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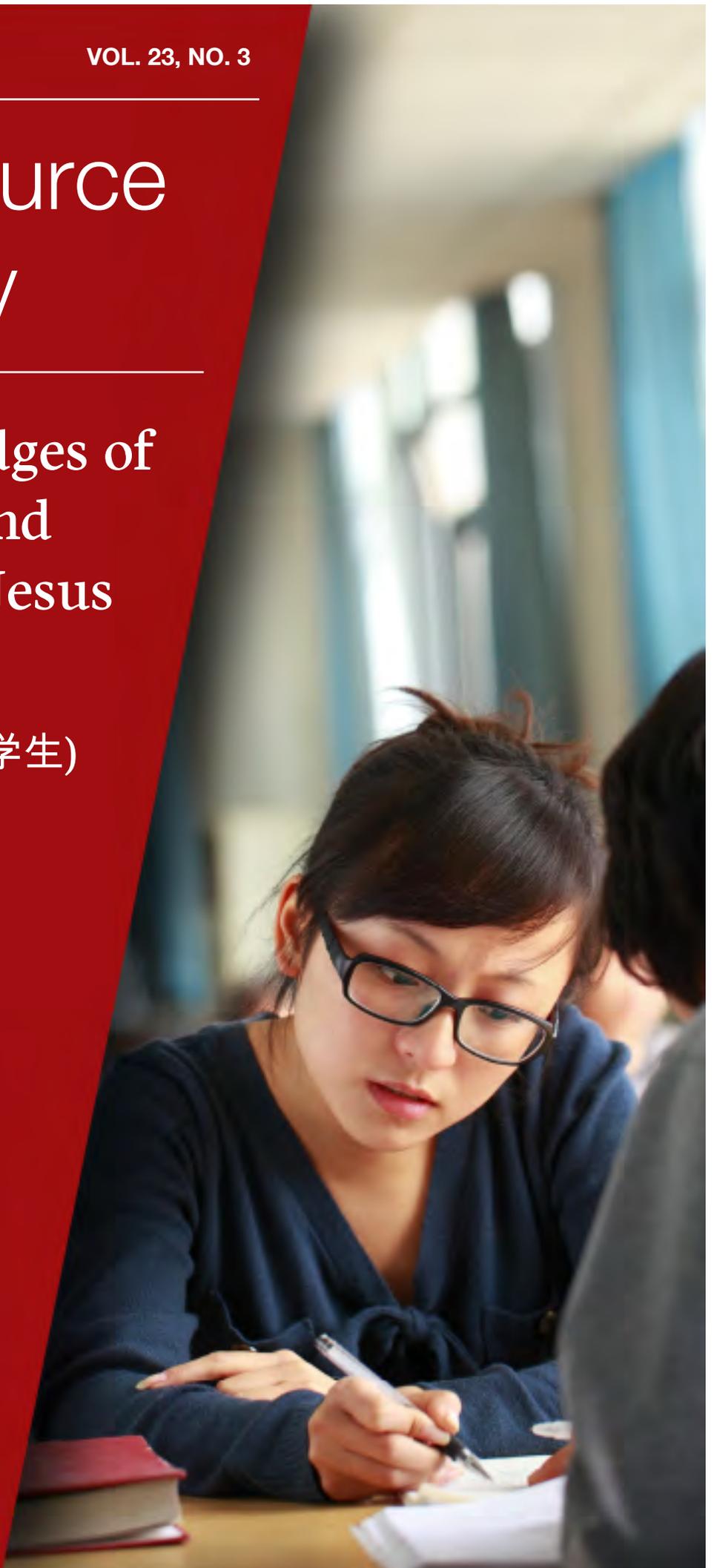
ChinaSource Quarterly

Building Bridges of
Friendship and
Introducing Jesus

Ministry among
Liuxuesheng (留学生)

Joann Pittman,
Guest Editor

華源協作
CHINASOURCE



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EDITORIAL

Loving the Liuxuesheng (留学生)

By Joann Pittman, Guest Editor



When I began my sojourn as a student of Chinese in Changchun, one of the first vocabulary words my classmates and I mastered was *liuxuesheng* (留学生), which means “student studying abroad,” or, more colloquially, foreign student. In a culture where categories are important, that was our category. We were not foreign experts (*waiguo zhuanjia* 外国专家), but foreign students. And we had the ID cards to prove it.

Years later, a professor in Beijing taught me more about Chinese students studying abroad, introducing me to the terms *liusu* 留苏 and *liumei* 留美. In the early days of the People’s Republic of China, Chinese students went to the Soviet Union (*sulian* 苏联) to study. These students were referred to as *liusu*. Now, he said, most Chinese students go abroad to study in the United States (*meiguo* 美国). These students are referred to as *liumei*. He pointed out that the then crop of Chinese leaders had all been *liusu*, and this deeply shaped their worldview. Twenty to thirty years hence, he suggested, it would be the *liumei* who would be in power. We had a long discussion on what it might mean for China’s future to have government officials who are *liumei* instead of *liusu*.

That day’s discussion has stuck with me whenever I think about the importance of outreach to Chinese students studying abroad, the Chinese *liuxuesheng*, the topic of this issue of the *ChinaSource Quarterly*.

Many people date the arrival of Chinese students in the United States to the 1980s, following the launch of China’s Opening and Reform policy. This is what we remember. Visiting scholars showing up at universities. Later grad students. Then undergrads. Now (COVID-19 aside) secondary students. However, Chinese students came much earlier, the first being in the 1840s. Stacey Bieler opens this issue with an overview of the early Chinese students studying in the United States, helping us understand when and why they came, the challenges they faced, and how Christians reached out to them.

In recent years, more and more Gen Z students (born between 1998 and 2014) have gone abroad to study. Unlike the students of earlier days (90s and early 2000s) Gen Z’ers are connected, both locally and globally. Chaoyang Peng takes a deep dive into the lives of Gen Z youth, their worldview, and effective ways to reach them for Christ.

Over the past decades thousands of Chinese students have made faith commitments during their time as *liuxuesheng*, either through the friendship and hospitality of individuals or because of outreach efforts by organizations and churches. Many have been discipled and become deeply involved in local churches. But what happens when their studies end, and they return to China? Do they connect with local Christians? How do they find and settle into local churches? The answers to these questions are complicated. Leo writes about the important dynamics of movement and connection in reaching this strategic group of returnees.

It is not just Chinese *liuxuesheng* who need friendship and hope; thousands of *liuxuesheng* from all over the world—most from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia—are studying in China. Indeed, this is a remarkable opportunity for the church in China to reach out cross-culturally without leaving home. What is being done to serve them? How has COVID-19 impacted this ministry? Phil Jones gives us an overview of the current difficul-

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American Friendships with Chinese Students, 1847-1930

By Stacy Bieler

For more than 170 years Chinese students have come to the United States. They made friends with American teachers, students, families, and business people. Some came as Christians while others became followers of Christ after they arrived. Christian students set up clubs to encourage each other in their walks of faith.

The First Chinese Graduate from a US College

In 1847, Rong Hong (Yung Wing) and two other Chinese young men came from Hong Kong to the US when their missionary teacher, Samuel Brown, returned to the US with his wife who was ill. Rong became a Christian while studying at the Monson Academy, a college preparatory school in Wilbraham, MA.¹

Rong was accepted to Yale College, but he needed funds to pay for his tuition. Members of "The Ladies' Association" in Savannah, GA, (through a connection with Brown), sent him money. He also worked as a steward at a boarding house club and as a librarian for a debating society.² Rong discussed his plan to bring other Chinese to study in the US with a college friend, Carroll Cutler, who later became president of Western Reserve College in Cleveland, OH.³ During college vacations Rong stayed in Springfield, MA, with Dr. Alexander McClean and his wife, Rebekah (Samuel Brown's sister).⁴ After graduating from Yale in 1854, Rong returned to China.⁵

The Chinese Educational Mission

Once Rong rose in position, he presented his study abroad program for 120 teenagers to Viceroy Zeng Guofan, the top Chinese official. In 1872 the first group of thirty students of the Chinese Education Mission (CEM) came to the US to gain technical skills.⁶ Rong, as Chief Commissioner, connected with the secretary of the Board of Education for Connecticut, who asked families in Connecticut and Massachusetts to open their homes to two to four students each and provide two years of homeschooling to prepare them to attend local high schools.⁷

