



As Chinese students meet the challenges of a new language and new ways to learn, higher education finds new ways to welcome them

## **VISITING** SCHOLARS

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By Rich Barlow

Crisp September air greets a throng of casually dressed students wending their way up the broad steps of BU's Tsai Performance Center for the Mid-Autumn Festival Gala, a traditional holiday that has been celebrated in China for more than 1,200 years. The students are handed programs in Chinese and their hands are stamped with a smiley face. They quickly fill the 515-seat auditorium. For the first performance, one spotlight falls on a woman playing a grand piano, another on a harpist strumming a classical Chinese instrument called a *guzheng*. A third, on stage right, shines on a woman who slowly and methodically assembles a floral arrangement.



CYDNEY SCOTT

**"When I speak, my language doesn't fit my thought. But I can understand what people are talking."  
—QIANKUN ZHAO**

The festival's acts range from Chinese comedy to music to all manner of dance, classical Chinese to hip-hop, as well as a spirited exhibition of martial arts. There is a kung fu routine, and nunchuks are wielded skillfully by Brad Liyue Wang (CAS'16). There are also passionate renderings of American tunes. Wang sings the theme from *Titanic*, in English, to his girlfriend, Wind Yijing Lu (SHA'15, SMG'15), who wears a pink gown. The night concludes with a duet guitar cover of Bruno Mars' "Marry You," capped by a scene that could have flashed on the Times Square Jumbotron on New Year's Eve: a student kneels on stage before a bouquet-bearing young woman and proposes. She accepts; the crowd roars.

The ancient celebration at the Tsai Center could be seen as a metaphor for the life of Chinese students at BU. It's a pastiche of cultural gems from opposite sides of the planet. Some, like the *guzheng*, are traditional, and carried with reverence from Shanghai and Beijing and Shenzhen; some are deliberately modern and quintessentially American, and some, like the mock proposal of marriage, are so universally goofy that they would crack up college students anywhere in the world. Ultimately, the evening is about having fun.

**WEBEXTRA** Watch a series of videos about the lives of Chinese students at BU at [bu.edu/bostonia](http://bu.edu/bostonia).

Chinese students are the University's largest group of international students, and they navigate life on the Charles River Campus with varying skills and success. Wang arrived with powerful advantages: he had honed his English during two years in US high schools and parlayed his natural charm and athleticism into campus involvement and friendships. Others, like Qiankun Zhao (CAS'17), need English enrichment study before matriculating as freshmen at the University.

BU welcomes Chinese students with an expanding panoply of services, many of them new to US higher education. There are English-improvement classes and writing seminars, workshops and courses that introduce them to cultural customs that may be unfamiliar, and staff to smooth out wrinkles in the numbingly complex immigration system. Dining Services is considering adding to its existing Chinese food offerings, and Behavioral Medicine at Student Health Services is researching the best ways to reach out to the Asian community.

The burgeoning international exchange is exactly that. While colleges and universities across the United States broaden services to accommodate Chinese students, the students bring plenty to colleges and universities. The non-

profit Institute of International Education and the US Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs estimate that foreign students, two-thirds of whom pay full tuition, contribute about \$24 billion annually to the US economy. Most come from China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Canada.

International students also enhance the experience of higher education by introducing Americans to new cultures and political perspectives. In the last few years, they have made the Charles River Campus less like the cities and towns that most BU students grew up in and more like the world in which they will build their careers.

Lily Lingxiu Ge, a freshman from Nanjing, and Alyssa Crippen met on the first day of lab last fall in their General Chemistry for the Engineering Sciences course. Directed to pair up with a partner, most of the class stood around awkwardly. Not Ge (ENG'17). "She just walked up to me and said, 'Do you want to be my lab partner?'" says Crippen (CAS'15), a geophysics and planetary sciences major from Rome, N.Y. "I was impressed. I said, 'Okay, why not?' Rome has 30,000 people. It's smaller than BU. It's predominantly Italian. When I came to college, I thought it was fascinating to have students from all over the place. I love learning about other cultures."

During lab, Crippen told Ge she would be spending spring semester studying abroad, in New Zealand. After that? Maybe China. She has always wanted to go. "She said, 'You should definitely go to Nanjing,'" Crippen says. The eastern

city of Nanjing, with more than six million people, is now on Crippen's list.

Ge is nearly fluent in English. Her native language, which she enjoys speaking with classmates from China, is Mandarin. Crippen does not speak Mandarin, but it doesn't matter. In lab, they share the language of science. They both talk about their love of the process of discovery. "My lab partner is good at everything," says Ge. "She's been teaching me a lot. We have fun. I enjoy that time."

Even with the University's growing support system, Chinese students say they face daunting challenges—mastering the language, coming to terms with the food, and making American friends. For some, four years in Boston is a vexing social adventure, and many Chinese seem to get to know America much better than they get to know Americans.

