

## China's Re-Emergence: Sociolinguistic Challenges Faced by Chinese International Students Enrolled in U.S. Universities

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In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is reemerging and reengaging in the world on all fronts. One area of this reengagement is the huge increase in the number of Chinese students who are studying abroad. This paper discusses and analyzes the academic experiences of the growing number of Chinese international students who are enrolled in institutions of higher education (IHE) in the United States of America (US). Specifically, it reports the results of ongoing qualitative research on the sociolinguistic experiences and challenges faced by PRC students who are participating in international programs at the Commonwealth of Virginia's George Mason University (GMU). The paper focuses on the academic English language challenges experienced by both undergraduate and graduate Chinese students at GMU as they transition from their home universities in the PRC and continue their higher education in the US, and it suggests an approach for achieving cultural awareness in the classroom that may impact their teaching and learning.

Keywords: globalization of higher education, international higher education, Chinese students, culturally responsive teaching.

### Introduction

This paper reports the results of ongoing qualitative research on the sociolinguistic experiences and challenges faced by both undergraduate and graduate international students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) enrolled at Northern Virginia's George Mason University (GMU). It focuses on the academic English language challenges faced by these international students as they transition from their home universities in the PRC to study in the United States of America (US) and return to the PRC. Specifically, it discusses the socio-linguistic

challenges faced by PRC international students at GMU and suggests an approach for achieving cultural awareness in the class-

room that may impact their teaching and learning.

The relevance of this study relies on the fact that the US continues to be a top destination for PRC students seeking higher education overseas; that although GMU is one of the most diverse institutions of higher education (IHE) in the US, only at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it launched and implemented specialized undergraduate dual degree and graduate-level teacher education programs for non-immigrant students from the PRC (GMU-China 121, 2010; GMU-Chinese Lic., 2010). It was a new experience for both the PRC students as well as for GMU faculty members and administrators. As part of this innovative experience, the university had to make the necessary adaptations and accommodations to facilitate and

guarantee the academic success and well-being of these international students.

Although the history of PRC higher education exchanges with the US dates back to 1872, when the Qing Court sent thirteen students to study in the US, these were interrupted in 1949 when Chinese revolution virtually transformed every aspect of US-PRC relations. From 1949 until 1978, academic and educational flows between the two countries were halted (Chu, 2004; Orleans, 1988). It was only after the US and the PRC signed a memorandum of understanding on student exchanges in October 1978 that a new group of PRC students was authorized to travel to the US. Since then, the number of PRC students in US higher education has grown rapidly, reaching an all-time high of 127,628 students in 2009/10 (IIE-Network, 2010a).

Understanding the academic challenges and adjustments of international students is an important priority for the globalization of higher education. Research shows that international Chinese students are usually academically successful when they study abroad, but also they face sociolinguistic challenges and adjustments that can affect their teaching and learning (Durkin, 2004; Scollon, 1999; Sun & Chen, 1997; Yang, 2001; Zawacki, Hajabbasi, Habib, Antram, & Das, 2007). In addition, research shows that addressing differences in the classroom requires adjustments by both students and instructors (Dunn, 2006; Durkin, 2008; Holmes, 2004; Miao, Badger, and Zhen, 2006; Osterling and Fox, 2004; Pearce and Lin, 2007; Zang, 2007).

The purpose of this paper is to identify the sociolinguistic challenges and adjustments experienced by Chinese international students enrolled at GMU. Based on a summary of two ongoing case studies, both of which were reviewed and approved by

the GMU Human Subjects Review Board, this paper presents a discussion of the sociolinguistic challenges and adjustments faced by PRC students enrolled in the *Sino-American 1+2+1 Dual Degree Program* (China 121) and the *Chinese Language Licensure Program* (CLLP) at GMU. It focuses especially on their academic English language experiences and suggests an approach for achieving cultural awareness in the classroom that may impact their teaching and learning.

### Background of the Study

During the past one hundred and fifty years, the PRC witnessed significant changes in its political, economic and socio-cultural structures that substantially transformed it. Today, the PRC is the world's second-largest economy and has a population of 1.338 billion, or one in every five of the earth's population (Jefferson, 2006; PRB, 2010; World Bank, 2010). As the PRC economy and population continue to grow, it is expected that the number of PRC students seeking higher education overseas will continue to increase as well.

