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# Chinese students in American academic libraries: A survey of Chinese user satisfaction with U.S. library experience

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**Abstract** While scholarship has addressed issues around serving international students in U.S. libraries, until recently, relatively little attention has been directly focused upon the library needs of specific ethnic groups. This study surveys 83 Chinese students and scholars after they returned from studying at universities in the United States to measure and document their satisfaction with the academic library services and resources they used during their study abroad. Results of the survey are analyzed with the goal of benchmarking and improving services for this growing academic library user population in the United States.

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## Introduction/background

Universities and colleges in the United States have seen a rapid increase in recent years in enrollment numbers of students from China. According to the Open Doors Data ([Institution of International Education, 2012](#)), there was a total of 764,495 international students from over two

hundred countries studying in the United States in the 2011–2012 school year. Chinese students increased in 2011–2012 to one-quarter of the international student population in the U.S. China, in fact, has led the world in sending students for higher education to the U.S. for three years in a row.

How to best serve Chinese students and help them adapt to the U.S. education system is of interest to everyone involved in higher education, including academic library professionals. One reason it is of interest to administrators in both higher education and government is that international students contribute more than \$21 billion to the U.S. economy ([Institution of International Education, 2012](#)), and higher education is among the United States' top service sector exports. But more importantly, serving students from

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abroad goes to the heart of the mission of modern librarianship classically espoused in the last of the Five Laws of Library Science by S. R. Ranganathan that suggested libraries must accommodate growth and change in patron use (Rubin, 2004). This mission is codified by the American Library Association's core values of librarianship in its commitment to value diversity and strive to reflect that diversity by providing a full spectrum of resources and services to the communities we serve (American Library Association, 2013).

This study looks at one segment of the international user population in the U.S. that librarians are seeking better to serve, namely, Chinese students and scholars. The study strives to gain insight into the Chinese student experience in the American library. It is hoped that the findings gathered will shed light on Chinese users' library needs. That input may not only help libraries develop strategies to improve resources and services for Chinese users but also to improve library services for all international users.

## Literature review

### Challenges facing all ESL students in U.S. high education institutions

From a review of the literature, it is often noted that English as a Second Language (ESL) students generally face three major challenges in the American educational system: (1) language and communication, (2) adjustment to a new educational system, and (3) general cultural adjustments (Baron & Strout-Dapaz, 2001, p. 321). In addition, ESL students may be unaware of services available for them at the university library they are using in the U.S. In some cases, they may assume the library system in the U.S. is not much different from their home country. The early findings of Ball and Mahoney in 1987 noted that reserves, interlibrary loan, database searching, and term paper consultation did not exist in some international students' home countries (Ball & Mahoney, 1987, p. 162). Almost 20 years later, Jackson noted, "Services such as interlibrary loan, librarian reference-by-appointment, and live online reference are new concepts, whereas some library services and concepts such as the reference desk and open stacks are understood" (Jackson, 2005, p. 203). Other common U.S. library features unfamiliar to many international students include: the Library of Congress Book classification system, borrowing policies, electronic self-service, U.S. copyright policies, and the availability of librarians for research assistance.

### Chinese students and language

The most cited barrier hindering library use by those of limited English proficiency is language (Conteh-Morgan, 2002, p. 191). Chinese students, like most ESL students, have to pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) to attend a U.S. college or university. However, many of these students at the time they begin studying in the U.S. still lack adequate vocabulary including library terminology (Morrissey & Given, 2006, p. 223).

Chinese students often have better reading comprehension than oral language skills in English, since they

usually have little opportunity in their home country to converse in English with native English speakers. The indirect consequence of these language barriers prevents them from taking full advantage of library services while in the U.S. even when they are aware the services exist. Mu recommends that when librarians work with international students they should avoid the use of slang, jargon or long complex sentences and should check often to be sure the student comprehends the instruction (Mu, 2007, p. 573).

### Chinese students and cultural differences in education

In China, teaching is more lecture-based and textbook centered. For an example of the latter, Chinese college students seldom engage in course-related academic discussions or experiential learning activities either inside or outside the classroom. Assignments in China usually do not require students to do extensively reading beyond the textbook or to react to course learning by composing their own ideas in an essay form as is common in U.S. college courses. Learning in China is heavily driven by teachers' instruction as well as exams (Johnson, Shi, & Shao, 2010, p. 188). Wang quotes a student as saying, "In China, one hundred percent of exam questions are from the textbook. Students in China, whether they are in engineering, science or the arts areas, are not required to write essays. They are required to write a thesis for graduation only" (Wang, 2006, p. 86).

In Western countries, student-centered learning, where students are taught to be active participants in their learning, has been the norm for quite some time. In contrast, the Chinese educational model tends to place more emphasis on textbooks and rote learning (Dello-lacovo, 2008, p. 245). This difference in educational approach explains some of the difficulties Chinese students have in adapting to the U.S. Educational system and to fully utilizing its libraries. But the approach to education in China is changing, with "Suzhi Jiaoyu" reform starting in the 1990s. The phrase "Suzhi Jiaoyu" is frequently translated as "quality education" and generally refers to a more holistic style of education that, in China, is usually discussed as the antidote to the excesses of exam-oriented education (Dello-lacovo, 2008, p. 241). However, most Chinese students coming to the United States to study will not have gone through an educational experience that rewards independent thinking skills and teamwork.

### Studies relating specifically to Chinese students using libraries

Although there is little scholarly literature specific to serving Chinese students at U.S. academic libraries, several studies of Chinese students' experience in Western libraries have appeared in recent years. In 2006, Wang wrote a thesis on library services to Chinese students and faculty in New Zealand. She reports on an in-depth study with eight Chinese students, which looked at perceptions, experiences and expectations. She also gives an analysis of a 2005 study with a much larger pool of international and domestic respondents, where the total number of Chinese respondents

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