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ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS:

A GUIDEBOOK TO BGSU

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HONORS PROJECT

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<u>Introduction</u>

The term "globalization" has become increasingly ubiquitous, and perhaps even clichéd, throughout modern studies. While the generalized understanding of this term has long been limited to overall interactions between cultures, there is an increasing need to consider these interactions at much smaller scales. For universities, "globalization" once was limited to providing foreign language and cultural education, and accepting small numbers of international students. Now, universities are seeing an increasing necessity to adapt strong international programs. Dealing with the "global" starts with dealing with the "local:" improving programs and international student experiences within their host university. Specifically, universities, such as Bowling Green State University, are seeing the benefits and growth opportunities with increased and improved international student programs. These students not only present economic opportunities, such as tuition, room, and board, but more importantly will ensure a diverse student body that can contribute to the university, the local area, and academics in general with unique cultural perspectives.

As an Asian Studies major here at Bowling Green State University (BGSU), I have taken particular notice of the experiences of Asian exchange students on campus. Specifically, because of my own interest in the Chinese language, I have made many connections with Chinese students, in order to gain new friendships, as well as hone my language skills. Similarly, universities are beginning to give special attention to their Chinese students, as their increasing numbers and influence in the education system play key roles in the future of university programs. In 2010, about 18% of international students in the US were Chinese (Ruble and Zhang 202). While my Chinese peers seem to have very positive experiences in Bowling Green, I have noticed that many of them have at least one "culture shock" story; an instance, usually

outside of academically-based cultural knowledge, in which the student's lack of experience in a new culture creates an embarrassing or difficult situation. In these cases, even the most well-intentioned of orientation programs can often fall short, as sometimes the information is too generalized in that it is intended as a resource for all international students, regardless of individual culture. Furthermore, despite many students having strong English skills, many can feel alienated or easily confused with information being presented in their second language.

In an attempt to address these issues, I have created a guidebook for Chinese international students studying at BGSU. This guidebook, entitled *Huānyíng nǐ lái dào BGSU*, or *Welcome to BGSU* in English, was carefully designed to cater to the specific needs of these students by covering a variety of topics in both English and Mandarin Chinese. Content of the guidebook was based on both academic research, and individual experiences, including interviews with Chinese international students, the BGSU faculty and Bowling Green community members that regularly deal with them, and personal observations. In this essay, I discuss the academic research, and how it contributes to the content of the guidebook. In much of the research surrounding acculturation, the most critical issue is the language barrier. However, transitional issues for international students do not lie in English capability alone. While a portion of the guidebook is designed to address the language barrier, much is also devoted to student support systems, and creating connections to the host society.

Addressing the Need of Chinese International Students at BGSU

One of the more difficult aspects of understanding international student needs is that the various issues they face are often interrelated. The language barrier is not an isolated issue, but contributes to other issues, such as adaptation to the U.S. student lifestyle. When considering academics, issues with language is a critical determinant of whether or not an international

student will succeed. For example, Maureen Snow Andrade notes that in English-speaking classrooms, "professor's accents, idiomatic styles, humor and choice of examples in lectures posed problems" (139). A professor's use of these language styles can often be an attempt to create engaging curriculum for domestic students, providing a more student-oriented environment rather than a dry, purely academic tone. For international students, however, this can make following lectures more difficult. Even if a professor uses a limited amount of idioms and humor, international students can also struggle with jargon and rapid lectures. The use of idioms and slang language can cause issues outside of the classroom as well. For example, Jan Guidry Lacina contends that even though international students may find language issues in the classroom, they may be even less prepared to deal with English in student social settings. As Lacina notes, "many international students acquire academic English so they can function successfully in their college classrooms but have little acquaintance with the language used in social situations." (22). For international students who have practiced English in their home country, much of their experience is likely to be in a classroom setting, and so can make it difficult to understand more casual usage. This issue is critical to international student success, as international study relies on cultural and social experiences outside the classroom.

While the language barrier seems to be the most pressing issue faced by many international students, it is also the most difficult to address. Because language skills must be learned in a very individualized manner, university international programs are often limited in how much aid they can devote to each student. Lacina and Andrade both argue that some of the more successful programs deal with creating direct connections between international and domestic students. For example, Lacina discusses an email exchange program at San Diego State University, which not only provides students an opportunity to practice (at least in writing) with

a native speaker, but also allows an opportunity for the international student to seek help as they adjust to the U.S. student lifestyle (25). Andrade cites a common practice of using "lecture buddies," similarly pairing international and domestic students, which can be very beneficial as it allows for course-specific help (140). Andrade builds on the success of these style of programs, noting that attempts to address international student language needs can be met "within current support centers given additional training of personnel and redesigning of existing programs" (150). While language issues can be particularly difficult for universities to address, some improvement is available if more programs are refocused on international students as well as domestic students.

