stylishly attired in distressed jeans and bright-colored sneakers; half tapped away silently on smartphones while the rest engaged in boisterous conversations. Eavesdropping on those conversations, however, would have been difficult for an observer not fluent in Mandarin. That's because, with the exception of one lost-looking soul from Colombia, all the students were from China.

Among them was Yisu Fan, whose flight from Shanghai had arrived six hours earlier. Too excited to sleep, he had stayed up all night waiting for orientation at the English Language Institute to begin. Like nearly all the Chinese students at Delaware, Mr. Fan was conditionally admitted — that is, he can begin taking university classes once he successfully completes an English program. He plans to major in finance and, after graduation, to return home and work for his father's construction company. He was wearing hip, dark-framed glasses and a dog tag around his neck with a Chinese dragon on it. He chose to attend college more than 7,000 miles from home, Mr. Fan said, because "the Americans, their education is very good."

That opinion is widely shared in China, which is part of the reason the number of Chinese undergraduates in the United States has tripled in just three years, to 40,000, making them the largest group of foreign students at American colleges. While other countries, like South Korea and India, have for many years sent high numbers of undergraduates to the United States, it's the sudden and startling uptick in applicants from China that has caused a stir at universities — many of them big, public institutions with special English-language programs — that are particularly welcoming toward international students. Universities like Delaware, where the number of Chinese students has leapt to 517 this year, from 8 in 2007.

The students are mostly from China's rapidly expanding middle class and can afford to pay full tuition, a godsend for universities that have faced sharp budget cuts in

recent years. But what seems at first glance a boon for colleges and students alike is, on closer inspection, a tricky fit for both.

Colleges, eager to bolster their diversity and expand their international appeal, have rushed to recruit in China, where fierce competition for seats at Chinese universities and an aggressive admissions-agent industry feed a frenzy to land spots on American campuses. College officials and consultants say they are seeing widespread fabrication on applications, whether that means a personal essay written by an agent or an English proficiency score that doesn't jibe with a student's speaking ability. American colleges, new to the Chinese market, struggle to distinguish between good applicants and those who are too good to be true.

Once in the classroom, students with limited English labor to keep up with discussions. And though they're excelling, struggling and failing at the same rate as their American counterparts, some professors say they have had to alter how they teach.

Colleges have been slow to adjust to the challenges they've encountered, but are beginning to try new strategies, both to better acclimate students and to deal with the application problems. The onus is on them, says Jiang Xueqin, deputy principal of Peking University High School, one of Beijing's top schools, and director of its international division. "Are American universities unhappy? Because Chinese students and parents aren't."

"Nothing will change," Mr. Jiang says, "unless American colleges make it clear to students and parents that it has to."

WENTING TANG is quick to laugh, listens to high-energy bands like Red Jumpsuit Apparatus and OK Go, and describes herself on her Facebook page as "really really fun" and "really really serious." Ms. Tang, a junior majoring in management and international business, speaks confident, if not flawless, English. That wasn't always the case. When she applied to the University of Delaware, her English was, in her estimation, very poor.

Ms. Tang, who went to high school in Shanghai, didn't exactly choose to attend Delaware, a public institution of about 21,000 students that admits about half its applicants — and counts Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. among prominent graduates. Ms. Tang's mother wanted her to attend college in the United States, and so they visited the offices of a dozen or more agents, patiently listening to their promises and stories of success.

Her mother chose an agency that suggested Delaware and helped Ms. Tang fill out her application, guiding her through a process that otherwise would have been bewildering. Because her English wasn't good enough to write the admissions essay, staff members at the agency, which charged her \$4,000, asked her questions about herself in Chinese and produced an essay. (Test prep was another \$3,300.)

Now that she can write in English herself, she doesn't think much of what the employees wrote. But it served its purpose: she was admitted, and spent six months in the English-language program before beginning freshman classes. And despite bumps along the way, she's getting good grades and enjoying college life. As for allowing an agent to write her essay, she sees that decision in pragmatic terms: "At that time, my English not better as now."

Most Chinese students who are enrolled at American colleges turn to intermediaries to shepherd them through the admissions process, according to a study by researchers at Iowa State University published in the *Journal of College Admission*.

Education agents have long played a role in sending Chinese students abroad, dating back decades to a time when American dollars were forbidden in China and only agents could secure the currency to pay tuition. Admission experts say they can provide an important service, acting as guides to an application process that can seem totally, well, foreign. Application materials are frequently printed only in English. Chinese students often are baffled by the emphasis on extracurriculars and may have never written a personal essay. Requiring recommendations from guidance counselors makes little sense in a country where few high schools have one on staff. Many assume the U.S. News & World Report rankings issue is an official government publication.

