



IN FALL 2008, there were 42 students from China in Boston University's freshman class. In 2013, there were 410. Nationwide, the number of Chinese students in American colleges and universities has increased almost sixfold in the last five years. Chinese students are coming because they believe an American education will give them advantages that a Chinese education will not. And they are coming now because China's economic growth has enabled their parents to pay for what they believe is the best higher education available for their only children. The movement is not just educating young Chinese. It's changing higher education across the United States, and it's energizing Chinese business practices in ways that will ripple through economies around the world. In the following stories, *Bostonia* examines the phenomenon from three perspectives: accepted Chinese students at home, Chinese students making their way on the Charles River Campus, and alums who have returned to China.

CHANGE AGENTS

Chinese students come to the United States to get the world's best education, and they return home to build what will soon be the world's greatest economy





Defined by being only children and empowered by a roaring economy, Chinese students are seizing the best college education in the world

FORTUNATE ONES





Freshman Lily Lingxiu Ge (facing page) in Nanjing, China, days before flying to Boston. Ge (right) working on a chemistry lab assignment in the BU Metcalf Science Center.

CYDNEY SCOTT

By Sara Rimer

In August 2013, a sweltering Nanjing was living up to its reputation as one of the Three Furnaces of China. Visiting businessmen hole up in luxury skyscraper hotels downtown. At the Starbucks café at the Westin mall, twenty-somethings wearing hip, chunky black glasses sip iced green tea lattes.

Lily Lingxiu Ge, an incoming freshman at Boston University's College of Engineering, is in her bedroom at her family's modern, air-conditioned apartment, sorting through her new winter clothes.

At BU there are 1,229 students from China out of 16,460 undergraduates. Lily Lingxiu Ge is one of 10 freshmen from Nanjing.

“I heard Boston will be very cold,” says Ge (ENG’17), who’s wearing the black-and-white panda slippers she’d exchanged for her pink Converse sneakers at the front door. “I heard it snows up to your knees.”

She hugs her dog, an exuberant white Samoyed named Rice, and goes to the dining room to help her mother, Helen Xu, make tea. Her father, Alan Ge, is due home soon from the high-tech company he started on a shoestring when Lily was a little girl. She plans to major in computer engineering so she can help run the company—or who knows, she might end up working in the United States.

“I heard not many Chinese girls study engineering,” Ge says. “My mother

is worried it will be hard for me, that I’ll be lonely.”

The outgoing, self-assured Ge declares that she is not at all worried. “I want to be like my father,” she says. “He’s brave, he challenges everything. I don’t want to be a traditional Chinese girl.”

It is August 20, three days before her 18th birthday. In seven days she will get on a plane in Shanghai with her backpack and two suitcases and travel half-way around the world to a country her father has visited once, 14 years ago, and that her mother has never been to.

“BU,” Ge says, “is the dream school.”

To get an idea of the demographic shift that has taken place at BU in the past few years, consider a few numbers:

in fall 2008, 42 of 4,131 freshmen were from China. In fall 2013, the numbers were 410 of 3,807 freshmen.

Ge is one of 10 BU freshmen from Nanjing alone. There are 1,229 students from China out of a total of 16,460 BU undergraduates. The demographic change has been even greater at other campuses across the country. In the 2012–2013 academic year, the number of undergraduates from China in the United States rose to 109,604, up from 79,989. With undergraduate and graduate students combined, students from China numbered 243,623 in 2012–2013, an increase from 202,051 in 2011–2012, according to the nonprofit Institute of International Education.



ANDREW TIANYANG ZHONG (CAS’17) OF NANJING

“I wanted to be a guy with perseverance. I went to Michigan for an exchange student program and learned that Andrew is Jesus’ first disciple. He is a tough and strong man. So I decided to keep this name.”



NICK HAISU YUAN (CAS’14, COM’14), A SIX-FOOT-TWO-INCH SENIOR FROM CHONGQING

“English names are picked quite randomly. I picked Nick because people who are called Nick are usually tall.”