Over the years, twenty-one married couples and sixteen single females hosted students. Most were members of Congregational churches who lived in small rural villages.⁸ They were told not to try to convert their pupils to Christianity, though the students were to "observe the regulations of the family in which they live."⁹

William Lyon Phelps was a schoolmate of the Chinese students in Hartford, CT. He later wrote: "They had excellent manners, were splendid sportsmen, alert in mind, good at their studies, good at athletics." His closest friend, Cho, was dignified, serious and a great translator of Caesar. Every Saturday they went shooting birds together.¹⁰

Rev. Joseph Twichell, pastor of Asylum Hill Church in Hartford, "gloried" in the honor of marrying Rong to Mary Kellogg, a daughter of one of Hartford's leading physicians, in 1875.¹¹ They named their two sons Morri-



Pictured in order:
Rong Hong (Yung Wing)
1828–1912
Tang Guo'an
1858–1913
Mei Yiqi 梅贻琦
1889–1962

[Biographical Dictionary
of Chinese Christianity](#)



son Brown and Bartlett Golden.¹²

In the winter of 1877–78, five students called upon the pastor of a Congregational Church in East Hampton, MA, to express their interest in making a public profession of their faith. Rong advised against the proposed action because it could endanger the government supported educational project. So instead, the students held weekly prayer meetings, Bible studies, and Christian doctrine classes with the pastor. In May, 1878, they organized the Chinese Christian Home Mission with a hope of taking Christianity back to China.¹³

The CEM Students are Recalled

In 1880, a newly arrived commissioner in the US, Wu Zideng, sent negative reports about the students to Beijing, including losing their ability to speak Chinese, playing sports, and becoming Christians.¹⁴ He wrote “they should be recalled without delay and should be strictly watched after their return.”¹⁵

After thirty years of a growing anti-Chinese movement in California, Congress began to debate restricting Chinese immigration. This disgusted Viceroy Li Hongzhang, who oversaw the Chinese Educational Mission (CEM) after Zeng Guofan died.¹⁶ This debate resulted in the Chinese Exclusion Act, signed on May 6, 1882. It prohibited all immigration of Chinese laborers.¹⁷

When Viceroy Li withdrew his support from the CEM in March 1881, only two students had completed their college degrees.¹⁸ The recall was temporarily postponed after Reverend Twichell gathered support from Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) and others to sign the Yale President’s letter urging the decision be reconsidered.¹⁹

Despite this support, the CEM was recalled in July.²⁰ On the eve of their departure in August, some of the students and families gathered together to sing hymns and hear Twichell say a few words and a prayer.²¹ One American woman wrote to a Chinese mother that her son “will be a useful man and serve his country with honor to himself and to his parents.” Phelps’ friend, Cho, gave him “his great gun as a pledge of eternal friendship.”²³

After the CEM students arrived in China, one wrote about the terrible reception they received.²⁴ Viceroy Li rescued many of them by placing them in technical colleges and in mining, railroad, and mining ventures where they slowly grew in responsibility.²⁵

The CEM students did not forget their time abroad. Like Rong, former CEM students named their children after their American friends. When some made it back to the US, they visited their American families or brought their children to live with them.²⁶

Rong’s wife died in 1886. When Rong was recalled to China in 1895, his older son was entering Yale, but his younger son needed a place to live. After Twichell and his wife offered their home, Rong appreciated “this act of self-denial and magnanimity.”²⁷

Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Students

While serving as Chinese minister to the US, Liang Cheng, a former CEM student, heard that President Theodore Roosevelt was considering returning the excess from the US share of the Boxer Indemnity to build a preparatory school in Beijing in order to send one hundred Chinese students a year to the US. He wrote, thanking the US for this “signal act of generosity.”²⁸ On May 25, 1908, Roosevelt signed the executive order.²⁹ In 1910, Liang invited the sisters, Louise and Mary Bartlett, to visit China where they stayed for a year.³⁰

Tang Guo'an, a former CEM student, accompanied the first two groups of Boxer scholarship students in 1909 and 1910 to the East Coast. He was able to visit close friends. He returned to serve as the founding president of Tsinghua College.³¹

Rong lived long enough to meet some of the next generation of students.³² After he died at age 84 in Hartford in 1912, Rev. Twichell presided over his funeral service.

Influential Friends

After hat maker Henry Fearing hosted the first and second annual conferences of the Chinese Students' Alliance (CSA) in his grove in Amherst, MA, in 1905 and 1906, the students elected him as an honorary member of the Alliance. When the students presented Fearing a loving cup as an expression of their love and honor in 1914, a local newspaper reported, "No one can measure what an influence this one humble man may have on China's teeming millions because he has loved 'the stranger within our gates.'"³³

When the first Boxer scholarship group arrived too late in the fall of 1909 to attend college, they were divided up and sent to preparatory schools. Arthur Clough, the principal of Lawrence Academy in Groton, MA, made a "profound impression" on Zhang Fuliang because of his humble service.³⁴ In 1912, Zhang and Mei Yiqi (president of Tsinghua from 1931–48) became Christians at a Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) summer camp.³⁵

After Harry Edmonds, a YMCA man, heard about a Chinese student's loneliness in New York City in 1909, he organized the Cosmopolitan Club at Columbia University to bring international students and Americans together. Later he asked John D. Rockefeller for funds to build an International House in New York City that opened in 1924.³⁶

In 1911, the YMCA set up the Committee for Friendly Relations Among Foreign Students (CFR).³⁷ Willard Lyon, the son of Presbyterian missionaries in Hangzhou, China, became CFR's executive secretary.³⁸ The CFR promoted "sympathetic and helpful relations between Americans and the foreign students" and recommended that universities set aside counselors for international students.³⁹

Pastor Xu Qin (Huie Kin) of the First Chinese Presbyterian Church in New York City and his wife, Louise Van Arnan, offered a dormitory on the third and fourth floors of their home and Sunday dinners for forty or fifty. All six of their daughters married Chinese students, serving China in the fields of education, religious, medical, and rural reconstruction.⁴⁰

Chinese Students' Christian Association

A group of twenty-four Chinese students began the Chinese Students' Christian Association (CSCA) in 1909.⁴¹ Members of the first executive committee became presidents of universities in China, the director of the YMCA in China, and a government official in the 1920s. The eight charter or "cooperative" members included Henry Fearing, Xu Qin, an American woman, a Chinese woman, and four missionaries serving in China.⁴²

The CSCA provided fellowship through local campus groups, yearly conferences, monthly journals, and year-books. Traveling secretaries visited students on campus, encouraging members to "cultivate the spirit of Jesus and apply his principles to their life and work."⁴³ When the Chinese Revolution disrupted finances coming from China in 1911, the CFR and community organizations gave students emergency aid. More than three hundred attended CSCA summer conferences in 1915.⁴⁴

Although today's Chinese students have better English language skills and may be less lonely because of the large numbers of fellow students, American friendships and hospitality still play key roles in building cross-cultural bridges and introducing Jesus.

Note: For information about students mentioned in this article, see entries in the *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity* at <https://bdcconline.net/>.

¹ Joseph H. Twichell, "Appendix," in Yung Wing, *My Life in China and America* (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 1909), 252; Yung Wing, 31.

² Yung Wing, *My Life in China and America* (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 1909), 36, 38–9.

³ Twichell, "Appendix," 255; Western Reserve College in Cleveland, OH is now Case Western Reserve University.

⁴ Yung, 28.

⁵ Yung, 39.

⁶ Edward J. M. Rhoads, *Stepping Forth into the World: The Chinese Educational Mission to the United States, 1872–1881* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 8, 9, 18.

⁷ Rhoads, 68, 70.

⁸ Rhoads, 49, 56, 60, 61.

⁹ Rhoads, 151

¹⁰ William Lyon Phelps, *Autobiography with Letters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 83, 85.

¹¹ Thomas E. LaFargue, *China's First Hundred: Educational Mission Students in the United States, 1872–1881* (Pullman, WA: Washington State University, 1987), 42.

¹² Morrison School in Hong Kong was named after Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary to China in 1807. Rong met David and Fanny Bartlett when he arrived in the US, Yung, 14–15, 24.

¹³ Joseph H. Sawyer, "The Chinese Christian Home Mission," in *The Independent*, July 5, 1894, 13–14.

¹⁴ Rhoads, 144–158.

¹⁵ Yung, 204–205; 210.

¹⁶ Rhoads, 171–172, 222.