Considering Chinese international students at BGSU, these concepts become very applicable. Much of the guidebook, *Huānyíng nǐ lái dào BGSU*, is devoted as a resource for these students to find help for their English proficiency. For example, in one section focused on advice for academic success, the issue of communicating with professors is addressed. Students are encouraged to meet with their professors, and discuss their needs as an international student. Similarly, in the same section, students are introduced to BGSU's Learning Commons, a free campus program that has writing and course-specific tutoring services, as well as staff who are trained to deal with the specific needs of international students (*BGSU Learning Commons*). As for English use outside of the classroom setting, students are encouraged to create connections to domestic students for practice opportunities. For example, somewhat similar to the "lecture buddies" described by Andrade, contact information for BGSU's Cross-Cultural Conversation Connection, "a partner matching program that pairs international students and American students for conversation and friendship," is provided (*Cross-Cultural Conversation Connection)*. Here, existing programs that can allow for an individualized English experience are introduced to

Chinese international students, which can be more effective than attempting to address these needs specifically in the guidebook itself.

In addition to language barrier issues, international students must also deal with losing their familiar support systems. These systems serve a variety of needs for students as they adjust to these changes: emotionally, financially, academically, and simply in finding help with everyday tasks. Even for domestic students, the transition from high school to college life can be difficult, despite the benefit of taking courses in their native language. Many of these students must leave behind their regular support systems, such as family and friends, to attend university in another state. For international students, especially Chinese international students, this issue is accentuated because their regular support systems can be on the other side of the world. As Chia-Chih Wang and Brent Mallinckrodt note, "international students must separate from significant others in their home countries when they study abroad and often experience loneliness, isolation, and anxiety as a result" (428). Both international and out of state students may struggle with separation from their familiar support systems, but it is even more difficult for these international students because of the difficulty of communication. First of all, difficulty with communication arises because international students are so far away. For example, despite the greater ease of communication due to technology, Chinese students in particular must deal with a time difference of about 12 hours, and so connecting to support in their homeland is limited to only certain times of the day.

Secondly, international students usually have greater difficulty creating new support networks than domestic students. As Andrade notes, "social support is important to international student adjustment, and that while friendships with domestic students are helpful, they may be uncommon" (136). Issues of connecting to domestic students and local university social setting

will be discussed in greater detail later, but what is important to note here is that international students have a disadvantage in being able to create support systems in their new environment. The creation of new support systems, such as network of friends, and familiar classmates or faculty can be a major aid to students as they adjust to university life. For example, as Blake Hendrickson, Devan Rosen, and R. Kelly Aune note, citing research by N. Lin, "social capital theory asserts that through social relations individuals are able to acquire social resources from others…theoretically having a variety of social contacts should give individuals access to different kinds of social resources…." (290). While having a variety of connections is important for student opportunities, for international students connecting and creating these networks poses a difficult hurdle. They may be surrounded by people who do not understand their needs as an international student, or they may create their own isolation through lack of adjustment to language and culture. These students sometimes must deal with these issues alone, or at least feel that they are alone.

Of course, the easy answer for these support issues it to create or strengthen programs as they deal with international students. However, much like programs that deal with the language barrier, universities must struggle with limited resources. Even so, because the language barrier issue is so much related to other issues for international students, similar practices can be used. Programs intended to address the language barrier can also be used to help create new support networks for international students. For example, the email exchange program mentioned by Lacina not only helps students practice their written English skills (25), but can also provide opportunities for international students to create support networks. International students can use this to seek basic help for things they may have trouble finding campus resources for, such as

personal culture advice. Not to mention that the domestic students can create their own unique support network with greater interactions with international students.

Moreover, like language assistance programs, a lot can be done with systems and programs that are already in place. For example, based on their previous research with K. Daly, Wang and Mallinckrodt note that "therapists can serve as a source of secure attachment and as a secure base for social–interpersonal exploration for European-American clients…perhaps with sufficient multicultural sensitivity and time to form a meaningful therapeutic bond, counseling psychologists and counselors can fill this role for international student clients as well" (431). Universities can adapt programs that may not usually directly deal with international students, such as counseling programs. Options like this can create inexpensive, and yet highly effective programs to deal with the issues faced by international students.

The guidebook, *Huānyíng nǐ lái dào BGSU*, addresses Chinese international student's support system in two ways, by both providing a resource to help these students create a new support system, and acting as a part of the student's new support system. The guidebook aids Chinese students as they create new support systems by introducing them to programs they might not be familiar with. As mentioned before, the guidebook suggests certain assistance options available to international students, such as the Learning Commons and the Cross-Cultural Conversation Connection. Many other programs and helpful offices on campus are mentioned, such as BGSU's Counseling Center, much like Wang and Mallinckrodt's suggestion, or the Career Center. Students are even encouraged to connect with Chinese faculty on campus, in order to create a support system based on a similar acculturation experience that the faculty member holds. While the scope of the guidebook must be limited, a major intention is for guidebook resources to serve as a pseudo-support system.