JENNIFER SHITAO LI (COM’15) OF SHENZHEN

“Each kid in my elementary school gets an English name in the first few days of their first semester. My name was written on a sign on my desk. I’m happy with my name because it makes me think about an outgoing American girl. I think it suits me.”



LUCY XI JIN (COM’15) OF BEIJING

“My mom said she named me Lucy because it sounded like my Chinese name. And also it will be easier for my grandparents, who don’t speak English, to remember. I like my name. It is easy to remember. Everyone loves Lucy (I’d never heard of the show until I came to the States). I did once want to change it to something more special, but I didn’t because I think I should keep the name my parents gave me.”



WIND YIJING LU (SHA’15, SMG’15) OF SHANGHAI

“Wind has very strong power—tsunami, typhoon, storm, tornado—those are all about wind. It says if you don’t treat wind, and the world, well, they’ll pay you back. Respect the wind, respect the world. Respect me.” SR

Chinese students explain how they chose, or were given, their American nicknames

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

They are part of the largest and youngest wave of college students from China in this country and around the world.

Ever.

Along with other international students, they bring new perspectives, cultural experiences, and knowledge that are transforming colleges and universities across the country, including BU, into vibrant global campuses. And colleges are adapting to meet their needs. To help Mandarin-speaking students from China integrate into campus life, many colleges are revamping dining hall menus, adding writing tutors, and creating videos that explain American college culture.

At BU, the cross-cultural experience of globalization—language barriers and breakthroughs, misunderstandings, connections, and learning—plays out day by day, in residence halls, classrooms, at the George Sherman Union.

Global campuses benefit everyone, education experts say. “The careers of all our students will be global ones,” says Allan E. Goodman, president of the Institute of International Education. “They will need to understand the cultural differences and historical experiences that divide us, as well as the common values and humanity that unite us.”

Ge and the other students from China are the only sons and daughters of their country’s rising middle class and its more than three decades of economic growth and open-door and one-child policies. Middle-class parents can afford not just cars and international travel, but the commodity most prized by their culture, with its Confucian-inspired reverence for learning: education. Specifically, US higher education.

For many of these young people, who are growing up in a global world, going to college abroad is all but expected these days. Ge graduated from Nanjing Foreign Language High School, considered one of the top high schools in China. Of the 400 seniors in her class, more than



Ge, at home with her parents and grandmother, attended the Nanjing Foreign Language High School, where some 280 of 400 seniors enrolled in colleges abroad.

ROBIN MAS

280 have enrolled in colleges abroad, primarily in the United States. She is one of several students from her high school who are BU freshmen this year.

“Our principal teaches us to be open to the whole world,” Ge says, “but we should always keep our Chinese spirit.”

Students from China, a country with 1.3 billion people, are as diverse as any of their classmates from the United States, or for that matter, from India, Europe, or Africa. They are bright, ambitious, hardworking, curious, and paradoxical. They embrace American culture—Starbucks, NBA basketball, *The Big Bang Theory*—and at the same

time they are deeply, proudly Chinese.

In one breath, Ge quotes Steve Jobs: “Stay hungry, stay foolish.” In the next, she channels Confucius: “It’s all about being kind and generous—not to be selfish.’ If you study, don’t just read something once. Read over many times.”

Wind Yijing Lu is the vice president of the BU Chinese Students and Scholars Association (BUCSSA). “It’s Wind, as in *Gone with the Wind*,” she introduces herself to Americans. “I’m a Shanghai girl—a modern Shanghai girl.”

Shanghai girls, with their hip-hop style and bold attitudes, could be New York girls. “Shanghai girls are independent, and they know what they want,” says Lu (SHA’15, SMG’15), who spent her junior year of high school as an exchange student in Indiana and wants a high-powered career in hospitality management.

Students from China are interested in business administration, economics, and math—and literature, language, education, journalism, psychology, music, and any number of other subjects.