¹⁷ Stacey Bieler, "Patriots" or "Traitors"? *A History of American-Educated Chinese Students*, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 13.

¹⁸ Rhoads, 313–132.

¹⁹ Yung, 211–215; General Ulysses Grant wrote a personal letter to Viceroy Li. Rhoads, 173; LaFargue, 50.

²⁰ LaFargue, 52.

²¹ Rhoads, 176.

²² Bieler, 10.

²³ Phelps, 85.

²⁴ Bieler, 11–12.

²⁵ Bieler, 12.

²⁶ Rhoads, 211–212.

²⁷ Yung, 223, 227–8.

²⁸ The Qing dynasty paid the Boxer Indemnity to the to thirteen Western countries and Japan for the loss of lives and property during the Boxer Uprising during the summer of 1900. Bieler, 27–32, 47, 68; The United States received 7.5% of the Indemnity.

²⁹ Bieler, 49.

³⁰ LaFargue, 40.

³¹ Forty-seven students came in 1909, 70 in 1910 and 73 in 1911. Bieler, 44, 57, 66–67, 68.

³² Bieler, 16.

³³ Bieler, 217.

³⁴ Bieler, 102.

³⁵ Bieler, 102–103.

³⁶ Bieler, 210.

³⁷ The funding came from Andrew Carnegie, Cleveland Dodge, and William Sloane. Mary Thompson, ed., *Unofficial Ambassadors: The Story of International Student Service*, (New York: International Student Service, 1982), 23. Thompson, 23; Ryan Bean, “Selling the Mission: The North American YMCA in China 1890–1949” (Chungli, Taiwan: Institute of History, National Central University, 2012). Retrieved from the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/140888>. Accessed June 1, 2021.

³⁸ Thompson, 38; The CFR created the first census of foreign students studying on American campuses in 1916. It was the forerunner of the Institute of International Education (IIE) established in 1919 and the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors (NAFSA) in 1948. Martin Tillman, “Life Begins at 50,” *NAFSA Newsletter*, Oct/Nov 1998, 1, 34.

³⁹ Bieler, 152–156.

⁴⁰ For a description of the first executive committee, see Bieler, 222. “I. Active Members,” Chinese Christian Student Association (CSCA): Registration book, 1910–1914 (Box 104, Folder 2), p. 13–17. Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

⁴² “Cooperative Members,” Chinese Christian Student Association (CSCA): Registration book, 1910–1914 (Box 104, Folder 2), p. 32–33. Kautz Family YMCA Archives.

⁴³ Bieler, 222.

⁴⁴ Thompson, 27–8, 33.

Stacey Bieler is the author of “Patriots” or “Traitors”? A History of American-Educated Chinese Students that focuses on the 1900-1930 generation of Chinese students in the US. She has enjoyed friendships with Chinese students and scholars since 1982. Her blog is at [Stacey Bieler; Historian-Author](#).

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ties and opportunities for reaching these students, ending with a challenge to believers in China—both local and expat—and to the global church not to forget these *liuxuesheng*.

Jon Kuert shares the story of starting a Chinese student ministry in Minnesota centered around outdoor activities—a providential choice since the pandemic broke out shortly thereafter. He includes suggestions and observations based on more than seven years in student ministry, both in China and the US.

BJ Arthur reviews “*Patriots*” or “*Traitors*”: *A History of American Educated Chinese Students*, by Stacey Bieler. The book tells the stories of key Chinese students who were educated abroad, beginning in the mid-1800s.

We close the issue by introducing two new resources from InterVarsity International Student Ministry. One is a booklet titled *Connecting with Chinese International Students: Sharing the Good News with Cultural Wisdom* which explores how to minister to this generation of Chinese students; the other a set of scripture memory playing cards in Chinese, English, and Spanish.

With travel restrictions being relaxed—at least in some countries—the Chinese *liuxuesheng* are once again making their way onto university campuses around the world. It is our hope that this issue of CSQ will motivate and equip us to reach out to them in love.

Joann Pittman is ChinaSource’s Vice President for Partnerships and China Engagement and the editor of *ZGBriefs*.

Meet China's Gen Z

By PENG Chaoyang

China's Generation Z is very different from previous generations. Born between 1998 and 2014, the majority in Gen Z are from one-child families. However, the greater defining characteristics are the influence of the internet on their lives along with the collective memory of critical events. In this article, we will look a bit deeper into Gen Z's characteristics, how they view life, and suggestions for how to get to know them and introduce them to Christ.



Two Buzzwords about China's Gen Z

The latest buzzword in social media among China's Gen Z is *Tangping* (躺平). Its literal translation is “lying flat,” which describes a phenomenon among young people who, instead of striving for higher pay and social status in life, choose to simply lie down, not to overwork, but to be content with more attainable achievements—and let time unwind. Despite criticisms from the official media, many Chinese people see this trend as a natural reaction to the unrelenting pressure of modern life.

The driving force behind the lying flat sentiment is another buzzword *Neijuan* (内卷) that gained traction in 2020. The Chinese term *Neijuan*, meaning “involution” which is made up of the characters for “inside” and “rolling,” suggests a process where people are trapped inside a cycle of over-competition that stops them from moving on or benefiting in a zero-sum game. A student at Tsinghua University was caught on video riding his bike at night and working on a laptop propped on his handlebars. The footage circulated in Chinese social media and the cyclist became a meme—“Tsinghua's Involved King.”¹

One can understand why these buzzwords resonate with China's Gen Z who face the pressure to outcompete their peers from kindergarten to high school in order to get into an elite university or study abroad. They also highlight the differences between China's young generation compared to older generations. To the Gen Z, material betterment is no longer the single most important source of meaning in life; they care more for their status as human beings. Many young people—especially those born after 1995 or 2000—are well aware of the overarching social structure and want to imagine alternative ways of living. It is more of a spiritual movement, less material-wise. They are open about the notion that they may be the first generation not to do better than their parents.

China's popular video-streaming website Bilibili released a video, “The Next Wave,” ahead of China's May 4th Youth Day last year.² The video praised the new generation's limitless potential, saying, “All humankind's knowledge and insight are gifts specially prepared for you.” But the video received backlash as many in the younger audience did not see it that way. They perceived a distance between themselves and older generations and offered a contrasting view. They felt that the airbrushed images of young people in the video did not reflect real-life conditions, and the polished footage was a misrepresentation of young people in China. So, who are the true young people in China? Here are some findings about China's Gen Z with a focus on the characteristics we see in students coming to study abroad.

Characteristics of Gen Z in China

China's Gen Z is defined by social media, critical events, and age. In a July 2021 research report entitled "Gen Z: Definition and Characteristics"³ three key dimensions were used to define China's Gen Z:

- the internet that has radically changed the way information is shared,
- critical events that make imprints in the collective memory of this generation,
- and (c) the age at which beliefs and outlooks are formed.

These factors point to a unique Gen Z in China born between 1998 and 2014.

The Gen Z population in China is about 280 million. A third of them are now in adulthood and starting to enter the job market. They will be the backbone of China's workforce in ten years. Under fifteen percent of Gen Z are university students with two percent of this elite group pursuing studies overseas. Among the one million international students in the US, a third of them are from China. They are set to make a major impact on China's transition in the years to come.

This cohort of Gen Z is growing up during China's fastest economic growth fueled by globalization following China's accession to the World Trade Organization, a landmark event that helped China surge to the world stage as the second largest economy after the US. This coincided with the arrival of the information age that brought a virtual fantasy world powered by the internet.

The majority of Gen Z in China are single children, born in an era when China experienced an alarming drop in birthrate under the one-child policy. At the same time, there was a significant rise in per capita GDP thanks to the booming economy.

All these have given rise to a generation that has benefited from economic prosperity, been loved by their parents and grandparents, and insulated from reality by a virtual world. They are more idealistic, simplistic, and nationalistic than earlier generations. They are also more open, straightforward, and spontaneous in expressing themselves, caring more about humanistic values and protecting the environment.

For example, Gen Z may staunchly defend China against attacks of its human rights record; yet they may also openly criticize social injustice if they see the progress of the country diverging from advancement in their own lives.

Citing the buzzwords *Tangping* (lying flat) and *Neijuan* (involution) in an interview reported by Zijia Song who published it online in *Daily Beast*, a Gen Z describes her lying flat as a positive way of living and involution being unnecessary.⁴ She says that lying flat allows her to listen to her heart more and enrich her inner being so as to experience the essence of life. This may appear to be self-centered but does not mean that Gen Z are selfish; rather, this is their value of individual self-fulfillment.