A key component of the effectiveness of these support systems is in international student connections to the host society, rather than reliance on university programs alone. Simply put, part of a quality study abroad is being able to make international friends. For example, in their study of international student relationships, Hendrickson et al. found "a significant positive relationship between contentment and host national friendship variability… [and] a significant positive relationship between feelings of social connectedness and current satisfaction" (289). However beneficial to student emotional adjustment to their new environment, these friendships are not particularly easy to gain. For example, one of the all too common complaints about international students is that they tend to stay in an isolated bubble: interacting mostly with other students from the same country. Considering the large amount of Chinese students in many U.S. schools, estimated at about 18% percent of international students in 2010 (Ruble and Zhang 202), this issue would seem to be more likely because it would be easy for these student to create their own isolated community.

On the other end, international students may also face issues connecting to domestic students because domestic students can also be hesitant to create international friendships. For example, Racheal Ruble and Yan Bing Zhang discuss that there are many unaddressed stereotypes about Chinese international students, many of which may hinder domestic student's willingness to start these friendships. While these stereotypes can sometimes be positive, such as the stereotype of Chinese as a "model minority," many can work to create a perceived separation from domestic students, such as stereotypes of "bad at speaking English, only friends with other Chinese students, not well assimilated to US culture, and socially awkward" (Ruble and Zhang 209). As Ruble and Zhang note, "activation of these stereotypes might accentuate perceptions of Chinese international students as outgroup members, leading to increased communication

anxiety and thus low level of willingness to communicate (209). Furthermore, as Lacina notes, "many Americans do not have the patience to listen to someone whose accent is different from their own, or they are fearful of other cultures or nationalities due to stereotypes they have of different groups" (22). These perceptions can be strengthened in cases where Chinese international students have difficulty in English, as poor English could easy be interpreted by domestic students as not being assimilated to U.S. culture, or being socially awkward.

Dealing with these stereotypes can be difficult because very little can be done on the part of international students. Even with improved English, some domestic students may continue to perpetuate these stereotypes if they have limited contact with foreigners. Based of research of "out-groups" by Gordon Allport, Hendrickson et al. argue that one option to address this issue to create further opportunities for interaction in these groups, particularly by universities establishing "integrated housing" programs (290). Although the effectiveness of these sorts of programs could possibly be impeded by domestic student's willingness to participate, there is at least some opportunity for students to gain better connections and learn more about foreign cultures. Lacina suggested other programs that have been effective in universities, such as a welcome dance for international students, the email partners program, conversational groups, and international movie clubs (25). Options like these are much less of commitment, and so these experiences may seem less threatening.

One of the ways that the guidebook, *Huānyíng nǐ lái dào BGSU* attempts to help international students connect to BGSU student society is by suggesting ways they can look for these friendships. For example, under a section entitled "Connecting with American Students," Chinese international students are encouraged to join some of the many international clubs available at BGSU. These clubs provide events, much like Lacina's suggested programs, in a

low-commitment atmosphere. Both international and domestic students would likely find these programs as a less threatening way to interact with each other because these organizations are mostly operated by students. Moreover, international students may have an easier time connecting to domestic students at these events. Domestic students who participate in international organizations are likely more open to inter-cultural experiences, in comparison to domestic students from classes or other student organizations. The guidebook also contains advice about some of the stereotypes mentioned earlier. Although cultural and language miscommunications are more likely than not to occur, Chinese international students are encouraged to continue to try to make these connections.

Secondly, the guidebook outlines important aspects and norms in U.S. student relationships and lifestyles. It is one thing to start connecting to domestic students, and another to maintain and grow these friendships under cultural conventions. One section deals with different aspects of politeness in interactions with friends, such as how to act when invited to a friend's home. For example, in China it is much more common to remove your shoes as you enter a home. One piece of advice is for Chinese international students to ask their host whether or not they should remove their shoes when they enter an American household. Similarly, for students who may have an American roommate, they are encouraged to set up rules and discuss preferences about their living space, such as if shoes should be removed. Chinese international students are encouraged to be more vocal about any issues they see, or if they are unsure what to do in certain social situations. Another example of advice is in how to interact with domestic students when they go out, such as eating out, attending movies, or visiting downtown. The guidebook reminds international students that normally in these situations each participant is expected to pay for their own. Here, the point is to introduce the student to cultural and social

norms in a clear, direct way, in order to prevent some difficult or embarrassing experiences they may have in the future.

Conclusions

With the increasing influence of globalization, more and more intercultural connections must be addressed locally. Addressing the needs Chinese international students is becoming a critical part of effective university international programs. While Bowling Green State University boasts strong international programs, enabling Chinese international students to reach their full potential will still prove to be a challenge. Issues for international students can become very individualized, and acculturative processes are filled with intricate nuances between cultures. Even with the most organized and comprehensive programs, students are likely to face language barrier, support system, and social connection issues. The guidebook, *Huānyíng nǐ lái dào BGSU*, serves as a resource for students to find the help they need, and become familiar with programs that are designed to help them. Most importantly, the guidebook is intended to encourage students to be actively engaged in their university experience, and gain the most out of their study abroad.

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