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Chinese college students flock to U.S.

Middle-class Chinese students are flocking to American colleges, battling homesickness and culture shock in their quest for international experience and a Western education

By Nara Schoenberg, Chicago Tribune reporter

Jiang is part of a new generation of Chinese students increasingly looking to America for a college education. Facing a shortage of spots at top universities at home and drawn by the prestige of U.S. schools and the opportunity for [international](#) experience, 57,000 Chinese undergraduates attended U.S. colleges in 2011, up from 10,000 in 2007. "Five or 10 years ago, going abroad was considered what dumb rich kids did, and now it's considered what smart middle-class kids do," said Xueqin Jiang, former director of the international division at Peking University High School. "That's a huge shift right now in China." The trend appears to be accelerating, Xueqin Jiang said, with Chinese students coming to America to prepare for college while in high school or even middle school. Chinese students said they initially struggle to connect with classmates who speak rapid-fire idiomatic English, listen to different music, watch different [TV shows](#), follow different sports, remember different childhood games and embrace a teen [drinking](#) culture that has no Chinese equivalent. Because Americans have trouble with Chinese tonal pronunciations, many newcomers forgo even their given names, adopting English ones during their time here.

"I do miss my name," said Northwestern sophomore Yuqing He, who is known here as Andrea. But in a half dozen interviews, Chinese students at Northwestern said they've embraced speaking up in class, landed dream internships and taken advantage of research opportunities they wouldn't have had in the test-based Chinese system. Some live off campus and socialize mainly with other Chinese students, but He, an outgoing economics student from Beijing, is a member of the Chi Omega sorority and Jiang, a competitive hip-hop dancer, practices with the Electric Funketeers dance crew in Chicago. That kind of adaptability and initiative is typical of the Chinese students who come here, said Peggy Blumenthal, senior counselor to the president at the nonprofit Institute of International Education, which tracks international enrollment at U.S. colleges and universities. "These are extraordinary kids," she said. "Taking the risk of studying outside the culture has weeded out the ordinary kids. They bring something very special: a willingness to be out there and live a little bit dangerously and experimentally, and they do thrive. "There is a potential for problems, experts say. In the cash-strapped University of California system, some [parents](#) have alleged that Chinese students, who are not eligible for [financial](#) aid and typically pay full tuition, are being chosen over qualified Americans. And experts acknowledge that schools may see a financial incentive to accept less adventurous and accomplished Chinese students who are ill-equipped for study abroad but can pay full tuition, which can come to more than \$30,000 a year at some private schools. "I think it's a calculation that U.S. universities and colleges are now grappling with: There's a short-term gain, perhaps, in taking students that aren't going to thrive, but a very big long-term risk," said

Blumenthal, pointing out that if students have a miserable experience at a particular U.S. school, they will tell their friends and relatives and the school's reputation will plummet.