#### BECOMING CLASSROOM-READY

"Would you rather do vocabulary?" senior lecturer Shelley Fishman asks her dozen students, all but two of them Chinese. A chorus of "Nos" scotches that idea in favor of a discussion of their current assignment, *Iron & Silk*, Mark Salzman's memoir of his time teaching English in China.

Starting in August, the first stop at BU for many Chinese students is a mandatory English-improvement class, before Matriculation, through the Center for English Language & Orientation Programs (CELOP). Students who don't score the required minimum on the TOEFL (Test of English as a

CYDNEY SCOTT

"Americans like to praise people. They say, 'I like your shoes; I like your hair.' We don't say that. It sounds fake... If an American says this, what should I respond?"  
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Foreign Language), an acronym Chinese students toss around as effortlessly as their own names, are admitted conditionally to BU, with the expectation that CELOP will help them upgrade their speaking and comprehension skills and become classroom-ready.

Sitting in the George Sherman Union a month later, Qiankun Zhao muses about how caring the CELOP teachers are, but she admits that she felt abashed by the number of her countrymen in the class. “When your whole class is Chinese...it’s really embarrassing. You look at each other with, like, ‘Am I better than her, or is she better than me?’” Zhao’s English is easy to understand, although she occasionally struggles for the right word. “When I speak, my language doesn’t fit my thought,” she says. “But I can understand what people are talking.”

That discomfort didn’t stop Zhao from breezing through her first week of classes. She marvels at the difference between the education back home—teachers handed her facts to memorize, she says—while here, concepts behind the facts matter. “We spend half an hour to discuss why one times five equals five,” she says.

She’s disappointed with initial efforts to make more American friends, a problem she does not attribute to the language barrier. “I think it’s a universal thing that people are not really brave enough to accept different cultures,” she says. “We look different. We do different activities.” She is grateful to be rooming in a Myles Standish single; Chinese students



CYDNEY SCOTT

who have graduated have told her that it can be awkward trying to get along with American roommates. And yet she still tears up at the thought of being at BU.

“I feel like I finally found a place that I really want to be,” she says. “It’s a place where I can have the motivation to work and study.”

For Tianfeng Sun (SMG’14), the embarrassing quicksands of English began with ketchup. He was a freshman, Sun recalls, when he went to a McDonald’s with new American friends: “They were asking for ketchup sauce. I was, like, ‘What is the ketchup sauce?’” I thought it should be called tomato sauce. I had a really hard year my freshman year, especially when I was communicating with American students.”

In the team projects that are a staple in School of Management classes, Sun labored to be understood by teammates.

**Brad Liyue Wang's skill with kung fu earned him popularity in the Kung Fu Club, and friendships that extended beyond practices. Wang studies with girlfriend Wind Yijing Lu (top).**



ROBIN MAS



Wind Yijing Lu is proud to be a "Shanghai girl," because, she says, "Shanghai girls are independent, and they know what they want."

ROBIN MAS

Mentally revisiting his Management as a System class, he says, "Sometimes, I can't catch some words of their sentence, or I know what I want to say, but it's just hard to express in English." Sun says Chinese doesn't have certain linguistic forms common in English, such as dependent clauses and differing verb forms for different tenses—not to mention the slang.

It's a problem known to many Chinese students, and one that Christopher Daly, a College of Communication associate professor of journalism, is trying to fix.

"You can be an A student in English in China and still not be ready to go up to an American on a sidewalk and say, 'Excuse me, can I interview you?'" says Daly, who teaches a seminar for graduate students from abroad. Daly's class is designed to improve English language skills and teach budding journalists about American topics that they will be required to report on, from Halloween to the World Series. His students, most

of whom are Chinese, polish their English by reviewing corrected assignments from other classes and by reading selected newspapers and texts.

Jeanne Kelley, director of BU's International Students & Scholars Office (ISSO), says schools and colleges tailor their support for students, with SMG and the College of Arts & Sciences offering programs similar to Daly's. Meanwhile, ISSO partners with other offices to provide orientation workshops on adjusting to American education and culture.

Chinese students also have taken the matter into their own hands. The Tsai gala, for example, was sponsored by the BU Chinese Students and Scholars Association (BUCSSA), a multiservice student group that contacts incoming students the summer before they arrive to arrange airport-to-dorm transit and runs orientation programs about culture and practical issues like visas.

## A TASTE OF HOME

Chinese students pick their favorite dishes in greater Boston restaurants

Many Chinese students say one of the reasons they prefer to live together off campus is that it allows them to cook the kind of food that tastes like home. Here, they recommend their favorite dishes, by region, at greater Boston restaurants.

