

## **Chinese Students and the American Dream: Are These Students Prepared for Success?**

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### **Abstract**

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This study examined the preparedness level of Chinese students graduating from a particular private school in Shenzhen China for first year success in an American University. As the number of Chinese students who wish to go abroad continues to grow; international schools within China need to constantly assess their program to make an accurate determination as to whether or not the program is adequately serving the student body.

This study will look specifically at and examine the following three areas: English language proficiency, cultural preparedness and understanding, and stress.

The results suggested that Chinese students graduating from an international school in Shenzhen China are not adequately prepared for first year academic success in the United States. Furthermore, the research shows that American universities need to do more in order to increase the chances of assimilation and academic success in the United States for Chinese international students.

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**Keywords:** English language acquisition, Chinese international students, Study abroad, International education, International school

## **1. Introduction**

International schools are tasked with providing the senior class with many more tools than just understanding the major subject areas (Math, English, Social Sciences, and Science). International schools in China must prepare graduating students for life in another country, away from their homes; speaking a language that is not natural for the young adults all while facing social pressure and adapting to a culture that is nothing like their own. Once Chinese students arrive in the United States; how do these students perform and how do they adapt to their new environment? These are important questions to ask considering that China sent 886,052 students to American colleges for the 2013-2014 school year (Institute of International Education, 2014).

This study will focus on students graduating from an international school in the City of Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, People's Republic of China and how these students fare during the first year of college study in the United States. In a brief examination of the literature the largest challenges that Chinese students face in the United States during their first year of college level study are language barriers, strong feelings of homesickness, and perceived discrimination (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Yam & Berliner, 2011).

The author of this study will examine how prepared graduating students are for first year college level study in the United States. This study will focus specifically on language barriers, feelings of homesickness and perceived discrimination and how these three factors relate to student success or lack thereof.

### **1.1 Research Question**

The purpose of this study is to analyze an international school in Shenzhen China and to determine how adequately prepared graduating 12<sup>th</sup> grade Chinese youth are for coping with feelings of English language proficiency, cultural preparedness and understanding, and stress, at the beginning of his/her Freshman year of college level study in the United States.

### **1.2 Hypothesis**

Hypothesis one: Students graduating from this international schools in Shenzhen as a whole do not possess adequate English language acquisition for year one of college study in the United States.

Hypothesis two: Students graduating from international schools in Shenzhen will experience a deep lack of cultural preparedness and understanding because these students lack the same backgrounds, sports interests, food, music, etc. from that of their American peers.

Hypothesis three: Students graduating from international schools in Shenzhen are not adequately prepared to deal with stress when they arrive in the United States because they are used to having a very controlling and secure support system in China.

### **1.3 Assumptions**

All of the former students that were be asked to participate in this study have already completed their freshman year of college. For the purpose of this study it must be assumed that the students completing the surveys and questionnaires are able to accurately remember his or her freshman year experiences.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Basic Reading**

China began transitioning from a closed society of more than 25 years to one that began to embrace the world outside of China in 1978. Upon the reform and opening policy of China's then Paramount Leader; Deng Xiao Ping recognized the need for Chinese students to learn from the West and began sending students to the United States for study. The number of Chinese students going to the United States for study has been on a steady increase since that time; from several hundred students in 1979 to over 40,000 by 1991, and nearly 300,000 for the 2013-2014 school year (Feng, 1991; Institute of International Education, 2014). Naturally, the large influx of Chinese students into the United States has created a need in China for international schools.

Chinese students who wish to study in the United States (and whose parents have the money to pay for such an education) would like to get a head start in preparing for life abroad by attending an international school within China.

Numerous studies and research have shown that upon arrival into the United States international students tend to struggle in the United States (Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008; L. & Lin, 1994; Tseng & Newton, 2002). Many of the above mentioned studies focus on the international community of students at large and try to find the larger contexts and struggles that these students will face upon arrival in the United States. This literature review will focus on Chinese students from the People's Republic of China and the major obstacles they face while making the transition from a Chinese education to a first year American college student.

The number of Chinese students entering American universities has been increasing every year for over twenty-five years (Feng, 1991) and continues to increase for the foreseeable future (Institute of International Education, 2014). Though Chinese students have been coming to the United States in droves for years, the general patterns of being ill-prepared seem to never abate. This can easily be seen when looking at a 1991 study (Feng) that detailed the major areas of concern for Chinese high school students entering the United States for college study: "(1) financial difficulty, (2) cultural differences and social interaction, (3) academic concerns, and (4) language ability." (Feng, 1991).

