


2011

## Passport to the World: Chinese Students at the University of Kentucky

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Ho, Denise and Flanery, Jared, "Passport to the World: Chinese Students at the University of Kentucky" (2011). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 8.

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## [Passport to the World: Chinese Students at the University of Kentucky](#)

December 12, 2011 in [missives from academia](#) by [The China Beat](#)

**By Denise Ho**

My Thursday afternoon flight from Shanghai to Chicago exhibited a curious phenomenon. United Airlines Flight 836, which went from China to Midwestern America on August 19, 2010, had the most homogenous set of passengers I had ever seen. They were all in their late teens and early twenties, Chinese youth dressed in the trendiest fashions and carrying the latest electronics. I was so impressed that I broke my rule about photographing people, popped up in my seat in the corner of economy class, and took their picture:



Whether United knew it or not, my flight was a modern school bus, ferrying Chinese students to (or back to) school at American colleges and universities, in search of what Vanessa Fong has called “flexible citizenship.”<sup>1</sup> Arriving in Chicago, the Chinese students scattered, many boarding transfers elsewhere and a few following me on my flight back to Lexington, Kentucky, where I am an assistant professor. Their photo I kept with me, and used it in my orientation lecture for new M.A. candidates in the University of Kentucky’s Patterson School of International Commerce and Diplomacy. These students, I argued, were (or would be) totally bilingual, globally educated, and locally connected. And they would be the wave of the future.

One year later, the topic of Chinese students at American universities has become both popular and contentious. Universities like the University of Kentucky, a public land-grant university, are aggressively recruiting Chinese nationals both to internationalize the campus and to seek much-needed tuition dollars in an era of stagnant state funding. According to UK’s Office of International Affairs, active recruitment in China began in 2008, and since then the number of new Chinese undergraduates has grown from 19 in fall term 2007 to 191 in the fall of 2011. Recruitment is facilitated through agreements with Chinese universities that allow students to transfer, and through a program of conditional acceptance; in the latter students enroll in English as a Second Language in a series of 8-week sessions, and may matriculate as regular students

upon testing out via the TOEFL exam. As of 2010, the University of Kentucky had a total of 685 Chinese students, of whom 45 were ESL students. As a percentage, Chinese students make up 2.44% of total UK enrollment, 41.6% of international students, and 23.2% of the ESL students.<sup>2</sup> Though these numbers are impressive and reflect national trends, an article published jointly in November by *The New York Times* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* sounded a note of caution: many students struggle with language and daily life when they arrive at American universities, and teachers and administrators alike report that they also have yet to adapt their classrooms and programs to the influx.<sup>3</sup>

As part of the University of Kentucky's "Year of China," the College of Arts and Sciences invited Vanessa Fong to speak to our students, and a summary and link to a podcast with undergraduate Jared Flanery are below. To learn about Chinese students at UK, I observed two ESL classes and talked with both instructors and students. The motivations of the students I met mirrored the experiences of the students in Fong's study. The students gave a variety of reasons for going abroad: parental ambitions, a desire to learn a new culture and expand one's horizons, a wish to learn independence, and a perception that American education is better. They are well-networked; they keep in touch with family and friends through Skype and cell phones, and have an idea of what to expect from friends who had come before them. Lu Mingyue, 22, from Hebei Province, explained that her experience was as she had expected, "because I knew more customs from my friends who study abroad." Most of the students I met plan to return to China eventually, citing both their responsibility to take care of their parents and a belief that studying abroad would help them find a better job in China.

While the Chinese students spoke of their individual aspirations, their ESL teachers gave me sense of the students as a group. Lina Crocker, an ESL teacher for over thirty years, was hesitant to generalize. Crocker, who has also travelled to China to recruit for UK, was positive about many of her students, and in particular about one Chinese student whose leadership provided an example for his peers. At the same time, however, she expressed many concerns that reflected the *Times/Chronicle* study; some students have little interaction with non-Chinese students, some struggle in the absence of parental pressure, and many are ill-prepared for the style and content of the American classroom. Tina Durbin, who has been teaching ESL at UK for two years, warns her students that passing the TOEFL is only the beginning, with the real challenge being actual matriculation in UK classes. Both Crocker and Durbin suggested that some of the challenges of these students are generational, and not unique to students from China. For example, American students also have difficulty adapting to college, and American students studying abroad may only socialize with American students or eat at McDonald's.

