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### Experiences of Chinese International Students Enrolled in Bible Classes at a Faith-Based Institution

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**Experiences of Chinese International Students Enrolled in Bible Classes at a Faith-Based**

**Institution**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores Chinese international students' experiences in Bible classes at a faith-based institution. This particular population was selected because Chinese international students often encounter distinct challenges and circumstances compared to their domestic counterparts. The research sample for this study consists of eleven Chinese international students located at a private four-year university in the southeastern United States. A survey instrument consisting of 19 items was specifically developed using Google Forms to gather data for this study. The collected survey data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method to explore respondents' experiences. The findings of this study provide insight into the unique challenges and perspectives of Chinese international students.

## **How Do Chinese International Students Experience Bible Classes At A Faith-Based Institution?**

Over the past decade, there has been an increase in Chinese international students in the United States, further adding to the richness and diversity within universities. Acknowledging that students from China represent 35% of all international students in the United States (Silver, 2021) is crucial. Their significance has grown for many educational institutions as most pay full tuition fees, contributing about 15 billion dollars to the US economy in 2018 (Chen, 2023). Jimenez suggests that recent Chinese government reforms and the pursuit of personal identity have resulted in a rise in Chinese international students enrolling at Christian universities (2017). However, the experience of culture shock introduces distinct challenges for these students, such as language barriers and academic difficulties, which may impact their overall well-being. Exploring the college experiences of Chinese international students in Bible classes can offer valuable insight that can inform educational institutions on creating inclusive learning environments that will foster a rich and diverse college experience for all students.

### **Church as a Support System**

International college students can benefit from social connections and support provided by church and fellowship, which can serve as sources of comfort as students are far away from their families. Moh et al. (2021) reported that international students face challenges in establishing meaningful connections with others in the community. However, several studies have highlighted that interaction with a church community facilitates greater feelings of social support for international college students (Bertram et al., 2014; Li et al., 2019; Moh et al., 2021; Yu & Moskal, 2019). Li (2016) found that Chinese international students face difficulties when it comes to adapting to the cultural disparities between American and Chinese cultures. Other

studies have observed that Chinese students who study abroad in the United States tend to associate Christianity with mainstream American culture. To adapt to Western culture, Chinese international students would immerse themselves in the church community and deepen their understanding of Christianity (Sun & Rhoads, 2018). This engagement in the church may foster additional social connections and serve as a support system for Chinese international students during the school seasons. Li et al. (2019) suggested that the church and its fellowship provide Chinese students with an informal learning community, a family-like atmosphere, and a higher spiritual connection than existing non-religious organizations. This study also found that informal and relational support from the church and its fellowship motivated Chinese students to continue their studies.

However, Li et al. (2019) noted that while church engagement can foster social connections and support Chinese international students, it is essential to consider possible limitations. One limitation is that investing heavily in the church community may take time away from studying. In addition, this investment in the church may restrict Chinese international students' social interaction with those outside the church, limiting social opportunities to explore the diverse cultural and social experiences in the United States. Moh et al. (2021) and Walker (2016) revealed that international students encounter social challenges while studying abroad. However, Moh et al. (2021) found that social support and acceptance lead to a more favorable international student experience. This study suggested that Christian universities should partner with local churches to provide culturally relevant social and intercultural support. These studies indicate the numerous benefits and some limitations that church involvement can mean for the Chinese international student experience; however, it is evident that there is still much more to uncover and understand in this area of research.