In a study on "Reaching the Current Generation of Chinese Students," AFC staff member Tsun-En Lu brilliantly wrote about the post-90s that in my view applies also to Gen Z:

Their parents have been protective of their children, to the extent that they are naïve about the world. As a result, they often have unrealistic dreams. However, precisely because they have not yet been socialized in society's contaminated waters many of them preserve a childlike sense of right and wrong. They seem more sincere, kind, and possess a sense of shame, making them the preservers of a social conscience.⁵

For Gen Z, the internet is part of their lives. They do not go online, they live online. When the internet was developing rapidly in China during the new millennium, it was precisely the time when Gen Z hit puberty, that critical period of adolescence when the psychological makeup is forming. The internet has since been their “growing-up memory.” For them, the virtual world is perhaps more vital and authentic than real life. In a manner of fashion, they have been shielded from reality by the internet. Once stepping offline, they face a harsh reality that is tough to deal with.

The single most daunting challenge to Gen Z Chinese students studying overseas is to adapt to a new environment and overcome a passive mindset or social phobia that are typically characteristic of netizens who are so used to the online world. They must learn skills to navigate social networks of the real world, to make friends, and to build a support network so they can succeed on campus and survive off campus. Considerable numbers of Chinese students quit, not because they lack academic merit, but because they lack the ability to survive in the challenging new environment of the real world.

On the other side of the coin, to reach Gen Z students from China, social media proves to be one of the best ways to get to know them and establish connections. One needs to switch from the mindset of a giver to the mindset of a consumer. We typically want to give help to students as the way to reach them, but to be a fan of students’ social media postings proves to be a far better and more effective way to win their friendship. By looking through their social media circles and liking their postings, one becomes a consumer of their products, a fan in their social circles, enjoys their creativity, and establishes meaningful relationships.

A Triple-A Strategy to Start a New Chinese Student Ministry

The challenges to start a new campus ministry focused on Chinese students and scholars are many. However, the principles remain the same, notwithstanding the characteristics of Gen Z we touched on above. Following is a Triple-A strategy.

Agape (愛): The parents, in China, of Gen Z students typically express their love for their single children through materialistic abundance. They work hard, making money, so they can send their children overseas to pursue quality education. In so doing, they neglect spending time with their children and caring about their emotional and spiritual needs. They also, often unknowingly, place tremendous burdens on their children who are under pressure to go overseas, earn a good degree, and honor their parents and grandparents. Many students develop depression under intense pressure. This is where *agape* comes in to fill the emotional and spiritual voids in students that have been left unfilled by their parents. They need to be given unconditional love and support. Everyone needs love; the way to love Gen Z students may be different, but the need for love is the same—and it is always the best way to connect and build relationships.

Authentic (真): People yearn for authentic friendship and non-defensive feelings of intimacy. For China’s Gen Z students, since most of them are an only child, their desire for a pure and honest friendship is even greater. They hate hypocrisy. With China’s current social environment where trust is lost in relationships between people, authenticity is something Gen Zers value in building a relationship. To be honest about one’s shortcomings is a strength and wins respect.

Amusing (趣): Amusing means to enjoy lively gatherings. Young people, including students, are attracted to those who are fun to be with. We can make ourselves attractive to Gen Z students by following the biblical mandate to be salt and light. Both of these have properties which affect things around them. Salt is used to enhance flavor. We can enhance our relationships by being enjoyable, fun to be with. Light is to shine, to show people the way. As we imitate Christ before Gen Zers, we can demonstrate the life and hope that are

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Adversity and Opportunity Returnee Ministry and a Global Pandemic

By Leo

Two important dynamics at play in returnee ministry are *movement* and *connection*. Each year several hundred thousand Chinese *move* between China and countries around the world, leaving China to go abroad to study and work and later returning to cities across China. As they leave one place to move to another, they leave the relationships they have established in that place and begin to make new *connections* in their new location. This provides opportunities for Christians around the world to *connect* with them, help them know Jesus, grow in faith in him and, together with Christians in China, help them after they return home to China to *connect* with Chinese churches and continue their spiritual journeys.

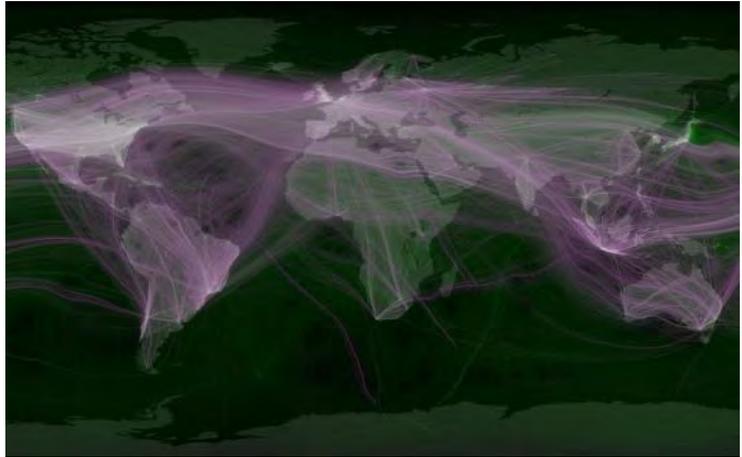


Image credit: [Erica Fischer via Flickr](#).

COVID-19 has struck right at the heart of these two important dynamics of returnee ministry. The *movement* of people between China and other countries has been impacted by border closures and travel restrictions reducing the numbers of Chinese moving to places such as the United States and Australia and increasing numbers moving to places such as the United Kingdom and Japan.¹ Social distancing measures have made it much harder for people to gather and deepen relational *connections* with one another although the rise of online *connections* has provided new opportunities. The impact of COVID-19 on returnee ministry has been widespread and diverse with some places and ministries experiencing significant disruption. While the key factor causing these changes may be the coronavirus, other factors such as geopolitics and political developments within China have played—and continue to play—an important role. Yet even these factors, to various degrees, have been influenced by COVID-19.

Below are a few observations about returnee ministry during a global pandemic.

Adversity

The disruption caused by COVID-19 has resulted in *adversity* in returnee ministry.

*Increased difficulty connecting with Chinese students.*² One impact of COVID-19 has been fewer Chinese moving overseas to study. Many, because of health concerns, visa restrictions or border closures, have delayed or changed their plans to move abroad, choosing instead to take a gap year, study online, or remain in a Chinese school or university. This decrease in Chinese students has been particularly significant in countries such as Australia and the US, which during the pandemic have largely restricted Chinese students from obtaining visas and entering the country.

COVID-19 prevention measures and social distancing have made it more difficult to meaningfully connect with Chinese students. Many classes have moved online, and restrictions on in-person gatherings have prevented orientation and other outreach events from taking place. Although online meetings have provided opportunities to connect with students, they are not so good for establishing and deepening relationships, particularly with new contacts.

Ministry worker stress. The large drop in international student numbers in some universities has meant that

many ministry workers have found themselves with very little ministry to engage in. This, along with uncertainty about the future and the need to quickly adapt to new styles of ministry, such as online meetings, has caused stress and discouragement for many of them.

During the pandemic, countries such as the US restricted visas to Chinese students while continuing to welcome students from other countries, resulting in a shift in the dominant demographic of international students on many campuses. Consequently, some staff workers and volunteers, whose primary ministry focus and experience in the past was with Chinese students, have had to rapidly adapt and learn to minister effectively to students from other nations, such as India.

Connecting returnees to churches in China. Throughout the pandemic, large numbers of Chinese have continued to return to China. The fact that COVID-19 has been much better controlled in China than in many other countries has encouraged many Chinese students and workers to cut short their plans to remain overseas and return to China earlier than expected.

Helping returnees connect with and join local churches after they return to China is an important aspect of helping returnees to continue in faith. COVID-19 has made this more difficult. Many churches in China have needed to meet online or transition to smaller scale gatherings because of the pandemic. In addition, there has been increasing tightening on religious activity in China these past few years. Joining a new church and establishing relationships in this context is challenging. Helping returnees to be aware of these issues before they return can aid in preparing them for the pressures they will face as Christians after they move back to China.

Opportunity

In addition to adversity, the disruption caused by COVID-19 has also opened up *opportunities* for returnee ministry.

