

Befriending Chinese Exchange Students

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Friendship is a crucial part of college life. Through friendships we are able to get involved in social gatherings, to share class notes and study together, and to fully enjoy college extracurricular activities. It is even more important for the International student, who has much to learn about American university life, yet it is more difficult for them to acquire friends.

A Leinenkugel Honey Ale in hand, I wave an enthusiastic goodbye to my friends Liye and Vincent. We make compatible friends because we share an enthusiasm for beer, good food, and shopping trips. These simple shared interests surmount what might seem to some students like a formidable language and culture barrier. Judging by observation and the reports of the students that I have worked (or played) with, many SPSU students do not befriend the Chinese exchange students. There may be students who, once learning a bit about the Chinese exchange program and the students involved, will understand how investing time in friendships with Chinese and other exchange students can be as rewarding as friendships with traditional SPSU students.

Getting to Know the Chinese Exchange Students

I had several exchange students in my classes, but since I am shy, I never introduced myself to any of them. My third semester, I was assigned a Chinese exchange student as my dorm mate. Wei Wei was so excited to meet me, that I could not help but be excited in return. We met for lunch together with other Chinese students from our hall often. They enjoyed my company

and were excited to be taught about American culture, to talk about Chinese culture, and to be my friend. Every night I would try to say “goodnight” to my roommate in Chinese. It took the entire semester for me to say it correctly, instead of saying the Chinese word “bowl”.



Southern Polytechnic State University began the cultural exchange with two universities in China in 2002. The Chinese students that attend SPSU are from either North China University of Technology (NCUT) or North East Normal University (NENU). It is a flourishing program with around 100 students arriving every year. Chances are that every student at SPSU will have at least one class with an international student from China. Students can stay for a semester, a year, or two years.

This year, I have been with the Chinese

exchange students from the beginning. The students arrive in America about three weeks before the semester begins. During those weeks, they attend orientation seminars to prepare them for American university life and the TOEFL test for English proficiency.

Orientation

We took them on field trips a couple of times a week. We went to the Martin Luther King center, hiked at a waterfall, went to the mall, and went to the movies. The goal of orientation is to point out important cultural ideas and to show them what activities are available in the United States. We received the equivalence of a boxed lunch every day, along with a breakfast and dinner catered by the school lunch program. It was not long before the students became incredibly tired of sandwiches. I am not sure whether the culture shock was better or worse because of the sandwiches, but almost every student would complain- "Rice! I miss rice!". Of course it wasn't all fun and sandwiches. For about six hours a day, they would have English/living in America lessons and get tutoring on their papers for three hours. They would have to wake up early every day to take the lessons and write the papers. It was tiring for them. Their favorite part was always to talk to Samantha Rooks and me, the American tutors.

A Lonely Life

Becoming a tutor over the orientation caused me to meet many more of the students than ever before. Throughout this semester, I started to understand the general experience of Chinese students at SPSU better than ever before. Unfortunately, their experience is sometimes a lonely and tiring one. Biyuan Wang, who is majoring in Accounting, said "Some students who can't make friends will choose to stay in [their] dorms- go to cafeteria and then go to dorm, class and then to dorm, this kind of life would make

anyone crazy. They live in their own world because they can't be as included as they were in China. This kind of life is a very lonely life." Making friends and joining organizations are integral parts of the college experience that many Chinese find extra difficult to get involved with. It is much like the frustration of a new college student, except there is a language and cultural barrier to cross.

Joining Student Organizations

The exchange students know that joining organizations is a good way to make friends, it is the same in China as in the United States. Linna Sun is a member of the Dance Team. She loves dance and was glad to be chosen from try-outs. Not very many students join organizations like Dance Team, because of the extra time it takes to study. Yet, it is helpful for her to enjoy an activity that she loved in China. Many of the students from China were involved in dance, sports, and student government. If a group of American students enjoys sports or major-specific activity, it would be beneficial to recruit from international students. An organization fair targeted to



international students, or providing information about student activities during orientation would be helpful. In the meantime, it is up to students to help other students find clubs to join.