But while there are certainly aboveboard agents and applications, other recruiters engage in fraudulent behavior. An administrator at one high school in Beijing says agents falsified her school's letterhead to produce doctored transcripts and counterfeit letters of recommendation, which she discovered when a parent called to complain about being charged a fee by an agent for documents from the school. James E. Lewis, director of international admissions and recruiting at Kansas State University, says he once got a clutch of applications clearly submitted by a single agent, with all fees charged to the same bank branch, although the students came from several far-flung cities. The grades on three of the five transcripts, he says, were identical.

Zinch China, a consulting company that advises American colleges and universities about China, last year published a report based on interviews with 250 Beijing high

school students bound for the United States, their parents, and a dozen agents and admissions consultants. The company concluded that 90 percent of Chinese applicants submit false recommendations, 70 percent have other people write their personal essays, 50 percent have forged high school transcripts and 10 percent list academic awards and other achievements they did not receive. The “tide of application fraud,” the report predicted, will likely only worsen as more students go to America.

Tom Melcher, Zinch China’s chairman and the report’s author, says it’s simplistic to vilify agents who provide these services. They’re responding, he says, to the demands of students and parents.

Thanks to China’s one-child policy, today’s college students are part of a generation of singletons, and their newly affluent parents — and, in all likelihood, both sets of grandparents — are deeply invested in their success. At Aoji Education Group, a large college counseling company based in China, one of the most popular services is the guaranteed-placement package: apply to five colleges and get your money back if you’re not accepted at any of your choices. “If a student isn’t placed, we’ve got screaming, yelling parents in the lobby,” says Kathryn O’Hehir, who works in the company’s American admissions department in Beijing. “They don’t want their money back. They want their kid in an Ivy League school.”

Students in China’s test-centric culture spend most of their high school years studying for the gao kao, the college entrance exam that is the sole determining factor in whether students win a coveted spot at one of China’s oversubscribed universities. So it’s not unusual for those who want to study in the United States to spend months cramming for the SAT and the Test of English as a Foreign Language, or Toefl, which most campuses require for admission.

Patricia J. Parker, assistant director of admissions at Iowa State, which enrolls more than 1,200 Chinese undergraduates, says students have proudly told her about memorizing thousands of vocabulary words, studying scripted responses to verbal questions and learning shortcuts that help them guess correct answers.

She has seen conditionally admitted students increase their Toefl scores by 30 or 40 points, out of a possible 120, after a summer break, despite no significant improvement in their ability to speak English. Her students, she says, don’t see this intense test-prepping as problematic: “They think the goal is to pass the test. They’re studying for the test, not studying English.”

Ms. Parker estimates she contacts the Educational Testing Services, the nonprofit group that is in charge of the Toefl, every other day during the admissions season to investigate suspicious scores. Like many educators, she would like to see changes to make it harder to beat the exam.

At Kansas State this fall, several Chinese students showed up for classes but did not match the security photos that were snapped when they supposedly took the Toefl months earlier. E.T.S. says it takes additional precautions, such as collecting handwriting samples to reduce the chance that students will hire someone to slip in, in their stead, after breaks. If cheating is found, E.T.S. policy is to cancel a score, but the organization won't say how often that happens, and where. Kansas State, too, won't comment on disciplinary measures, but it has named a committee to draft a policy on dealing with fraud on the Toefl. Says Mr. Lewis, the international admissions director, "It's very hard, sitting here at a desk in the U.S., to judge what's fraudulent."

DURING this past September's orientation on the University of Delaware's Newark campus, Scott Stevens, director of the English Language Institute, stood on stage in front of a mostly filled theater. Behind him, on a large screen, was a stock photo of two white college students seated at desks. The male student was leaning over to look at the female student's paper. "We are original, so that means we never cheat!" Dr. Stevens told the audience of primarily Chinese students, mixing compliments and warnings. "You are all very intelligent. Use that intelligence to write your own papers."

Dr. Stevens has worked at the language institute since 1982. As the program has swelled in the last few years, the institute has outgrown its main building and expanded to classroom space behind the International House of Pancakes on the campus's main drag. Watching Dr. Stevens over the course of a day, it's clear that he is a man with more tasks than time. It's also clear that he's proud of his well-regarded institute and that he cares about students. He gives out his cellphone number and tells them to call any time, even in the middle of the night, if they need him.