The previously mentioned areas of concern that Chinese students entering American in 1991 really should come as a bit of a shock to the readers considering that China has been sending students to the United States since 1978. In order to try and confirm (or deny) the progress that is being made in adequately preparing Chinese students for first year university success in the United States we need look no further than the *Journal of Counseling and Development* for a hint. "It is not surprising that international students often face language barriers, immigration difficulties, culture shock, social adjustment, and homesickness" (Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008). In comparing the two studies that were conducted seventeen years apart it is readily apparent that International schools in China are not properly preparing these students for first year college study in the United States.

In 2011, Beth McMurtrie conducted a study exploring the degree to which American universities and colleges rely on Chinese students. McMurtrie found that China is the largest supplier of international students to the United States (McMurtrie, 2011). The study goes on to mention how tied to China the United States actually is. This again helps to highlight the importance of China in the international community and the continued need for international schools in China to adequately prepare Chinese students for academic success in America.

"We are so tied to the Chinese economy in so many ways that if something were to happen in China, we'd all be feeling the impact," says Scott E. King, assistant dean of international programs at the University of Iowa, where more than 1,245 of the 1,734 international undergraduates are from China. (McMurtrie, 2011).

This again is a demonstration that Chinese students moving to the United States for study is something that is quite likely to continue into the foreseeable future.

## **2.2 Conclusion**

The number of Chinese students who are both willing and able to travel to the United States for college level study continues to increase with every passing school year. Though these levels continue to increase, the level of student preparedness has not (Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008). This continued lack of preparedness has far reaching implications for Chinese students and their families who are investing a great deal of both time and money in going abroad without having any clear ideas as to what can be expected upon arrival. The vast majority of students lack sufficient training in English language proficiency as well as an in-depth understanding of American culture (Luan, 2012).

Though countless studies have shown that Chinese students lack the necessary skills of first year success in America there is little that is being done about it. International schools in China face increased competition for student enrollment (due to the growing number of international schools in China). While American universities rely so heavily on the money coming from China in terms of tuition that it is hard to turn people away (McMurtrie, 2011). These two factors combined lead to both parties (Chinese international schools and American colleges) becoming too focused on money and spending too little time ensuring a high rate of acclimation of American culture and ensuring that Chinese students meet acceptable levels of English language proficiency. Without an adequate understanding of the previously mentioned international student levels of stress, dropout rates, and inability to make American friends and assimilate into American culture will continue.

### **3. Research Methods**

#### **3.1 General Description**

The purpose of this study was to determine if Chinese students graduating from a particular international school in the People's Republic of China are/were prepared for first year college success in the United States of America. In order to make an accurate assessment of student preparedness (see definition of terms in Chapter 1) former students of an international school in Shenzhen who are currently attending an American university (first year or otherwise) were given an online survey consisting of twelve (12) questions. The survey was used to determine highest TOEFL score to date, how the student felt about his or her own level of preparedness, various levels of stress, and if they experienced discrimination while in the United States.

#### **3.2 Participants**

The participants in this study were required to meet two criteria. The criteria are as follows: 1) graduates of an international school in Shenzhen 2) students who are currently enrolled in an American university in first, second, or third year of study. All of the study participants ranged in age from nineteen (19) to twenty-one (21) years of age. A major determination in college acceptance for international students is his/her TOEFL score (a perfect TOEFL score is 120; with 80 being the minimum standard to apply to top universities). This study included students whose TOEFL scores ranged from 43 to 104. Additionally, the participants of this study vary in both declared college major and gender.

In total fifteen students were contacted and asked to participate in this study with ten students agreeing to do so and a total of eight students actually responding to and completing the survey.

#### **3.3 Instruments**

This study includes both quantitative and qualitative elements but does incorporate much more qualitative elements due to the design of the questionnaire. Aside from the first two questions that ask for personal information such as name, age, college major, and highest TOEFL score to date; the remaining questions are open ended questions. The open ended questions are all written with the format of "If you experienced X situation please explain why you feel this was the case; if you did not experience X situation please explain why you feel this particular situation did not occur to you." For further clarification of this point an example from the actual study has been provided below.

"During your first year of college study in the United States did you find it difficult to adapt to the culture? If yes, please explain what particular things made this so. If not, please explain why you feel that you were adequately prepared for the culture of the United States."