As highlighted by the Institute of International Education (IIE-Network, 2010b), the PRC sent no students to the US from 1950 until 1978, when they normalized their relations. Between 1979 and 1983, there were 19,000 Chinese scholars in the US, and by 1996, there were 42,503 PRC students enrolled in US IHE. In 2009/10, there were 127,628 Chinese students in the US, making the PRC the leading place of origin for international students in the US (IIE-Network, 2010a). The growing number of PRC students enrolled in US IHE is a reflection not only of the Chinese people's traditional high value on education but also of the affluence of their growing middle class (Shuangcheng, 2009).

As will be discussed in this paper, Chinese students face unique sociolinguistic challenges in their transition to western institutions of higher education (Chen, 2003; Durkin, 2004; Holmes, 2004; Pearce & Lin, 2007; Scollon, 1999; Sun & Chen, 1997; Yang, 2001). Students rapidly discover that the Chinese education system is very different from the US education system in the structuring of classes, curriculum and administration, materials, teaching styles, and student expectations (Holmes, 2004; Scollon, 1999).

Although generalizations are often misleading and inaccurate, it is fair to suggest that Confucianism continues to influence the Chinese education system. As a result, once enrolled in a US IHE Chinese international students rapidly find themselves in a more open, student-centered, academic environment, which values critical thinking rather than rote learning and conformity. Also, they find that their English language proficiency (both oral and written) is insufficient to participate in US classrooms and seminars conducted in academic English.

According to Yang (2001), this situation is due to ideological, cultural and linguistic differences between Chinese and English language discourse development, especially in writing. Yang found that in the US "...Chinese students find it difficult to do critical writing because they are used to writing in conformity with the political and academic mainstreams..." and "schooling still focuses on conveying established knowledge instead of cultivating individuality or critical thinking abilities, which revealed in writing is the absence of self-expression" (Yang, 2001, p. 5).

### ***Sociolinguistic Challenges Faced by Chinese International Students Enrolled in U.S. Universities***

Research on international students' experiences continues to indicate that language problems, cultural differences, social isolation, and stress factors limit their ability to participate both academically and socially in the campus community. In the specific case of PRC international students, they are bilingual in *Putonghua* (Mandarin-Chinese) and English. However, *Putonghua* (Mandarin-Chinese) and English languages have little in common (see Appendix, Table 1). Mandarin-Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan linguistic family of languages and is a non-alphabetic, tonal language with more than 47,000 characters. On the other hand, English belongs to the Indo-European linguistic family of languages, has a Roman alphabet and uses stress on syllables to express meaning. Today, English is required as part of the PRC core curriculum and students typically study English throughout their secondary school years and university education (Feng, 2009, p. 89-90).

### **Research Design**

This study reports the results of ongoing qualitative research on the sociolinguistic experiences and challenges faced by PRC students participating in two international programs at the Commonwealth of Virginia's George Mason University (GMU): the *US Chinese Language Licensure Program* (CLLP) and the *Sino-American 1+2+1 Dual Degree Program* (China 121). The objective of the CLLP is to address the critical shortage of Chinese language teachers in the US by educating PRC graduate students to be teachers of Chinese as a foreign language (GMU-Chinese Lic, 2010) while the US-China 121 joint academic program brings US and Chinese universities together to offer dual degrees to Chinese undergraduate students. China 121 students spend their freshman year in a Chinese uni-

versity, their sophomore and junior years at an American university and their senior year back home at their PRC university (GMU-China 121, 2010).

The following questions guided the research of these two case studies:

- a) What were the lived experiences of the mainland Chinese international undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at GMU?
- b) As bilingual *Putonghua* (Mandarin-Chinese) and English students, how did they perceive their lived experiences as university students in English language classroom environments?
- c) How did they perceive their development of intercultural, academic, and linguistic competencies?