But he is candid about the challenges Delaware is facing as the population of Chinese students has grown from a handful to hundreds. Confronting plagiarism is near the top of the list. Dr. Stevens remembers how one student memorized four Wikipedia entries so he could regurgitate whichever one seemed most appropriate on an in-class essay — an impressive, if misguided, feat. American concepts of intellectual property don't translate readily to students from a country where individualism is anathema. (In the language program, Dr. Stevens says there has been no surge in formal disciplinary actions, as instructors prefer to handle questions of plagiarism in the classroom.)

Just as an understanding of authorship is bound up in culture, so are notions of authority. “It’s not simply the language and culture but the political element as well,” he says. “We’re well aware that the Chinese are raised on propaganda, and the U.S. is not portrayed very positively. If you’ve been raised on that for the first 18 years of your life, when it comes down to who they trust — they trust each other. They don’t particularly trust us.”

Instead of living with a randomly selected American, Dr. Stevens says, some freshmen will pay their required housing fees but rent apartments together off campus, a violation of university rules. And they rarely attend voluntary functions at the institute. At a gathering this summer, of the nearly 400 students from 40 countries, about 10 were from China. Also, according to Dr. Stevens, students regularly switch classes to be with their countrymen, rather than stay in the ones they’ve been assigned by their advisers.

One of those advisers is Jennifer Gregan-Paxton. Dr. Gregan-Paxton, program coordinator of the business school’s office of undergraduate advising, says she is impressed by the work ethic and politeness of her students from China. They regularly bring her and other professors small gifts to show their appreciation; on a single day recently, she received a folding fan, a necklace and a silk scarf. She’s not surprised that they would want to stick together. “Even if there were Chinese students who wanted to break out of their pack,” she says, “they wouldn’t necessarily get the warmest reception.”

For example, Ms. Tang, the marketing major, recalls one class in which, she says, the professor ignored her questions and only listened to American students. Also, while working on a group project in a sociology class, she says she was given the cold shoulder: “They pretend to welcome you but they do not.” The encounters left a deep impression. “I will remember that all of my life,” she says.

Last fall, Kent E. St. Pierre was teaching an intermediate accounting class with 35 students, 17 of them from China. Within a couple of weeks, all but three of the non-Chinese students had dropped the course. Why did the American students flee? “They said the class was very quiet,” recalls Dr. St. Pierre, who considers himself a 1960s-style liberal and says he’s all for on-campus diversity. But, he agrees, “It was pretty deadly.”

In many schools across Asia, vigorous give-and-take is the exception. No doubt, as Dr. St. Pierre points out, if you were to place Americans into a Chinese classroom they would seem like chatterboxes.

Despite the unfamiliar learning style, the average grades of Chinese students at Delaware are nearly identical to other undergraduates'. That may, in part, reflect China's strong preparation in quantitative skills, which holds them in good stead in math-intensive programs like business and engineering, two of the most popular majors for Chinese students and ones in which mastery of English is less crucial. Indeed, some of China's undergraduates are strong enough to land spots at the nation's most selective institutions; Harvard had about 40 in the 2010-11 academic year.

But some professors say they have significantly changed their teaching practices to accommodate the students. During quizzes, Dr. St. Pierre now requires everyone to leave their books at the front of the classroom to prevent cheating, a precaution not taken during any of his two decades at Delaware. And participation counts less, so as not to sink the grades of foreign students. In the past, he required members of the class to give two or three presentations during the semester. Now he might ask them to give one. "I've had American students saying they don't understand what's being said in the presentations," he says. "It's painful."

Robert Schweitzer, a professor of finance and economics, frets about using fairly basic vocabulary words. "I have students say, 'I don't know what 'ascending' means,' " Dr. Schweitzer says. "Did they get the question wrong because they don't know the material or because they don't know the language?"

If professors struggle to understand the students, the reverse is also true.

Damon Ma is in the language center's so-called bridge program, which means his English was good enough that he could start taking regular classes even though he hasn't finished with the language program. Mr. Ma is very enthusiastic about studying in the United States, something he's dreamed about doing since he was a boy, and he is conscious of the academic contrasts between the two countries.

"Everything is copying in China," Mr. Ma says. "They write a 25-page paper and they spent two hours and they got an A."

He was nervous about taking his first university class — an introduction to ancient Chinese history — and, a few weeks into the semester, was still wrestling with the language barrier. "I understand maybe 70 percent," he says. "I can't get the details, the vocabulary."

Many arrive at Delaware expecting to take English classes for just a few months, but end up spending a year or more at the language institute, paying \$2,850 per eight-week session.

Chuck Xu and Edison Ding have been in Delaware's English program for a full year. Their English is, at best, serviceable, and they struggle to carry on a basic conversation with a reporter. Mr. Ding says he paid an agent about \$3,000 to prep him for standardized exams, fill out his application and help write his essay in English. What was the essay about? Mr. Ding doesn't recall.