#### **3.4 Procedure**

Former graduates were asked to answer a twelve (12) question survey with participants understanding that all twelve questions were to be answered. In total eight students participated in the survey; participation was ultimately determined by the number of students who signed and returned his/her consent form as well as completed the twelve question survey. Survey participant answers were reviewed and commonalities were noted that existed in the three types of questions that were asked (English language proficiency, cultural preparedness and understanding, and stress). Owing to the fact that the author of this paper resided in the People's Republic of China during the survey and all of the survey participants resided in the United States all communication took place electronically including email, text message, and online face-to-face conference software.

### **4. Results**

#### **4.1 Analysis**

This research surveyed eight (8) former students of a particular international school in Shenzhen, China to make a determination as to how well prepared these students were for first year study in a college or university located in the United States. More specifically the three factors that were looked at were English language proficiency, cultural preparedness and understanding, and stress.

The data collected for this research was collected from former graduates of an international school in Shenzhen who have been in the United States for either two or three years of college study.

This will require the current College Sophomores or Juniors to think back to their first year of college study in the United States and to as accurately as possible recall and answer the questionnaire that has been provided for them.

After reviewing the results of the questionnaire's, students were first divided into two categories: those who responded by saying they felt stressed during their first year college and those who did not feel stress during the same time period. Of the eight (8) participants a total of four (4) felt stress during their first year of college study and four (4) did not feel stress during their first year of college study.

When comparing the above findings with the response given as to whether or not the individual experienced stress there seems to be no clear link indicated that a student's TOEFL score is directly related to stress during the first year of college study in the United States. Table 2 below shows individual TOEFL score and the response of the individual in relationship to whether or not the individual experienced stress.

In looking at Table 2 we also see that for each "no stress" score this is a comparable "stress" score i.e. 82 "no stress" to 78 "stress"; 103 "no stress" to 104 "stress". This helps to further demonstrate that, as far as this study is concerned, there is no positive correlation between reported TOEFL score and stress factor. When taking an even deeper look as to the reasons given by individual students as to why they did or did not feel stress no students specifically cited "low TOEFL score" or poor English ability as a major contributing factor. Those students who felt they did not experience stress attributed this lack of stress to factors other than "having a high TOEFL score" or "high level of English".

Students who responded as having stress during their first year of college study cited reasons such as lack of background knowledge, too focused on GPA and factors outside of the coursework. Others attributed their stress to major cultural differences in reference to student/instructor interactions and/or classroom expectations.

Students who responded that they did not experience stress during their first year of college study in the United States cited that having a good support network was important. Several others in this "no stress" group felt that being familiar with the course material helped for a smooth transition. Finally, others felt that with a combination of the previously mentioned as well as proper planning for deadlines and staying ahead of the game allowed for a rather stress-free environment.

The second integration factor that was surveyed was that of difficulty (or lack thereof) in adapting to or assimilating to the cultural environment of the United States. Seven of the eight respondents felt that there was difficulty in adapting or assimilating to the American culture. Only one of the respondents felt that there were no problems in adapting to the new environment. The respondent did not elaborate as to why he/she felt there was no difficulty.

Figure 1 is a graphical representation of the other seven respondents' responses to the cultural problems they encountered. It should be noted when looking at the chart there are more than seven instances counted. This is due to the fact that many respondents cited multiple reasons for their difficulty in adapting to the culture.

The largest factor cited in adapting to the American culture was a lack of common interests. Questionnaire respondents explained that lack of commonalities in television programs, food, reading interests, and language curbed their ability and interest in assimilating into the culture. This led to Chinese students turning to other Chinese students to feel a sense of belonging and culture. These students then banded together and resorted to watching television programs that were familiar to them, opting to not eat in the school dining area, read books in their mother tongue and speak to those who spoke Mandarin Chinese. Since these common interests did not exist in the beginning, the Chinese students wanted to remain with other Chinese international school. This further exacerbated their plight as this action prohibited the Chinese students from ever really acquiring the same interests as their American counterparts.

The second and third largest factors for difficulty in assimilating in American culture during this study were both cited twenty-three percent of the time by this studies respondents; lack of interest in traditional American sports (football and baseball), and the overwhelming college campus party culture that exists on many American college campuses. The respondents felt isolated and showed little interest in the party college of American colleges and did not see the point to "drinking and [smoking] weed". Another respondent felt that "socializing, especially drinking, partying and going to sports games like football and basketball games is an important part of American college life" a life that the particular respondent has "no interest in learning more about."