Online meetings and connections. Restrictions on in-person gatherings have resulted in a proliferation of online meetings. Although online interaction is not as deep or effective as face-to-face interaction, it has enabled ongoing connections during the pandemic and provided some new opportunities.

One of these involves the *prereturn preparation retreats* that are an important way Christian returnees can be equipped and prepared for their upcoming return to China and the challenges they will face after they are back. Being unable to hold in-person retreats because of COVID-19 has forced the ministries that run these retreats to quickly develop and transition to online retreats. The ease of access, and reduced costs and resources involved with attending and running these retreats online has resulted in a number of benefits including:

- A significant increase in the number of participants.
- The ability to run these retreats more frequently, providing more opportunities for returnees to attend and be equipped to return to China.
- Allowing ministry workers and returnees who are in China to more easily be involved and help with these retreats.
- Providing for a smooth and natural transition to online follow-up after the retreat and continuing online discipleship with returnees even after they have moved back to China.

As a result of the pandemic, people around the world are *increasingly comfortable with the use of online platforms*. This has made it easier for ministry workers and volunteers to stay connected with returnees even

after they have returned to China. This ongoing contact and support from more mature Christians overseas can be a great help to returnees, particularly in the first six to twelve months after returning to China when the stresses of re-entry and transition are at their most acute, and the returnee has not yet developed good connections with a Chinese church. Staying connected with returnees also helps to remind ministry workers overseas that the returnee journey is a long-term one. It does not end when the returnee goes back to China. Even more important than their brief period of discipleship overseas is how they continue their faith journey in China for the rest of their lives.³

Learning and Improving. God in his wisdom and grace often uses hardship and adversity to help us learn and grow. The global pandemic has disrupted our usual way of doing things, forcing us to pause and evaluate what we do. Rather than just continuing what they have always done in the past, many ministry workers have been pushed to think deeply about what is most important and foundational to their ministry, to adapt, and learn new skills. Examples of this include finding ways to use online meetings, such as the online prereturn retreats mentioned above, to complement other aspects of their ministry, and being more deliberate in working out how to go deeper in discipling Chinese and preparing them to return.

Collaboration. The disruption and adversity caused by COVID-19 has resulted in an increase in collaboration between different groups. At some universities, different groups reaching out to Chinese students have started meeting together regularly for prayer and mutual support and are exploring ways that they can better partner together. Online platforms have made it easier for organizations in different countries, and for Chinese and overseas groups, to connect with one another and share resources. Could this be a turning point for growth in partnerships between Christians in China and Christians overseas as they work together on strategic projects such as prereturn retreats? Could this smaller scale and scattered rise in collaboration in returnee ministry be the start of a larger global movement in this area?

A Strategic Group

Returnees are still a strategic group for ministry to China. The movement of large numbers of many of China's future leaders to countries around our world provides opportunities for Christians in those countries to connect with them, share their lives and faith with them, and help send them back to China to have an impact for Jesus in their workplaces and communities.

Returnees are even more strategic during this global pandemic and into the future. Although China's borders are currently closed to foreigners, Chinese citizens are able to return and are continuing to return in large numbers. And even when COVID-19 becomes better controlled globally, and China reopens its borders, the increasing restrictions on religion in China will make it harder and harder for foreign Christians to live and serve there. Hence, returnees are an increasingly important group for Christians around the world who want to engage with China.

What opportunities can you undertake during this pandemic to connect and journey with a Chinese person who, by God's grace, may one day make an impact for Christ in China?

For more information about the importance of returnee ministry see: ["A Key Way that Christians around the World Can Contribute to Gospel Growth in China: Returnees."](#)

¹ The following article gives more information about how COVID-19 and other factors such as geopolitics have changed the distribution of countries that Chinese students are going to, as well as reasons why the number of Chinese going overseas in the future will rebound and even increase: “How will the coronavirus affect outbound Chinese students?” *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, 25 Sept 2020. <https://www.eiu.com/n/how-will-the-coronavirus-affect-outbound-chinese-students/> (Accessed 15 July 2021)

² Returnees as a category are broader and more diverse than just Chinese students studying abroad. However, this article focuses on students as they are the primary focus of most returnee ministries due to their large numbers and strategic nature as future leaders and influencers in China.

³ The following article emphasises the importance of having a long-term perspective in discipleship of international students: Stuart Bullington, “Walking the Second Mile with International Students: Discipleship Issues for Returnees,” *Insight Issue 11 Winter 2013/2014*, 2-4. https://www.friendsinternational.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/insight_issue-11---winter-2013-14.pdf (Accessed 15 July 2021).

Leo (pseudonym) is a cross-cultural worker in China ministering to returnees and local church leaders.

Meet China’s Gen Z

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found in Jesus Christ.

While students from Generation Z have many unique and challenging characteristics, they still need to know Christ. Student ministries may need to formulate new strategies and methodologies to connect with them, but the underlying needs and principles remain the same. With prayer, openness to new ideas, and providing unconditional love we can introduce them to Christ.

¹ Fan Wang and Yitsing Wang, “The Buzzwords Reflecting the Frustration of China’s Young Generation,” BBC World Service, June 14, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-57328508>.

² Bilibili, “The Next Wave,” <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1uk4y127x1/> accessed August 21, 2021.

³ CYANHILL CAPITAL, “GEN Z: DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS,” AOYAMA CAPITAL 2021 MID-YEAR CONSUMPTION REPORT, July 2021, Beijing, China, <https://www.36kr.com/p/1310331587281670>.

⁴ Zijia Song, “Chinese Millennials Are Giving Up the Rat Race to ‘Lie Flat,’” *Daily Beast*, July 7, 2021, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-lying-flat-took-chinas-overworked-millennials-by-storm?ref=author>

⁵ Tsun-En Lu, “Reaching the Current Generation of Chinese Students,” *Church China*, Issue #50, November 2014, <https://www.churchchina.org/>.

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International Student Ministry in China

Is There Still Hope?

By Phil Jones

To the human eye it appears that international student ministry (ISM) in China is experiencing a drought. Is there still hope?

Despite student attrition, 18 months into the pandemic there remain significant numbers of international students in China. Jesus' command to love this forgotten academic diaspora with the gospel of his grace has not changed. What is God doing, and how should we pray? Let's look at the current situation and suggest a way forward for ISM in China in the coming years.



Current Realities

Given that the last published statistics of international students in China were for the 2018–19 academic year (492,185 students), it is difficult to assess how many actually remain in the country. The November 2020 national census reported just under 220,000. Conservatively, that left 272,000 students stuck outside China at census time.

Some students escaped the COVID-19 pandemic at its onset while others left temporarily only to be locked out. Apart from the exception for South Korean students, no new international students have arrived in China since September 2019.

Those in China are fewer and have experienced severe restriction of movement which means they are not seen. Sadly, many ethnic Chinese overseas have experienced the stigma of the “China Virus” label. Ironically, within China the fear from locals, of the virus “that foreigners are bringing in,” accentuates pre-existing negative views, especially regarding African students. The vast majority of in-China international students are now from sub-Saharan African countries and the Indian subcontinent, along with South Koreans and some Russians and Central Asians.

The greatest challenges for students in the past 18 months—in China or stuck outside—have been emotional, social, and psychological. They include the isolation of quarantine, the frustration of unfair restrictions of movement, boredom, lethargy from online education, and for some, online church. Relationships have grown cold, and there are simply a lot of very lonely students. The two years that some students have been apart from their spouses or children tear at the most precious of human relationships. Being away while their home communities reeled from the pandemic's impact has made them more than ever strangers to their own land and people.

However, for all that, there is evidence of Christian students having grown in their faith during these troubled years. An Ethiopian student shared, “I have been challenged to question my beliefs as a result of the pandemic and challenges in my life. But thanks to God, that has been a great growth opportunity for me. It helped me to clarify my values and openly show my faith.” Students have testified about a deeper awareness of God's sovereignty and personal care for his people, the extent of brokenness in this world, and that “no nation or

person is greater than God.” Others have described new opportunities to share their faith.

The debilitating frustration of international students stuck outside of China can be seen by a brief search on Twitter at [#TakeUsBackToChina](#). They report psychological distress and unworkable online educational conditions with no timetable for return. So, what does the future look like?

The Forecast

Three forces interplay regarding China’s international education policy: political stability, economic growth, and global influence. No COVID-19 risk will be allowed to upset the Winter Olympics nor the November leadership changes late in 2022. Similarly, China’s enviable economic resilience and growth is protected by its closed borders. Offsetting these, but not sufficiently strong to trump them, is the long-term strategy to grow China’s soft power. [Fallon and Smith’s insightful article](#) captures the complexity of China’s public diplomacy under threat.