ABOUT THE NAMES

In China, family names generally precede given names, but Chinese people living in the United States often follow the American convention of writing their given name first and family name second. Because most of the students and experts interviewed for these stories are known by this Anglicized nomenclature, we have applied the convention throughout these articles.

BUCSSA president Nick Haisu Yuan (CAS'14, COM'14), a double major in economics and film, wants to be a filmmaker like his hero Martin Scorsese. "I want to make films that tell stories about China—how China really is," he says. He is passionate about Sichuan food—he is from Chongqing—and may dabble in food criticism, too.

Parents of students from China are lawyers, teachers, government workers, entrepreneurs, real estate developers, and small businessmen who have poured all their faith in education into their only children. The expectation is that many of these children will eventually return home, with their coveted degrees and Western knowledge, to help their families—and build a better China.

BU: A TOP BRAND NAME

"Education is the most important thing," says Jin Li, a professor of human development and education at Brown University, who grew up in China during the Cultural Revolution and whose recent book, *Cultural Foundations of Learning: East and West*, explores how differences in Asian and Western beliefs about learning shape attitudes toward education and parenting.

"If you have money, you buy education," Li says. "You buy the best. They think US higher education is the best."

International students are not eligible for need-based financial aid at BU and many other US colleges. Parents from China invest every possible working hour and all their savings—and they are a generation of savers—to send their children here. They hope that a BU degree will provide an edge in the competition for jobs in China, or in the United States. With Chinese real estate values reaching stratospheric levels in the past decade or so, some parents sell apartments they had bought when the market was low in order to pay for BU.

In China, where brand names carry great weight, Boston University is a top brand name. Students from China, who are almost all the first ones in their families to go to college in the United States, track the *U.S. News & World*

"I want to be like my father. He's brave and challenges everything."
—LILY LING-XIU GE



ROBIN MAS

GOING GLOBAL

BOSTON UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT BY CITIZENSHIP

Fall 2008–2013*

In fall 2008, 42 of 4,131 BU freshmen came from China. In fall 2013, the numbers were 410 of 3,807.

YEAR	TOTAL	ALL INTERNATIONAL	CHINA
2008	16,521	1,851	208
2009	16,340	1,986	293
2010	16,683	2,210	398
2011	16,648	2,516	613
2012	16,545	2,799	887
2013	16,460	3,177	1,229

* Fall 2013 is based on mid-semester enrollment.
SOURCE: BU Institutional Research

REACHING OUT

Report rankings even more closely than do kids here.

Case in point: in September 2013, Kelly A. Walter, BU associate vice president and executive director of admissions, was on one of her regular recruitment trips to China. She walked into Beijing School No. 4 shortly after the latest *U.S. News* rankings were announced. The students were abuzz over BU's 10-point jump.

"One boy said, 'Miss Walter, we see that BU is now 41,'" Walter says.

Parents expect BU to help their children develop habits of mind they associate with US education—critical thinking, creativity—which they say are not encouraged by China's system, with its emphasis on rote learning, a teacher's authority, and grueling high-stakes exams. It can be challenging, though, to spend 12 years learning to succeed in one system and then to be expected to think in very different ways at BU. Freewheeling class discussions and challenging authority may be new for students from China, who, as Li writes in her book, come from a culture that prizes humility and listening as important learning virtues.

But adapting to BU is part of keeping pace with China's race into the future. "We're a new generation," says Ge. "We like American culture. It's new, it's free." She pauses, searching for an example of that new freedom: "like critical thinking."

She and the other students from China were born in the early- to mid-1990s, most of them during the second decade of Deng Xiaoping's innovative economic policies known as Reform and Opening. "To get rich is glorious," Deng declared. The largest human migration in history was under way, with hundreds of millions of people moving from rural areas to seek factory jobs and other opportunities in cities.

Ge's parents migrated to Nanjing, an eastern city with more than five million people. Their apartment, in a new, gated complex, is a 15-minute drive from the skyscrapers of central Nanjing—and a few minutes' walk from a restored sec-

Kelly A. Walter has been building relationships with some of China's top public high schools for the past five years. That was when those schools began opening their doors to a handful of US college admissions officials.