The final data collection point of this study was to see if there was a correlation between one's TOEFL score and whether or not that student felt that he or she had difficulty in his or her first year of American college study communicating in English. The table below shows the TOEFL score of each student, whether or not that particular student felt that he or she experienced difficulty in communicating ("yes" or "no"), and how he or she responded to various questions that sought to determine whether or not the study participant felt it was 1) Difficult to communicate in English, 2) Did language problems affect your ability to make friends, and 3) Did language problems affect your ability to earn the grade you had hoped for.

The results from this portion of the study clearly indicate that TOEFL score is not a determining factor as to whether or not the student will feel that he or she is successful in his or her daily communication both in and outside of classroom situations. Seven of the eight participants felt that they experienced difficulty in communicating. The student who felt that there was no, or very little difficulty in communicating scored a 99 on the TOEFL examination (with a perfect score being 120).

The seven respondents had TOEFL scores ranging from 43 to 104. While it should not be surprising that students with TOEFL scores below 80 had difficulty communicating in English it is interesting to note that student with scores above 90 (and in this case above 100) felt that communicating in English was a task and something they were not prepared for.

Upon closer examination of the reasons given for student difficulty communicating in the English language the answers appear to have little to do with TOEFL score at all. A common theme among the respondent's points to the idea of students becoming mentally tired when required to communicate in English for prolonged periods of time. This can be seen with participant responses such as "...it's difficult for me to introduce myself as vivid as I am using Chinese."(TOEFL score 103); "chatting to people just about random stuff always get difficult"; "it is hard to catch up [with] the whole lecture. For American students, they may only need 30 minutes to read a short article. For some Chinese students, it might take one hour or even longer."(TOEFL score 78). These responses would indicate and identify factors that the TOEFL examination cannot possibly test and accurately review in the time allotted for the test itself.

The second major reason that students identified as reasons for not feeling able to adequately communicate in English is due to differences in the cultural background(s) Students cited cultural background as a difficulty when communicating in English because the Chinese students simply were unaware of the specific content (such as the rules in Baseball), or the Chinese student was able to understand the background but was unaware of the specific words required in order to communicate (i.e. pitcher vs. catcher).

Finally, students felt that the specific way in which the classroom was run was a factor that made them feel uncomfortable and nervous. Therefore the student's confidence was diminished and the chances of that student being willing to participate combined with the ability to match his/her peers' English level disappeared. This resulted in students who now had no self-confidence and were unwilling to make an effort as the risk of embarrassment was ever present. This can be seen in responses such as "I don't know how to explain some special things to my classmates, so I always keep silence."(TOEFL score 43); "I had spent a lot of time to improve [my English] but I still had a hard time with it." (TOEFL score 96).

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Summary**

The number of Chinese students who are moving to the United States for college study is ever increasing. Two of the biggest factors that a college or university considers when accepting or rejecting a Chinese international student is their SAT or ACT score and his or her individual TOEFL test. This study specifically examined the Chinese student preparedness level for a first academic success in a college or university in the United States. The data collected in this study indicates that Chinese students are not adequately prepared for first year of college study in the United States.

The research conducted with the pages of this study indicates that Chinese students are not adequately prepared for success during their first year of college study when they leave an international school in Shenzhen China. The research further shows that looking at the student's TOEFL score as an accurate indicator as to whether or not a student's English language level meets American standards for English communication is mediocre at best.

Student responses to the questionnaires indicate that the largest barriers in Chinese student success in the United States are things that are not thoroughly tested on the TOEFL at all. Responses indicated first year Chinese students in America struggled largely due to the lack of background knowledge or contents specific vocabulary of various different subjects. These subjects included sports, television dramas, and lack of information in various academic subjects the students were required to enroll in during their first year of college study such as Philosophy, Public Speaking, and various science subjects (unfamiliar with the English vocabulary).

## **5.2 Interpretation**

The continued influx of Chinese students into American institutions is something that must be addressed to ensure that these students are assured a fair chance of academic success during their college study. These students are not receiving adequate training and preparation while they are attending international schools in Shenzhen and are also not receiving much help upon their arrival in the United States.