### SHANGHAI-STYLE

**RESTAURANT:** Gourmet Dumpling House, 52 Beach St., Boston  
**DISH:** Xiao long bao, or "soup dumplings"

### CANTONESE-STYLE

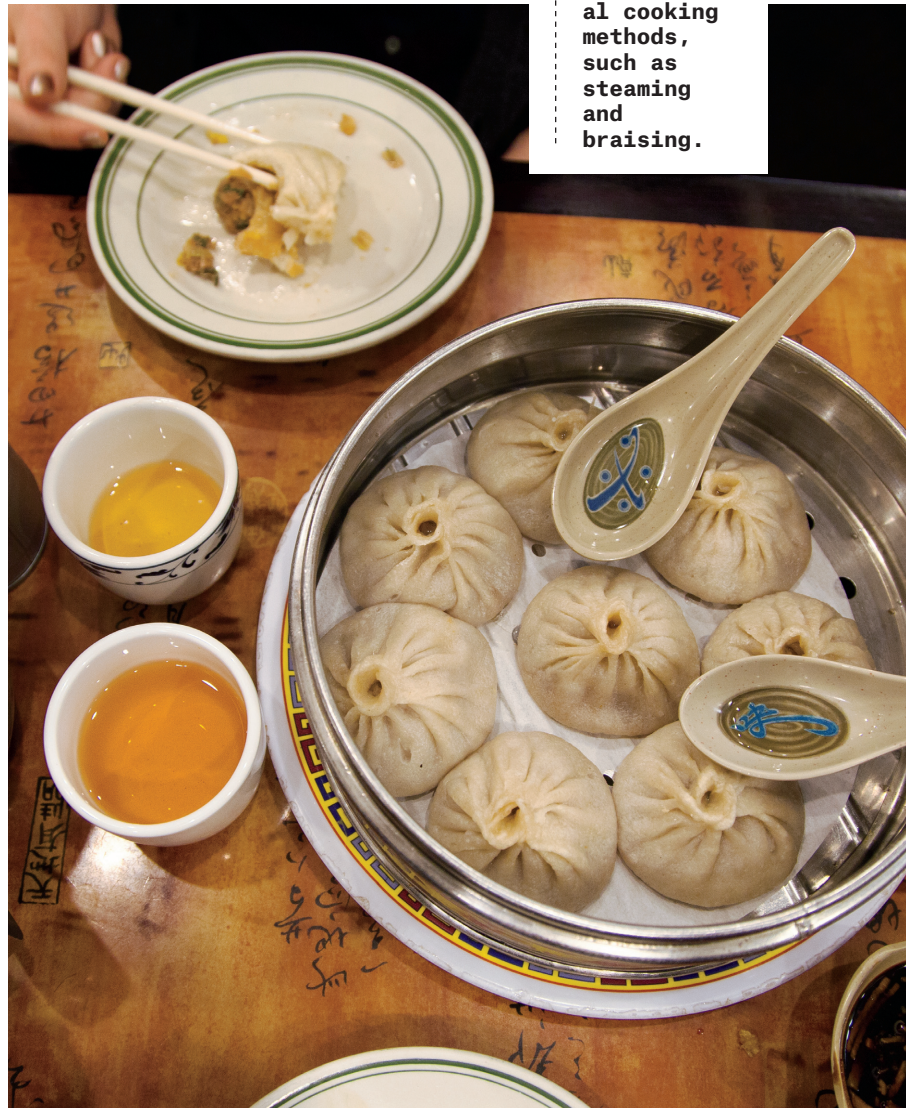
**RESTAURANT:** Winsor Dim Sum Cafe, 10 Tyler St., Boston  
**DISHES:** Chicken feet and rice noodle rolls

### SICHUAN-STYLE

**RESTAURANT:** Sichuan Garden, 295 Washington St., Brookline  
**DISHES:** Steamed pork dumplings with roasted chili vinaigrette and sliced pork chop with noodles in soup

### BEIJING-STYLE

**RESTAURANT:** Beijing Café, 728 Commonwealth Ave., Boston  
**DISH:** Zhajiang noodles



BU's new Chinese menu will focus on traditional cooking methods, such as steaming and braising.

Sun's personal remedy for the language barrier can be summarized in a single Americanism: chill. "If you had some embarrassing moments or culture shock when you were hanging out with your American or local friends, act naturally. Don't think it's a big thing or it's a harsh problem. You can just act naturally, and people will understand."

Film studies major Shuang Hao (COM'16) has a close group of Chinese friends. In fact, Hao says, most of her friends here are Chinese or fellow Asians, largely because of what she calls Americans' "different logic." She means habits that at best can be jarring, sometimes uncomfortable.

"American students like to praise people a lot," says Hao.

"They like to say, 'I like your shoes; I like your hairstyle.' But we don't say that. It sounds fake. I don't know, if an American says this, what should I respond? If I talk with a Chinese student or Asian student, I will know what he expects me to say."

