

Chinese Students in America: 'Strategically Important'

“Reaching out to students from Mainland China is simply the most strategically important Christian missionary endeavor anywhere in the world.”

– Dr. David Aikman, a Christ-follower who served as bureau chief for Time magazine in Beijing, Moscow and other major cities.

Though stated more than 20 years ago, these words from a top-ranking journalist are as true today as ever. What makes the Chinese who study on America's campuses so influential in their nation and the world?

- They are **numerous** – the largest foreign nationality on U.S. campuses. Nearly one in three international students is from Mainland China. Chinese can be found at virtually every institution of higher learning in America.
- They are **prestigious** – the best and brightest of Chinese society. They represent the top 1% of students from their country. (Although some are less gifted in their academics, those individuals come from families with wealth and influence.)
- They are **estranged** – often lonely and isolated. Many Chinese students struggle to integrate into American campus life and often retreat to their own little circles.

- They are **intrigued** – interested in learning more about Jesus. Although most Chinese students have not been contacted by Christians in their home country, they are curious about the gospel and few are “resistant.”
- They are **strategic** – potential ambassadors for Jesus throughout the world. Chinese can travel to certain places where Americans are not welcome, and they are not perceived as “Western imperialists” when they share their faith.

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1 Understanding Their World

A Recent History

Chinese students are proud of their nation's glorious past. Their ancient dynasties were marked by literary masterpieces, scientific discoveries and technological achievements. Unfortunately, earlier generations also ex-

Fast forward to the mid-1980s and you will observe massive changes in Chinese society. In the '80s, China opened itself to the world and laid the foundation for its current status as a major economic force. Widespread discontent with national policies was also voiced in the '80s and is still heard at times. Spurred by the growth of their nation's economy, today's Chinese students are focused on material success as they pursue the “China Dream.” At the same time, many feel an inner hopelessness that drives a search for meaning and love.

A Current Profile

Today's Chinese students, strongly influenced by their culture, typically demonstrate these traits:

Society

- **Materialistic** – Students pursue wealth for significance and security. They take great pleasure in dining, shopping and traveling.
- **“Wired”** – Students are tech savvy and connected to the virtual world. They may stay online for hours chatting, watching TV shows and playing video games. They may find it difficult to verbally communicate and emotionally connect with others. Some are socially awkward.
- **Self-sufficient** – Chinese students have been taught to be extremely determined. Even though they think collectively, most ultimately rely on themselves.
- **Worldly** – Because of their exposure to movies and music, students are familiar with certain aspects of Western culture. Many have lost innocence through pornography and sexual activity.

Relationships

- **Harmonious** – Chinese students want to connect with others. They think collectively in matters of daily life--“we” not “me.” Chinese depend on their network of functional relationships within their community (expressed in Chinese as “guanxi”) for help and resources.
- **Respectful** – Students are obliged to respect and obey, especially within the family. They are dutiful to those in authority, such as parents and professors. They display politeness (“keqi”) to show their humility. Meanwhile, they tend to avoid conflict and in-depth communications because they are unsure of how to process such emotional content.
- **Conditional** – Students seek to give honor and not shame to others. They refrain from actions that would reflect badly on themselves or others and thus cause a loss of “face” (“mianzi”). They have a tendency to view interactions with others according to obligation. If they receive any favor, they think they must pay it back.

Family

- **Self-Focused** – Almost every Chinese

student has been raised as one child in the “4-2-1 family” (4 grandparents, 2 parents, 1 self). Because of this structure, many have been pampered as the center of family life. Some will demonstrate an undue focus on self and a struggle to connect with others.

- **Pressured** – Many students feel great pressure from their parents' high expectations. In general, parents have sacrificed much for their children, and the children are expected to perform well in academics and artistry.
- **Disconnected** – Many Chinese students feel distanced from their parents because of the parents' focus on career. Consequently, the students crave love and support, and they desire to be more deeply known by their parents.

Typical Profiles of Chinese Students

Li comes from an upper middle-class family in China, and her parents have chosen to pay the tuition for her to study in America. Much like her American undergraduate classmates, Li drives a nice car, spends countless hours on the Internet and takes luxurious trips during school breaks. Yet, she has problems understanding and relating to her American classmates. Li does not know how to join in

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conversations about American culture, especially sports and music. She has given up trying to understand American students and has resolved to stay within her Chinese social circle. How might one enter Li's world?