Students who are earning a high score on the TOEFL examination and completing all of their coursework while attending a Chinese international school in China may be receiving a false sense of accomplishment and lack true understanding of the situation that will await them in the United States. This false sense may be further confirmed when a Chinese international student is accepted into an institution of higher education in the United States where no real support system exists to help ensure student success. Both Chinese international schools in Shenzhen and American colleges and universities need to understand how the other operates, setup necessary cooperation's and support systems, and ensure that students are more adequately prepared for life in the United States.

Helping to prepare Chinese international students for better success in the United States can be accomplished by Chinese students being provided with culture classes, strategies to make friends, or courses that hit heavy on the ideas of free thinking, group work, and class participation. These small ideas will help to better prepare the student for first year academic success in the United States.

## **5.3 Implications for Future Research**

Further research is required to make a determination as to whether the conclusions drawn in this research are applicable to the broader international population in China. Those several American universities were considered, all of the students attending those universities hailed from the same international school in the same city of People's Republic of China. Additionally it should be noted that the sample size of this student was eight (8) participants. Should further research be conducted in the future it is advised to increase the sample size. Increasing the sample size in conjunction with studying students who hail from various international schools in China will allow any future research to determine if his or her results confirm or reject the conclusions drawn here within.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

This students concludes that while more and more Chinese students are deciding to leave China and attend universities in the United States not enough is being done to adequately prepare them for first year success in American universities. It must be further noted that both international schools in China as well as American universities who are accepting Chinese international students into their ranks need to do more to ensure these students a fair chance at academic success.

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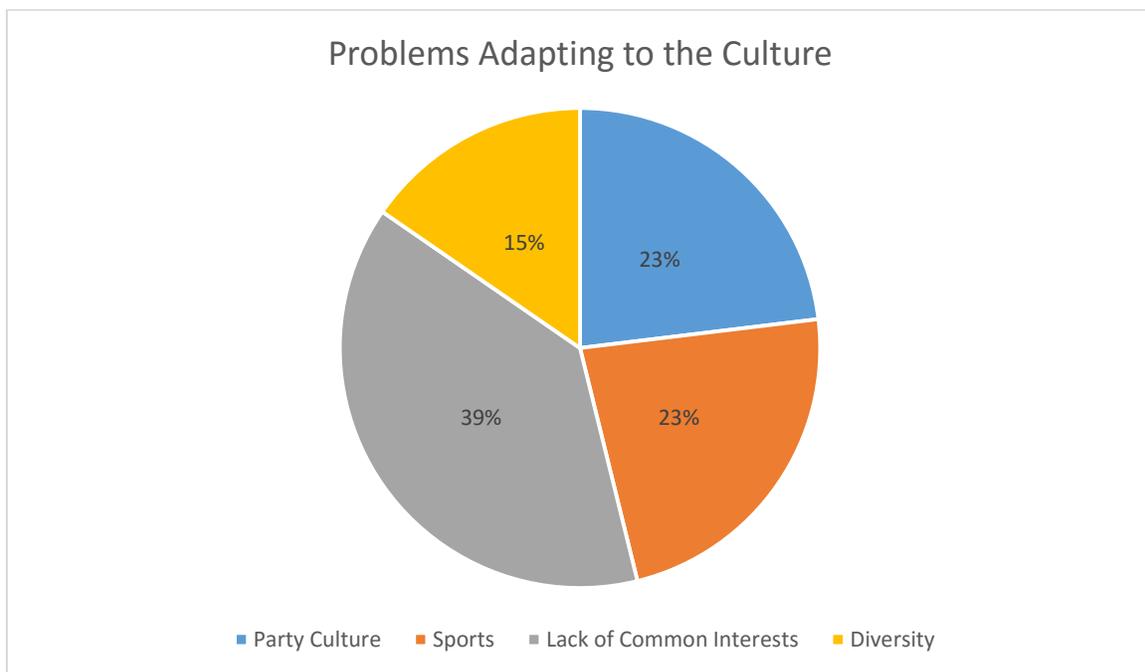
**Figure 1: Participant Information**

|                  | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>TOEFL Score</b> |
|------------------|------------|---------------|--------------------|
| <b>Student 1</b> | 21         | Male          | 85                 |
| <b>Student 2</b> | 19         | Female        | 96                 |
| <b>Student 3</b> | 21         | Male          | 43                 |
| <b>Student 4</b> | 21         | Female        | 104                |
| <b>Student 5</b> | 20         | Female        | 99                 |
| <b>Student 6</b> | 20         | Female        | 103                |
| <b>Student 7</b> | 19         | Male          | 82                 |
| <b>Student 8</b> | 20         | Male          | 78                 |