Mr. Xu just completed the program and is now enrolled in freshman classes. Mr. Ding has yet to pass the final stage and hopes to begin regular classes in the spring.

About 5 percent of students in the language program flunk out before their freshman year. In addition, Chengkun Zhang, a former president of Delaware's Chinese Students and Scholars Association, has known students who simply got frustrated and returned home. "I know a couple of students who have complained to me," he says. "They think that the E.L.I. program is doing nothing more than pulling money from their pockets."

THE university's push to attract more foreign students is part of the "Path to Prominence," a plan laid out by Delaware's president, Patrick T. Harker. When Dr. Harker came to Delaware five years ago, less than 1 percent of the freshman class was international. He knows firsthand about the classroom challenges because he has taught a freshman course each year. "They're very good students that struggle with American idiom and American culture," he says. Dr. Harker says he's aware that applications from China aren't always what they seem to be. He notes, though, that it's a problem lots of universities, not just Delaware, are grappling with.

But Dr. Harker rejects the notion that the university's recruiting effort in China is mainly about money. "The students from New Jersey pay, too," he says. "For us it really is about diversity."

Still, the majority of Delaware's international undergraduates are Chinese, an imbalance Louis L. Hirsh, the university's director of admissions, says he's working to change. Delaware is trying to make inroads into the Middle East and South America, he says.

For colleges that want to go global, and quickly, a natural place for recruiting efforts is China.

When Oklahoma Christian University decided to jump into international admissions, it hired three recruiters and sent them to China. “China was the market we decided to target,” says John Osborne, Oklahoma Christian’s director of international programs, “because it was just so large.” Today, the university, which admitted its first foreign student in 2007, has 250 overseas undergraduates, a quarter of whom are from China.

Indeed, if universities turned on the recruiting spigot in China expecting a steady trickle of students, they’ve gotten a gusher instead. Ohio State received nearly 2,900 undergraduate applications from China this year. Mount Holyoke College could have filled its entire freshman class with Chinese students. A single foreign-college fair in Beijing this fall drew a crowd of 30,000.

The very size of the market can make it daunting and difficult to navigate. While many American colleges have long-established connections with universities in China, pipelines for generations of graduate students, most do not have strong relationships with the country’s high schools. When only a few of the very best students went abroad, it was easy enough for colleges to focus their efforts on a handful of elite secondary schools, but now admissions officers must familiarize themselves with potentially thousands of schools to find a good fit. That’s tough for American recruiters who only visit once or twice a year.

Some universities, including Delaware, have hired agents overseas, a practice that is banned in domestic recruiting, and this year has been at the center of a debate within the National Association for College Admission Counseling. Though the agents act as universities’ representatives, marketing them at college fairs and soliciting applications, that’s no guarantee that colleges know the origin of the applications, or the veracity of their grades and scores.

For those on the ground, there’s deepening concern that American colleges have entered China without truly understanding it.

Not long ago, Tom Melcher of Zinch China was contacted by the provost of a large American university who wanted to recruit 250 Chinese students, stat. When asked why, the provost replied that his institution faced a yawning budget deficit. To fill it, he told Mr. Melcher, the university needed additional students who could pay their own way, and China has many of them.

“Do I think the budget squeeze is driving the rush to international?” Mr. Melcher says. “Unfortunately, yes.”

At Delaware, officials are trying new strategies. They've started a program that pairs Chinese and other international students with mentors to help ease their transition to American academic life. In addition, the English Language Institute runs workshops for faculty members who have Chinese students in their classes. Other institutions are also rethinking their approach. Valparaiso University, in Indiana, has started a special course to give international students on academic probation extra help with English and study skills.

There are ways to improve the admissions process as well, including interviewing applicants in person to get a sense of their actual English abilities and to discover more about their academic backgrounds beyond test scores. A handful of institutions, including the University of Virginia, have alumni and students interview prospective students, either in the home country or via Skype, and the Council on International Educational Exchange, a nonprofit group, has begun offering an interview service. Such changes are welcome to some educators on the ground. Mr. Jiang, the deputy principal in Beijing, believes oral interviews could give colleges a better sense of students' readiness for an American classroom.

Some universities, too, are hiring outside evaluators to review transcripts or are opening offices in China with local staff members who can spot the application red flags that colleges are missing. But interviewing and thoroughly evaluating every applicant, considering the deluge, would be an enormous and expensive undertaking.

For officials like Dr. Stevens, who has been dealing with international students for nearly three decades, Chinese undergraduates are like a code he's still trying to decipher: "How can we reach them? How can we get them to engage?"

"That," he says, "is something that keeps me up at night."