"This is part of the relationship-building that is absolutely critical in everything we do, but especially so in China," says Walter, BU associate vice president and executive director of admissions. As an indication of how seriously she takes this outreach, she is studying Mandarin.

"As the doors have opened for high school students to enter higher education in the United States," she says, "public schools in China—called national schools—are beginning to allow us access to classroom teachers and students."

Walter views it as her job—and the job of other US admissions officials—to help school administrators, counselors, students, and parents in China better understand what is to them the mystifying US college admissions process.

She and a group of admissions officers from other top US colleges and universities, including Vanderbilt, Boston College, Tufts, and the University of Michigan, are part of a new effort to train administrators and other staff at high schools in China in the complexities of US college admissions. They held their first training session in September, in Beijing. Administrators from 80 high schools around the country attended.

Walter spoke to the group about BU's holistic admissions, which take into account a combination of factors: academic performance, including high school grades, standardized test scores, extracurricular activities, essays, and teacher recommendations.

The first stumbling block was the word *holistic*. "They couldn't translate it," she says. "It's a process that is foreign to them. They've had to learn about it. Even having to write an essay for admission is something they're not familiar with."

College admissions in China are based on the score of a national high-stakes college entrance exam, the demanding nine-hour Gaokao. About nine million high school seniors took the test last year.

Walter emphasizes that students from China are held to the same admissions standards as all other applicants to US colleges. "We expect that these students were strong performers in high school," she says. "Academic expectations are the same regardless of whether students are from Albany, N.Y., London in the UK, or Beijing, China. They are required to take the same standardized tests as any American student." In addition, she says, they must demonstrate English language proficiency on the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). SR

CYDNEY SCOTT



Kelly A. Walter says students from China are held to the same admissions standards as all applicants.

tion of a 14th-century Ming dynasty wall. China, land of contrasts. It's a cliché, but it's accurate.

A group of visitors from BU is welcomed in August by Ge and her parents with typical Chinese warmth. They talk about their hopes for their daughter's education over ginger tea—followed by heaping bowls of dumplings for lunch—around the table in their light-filled dining room.

"In America you have a spirit of innovation," says Ge's father, speaking through a translator. "Society encourages it."

He describes Boston as the Silicon Valley of the East Coast, with BU an incubator where Lily can learn and grow while sharing her country's culture. "I hope she will be a link between the United States and China," he says. "I hope she will bring back new ideas and technology."

"To us, BU is like a large city," he says. "It will broaden her view. She can make many friends, not only among students, but also some professors."

He talks about how he and his wife started taking Lily abroad when she was six, to Australia, Indonesia, France, England, Germany. It was part of helping her develop as a citizen of the world.

Recalling his business trip to the United States, when he visited New York, Boston, and San Francisco, he says, "I have seen some American universities. They are fenceless, very free. We wanted to let Lily study in such freedom."

Ge's parents are both 48. They came of age during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. Universities were shut down from 1966 to 1976. Intellectuals were sent to the countryside to work the land. China was all but closed to outsiders.

"If we wanted to travel, we couldn't," Ge's father says.

Dreams were put on hold. "It was not just our one family," he says. "The entire society was like that. What could we do? We could wait, waiting for things to change."

His voice holds no bitterness. He

is focused on the present—his family, keeping his large, successful company competitive, China's development.

If studying abroad was unimaginable for Ge's parents, going to college in China was almost as far out of reach. The national college entrance exam, known as the Gaokao, was discontinued during the Cultural Revolution and not reinstated until 1977. With little opportunity to prepare, only a tiny percentage of those who took the famously difficult test in those early years passed.

"My parents both failed the Gaokao," Ge says. "My mother compares the Gaokao to hell."

Just taking the test showed remarkable drive, says Min Ye, a College of Arts & Sciences assistant professor of international relations, who graduated from Beijing University and came to the United States as a graduate student in the late 1990s, earning a master's at the University of South Carolina and a PhD at Princeton.