Figure 2: TOEFL Score and Stress Response

|                  | TOEFL Score | Stress Response | Summary of Reason Given for Student Stress or lack thereof   |
|------------------|-------------|-----------------|--|
| <b>Student 1</b> | 85          | No stress       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Close group of friends</li> <li>• Good support network</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Student 5</b> | 99          | No stress       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Love reading</li> <li>• Interested in subject matter</li> <li>• Plan ahead of deadlines</li> </ul>                                  |
| <b>Student 6</b> | 103         | No stress       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Previous knowledge of all first year course subject knowledge</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Student 7</b> | 82          | No stress       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “naturally resistant to” lonesomeness and being homesick</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Student 2</b> | 96          | Stress          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of background knowledge of the subject (philosophy course)</li> <li>• Strong Middle Eastern accent</li> </ul>                  |
| <b>Student 3</b> | 43          | Stress          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Always focused on GPA</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Student 4</b> | 104         | Stress          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Class requirement too different from China (class discussions, projects, hard deadlines)</li> <li>• Cultural differences</li> </ul> |
| <b>Student 8</b> | 78          | Stress          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difference of instruction methods b/w China and America</li> </ul>  |

Figure 3: Problem Adapting to the Culture



**Figure 4: TOEFL Score and Ability to Communicate**

|                  | <b>TOEFL Score</b> | <b>Yes/No Response</b> | <b>Reason for the Response Given</b>   |
|------------------|--------------------|------------------------|--|
| <b>Student 1</b> | 85                 | Yes                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty with sentence structure</li> <li>• Unable to participate in class discussions</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Student 2</b> | 96                 | Yes                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty communicating using the written word</li> <li>• Lack of class participation</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Student 3</b> | 43                 | Yes                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not participate in class</li> <li>• Feelings of embarrassment</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Student 4</b> | 104                | Yes                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not participate in class</li> <li>• Native English speakers speak too quickly to stay involved in the conversation</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Student 5</b> | 99                 | No                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not difficult to communicate in English</li> <li>• A little nervous at times but really no communication problems</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Student 6</b> | 103                | Yes                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unable to express himself/herself as vividly as he/she can in Chinese</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Student 7</b> | 82                 | Yes                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unable to understand American idioms and/or slang</li> <li>• Unable to communicate for long lengths of time</li> <li>• Difficulty understanding lengthy reading passages</li> </ul> |
| <b>Student 8</b> | 78                 | Yes                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More time will be needed to earn good grades</li> </ul>   |

**Appendix A****Survey Questionnaire**

Former Shenzhen International Student Questionnaire/Survey

If you are not a first year college student, for question two (2) and beyond please try to recall as accurately as possible your first year college experience.

1. Please provide the following information

Your name:

Age:

Year of graduation from your international school:

Current year of study in the United States:

Current Major:

Total length of college years spent in the United States:

What was your highest TOEFL score earned prior to your arrival in the United States?

1. Have you taken the TOEFL test since your arrival in the United States?

If yes when did you take it? What was the score?

If no please proceed to the next question.

2. During your first year of college study in the United States did you feel stress?  
If yes, when did the stress start?  
If not, please explain why you feel you were adequately prepared to handle stress.
3. If you answered “no” to question 2 please proceed to question 4. If you answered yes to the above question (question #2); what type of stress did you encounter? Please try to describe your feelings at that time.
4. During your first year of college study in the United States did you find it difficult to adapt to the culture?  
If yes, please explain what particular things made this so.  
If not, please explain why you feel that you were adequately prepared for the culture of the United States.
5. Did you feel socially isolated or feel that you had no friends during your first year of study? If yes, please explain why you feel/felt so.  
If not, please explain why you feel that you were adequately prepared.
6. Do you have any suggestions for incoming freshman as to how to better prepare for first year cultural adaptation? Please explain.
  7. Did you find it difficult during your first year of college to communicate in English? If yes, please explain why you feel/felt so.
  8. Did you feel that language problems affected your ability to make friends? If yes, please explain why you feel/felt so.
  9. Did you feel that language problems affected your ability to earn the grades you had hoped for? If yes, please explain why you feel/felt so.
  10. Did language barriers contribute to your stress? If yes, please explain why you feel/felt so.
  11. During your first year of college did you experience any form of discrimination? If yes, please explain why you feel/felt so.
  12. What actions, if any did you take to resolve the above manner?