Other students find that language isn't the only challenge. At midterm, Zhao remained frustrated by what she calls Americans' reluctance to become friends. "If you say hello to them, they respond, and it is friendly, but if you expect more, like hanging out...that never happens." The one exception, she says, is an ABC (American-born Chinese) student who became a Facebook friend and has asked her to teach him Chinese.

Zhao says she's not homesick, even as the novelty of BU



JAKE LEVIN

has ebbed, but she is occasionally stressed, mainly by the demands of the unfamiliar independent style of learning. In her Chinese high school, she says, teachers “will chase after you—‘You should do this, did you do this?’” At BU, students are expected to manage the workload themselves, and their success is measured by what she considers fast-and-furious-paced quizzes throughout the semester.

Indeed, at one point in Zhao’s writing class, Olga Drepanos, a Writing Program lecturer, places motherly hands on her shoulders and says good-naturedly, “Will you relax?”

Drepanos’ course hones the English grammar and composition skills of her international students (all are Chinese). Today, they’re studying President Lincoln’s use of rhetoric in his second inaugural address (“With malice toward none, with charity for all...”). The use of such masterful prose to teach students writing skills in a second language may seem odd to an outsider, but Drepanos says it’s appropriate. By dint of their matriculation at BU, “their English is definitely beyond basic. We have to get them up to standard so they’re writing papers for classes, and those professors are not going to babysit them.”

#### THE COMFORT OF CUISINE FROM HOME

On a Wednesday evening in early November, guests arrive for an authentic Sichuan meal at Nick Haisu Yuan’s Babcock Street apartment. Yuan (CAS’14, COM’14) hails from the city of Chongqing, and his mother occasionally mails him spices. Tonight he is putting those spices to work in a dinner so fiery that the aroma alone makes the guests cough. The menu includes spareribs with

potatoes, beef with celery and mushrooms, and fish balls, all infused with chilis, chili paste, or both. They are among Yuan’s favorite dishes, and being able to prepare them, he says, is one reason he traded the cocoon of BU dorm life for off-campus digs.

It’s a trail taken by many Chinese students, enough to prompt Marc Robillard, executive director of housing and dining, to wonder if there were something the University could do to slow the exodus. Robillard, who is currently studying the issue, says 75 percent of American and non-Chinese international students return to campus housing their sophomore year, but fewer than half of Chinese students do.

A survey of 100 Chinese students revealed that dining choices had a lot to do with it. So, the University this year added 15 Chinese dishes to the monthly menu at the three residential dining halls, including Sichuan chili chicken and eggplant, braised pork with bamboo shoots and carrots, and black mushroom and marinated bean curd. BU has also changed the way it cooks Asian food, using traditional methods such as stewing, braising, steaming, and boiling.

Yuan, who is BUCSSA president, and his three Chinese dinner guests start their meal with a toast, raising teacups instead of wine glasses. Yuan says he and his friends have nothing against wine and beer, and he insists that the notion that Chinese students don’t drink alcohol is false. But it is true, he says, that many Chinese students don’t enjoy large beer parties. “That’s an American thing,” he says. “If I go to those parties, I don’t know what to do.”

Ultimately, Yuan, like all Chinese students, will have to choose a permanent address, either in China or in the United States. It’s a decision that is shaped by many factors: job offers, visas, and a deep cultural conviction that education is a gift to be used for the benefit of society, in this case Chinese society.

Many students, of course, will return home to China. Huiyao Wang, director general of the nonprofit Center for China and Globalization and vice chairman of the China Western Returned Scholars Association, as well as a senior fellow at Harvard’s Kennedy School, estimates that about 40 percent of Chinese students will return. David Zweig, director of the Center on China’s Transnational Relations at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, puts the number of returnees historically closer to 30 percent, but Zweig allows that it has increased since 2008, when the Chinese government started its 1,000 Talents program, a deliberate effort to attract returnees by investing in academic and research institutes.

Tianfeng Sun, who struggled with the meaning of ketchup, left the city of Wenzhou on the East China Sea four years ago. After graduating this spring, he plans to work in Singapore. He has a friend there who is starting an interior design company and could use someone with the kind of business skills they teach in America.

Wind Yijing Lu, on the other hand, says Shanghai will always be her home. She has her eye on her postgraduation dream job—the Shanghai Disney Resort and Shanghai Disneyland. The first Disney resort in mainland China, it is scheduled to open at the end of 2015. “I am passionate about working there,” Lu says.

Her boyfriend, economics major Brad Wang, who is also from Shanghai, says he would like to spend a couple of years working in the United States after graduation. And then, he says, “I’ll go back to Shanghai. I’m from Shanghai. My family is there. I’m obligated to go back.”

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*Sonia Su (COM’15) contributed to this story.*