### **Language Barriers and Academic Success**

Chinese international college students face unique academic challenges compared to domestic college students. The existing literature provides compelling evidence that these particular international college students experience language barriers (Bai & Wang, 2022; Bumgarner, 2016; Holliman et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2017; Koo et al., 2021; Li, 2016; Shen, 2019; Tang et al., 2018; Walker, 2016). Li (2016) found that the lack of practice of the English language in their country contributes to communication difficulties. Koo et al. suggests that limited English proficiency negatively impacts overall well-being, including intellectual, mental, social, occupational, and physical wellness (2021). Similarly, Walker (2016) reported that academic stress caused by language barriers contributes to anxiety and a lack of confidence in the learning process. Asian international students struggle to comprehend in-class instructions and perform well on tests (Bumgarner, 2016; Walker, 2016). Moreover, Shen (2019) highlights their challenges with writing and presenting effectively. Jiang et al. (2017) and Walker (2016) also found that the professor's speaking speed and accent significantly impacted Chinese international students' listening by creating more challenges in comprehending and understanding the professor's words. While ample evidence exists regarding the impact of language barriers on Chinese international students, further investigation reveals additional challenges these students face in their experience at faith-based institutions.

### **Chinese International Student Interactions with Faculty and Peers**

Faculty and peer interaction hold significant value in the overall experience of Chinese international students. Moh et al. (2021) and Li (2016) reported that these students enrolled at a faith-based university have experienced positive interactions with professors and peers. The research highlighted that faculty members are willing to converse about religions beyond

Christianity, and peers are interested in their personal lives despite differences. However, a wealth of knowledge suggests these students have difficulties interacting with professors and peers and often adopt a reserved and passive demeanor in classroom settings (Bai & Wang, 2022; Shen, 2019; Walker, 2016; Holliman et al., 2023). Reasons for not participating in class include weak oral communication skills and fear of embarrassment (Bai & Wang, 2022).

According to Shen (2019), Chinese international students feel nervous when speaking to faculty and American classmates. Tang et al. (2018) and Walker (2016) found that Chinese international students prefer the comfort of socializing and seeking assistance from peers with similar backgrounds. For academic problems, they will reach out to other Chinese classmates before approaching the teacher (Bai & Wang, 2022). However, most of them desire more interaction and socialization with Americans, which can be beneficial for improving their proficiency in English. The cultural differences and language barriers make it difficult for Chinese international students to socialize with domestic English-speaking students, contributing to feelings of isolation and loneliness (Holliman et al., 2023). Cheng & Adekola (2022) highlighted experiences of unkindness towards Chinese international students when seeking help from professors. Similarly, Walker (2016) reported that international students expressed that some faith-based university professors were disinterested in their learning and comprehension of the course material. These students avoid seeking help from professors when dealing with negative emotions (Shen, 2019). Koo et al. also reveals that receiving negative feedback from faculty members causes significant stress, leading students to experience mental health issues (2021).

The existing literature on the experience of Chinese international students in universities has shown that these students undergo unique challenges compared to their domestic counterparts. This study aims to investigate the Chinese international students' Bible class

experiences at faith-based universities. In doing so, it will add to the body of literature regarding the Chinese international student experience.

### **Purpose of Study**

This study explores Chinese international students' experiences in Bible classes at a faith-based institution. The research questions were:

- (1) What are the experiences of Chinese international students in Bible classes at a faith-based institution?
- (2) What challenges do Chinese international students encounter in Bible classes at a faith-based institution?

### **Method**

#### **Recruitment & Participants**

The participants in this study were a convenience sample of 11 Chinese international students from a private four-year, faith-based university in the southeastern United States. We collected the demographic characteristics of the participants, including gender, student classification, and the number of semesters of Bible classes they had completed. Among the participants, 54.5% were male, and 45.5% were female. Among male participants, there were five seniors or graduate students and one sophomore; among female participants, one was a freshman, two were juniors, and two were seniors or graduate students.

#### **Instrument**

For this study, a survey was created using Google Forms to facilitate gathering information about students' Bible class experiences. The Bible Class Feedback survey consists of 19 open-ended questions, allowing qualitative data to be collected. Specifically, it explores the respondent's reasons for choosing this university and whether orientation to the university was



helpful to their experience. The instrument also investigates the respondent's prior knowledge of the Bible and whether they knew that Bible classes were required to graduate from the university. Items on the survey gather information on the number of semesters of Bible classes the respondent has taken and their academic performance in those classes. The survey further includes items to explore positive and negative interactions with professors and students in the Bible classes and how cultural norms and English proficiency may have influenced respondents' experiences. The last few items relate to any uncomfortable experiences in the Bible classes and other experiences they may have had in those classes. (Please see Appendix A for a complete list of the 19 open-ended questions.)