The participants in the *US Chinese Language Licensure Program (CLLP)* study included the entire cohort of CLLP graduate students: ten females and one male, aged 22 to 32 years old. They were all bilingual in *Putonghua* (Mandarin-Chinese) and English in addition to their regional dialect. They all held bachelor degrees from their home PRC universities, had passed their Chinese and US English language proficiency exams, and had passed the US PRAXIS-1 test required for acceptance into an approved US teacher education program. Each CLLP participant applied to GMU individually and traveled to the US independently without receiving financial aid, loans, grants or scholarships. They entered the US on non-immigrant F1 student visas, enrolled full-time (minimum 9 graduate credit hours per semester), and successfully pursued the requirements to obtain a state teaching certificate. These eleven participating CLLP graduate students were interviewed, reviews were made of

their academic work, participating faculty and staff were interviewed, data was collected, coded, and analyzed for emerging themes, and triangulation was applied to improve the validity of the results. A limitation of the CLLP case study was the prior student-teacher relationships of the researchers to the participants.

The five undergraduate participants in the US-China 121 case study were purposively selected, three males and two females. They were bilingual in *Putonghua* (Mandarin-Chinese) and English, in addition to their regional dialects, and had entered the US on J1 exchange student visas. Utilizing a protocol that allowed student-directed conversational threads with interviewer restatement clarifications, they were asked to reflect on and relate their personal experiences in reading, writing, listening and speaking in English before they arrived in the US to attend GMU, when they first arrived at GMU, and at the time of the interview near the end of their academic programs at GMU.

### Findings

Socioeconomically, all participating students were from middle to upper class urban families and had benefitted from the PRC's newly reformed education system. They were all bilingual in *Putonghua* (Mandarin-Chinese) and English, and several of them were fluent in a local dialect. Nonetheless, these students initially encountered difficulty speaking academic English, understanding lectures, participating in class discussions and making oral presentations. Several of them, particularly those undergraduate students who had not passed the TOEFL exam, were required to raise their level of English language skills in courses at GMU's English Language Institute (ELI). However, in most cases, these students rapidly acquired the needed academic English

language skills and moved into full-time undergraduate course work at GMU. Tables 2 and 3 in the Appendix present summaries of the PRC student experiences and sociolinguistic differences.

Pre-departure preparations for study in the US were done individually with the help of a professional Chinese educational agent or a program coordinator, who assisted them with admissions, administrative tasks, travel and lodging arrangements, legal issues, and other needs related to their study abroad experience.

Upon arrival at GMU, most participants encountered unexpected difficulties in academic, personal, socio-cultural, and environmental areas. Language and communication appeared to be the most challenging areas, mostly due to differences in accents, enunciation and the use of slang. However, coping with cultural differences, social integration, loneliness, and academic stress were other areas of difficulty. In addition, several students perceived that the institutional academic and social support systems were either not readily available to them or non-existent, leading them to develop informal peer support groups.

Overall, we found that the participants overcame their challenges and ultimately succeeded, or excelled, in their respective programs. Some of the values and strengths they brought to their GMU experience included a foundational knowledge of the English language, an appreciation of hard work, ability to study proficiently, awareness of course requirements and time constraints, a determination to adapt, and support from their families, friends and home universities. Their values and strengths were augmented by a total immersion English language experience at GMU. In addition, the University provided resources, such as tutoring, workshops and seminars from

the ELI and Writing Center, academic advising, organized activities through campus student organizations, and special events that helped them improve their spoken English and provided acculturation experiences.

### Discussion of Findings

PRC international students are an asset to GMU's undergraduate and graduate programs, adding new ideas, perspectives and cultures to our diverse university. The challenges they encounter at GMU and the solutions they devise to achieve improvements rely on their cultural strengths and determination. In many ways, our research findings are similar to those encountered in other parts of the world. For example, in a study of Chinese students enrolled in a New Zealand university, Holmes (2004) found that these students' efforts and willpower were equated to success, even when they were confused with their classroom experiences. When faced with confusion, these students would *...reconstruct and renegotiate their primary culture learning and communication styles to accommodate another way* (Holmes, 2004, p. 303).

The authors of this paper suggest that globalization of higher education requires a culturally responsive approach to teaching and learning. Gay (2002) presents five essential elements of culturally responsive teaching: a cultural diversity knowledge base, culturally relevant curricula, a cultural caring learning community, cross-cultural communications, and cultural congruity in classroom instruction. In order to develop a responsive environment for PRC students, Holmes (2004) states: "The primary challenge is for teachers to move from the mindset of **deficit to a difference** view of Chinese learning and teaching methods" (Holmes, 2004, p. 304).