Asked whether UK has tracked Chinese students who have graduated out of ESL, Durbin commented that data gathering has only just begun, so it is still too soon to assess their trajectories. When asked whether it was worth it to study abroad, a 23-year-old from Shanxi admitted that he gave up time with his family but concluded it was worth it, "because I could learn and improve myself here, and that is my parents' desire." His classmate Claire, a 22-year-old from Beijing, was less sanguine. Having given up the chance of job to come to UK, she replied, "Now I cannot judge whether it was worth it or not."

**By Jared Flanery**

Neoliberalism may be viewed as the latest form of capitalism, with a shift in emphasis from physical to cultural capital. Neoliberal individuals expect to garner enough education, credentials, and social contacts ultimately transferrable as elite status and increased freedoms. As Dr. Vanessa Fong has documented, the problem is that the imagined global neoliberal community is more Janus-headed than its discourses suggest.

Since 1997, Dr. Fong, currently teaching in the Harvard School of Education, has followed nearly 3,000 members of a generational Chinese cohort. Readers may recall [\*Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy\*](#), her 2004 book tracing the early lives of children born immediately after the imposition of the 1979 One Child Policy. Her research initially arose from the question of whether female singletons (by definition) without brothers competing for the family's resources experienced increased gender equality. Her hypothesis—yes—was quickly confirmed, and her longitudinal study broadened to include male members of the cohort born between 1979 and 1986. Clearly the members of this cohort are no longer children. Yet as her survey participants approached the horizon of adulthood, she found that an unexpected portion of that group ended up extending its youth by studying abroad.

Dr. Fong visited the University of Kentucky under the banner of the China Initiative, a year-long thematic focus featuring lecture and art series, all as part of the “Passport to the World Program.” Her new book employs Aihwua Ong's concept of flexible citizenship. *Paradise Redefined* defines the primary motivation of Chinese students studying abroad as the achievement of social and cultural (if not legal) citizenship in the developed world. This sort of cultural capital transcends the boundaries of the nation-state, while staying safely within the de-territorialized space of the global neoliberal order.

Not every country, though, can be paradise. Just as UK has yet to inaugurate a “Year of Haiti” or “Year of Belarus,” Chinese students seeking to study abroad rarely venture outside the developed world. In fact, Dr. Fong found that 42% of the Chinese students traveled to Japan, a further 15% to Ireland and the remaining relevant destinations split up into around 8% each (Australia, Great Britain, the United States). Rarely did Chinese students even consider countries outside the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development). As *Financial Times* writer Richard McGregor stated in [a previous China Beat interview](#), “They [Chinese people in general] have a chip on their shoulder about the developed world.” Several of these newly neoliberalized individuals set off for abroad with about enough money to pay for room and board, maybe a semester of tuition and the plane ticket.

As Dr. Fong learned, however, many Chinese transnationals began to reconsider their decision once they arrived at their destinations. She continued her participant observation in the “paradise” countries, boarding Oneworld Alliance flights across the world and reflecting the travel freedoms embedded in developed world citizenship. Chinese students, many of whom ended up in state universities like Kentucky, expressed various reactions one might expect: financial difficulty in language and college education, cultural obstacles and exclusion, and an exigent desire to provide for their parents and even grandparents. She also outlines a phenomenon perhaps unique to Chinese transnationals: filial nationalism. Although they did not view themselves as “China” writ large, many students were essentially expected to represent their country to foreigners (*waiguoren*). Filial nationalism refers to a reflexive reaction toward

defending their country as they would their parents, despite any imperfections. Still, Dr. Fong's work details the unavoidable ambivalence Chinese transnational students feel, their subjectivity transformed. As one Chinese transnational confessed, "I'm not used to anywhere anymore."

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Vanessa L. Fong, [\*Paradise Redefined: Transnational Chinese Students and the Quest for Flexible Citizenship in the Developed World\*](#) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Data provided by Audra Cryder and Ann Livingstone, University of Kentucky Office of International Affairs.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Bartlett and Karin Fischer, ["The China Conundrum: American Colleges Find the Chinese-Student Boom a Tricky Fit."](#) *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 3, 2011.

*Denise Ho is assistant professor of history at the University of Kentucky. Jared Flanery is a junior at the University of Kentucky. This article is the second of a four-part series on teaching and learning about China at the University of Kentucky, a public land-grant institution founded in 1865. More information about the "Year of China," including Jared's podcast with Vanessa Fong, can be found [here](#).*