### **Data Collection**

IRB exemption was received before conducting this qualitative study. The Bible Class Feedback Survey was sent to the Chinese International Office, which distributed it electronically to the Chinese international students, ensuring ease of access and convenience. The data collection phase was conducted over two weeks, giving participants sufficient time to complete the survey. Following ethical guidelines, responses were received and stored securely to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

The collected survey data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative interpretative approach to explore respondents' experiences. The analysis involved systematically examining the survey responses and identifying common themes and patterns within the participants' experiences. The themes were refined and reviewed to reflect participants' realities accurately (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allowed a better understanding of participants'

perspectives, shedding light on their thoughts, feelings, and experiences within the context of the faith-based institution.

## Results

The following sections are based on the themes represented by participant responses. These themes included (a) positive experiences, (b) negative experiences, (c) and language difficulties.

**Table 1:** Themes

<b>1. Positive experiences</b>	— Any favorable encounters in Bible classes characterized by inspiration, personal growth, or spiritual enrichment
<b>2. Negative experiences</b>	— Any adverse or unpleasant interactions in Bible classes characterized by discomfort, disappointment, or dissatisfaction
<b>3. Language difficulties</b>	— Any challenges when learning, understanding, or communicating in a non-native language.

### Positive experiences

Our participants expressed positive experiences with their peers and faculty members during their Bible classes. Several students mentioned the valuable assistance an upperclassman, a Chinese international student, provided. Lin expressed gratitude, stating, “*She really helps a lot.*” Similarly, Pam acknowledged the upperclassman’s compassionate and supportive nature, affirming, “*Miss Joy is very caring and helpful to us.*” This type of Bible peer seems instrumental in fostering an atmosphere of encouragement and fulfillment within the Bible classes. The support and guidance of someone with a similar background contribute significantly to creating a positive learning environment for these students.

More than half (54.5%) of the participants indicated having positive interactions with peers in Bible classes at this school. The following are sample responses from students:

*I like talking to the person next to me for in class discussions (Dane)*

*In the Bible class, I really enjoy listening to other students share or discuss their opinions on certain contents of the Bible in class. For example, in the course of Biblical Aesthetics this semester, everyone will ask whether the use of images violates the teachings of the Bible To explore, these were great experiences for me. (Charlotte)*

All participants (100%) reported having positive interactions with professors in Bible classes. These interactions highlight the professors' ability to positively impact the students' Bible class experience. Specifically, Dane praised a professor, stating, *"I like Dr. V. He is helpful and thoughtful."* Not only were their professors described as helpful and thoughtful, but participants also mentioned their professors' openness to communication and genuine interest in their cultural background. For example, Joe preferred discussing *"the differences between the ideas in the Bible and Chinese culture"* with his professor. These qualities further indicate that professors' dedication to providing support and understanding can contribute to fostering meaningful connections for Chinese international students in Bible classes. The following are additional sample responses, which reveal positive interactions with professors in Bible classes at this school:

*I choose to baptize because one of my professors (Jessica)*

*I asked a professor questions about my bible assignment and got good feedback. (Sam)*

*Mr. K is always energetic during class and know how to warm up the mood (Pam)*

### **Negative experiences**

None of the participants (0%) reported negative experiences with peers in Bible classes. This finding could be attributed to some students' limited interaction with peers. For instance, John mentioned that he rarely interacts with other students in Bible classes. This lack of interaction could contribute to the absence of any negative experiences among peers. The following are additional sample responses, which revealed a lack of negative interactions with peers in Bible classes at this school:

*None (Jessica, Joe, Seth, and Dane)*

*Not yet experienced (Lin)*

*I don't think there is any. (Sam)*

None of the participants (0%) reported any negative experiences with professors in Bible classes. This finding could be attributed to some students' limited interaction with professors. The following are sample responses, which revealed a lack of negative interactions with professors in Bible classes at this school:

*None (Jessica, John, and Seth)*

*Not yet experienced (Lin)*

*I don't think there is any. (Sam)*

### **Difficulties with language**

Chinese international students often encounter language and communication difficulties, negatively impacting their academic performance. Their struggle to understand the professor's instructions and lectures may limit their ability to grasp the course material leading to academic difficulties. Many participants in this study expressed their limited vocabulary as a significant hurdle. For example, Pam reported she “*can't understand some words*,” while Lin specifically highlighted vocabulary as a challenge in Bible classes. The language proficiency of these

students also affects their understanding of the Bible, which may impede their spiritual journey. This is evident with Sam, who reported, “*I deeply feel that my level of English somehow stopped me from learning deeper about the Bible.*” Likewise, Joe acknowledges that the language barrier affects his “*understanding of the Bible story.*” The following are additional sample responses, which reveal how a deficit in English proficiency influences participants’ experience in Bible classes at this school:

*There were too many words about people, place and concept I didn’t know about (Sam)*

*There are some stories that are hard to understand (Joe)*

*Although I can understand 60%-70% of the content in the class, some content is related to the local culture and thinking logic, such as the understanding of the Holy Spirit, which is far less thorough than other students. Therefore, once the content of the Bible class involves my personal experience or thoughts about God, I may not be able to deeply participate in it. (Charlotte)*

### **Discussion and Implications**

The findings from this study indicate the significant role faculty and peers play in the positive or negative experiences of Chinese international students. Teachers are vital in supporting marginalized Chinese international students enrolled in faith-based institutions, as they often receive less attention and care (Li, 2016). These students encounter numerous unique experiences in Bible classes at a U.S. faith-based university. There were similarities across the sample, indicating that the experiences were not unique to any student classification. These findings support and extend existing literature and give rise to a few implications for educators and researchers concerning enhancing Chinese international students' experience. Our study also supports previous findings indicating that Chinese international students experience language

barriers (Holliman et al., 2023; Li, 2016; Shen, 2019). Therefore, it is vital that English educators in the United States and China make the necessary modifications to their language courses to effectively prepare students for studying in American institutions (Jiang et al., 2017).

Universities must adopt strategies and activities that facilitate cross-cultural communication between international students and their American counterparts (Li, 2016). One way could be organizing more social events that allow students to share their culture's customs and traditions. Universities can create a more inclusive and enriching campus environment by creating these social opportunities.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Survey Open-Ended Questions**

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your student classification? (freshman, sophomore, etc.)
3. Why did you choose a faith-based university?
4. Did you find your orientation to the university experience helpful in preparing you for your first semester?
5. What did you know about the Bible before enrolling in this university?
6. Were you aware that Bible classes would be required to graduate from this university?
7. How many semesters of Bible classes have you taken at this school? (including this semester)
8. How did you feel about your first Bible class at this school?
9. What challenges have you experienced in your Bible classes at this school?
10. Describe your academic performance in your Bible classes at this school.
11. Describe a positive interaction with a professor in any Bible classes you have taken at this school.
12. Describe a negative interaction with a professor in any Bible classes you have taken at this school.
13. Describe a positive interaction with other students in any Bible classes you have taken at this school.

14. Describe a negative interaction with other students in any Bible classes you have taken at this school.
15. How did your level of English proficiency influence your experience in your Bible classes?
16. Describe an experience where you felt uncomfortable in a Bible class at this school.
17. How did the cultural norms affect your experience in Bible classes at this school?
18. Overall, how would you describe your experience taking a Bible class for college credit?
19. What other experiences have you had in your Bible classes at this school that would you like to share?