China might therefore not expect a significant number of in-person international students until the September 2023 intake after three full cycles of graduation/no-arrivals.

2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• February, over half of international students left China.• June, graduation departures.• September, no new arrivals.
2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• June, graduation departures.• September, no new arrivals.
2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• January, Winter Olympics.• June, graduation departures.• September, no new arrivals.• November, Communist Party power transition.
2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• June, graduation departures.

However, China’s commitment to international education enjoys top level foreign policy support backed by massive economic investment. Because of this, and despite the temporary erosion of China’s image, international students will return to China in large numbers within two to five years.

The Church’s Response

Mindful of these realities now and the possible road ahead, how might the local and global church respond? How should we pray?

For *Chinese churches*, the vastness of the country, the lack of networking between Christian leaders and the rarity of ISM as a topic of ministry makes it hard to generalize these churches’ current posture to ISM. But it seems that 2018 may have been a high point for local ISM enthusiasm. A foreigner working with a local network to grow outreach to international students shared how after an initial period of disinterest, people suddenly caught the ISM vision. (The [China consultation on ISM](#) was during this period). There was a local ISM team and a handful of local ministry interns.

Regular church members desired to befriend international students, but they often relied on this foreigner to broker the new relationships, to find the international students and create a context where they could meet

local believers. While the foreigner tried to empower these believers to carry on ISM themselves, there were no leaders who took ownership of the call and many continued to look to the foreigner for leadership and guidance. The lack of local leadership and continued dependence on a foreigner to introduce internationals raised questions about self-sustainability.

Two distinct approaches emerged as possibilities for catalyzing long-term ISM among local churches: modeling and teaching. Foreigners on the ground who are networked with local fellowships could build relationships with international students, model bridge-building and discipleship across the culture gap, and invite others into this cross-cultural training experience. Then there is teaching interested believers about overcoming barriers and designing attractive contexts as well as coming alongside leaders as consultants once churches have actually started building those friendships.

However, simultaneously in 2018 there was new pressure on unregistered churches. One previously energetic pastor who had been at the forefront of the ISM “awakening” in China sadly confessed in 2019, “If you want to talk about international students, I’ve got nothing.” Another pastor responded more recently, “The local church has too many challenges to think about international students.” And another in campus ministry said simply, “They’re not around anymore.” Indeed, the numbers of international students have dropped, but many do remain in the country. They are just less visible due to university policies restricting movement and being more stigmatized as the “foreigner who might give me the virus.” Apart from the rare exception, sadly international students basically have no interaction with local believers.

So, there was a promising high in 2018. But three factors have hampered a local take-up of ISM in China: the political context which increased pressure on churches, the lack of sustainable models of ISM, and the impact of COVID-19 on both the population and perception of foreigners.

God has allowed *international churches in China* to continue discipling and encouraging international students throughout the pandemic, although some have lost key ministry leaders or even closed. And while a few have resumed occasional in-person services, others remain entirely online because of current religious and pandemic government policies.

These multi-ethnic expressions of the universal church of Jesus are an essential, though sometimes overlooked, player of ISM in China. The commonality of experience allows people to say “I understand you” even if they are from another continent, and the melting pot of church cultures can healthily keep the gospel central. Students have testified how, through the ministry of such churches, God has grown them in their faith, their courage to reach out, and their understanding and ability to teach the Bible.

International churches may need to rethink ministry paradigms. New Christian students used to just arrive every academic year. But no new students until 2023 could catalyze these churches to be more creative and purposeful to reach the international student community, not just wait for them to come. They could also engage in deeper discipleship since numbers are reduced and explore the very real biblical themes of lament and comfort.

Local believers will always be watching their foreign brothers and sisters, ideally with strong local-foreign connections between key individuals as they seek to love international students from quite a different ministry base.

Understandably, *the global church* has been under strain in students’ home contexts with pandemic concerns. Every sphere of global mission has been impacted, whether sending members to foreign contexts or just welcoming the stranger. The worldwide church shares the Chinese churches’ obligation to love the dis-

placed and the lonely with the gospel, and to pray for ISM in China. Pre-pandemic there had been interest from ministry interns coming to China, plus mission organizations, denominations, and individuals actively contemplating this work. I have seen nothing in that regard since early 2020.

The Way Forward

So, what is the way forward? Is there still hope?

In the face of an apparent drought in China ISM *we must trust that God is at work in his time and his way*. Paul in Acts 17 spoke of how God “marked out [all the nations’] appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.” He is the same God who lovingly governs who lives when and where “so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.” Neither COVID-19 nor Chinese border policy changes caught him by surprise. Encouragingly, ISM in China is a sibling in a family of movements globally. We have seen a strengthened sense of global ISM fellowship in Lausanne WIN connections, IFES, and ACMI.

Moving forward means *adjusting to the new reality*—expecting no new students for quite some time and getting on with real discipleship and real evangelism with those settling into another year of COVID reality. It means we should not expect promising leader-quality students to just walk in the door; instead, train up those you have. There is a longer term need for online ministry models while always striving to bring people together physically. It means careful attention to the emotional, psychological, and relational toll that this set of conditions takes on international students—believers and unbelievers—and praying for practical ways of showing God’s love to those burdened. A sad reality of the pandemic context is that international students studying in Chinese universities online remain pragmatically out of reach because of time zones and the burdens of dislocated education. These include students stuck outside of China who “migrated” to online learning and new enrollments since early 2020.

If I may, I offer *a brief word to my Chinese brothers and sisters in Christ*, and especially those to whom God has given a love for the foreigner among you: opportunities abound; now is your time; do not lose this vision. Yes, the barriers of language and cultural fear are real. Yes, the burdens on the bride of Christ are heavy, but please do not neglect to love the stranger who lives in your city.

It is estimated that 85% of international students are ready to say “yes” to an invitation to build a friendship with a local. They want to learn Chinese language and culture better and crave human connection. Chinese believers, you naturally have these to offer! The door seems to be closing for foreigners to do this ministry. Many of you are passionate about missions—is ISM an answer to your prayers to influence the world for Jesus, right where you are?

I invite you, the global church, *to continue to pray* for this precious group of people, so incredibly isolated and often forgotten but immensely strategic and loved by God.

- Pray for Christian international students in China to love their friends with the gospel, to be responsive to Bible teaching, discipleship, and training inside China, especially through international churches.
- Pray for Chinese believers to notice, pray for, and courageously welcome international students—even with cultural and legal barriers, and to incorporate ISM into the mission of the local church.
- Pray for Chinese students returning from abroad to strengthen ISM in China.
- Pray that in God’s time China’s borders will open again to international students, and the Chinese and international churches there will receive them with the practical love of Jesus and the liberating news of the gospel of grace.

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China Never Left Us

By Jon Kuert

Although we were raised with a healthy awareness of the world and a respect for other cultures, China was never really on our radar. That is why it was so surprising that my first trip there in 2001 and my wife's in 2002 created such a deep and profound impact on our lives. It is not an exaggeration to say that those experiences changed everything from where we consider home, to the trajectory of our work, and to the makeup of our family through the miracle of adoption. On those first trips, our hearts were unlocked, and something buried deep was released.



Image credit: Jon Kuert.

It seemed funny to us at first that everyone who visits China does not necessarily come back with a longing to return and desire to move there. The fact is, we absolutely loved our trips to China and inevitably, two-week excursions to visit and serve with long-term workers just were not enough. We wanted to be those long-term workers! So, we did what China-smitten people do. We moved there for one year which actually turned into seven. There is still not a day that goes by that we do not reflect on those experiences with warm hearts.

Upon our return to America, we found that our passion for the place and love for the people only seemed to increase. Even though we left China, China never left us. As followers of Jesus, I think it is important we take a closer look when our hearts seem always to go in a certain direction. As the years began to stack up in America, we were reminded that the love we have for China is tethered to a calling, and even though our next step did not include a return to China (the place), God was still calling us to China (the people). We had to do something about that. So, we did what China-crazy people do. We launched a brand new campus ministry for international students from China at the beginning of a pandemic.