Recent movements towards developing a culturally responsive teaching and learning environment at GMU are exemplified by the research of Osterling and Fox (2004) and Zawacki, Hajabbasi, Habib, Antram, and Das (2007). Osterling and Fox revised a graduate-level teacher education course by incorporating a culturally responsive pedagogy. The teachers and students exchanged roles and developed a community of learners where the teacher candidates learned how to interpret the culture of each of the students. By participating in this transformative process, the traditional classroom environment became an effective culturally responsive environment where the students prepared to practice culturally sensitive pedagogy. Zawacki, et al. (2007) found that the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of GMU's international students impact their writing in academic English. For example, the concept of plagiarism has diverse meanings depending on the student's culture.

*[The] ...divergent definition of critical thinking is at the heart of the non-native English speaker's relationship to citation....they are not familiar with the concept*

*of plagiarism as it is defined in the American academy (Zawacki, 2007, p. 27).*

One Mason undergraduate student from China stated, "Here thesis is very obvious, but in Chinese, we don't write something so obviously. We like to allow the reader to think about it" (Zawacki, 2007, p. 36). Understanding these differences in teaching and learning could help reduce confusion and miscommunication between Chinese students, their peers and their GMU instructors.

As the economy and population in the PRC continue to grow over the next decades, it is expected that the number of PRC students seeking higher education in the US will continue to grow as well, requiring US IHE to proactively address the sociolinguistic challenges and adjustments that international students face when they study at US colleges and universities. In concluding, we posit that the most effective approach to assuring successful learning outcomes for our diverse university populations will be through the development of university-wide culturally responsive teaching and learning environments that address the strengths that these students bring to our campuses.

## Appendix

**Table 1: A brief comparison between Mandarin-Chinese and English**

<b>Mandarin-Chinese</b>	<b>English</b>
Sino-Tibetan family of languages	Indo-European family of languages
Logographic writing system with over 47,000 characters <i>Pinyin</i>	Roman alphabetic writing system with only 26 letters
Non-alphabetic characters represent words	Alphabetic characters represent words
Monosyllable	Strong and weak syllables
Tonal language	Phoneme stressed language
Questions conveyed by intonation	Questions conveyed by inverted subject and verb
Few grammatical rules	Specific grammar rules
No articles	Has articles
No verb tenses; no time	Verb tenses
Use of shared understanding of context	Citations required for all

**Table 2: Experiences of PRC graduate and undergraduate students in the two studies at George Mason University**

<b>Graduate students in the CLLP</b>	<b>Undergraduates students in the China 121</b>
Bilingual in Mandarin-Chinese and English; local dialects at home	Bilingual in Mandarin-Chinese and English; local dialects at home
Teaching to the test for English language; TOEFL and PRAXIS-I exams required	Teaching to the test for English language; TOEFL not required; Comprehensive English Language Test (CELT) at GMU's English Language Institute (ELI)
Parents value education and are willing to make big financial sacrifices to send their only son/daughter to study abroad	Parents valued education; they encouraged study abroad and worked for years to send their only son/daughter overseas for higher education
Pre-departure done on an individual basis with help of professional Chinese Education Agent;	Pre-departure done by China Center for International Educational Exchange; pre-departure

F1 visas to the US	orientation; J1 visas to the US
Traveled to the U.S independently	Traveled to the U.S. in a group of 30+ China 121 students
Experienced difficulty with spoken English on arrival	Experienced difficulty with spoken English on arrival
Individual students perceived as a homogeneous group who shared same socio-cultural, educational and economic backgrounds	Organized as an annual cohort of 30+ international Chinese students who arrive at Mason and pursue their degrees together as a group
Early experiences impetus for participants to bond into a close symbiotic relationship	Bonding occurs in the ELI classroom, UNIV 100, cohort activities

**Table 3: Sociolinguistic differences experienced by PRC students in the two studies at George Mason University**

<b>People's Republic of China (PRC)</b>	<b>United States of America (US)</b>
21 <sup>st</sup> Century Confucian thought	Socratic thought
One child family policy	No family size policy
Modern, urban, middle class	Modern, urban, middle class
Newly developed education system	Established education system
Social capitalism; western cultural influences	Capitalism; multicultural influences
Mass media; computer technology; western movies	Mass media; computer technology; western movies
Teacher-centered classroom; rote memorization; knowledge transmission	Student-centered classroom; critical thinking
<i>Putonghua</i> (Mandarin-Chinese)	English



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