One of the most popular organizations that Chinese students join is the International Student Association (ISA). ISA works together with Friends of Internationals (FOI), a Christian organization, to provide activities and presentations to the students. Friends of Internationals offers a bible study to students so that they can learn about Christianity. The type of

Christianity in America is not present in China, so they enjoy learning about it. Since Friends of Internationals, and another group called Cafe Global, seem to be the only groups that go out of their way to be kind and talk with the Chinese students, some convert to Christianity. Liye Zhang told me that when one of her friends suffered through a break up, he converted to Christianity. It is a disconcerting situation that the most popular group that almost all exchange students participate in, is religiously motivated. ISA is supposed to be secular, but when I asked the students whether they preferred ISA or FOI, they seemed to not see a real distinction. Linna Sun said "I do not know the difference between ISA or FOI, I just attend the activities."

Succeeding in Classes



Developing friendships in class is often a crucial part of success, especially when you are learning in a second language. English-speaking students have a big advantage in understanding the material and guidelines. Exchange students always receive advice to record the lecture and use the translator to learn unfamiliar words. I learned that this is not as effective as I personally expected. A student told me, "The translator and recorder are useless! If you don't know a word, it doesn't matter, you don't know it. No matter how slow you play it, you don't know it." Where the translator fails, a classmate or tutor can help. A classmate is best because they have a better understanding of the context. As a tutor, I have to spend more time finding out what is going on in class so that I can answer questions than a classmate would. Fortunately, many students I talked to said they did feel able to get help from their classmates, though they admitted they would be able to more easily talk with other

Chinese. There is also no question that being able to clarify a concept for a classmate will enhance your own ability to understand the material.

Forming Friendships

Liye Zhang, a Computer Science major, told me about an attempt at befriending a classmate. She noticed that he was being distant, and asked why. His response "I don't think we have anything in common. You're from a different country." This response is atypical in its directness, but does not seem to be far from how some American students feel. It is difficult for any of us to make friends, because we arrive to class right before it starts and shoot out the door right when it ends. I remember that most of my friendships began from people I met at orientation, hall-mates, roommates, and architecture students. That the international students do not participate in the regular orientation activities might hurt their ability to make friends. Biyuan complained that her attempts to meet other students on her hallway are met with indifference. Her theory is that perhaps they are too busy with other things, but also that many Americans just do not care about other cultures, people, or global issues.

It may be so. I am fortunate to know a couple of the American students that do take the time to get to know the students. Samantha Rooks, the other American tutor also sustained her friendship with the students after orientation. She hangs out with three students regularly that she found had extremely similar tastes in music, fashion, and shopping. "They are an amazing group of students, each with a story to tell and a lot to share about their culture." She invited two of her friends, Yueying and Yuchen, to her family's Thanksgiving dinner. It can be invigorating to share a beloved tradition with someone from a different culture, because their excitement can enhance even what would usually be taken for granted. Yuchen said that her friendship with Samantha is a part of what has made her stay in America enjoyable.

Hopefully, more American students will be willing to work through this language barrier to become friends with the Chinese exchange students. It is not difficult, since most of the students have a decent grasp of English. Once the language and cultural barrier starts becoming less of an issue, you have made a friend. If you are interested in interacting with exchange students, look for fliers about ISA, American students are welcome. Honors students can volunteer to tutor International Students, there is an extreme need for American students who have taken the American history class.

It is natural that the Chinese exchange students end up spending most of their time with one another rather than Americans. It is much easier for them to develop friendships with each other because there is no cultural or language barrier. Many are content to have mostly Chinese friends. But those that have befriended Americans are happy, get better grades, and learn their English much quicker. So if you have the inclination to say hi, but are being held back because you are shy, think they do not know enough English, or because they are shy, bite the bullet. You both will be glad you did.

Sources

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