With our task settled and our timing flawless, the only thing left for us to consider was what to do next to actually build a ministry of this type from the ground up. Historically, a common avenue to develop meaningful relationships with international students was to meet felt and physical needs. Some furniture, an English lesson, and a ride to the grocery store was enough to get things rolling. However, the world has changed. Today, many Chinese students arrive in America and catch an Uber to their furnished apartment where Door Dash is waiting with dinner. Students possess a familiarity with US culture and life as well as the resources and information to make it here just fine.

However, what is harder to come by are unique opportunities to experience local places and connect with local people. Unfortunately, it is often the case that students come away from their university experience here in America disappointed because their time was primarily spent in classrooms, labs, and dorms while their connections were only with the Chinese student community on campus. We began to think there was room in that space for us to create unique events and make meaningful connections to help enrich the Chinese international student experience. To do this well, we have naturally drawn on our seven years of experience in China—tutoring, teaching, and spending time with students to inform our approach. Lessons learned and experiences gained in China are being put to good use in our work on campus.

Get Out

When we lived in China, we taught English on university campuses and used that platform to promote hikes and camping trips for students to get outdoors and practice English. We did it because we love the outdoors and have learned that our yielded passion and love can be an incredible way for God to accomplish his purposes in powerful ways. It was amazing to watch students bottled up in the classroom come alive outside with some fresh air to breathe and a fresh vantage point from which to view the world.



Image credit: Jon Kuert.

Every ministry has a primary on-ramp for engagement, and we have decided that for us there is none better than outdoor adventure experiences. Through our events and excursions, students are able to travel off campus and outside the city and access a release valve from the pressure and grind of education that dominates the lives of Chinese young people. An added value is the fact that active environments outdoors are also an extremely effective vehicle to form interpersonal bonds. Conversations seem easy and natural when you are walking along a trail, setting up a tent, or taking a break between climbs on a rock wall.

These types of events are evidently beneficial to our bodies and our minds, but there is also a spiritual component involved. Many people, including my wife and myself, are wired in such a way that the beauty of a sunset or the splendor of a forest can point to the Creator in ways that the inside of a classroom never can. As if that were not enough, we also discovered one additional benefit that initially we did not see coming: using the outdoors as a primary source of engagement with students is virtually pandemic proof! During year one, the only thing we *could* do was go outside with students—but thankfully, that had been our plan.

Come Over

Some of the fondest memories we have from our time in China are when our friends invited us to their parents' flat for dinner. There we would share a home cooked meal, drink tea in front of the TV, and play mah-jong after dinner. Those nights were special. It is difficult to match the intimacy reached when you are the guest in someone's home. In just a few hours friends can start to feel like family. All I know is that when we hopped on our scooter to head home after those evenings with our friends, we felt connected.

Among international student ministry workers, it is commonly understood that the majority of international students who come to study in America never share a meal or even step foot inside an American home. Some put the number of those who never get that chance at 70% or higher. This creates a huge opportunity for us as followers of Jesus to have deep and meaningful impact in the lives of international students. A critical part of our strategy is to open our home and share meals with students and encourage those in our sphere of influence to do the same. Through our outdoor adventure experiences, we are able to create breadth in our ministry, but it is in our home around the table where we experience depth.

Ask Around

When we moved to China, we attended an international church that we loved dearly. I will always remember one of our first Sundays there because it taught us a valuable lesson about collaboration. Two of the leaders, with over 40 years of mainland ministry experience between them, invited us to lunch with their families where they shared openly, offered help, and even expressed interest in what we were planning to do. Over the next seven years in that church, we found that we could retain our autonomy, but we never felt alone.

In our current ministry context, there are numerous established international student ministries with rich history, favor, and reach, and we have come in with a determination to ask questions and learn from them. Thankfully, they are willing and open to work together with us as well. If we remember that the work is God's, there is room for all of us, and we can be released to collaborate, coordinate, and develop partnerships that bring out the best in us and the best in others.

Look up

If our time in China taught us anything, it is that any meaningful work for God's kingdom is rooted in prayer. As we wrestled with our love for China and our calling to the Chinese, it was prayer that gave us the courage to take the leap and start this new work. As we strategized and determined what to do, it was in prayer that we found the wisdom to create a plan. As we struggled alone through the early days, it was prayer that brought people alongside us to share the burden and join the work. As we move forward in anticipation and excitement, we know it will be prayer that brings us into all the good things God has in store.

After his first trip to China in 2001, Jon Kuert served as the director of AFC Global for seven years and was responsible for sending teams of students and volunteers to China and other parts of Asia. After that, he and his wife Elissa moved to Yunnan province where they lived for seven years. While in China, Jon taught English and led language and leadership hikes with university students. Together, he and Elissa also established a small business initiative to help rural Chinese women in difficult life situations. Currently, Jon lives in Minnesota and is the founder and director of Nihao MN, an international student organization dedicated to enriching the Chinese student experience through outdoor adventure and meals around the table.

International Student Ministry in China: Is There Still Hope?

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Note: For a Chinese translation of this article, read [留学生事工在中国: 还有希望吗?](#)

¹ "International Student Ministry" includes ministry with international students, teachers, professors, and post-docs.

² Ministry of Education, People's Republic of China, "Statistical report on international students in China for 2018" http://en.moe.gov.cn/documents/reports/201904/t20190418_378692.html 18 April 2019. Viewed 20 July 2021.

³ National Bureau of Statistics of China, "Communiqué of the Seventh National Population Census (No. 8)" http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202105/t20210510_1817193.html 11 May 2021. Viewed 20 July 2021.

⁴ Twitter.com, <https://twitter.com/search?q=%23TakeUsBackToChina>

⁵ Maryann Xue, "Foreign students wait for green light to return to China with growing concern," *South China Morning Post*, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3139775/foreign-students-wait-green-light-return-china-growing-concern>, 4 July 2021. Viewed 20 July 2021. See also Wachira Kigotho, "China quiet about return of African foreign students" *University World News*, <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210419161154322>, 22 April 2021. Viewed 20 July 2021.

⁶ Keith Zhai and Sha Hua, "China to Keep Covid-19 Border Restrictions for Another Year" *Wall Street Journal*, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-to-keep-covid-19-border-restrictions-for-another-year-11624361777>, June 22, 2021. Viewed 20 July 2021.

⁷ Tracey Fallon and Nicholas Ross Smith, "How China's treatment of international students hurts its public diplomacy" *South China Morning Post* <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3137484/how-chinas-treatment-international-students-hurts-its-public>, 17 June 2021. Viewed 20 July 2021.

⁸ Jing Qi, "How China has been transforming international education to become a leading host of students," *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/how-china-has-been-transforming-international-education-to-become-a-leading-host-of-students-157241> 13 May 2021. Viewed 20 July 2021.

⁹ WIN stands for *Worldwide ISM Network*. IFES is the *International Fellowship of Evangelical Students*. ACMI is the *Association of Christians Ministering among Internationals*.

Phil Jones (pseudonym) and his wife have worked among international students including in China for over six years. Their passion is to see international students fall in love with Jesus Christ. Phil also serves as a Lausanne WIN (Worldwide ISM Network) Global Catalyst.

BOOK REVIEW

Chinese Students Return Home—To What?

Reviewed by BJ Arthur

“Patriots” or “Traitors”: A History of American Educated Chinese Students, by Stacey Bieler. Routledge, June, 2003. Hardcover, 496 pages, ISBN-10: 0765611864; ISBN-13: 978-0765611864. Available on [Amazon](#).

Our old hearts, burnt out by dreams,
Fell like meteors on the shore
And transformed into these rocks
That cannot be shaken by the great waves.

From “An Old Red Guard Reply,” By Ha Jin *Between Silences* (Bieler 351).

Scorched, seared, scalded in the fire of deception, they were left only with the ashes of what once seemed magnificent hopes and dreams. The young Red Guards—those who had so exultingly cheered Chairman Mao Zedong in Tiananmen Square, while thrusting aloft the little Red Book containing his oh-so-wise pronouncements—those Red guards had crashed and burned.

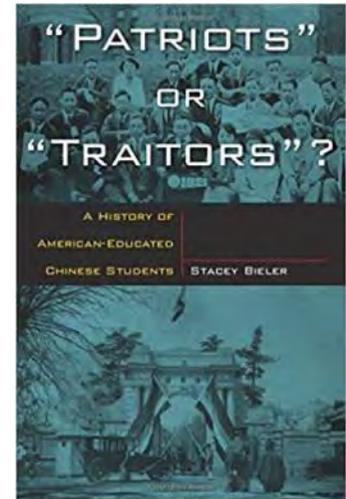
Generation after generation, the youth of China have searched for a secure anchor, a moral compass by which they might be guided in a modern world that somehow does not mesh with the mores of their home culture. In the mayhem of June 4, 1989, the man those youth in Tiananmen Square thought was their savior became their destroyer.