"That first generation was incredible," Ye says.

Ge's parents both got jobs at China Telecom and jumped at the opportunity to be trained in engineering by Bell Labs in China. Bell Labs changed their lives, and part of their affinity for BU is that Alexander Graham Bell was once on its faculty. In the early 1990s, Ge's father left China Telecom to start his first company. In less than 10 years, he took it public.

The experience and opportunity gap between Ge's generation and their parents' is staggering. The younger generation struggles to grasp it.

A couple of afternoons before the visit to the Ge home, Ge has lunch with five other BU freshmen at Dai Pai Dang, a popular Chinese restaurant in the Westin mall that is decorated like a traditional teahouse, with red lanterns and carved wooden pillars. The students sit around a table in their jeans and converse sneakers, carrying cell phones loaded with apps for Skype and the Chinese social media sites—WeChat, Renren, QQ—they would use at BU to con-

nect with family and friends back home.

"Our parents couldn't have imagined going abroad when they were our age," Ge says, looking around the table. "Everyone was poor."

Acting as host, she discusses the menu with the group and orders a variety of dishes to share: salted duck, sugary taro soup, deep-fried tofu, stir-fried rice cakes, pork dumplings, sautéed vegetables. Socializing over their country's food is an essential part of their culture these students will bring with them to BU.

They have a question: can they have electric kettles in their dorm rooms, so they can boil water for tea?

"Americans use tea bags," says Andrew Tianyang Zhong (CAS'17). "That is not tea." To brew tea the Chinese way, the water must be properly boiled. Microwaves don't cut it.

There is a brief discussion of life goals. Money is necessary, the students agree. But family and happiness matter more. They go on to complain about all the hours their parents are spending on the internet, researching BU.

"Our parents know more about Boston than we do," Zhong says.

A DAUGHTER'S DREAM: FOUR YEARS AT BOSTON UNIVERSITY

By late August, students in big, modern cities across China, from Dalian to Beijing to Chongqing to Shanghai, are preparing to leave for BU. South of Nanjing, Jennifer Shitao Li (COM'15) is finishing up an internship at a television station in Shenzhen, the Overnight, or Experimental City.

In 1980, Deng declared Shenzhen a Special Economic Zone. Factories, skyscrapers, and highways rose out of what had been a sleepy farming and fishing town. From all over China, people migrated to Shenzhen seeking jobs. The population exploded from 300,000 to nearly 15 million today.

Li was four when her parents arrived from central Henan province. On a Sunday afternoon 17 years later, just 3 days before her flight from Hong Kong to Boston, she is in a cab on her way to a five-



"Sometimes I feel guilty about my choice because my parents sacrifice so much."—JENNIFER SHITAO LI

ROBIN MAS

star hotel to interview a Chinese pop star duo. She drives past rows of skyscrapers and high-rise apartment buildings.

Li is eager to get back to Boston. China may be a country with 5,000 years of history, but she grew up in a city not much more than a decade older than she is. "Boston," she says wistfully, searching for the words to describe its appeal, "is an ancient city."

A few miles away, in a designated garment zone in the western part of Shenzhen, Li's parents are at their small wholesale women's clothing store. Between the store and their sales on China's equivalent of eBay, they have built up a large base of international customers, says Li's father, Min Li. He and his wife, Chunli Zheng, talk about their business, and BU, between customers.

Many evenings, Min Li says, they head from the store to their supply factory, often not getting home until after 10. Zheng also works full-time as a kindergarten teacher.

This is how they support their daughter's dream: four years at BU.

They are gratified, they say, by how she has grown at school. "Her thinking has become more active," Zheng says. "She is full of her own ideas and can express her own views on many issues. She has become happier."

Jennifer Li worries about all the hours her parents work. "Sometimes I feel guilty about my choice because my parents sacrifice so much," she says.

Li was on her own when it came to figuring out the confusing US admissions process, all of it in English. What

was a personal statement, anyway?