“Ming” is a popular guy among Chinese students at his U.S. university. It seems like everything is working for him--many friends, good grades and a pretty girlfriend. He and his girlfriend live together, which is common for Chinese couples on campus. Yet, deep in Ming's heart, he feels lonely and does not want to share his feelings of vulnerability with others. When he feels lonely and distressed he searches for pornography on the

Internet. He doesn't think this is wrong and, in fact, he sometimes looks at porn with his girlfriend. How might one enter Ming's world?

2 Connecting Them To Jesus

Understand their Spiritual Journey

Today's Chinese students were raised under the academic influence of evolutionism and, of course, atheism. As a result, most lack religious or philosophical beliefs to provide answers for life's ultimate questions. Although their teachers in China probably told them that all religion is “superstitious,” those who have formed friendships with Christians may be open to spiritual truth.

It's important to realize that Chinese usually approach the gospel from a pragmatic perspective—looking more for God's hand of blessing than for a personal relationship with Him. After all, they come from an ancient culture with Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist influences, and they've been reared under atheism, evolutionism and humanism—with a dash of post-modern Western thought. Because of their utilitarian approach to the spiritual world, they expect a deity to give good luck or blessing. They only call upon their gods in times of need. The primary concerns of Chinese people are to live life well and honorably and to be prosperous. Their initial thoughts about God may focus on whether He can help them with practical aspects of their academics/career, their finances or their family.

Because of the factors mentioned above, we recommend sharing the gospel with these dynamics:

Relate truth to real life issues:

- 1) **Love** – Because the average Chinese student is looking for love, descriptions of God's unconditional love may resonate deeply. (See 1 John 4.)
- 2) **Peace** – Students who feel stress from the expectations of others may readily embrace the peace that comes from a believer's identity in Christ. (See Romans 6.)
- 3) **Direction** – Students who lack direction in life may appreciate the reassurance that God gives to His people in times of duress. (See Jeremiah 29.)

Ask questions to create spiritual conversation:

- 1) “Have you ever attended a church service?”
- 2) “Have you had any experiences with various religions?”
- 3) “Have you ever read the Bible?”
- 4) “Do you have friendships with any Christians—in China or the U.S.?”

Respond thoughtfully to negative notions:

- 1) **“Christianity is a Western religion”** – Explain that Jesus was born in the Middle East and that Christianity developed within an Eastern culture.
- 2) **“My family is opposed to Christianity”** – Offer your personal understanding for a student who feels that becoming a Christian may cause him/her to appear to be abandoning family traditions. Add your suggestions for how a person can be loyal to God without rejecting his or her family.
- 3) **“Christianity is unscientific”** – Expose your friend to tools that address topics of faith and science (see resources below)
- 4) **“Christianity is incompatible with Communism”** – Realize that students who are Communist Party members are told to avoid faith in God if they want to maintain their political affiliation. (Party membership is considered an honor and it is accompanied by opportunities for

career and financial advancement.) After demonstrating your sensitivity to the situation, urge your friend to weigh the current and eternal benefits of believing in Jesus. (You may wish to share many Scriptures including Matthew 16:26.)

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Present spiritual truth

- 1) **There is a God** – For people who lack a “God-consciousness.”
- 2) **They can be loved** – Those who have never heard of unconditional love may believe their prior bad actions have made them unlovable to other people and even to God.
- 3) **They have sinned** – Because the closest translation of “sin” in Chinese literally means “crime,” some students will not grasp their sinfulness. Because they have not broken the laws of their society, they may consider themselves to be “good”

and not in need of being saved from anything.

- 4) **They can be forgiven** – With no clear concept of sin or atonement, the student may have no authentic basis for understanding forgiveness. Ironically, their lack of clarity about “sin” may prevent them from dealing with distrust or hate toward themselves and others.
- 5) **They can trust Christ** – Without affirmation of the Bible’s historicity and veracity, some students will consider Jesus as a mythological figure. They fail to understand his purpose or plan.
- 6) **They can have hope after this life** – Most Chinese students fear death; for them, it is the end of all existence. As a result, they focus on present goals and generally avoid any discussion of death or the hereafter.

3 Do’s and Don’ts

DO... speak clearly and slow down! These are bright students but they may not be able to follow fast-paced talk in their second or third language.