Today in 2021, though experiencing a prosperity previously unknown in modern China, many men and women still carry the pain of the wounds of Tiananmen within and too often see that same pain in the eyes of their aging parents. Only one segment of Chinese society has succeeded in finding a secure anchor; they succeeded not with politics or possessions but with faith in Christ.

Among those who followed Christ, some found their faith not in China, but rather on foreign shores. They were *liuxuesheng* (留学生) foreign students who had been sponsored in a variety of ways to study abroad and many of whom chose to go to the United States for that opportunity. Many were welcomed into the homes of Christians who offered to host them during their stay and help them navigate a culture very different from their own. Some of these students became fervent Christians; others chose to follow Marx and Lenin down the communist road.

The story of these adventuresome souls and the difficulties they faced upon return to their home culture in China is aptly and entertainingly told by Stacey Bieler in her work entitled *“Patriots” or “Traitors”*: A History of American Educated Chinese Students.

The title chosen by Bieler gives a clue to the book’s emphasis. She shines a spotlight on the reception experienced by the returned students as they settled back into their home locations between 1850 and 1930. They were eager to use the training and expertise they had acquired in their long hours of study abroad. However, many became discouraged when they discovered that it was impossible to directly apply what they had learned in the US to their own society; China was too many years behind the US in development. Others were shocked to be met with jealous hostility as they attempted to share their new expertise with former teachers and local government officials.



It took great patience and creativity for these returned students to find ways to use their new knowledge and training, especially those who had studied agriculture. Returned student, Jimmy Yen, wanted to design a better chicken brooder to aid Chinese chicken farmers.

One Mass Education Movement staff member with a Ph.D. from Cornell went through ten modifications before the model of brooder was “scientific,” used local materials, and was cheap—it was a mud brooder with a screen made of twigs.”¹

Humility and a true desire to serve were also required of the students. Some that had been highly regarded enough to earn the opportunity to study agriculture abroad were not eager, upon their return, to work in the relatively primitive conditions of rural China. “Zhang Fuliang, the rural reconstructionist, commented, ‘Unless he is a saint or a fanatic, the temptations of living away from the farm are too great for him to resist.’”²

In her book, Bieler shares the experiences of sixteen returned students. These include China’s liaison officer to the US Army under General MacArthur, China’s Ambassador to the US in WWII, the first Chinese woman university professor, and a General Secretary of the YMCA in Beijing c.1900—along with several less renowned students and professors. The primary research source chosen by Bieler was the *Chinese Students’ Monthly*, the first magazine published by Chinese students in the United States. It was in circulation from 1906 to 1931 and became the official publication of the enlarged Chinese student organization: The Chinese Students’ Alliance in the US. Out of this organization came many of the politically ambitious and savvy young people who very quickly became prominent citizens and filled influential posts upon their return to China.

The *Chinese Students’ Monthly* reflected the changing political make-up of the leadership of the Students’ Alliance. It sometimes sported articles favoring Chiang Kai-shek’s *Guomindang*³ and at other times revealed a distinctly Marxist inclination.

The *Monthly* stressed cooperation as the “watchword of the twentieth century”.... The small group of returned students, equipped with degrees and dreams, the power of the pen, and foreign connections found that both traditional strongholds and revolutionary rhetoric regarded liberal ideals as a threat.⁴

The “liberal ideals” referred to here are those learned and adopted in the US by the foreign students. These students had supposed that they would be teaching and implementing these new liberal ideals when they returned to China. What they encountered instead was a fierce, on-going battle between the Chinese traditionalists and the Communists, both of whom regarded Western values as traitorous.⁵

Bieler has meticulously documented her research; there are 366 pages of text, followed by 162 pages of appendices and footnotes after the epilogue. This format provides a reader-friendly work for those interested in Chinese history but not intent on doing research, yet also meets the needs of those requiring documentation for writing projects or researching individual historical persons.

What happened to the returned students that became China’s intellectuals? Bieler recounts how they did indeed crash and burn; she quotes two other works on the returned students.

Jerome Grieder labels the Chinese intellectuals’ transitions over the years: They went from “political entrepreneurs” around the time of the 1911 Revolution, to “political amateurs” during the New Culture Movement, to, finally, “victims of politics” in the 1930s onward.⁶

Bieler’s second quote is an excellent one from John Dewey, a prominent educator and philosopher in the first

half of the twentieth century. Dewey's description seems to apply to all of the returned students—even those who study in the present era in the US and then return to China:

They have been idealizing their native land at the same time they have gotten Americanized without knowing it, and they have a hard time to get a job to make a living. They have been told they are the future saviors of their country and then their country doesn't want them for anything at all—and they can't help making comparisons and realizing the backwardness of China and its awful problems. At the same time at the bottom of his heart probably every Chinese is convinced of the superiority of Chinese civilization—and maybe they are right—three thousand years is quite a spell to hold on.⁷

Patriots or Traitors: A History of American Educated Chinese Students by Stacey Bieler details three waves of students that were sent abroad to study in the fervent hope that they would strengthen and modernize their homeland upon their return. Today China is one of the lions of the world economy, intent on extending its power and influence around the world through the "Belt and Road Initiative." Although rural China is still quite primitive, urban China rivals New York City and the capitals of Europe. The nation's high school students often set the curve on international standardized tests and earn many of the seats in top American and European universities. These students go on to fill key roles as researchers and scientists in major multinational corporations.

However, there are also those who upon return to their homeland experience a disappointing reception. They find it difficult to land the kind of job they assumed would be theirs after investing in study abroad and are sometimes treated as unpatriotic by friends and neighbors. As relations between China and the US continue in a downward spiral, some returnees may hope to again leave China in search of a warmer welcome elsewhere.

¹ Bieler, 325; Quoting J.P. McVoy, *Jimmy Yen: China's Teacher Extraordinary*, 41-42.

² Bieler, 325; Quoting R. E. Stross, *The Stubborn Earth: American Agriculturists on Chinese Soil* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1986).

³ *Guomindang* was the political party founded in 1911 by Sun Yat-sen. It governed China under Chiang Kai-shek from 1928 until 1949 when the Communists took power and subsequently was the official ruling party of Taiwan.

⁴ Bieler, 334.

⁵ Bieler, 336.

⁶ Bieler, 335; Quoting Jerome Grieder, *Intellectuals and the State in Modern China*, chapters 5, 6, 8 titles.

⁷ Bieler, 344; Quoting John Dewey and Alice Chipman Dewey, *Letters from China and Japan*, 244.

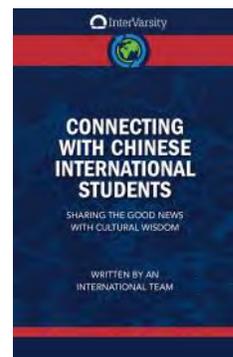
BJ Arthur (pseudonym) has lived in China for many years and was in Beijing in June 1989.

RESOURCE CORNER

Two New Resources from InterVarsity International Student Ministry

Connecting with Chinese International Students: Sharing the Good News with Cultural Wisdom. Available from InterVarsity at [Connecting with Chinese International Students Booklet - InterVarsity](#), 2021, paperback, 148 pages. Cost: US \$16.

This booklet, published just this year, and written by seventeen campus ministers, pastors, and students from China and the US, recognizes that the current generation of Chinese international students think and act differently than previous students. It seeks to answer the question of how we can minister effectively to this generation of students.



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- Part 3: Sharing Jesus
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A Chinese Christian student writes: "This booklet provides a comprehensive guide for Christians who work with Chinese international students. It not only helps readers gain a cultural and historical perspective but also offers very practical and up-to-date advice on how to walk alongside Chinese students in their faith journeys. I couldn't recommend it highly enough as an essential resource on all aspects of Chinese international student ministry" (from the book's back cover).

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- 61 color photos

A review of this booklet is available on the ChinaSource Blog, "[Connecting with Chinese International Students](#)."

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Scripture Memory Playing Cards can be used as flash cards or to share Bible verses with friends while playing card games. The verses on all 54 cards are in English (2011, NIV), Spanish (2015, NVI), and simplified Chinese (CUVS).



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