That admissions process is still so new that most Chinese students are on their own unless they go to one of a handful of high schools like Ge's. The Chinese government uses only Gaokao scores to determine who goes to college, and where. Nothing else matters. Not grades, not extracurricular activities (what extracurriculars?). So most schools haven't felt the need for guidance counselors.

Middle-class students in the United States have long relied on independent college counselors. Like many students in China, Li turned to a private agency for help in understanding the process.

Ge was fortunate to have attended Nanjing Foreign Language High School, which is known for preparing students

for college abroad and offers Advanced Placement courses. Like a growing number of students, she opted out of the Gaokao.

“Nanjing Foreign Language made me the person I am today,” Ge says. “Students from my high school are not shy. Our teachers encourage critical thinking.”

She spent her high school junior year in Los Angeles as an exchange student. As the competition to get into US colleges intensifies, more parents are sending their children to the United States as exchange students, for summer enrichment programs, even to boarding schools.

Senior year, Ge flew to Hong Kong to take the SAT, which is not offered in mainland China but is required for admission to BU.

While she had never been to Boston, Ge already knew a lot about it. “I saw *Social Network*,” she explains. “Our parents grew up with siblings. They learned from their siblings. Our generation doesn’t have siblings. We learned from television and the internet.”

And, of course, from their parents and grandparents. Being only children is a defining aspect of Ge’s generation. It means two parents and two sets of grandparents all focusing their attention—and all their reverence for education—on a single child.

So, what’s it like being an only child? They get asked that a lot at BU.

Considering the question, Nick Haisu Yuan sighs. “It’s a lot of pressure.” On the other hand, he says, “you don’t have to share the love.”

In Shanghai last August, over a family dinner in a Chinese restaurant, Wind Lu’s mother, Deqing Qiu, talks about how she and her husband, Yongfeng Lu, accompanied Wind to Boston for freshman orientation and rode the T all over town. They visited again the next year. Back in China, after their daughter had moved into an off-campus apartment, they turned to Google Earth.

“We must familiarize ourselves with every corner,” Qiu says with a sheepish smile. “We want to know how many

blocks it is from where she lives to the T. When she mentions that she went somewhere, we want to know what she’s talking about.”

In exaggerated outrage, Wind bursts out: “They stalked me.”

Lu’s advice to new students: get out there and mix with Americans. What is the point of going to BU if you are just going to hang out with other Chinese kids and speak Mandarin?

But not everyone is as outgoing as Lu, or has her fluency in English. And, she acknowledges, years of formal language classes in China are often not enough for students to feel comfortable in the classroom or socially.

“Person A says, ‘Hello, how are you today?’” Lu says in a robotic tone, parodying a typical English class in China. “Person B says, ‘I’m fine, thank you. How are you?’”

She tossed around conversational openers like that on her first day at Warren Towers freshman year. “People laughed at me,” she says. Lu laughed, too. “Everyone was just saying, ‘Waddup.’”

In Nanjing, days before her departure, Ge is looking forward to getting to know her two American suitemates, one from California, one from Pennsylvania.

“This is the first time I’ll be living with so many Americans,” she says. “My mother says it’s important to share and help other people.”

It isn’t easy to send your only child to college more than 7,000 miles away. “My mother asked me, ‘Can we Skype every day?’” Ge says. “I told her, ‘We can Skype, but not every day. I have my studies.’”

“We are very happy she has an opportunity to study at such a great university,” her mother says. “But as a mom—she is my only child—I have a terrible time letting her go.”

Ge’s flight leaves Shanghai the evening of August 27. She is traveling with four other BU freshmen from Nanjing. With a layover in Los Angeles, they arrive in Boston around 6:30 a.m. the next day.

From Logan, Ge sends a WeChat to her mother: “We’re here. We’re safe.”

CYDNEY SCOTT



Senior Nick Haisu Yuan, who often cooks in his own apartment, appreciates BU’s recent efforts to expand its Chinese menu.