DO... connect with them through technology and social media. Be aware that WeChat is the most popular communication medium for Chinese students, but of course, you must use it cautiously since others could monitor your messages.

DO... be sensitive to include them in conversations when you talk to others.

DO... ask questions politely if they are doing things that you don’t understand.

DO... initiate spiritual conversations rather early within a relationship. Share your testimony and how Christ makes a difference in your life.

DO... invite them into “your world” (invite them to your house, introduce them to your friends, take them camping, invite them to watch football games, include them in family gatherings).

DO... experience life in “their world” (eat Chinese food, watch their favorite shows, hang out in their apartments, seek to understand their backgrounds).



DO... celebrate special Chinese holidays with them – such as the Mid-Autumn Festival and Spring Festival. Learn about the significance of each holiday.

DON'T... think that all Chinese come from the same background.

DON'T... underestimate the influence their families and culture have on them.

DON'T... discuss controversial topics such as “T-T-T” (Taiwan, Tibet, Tiananmen Square).

DON'T... assume they always understand what you’re saying when they nod and smile.

DON'T... pressure them to do things they don’t want to do.

DON'T... forget to explain basic spiritual terms, such as “New Testament,” “Christian,” “baptism” and “saved.”

DON'T... get discouraged if it takes them a while to come to Christ. Be a true friend!

DON'T... assume they have fully understood the gospel when they say they have believed in God.



proven effective for engaging Chinese students in spiritual conversation. Check out information at: bridgesinternational.com/chinesenetwork

Bibles and Books for Chinese Students

- **Ambassadors for Christ Bookstore-** (Chinese Resource Ministry) for *Four Spiritual Laws*, books, Bibles and videos for Chinese seekers and believers at discounted prices. afcresources.org
- **Print Bibles-** for Chinese and Bilingual Bibles (order at AFC bookstore). The CUV (Chinese Union Version) is commonly accepted in Chinese house churches but it is not easy to read. The CNV (Chinese New Version) is popular with students, as well as the CSB (Chinese Standard Version).
- **Online Bibles-** youversion.com and biblegateway.com provide Bible versions and study tools (Chinese and bilingual).
- **Bible App-** wedevote.com offers special features such as text search, reading plans, multiple versions and social tools (Chinese and bilingual).

Resources to Learn About Chinese Ministry and Culture

- **Bridges Chinese Network-** for resources and information on mission opportunities and conferences to equip believers: bridgesinternational.com/chinesenetwork
- **China Source-** for resources that provide a window into Christianity in China and

the key issues that impact the church. chinasource.org

- **China Partnership Blog-** for articles about China and Christianity chinapartnership.org/blog
- **China in Our Midst: Reaching Chinese International Students in America-** by Glen Osborn and Daniel Su with China Outreach Ministries that gives insight and guidance from research and experience to encourage engagement in this God-given opportunity to “Give Christ to China’s Future Leaders.” Available at amazon.com
- **Connecting with Chinese International Students: Sharing the Good News with Cultural Wisdom-** a book written by InterVarsity staff members for those just getting started or have already experienced the many challenges, joys and questions in connecting with mainland Chinese students. Available at the InterVarsity bookstore: store.intervarsity.org
- **Jesus: The Path to Human Flourishing: The Gospel for The Cultural Chinese-** a book written by I’Ching Thomas to help Christians from non-Chinese backgrounds know how to present Jesus to the Cultural Chinese. Available at amazon.com

For more information on how to reach out to this people group, please contact us at: chinesenetwork@bridgesinternational.com



4 Recommended Resources

Evangelistic Tools to Use with Chinese Students

- **Four Spiritual Laws-** Bi-Lingual and Chinese gospel tracts. Available through Ambassador for Christ bookstore: afcresources.org
- **Honor Restored-** relevant tool to share the good news of Jesus from an honor-shame perspective. Available in various languages at: godtoolsapp.com
- **Everystudent.com (Chinese version)-** for articles and videos that address students’ most important questions about life and God. xinshengming.com
- **Discovering God in Chinese Characters-** an illustration of the gospel in Chinese characters. Available at crustore.org
- **Song of a Wanderer-** popular apologetics book written by a Chinese scholar for Chinese seekers. Order online at afcresources.org to give away.
- **Heart Mirror-** popular pictorial tool