

How to pursue an academic career in China

Part Two: Adapting to academia in China





Adapting to academia in China

This ebook is the second in a two-part guide primarily aimed at those seeking to pursue an academic career opportunity in China. Some of the information will also be useful to Chinese citizens who studied overseas and are contemplating returning to China to work as an academic. While the focus is on academic careers, many of China's universities also have foreigners who work in administration, especially in the international office, as well as those involved in the teaching of English and working with the increasing number of international students that are coming to China.

What this ebook will cover:

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The Higher Education Sector in China

University level education has developed rapidly in China over the last fifteen to twenty years, and academic achievement is highly prized. The number of higher education institutions has increased drastically, with around 20 million people now attending over 2,000 universities and colleges. Over a hundred institutions carry the National Key University designation, which although no longer an official term, is still considered a mark of real prestige. Historically there was a tendency for Chinese universities to specialise in one area, but recent diversification means that even institutions whose names imply a specialism often have faculties covering completely different academic areas.

The Chinese higher education system, like higher education elsewhere, is undergoing rapid change. For example, in 2014 China announced that it would convert [600 of its universities to polytechnic type institutions](#) with a greater focus on technical and vocational areas. This was based upon a concern that China was producing too many graduates with the same basic set of general skills. Another major reform is the announced changes in China's university entrance exam designed to make it more flexible. A separate 'vocational' exam will be offered as an alternative to the traditional 'academic' gaokao. This vocational exam will be more appropriate to technical/vocational tertiary study and with less reliance on memorisation.

Universities in China

There are more than 2000 universities and colleges in China, categorised by public or private status. Public universities generally have higher entrance standards, which increase their rank and status. Although international 'league tables' will vary depending upon their adopted methodology, most would list the following among the top 10 comprehensive universities in China:

1. [Peking University](#)
2. [Tsinghua University](#)
3. [Zhejiang University](#)
4. [Fudan University](#)
5. [Nanjing University](#)
6. [Wuhan University](#)
7. [Shanghai Jiao Tong University](#)
8. [Beijing Normal University](#)
9. [Sun Yat-sen University](#)
10. [Renmin University of China](#)

In addition to comprehensive universities, there are many specialist universities, for example [China University of Political Science and Law](#) which is among the top law programs, although is not a comprehensive university like those in the general list. The universities of China are regularly assessed by independent assessors and ranked in terms of their specialist category. The tables for each category can be viewed [here](#).

Student fees and admissions

The average annual tuition fee for a domestic student in China is 4,000 to 4,500 yuan, which equates to roughly 620 to 700 US dollars. For an overseas student, the fee rises to around \$1700-3000 per annum, but can increase to over \$6000 for some science based UG courses. Fees vary greatly according to the location, prestige and whims of the university.

Admission to Chinese universities is based on students' scores in the National Higher Education Entrance Examination (known as Gao Kao). Despite being a 'national' exam, each province runs its own unique exam. The students' overall score is an average of their score in all subjects. Generally, students sit the exam at the age of 17, in their final year of high school, and it lasts for nine hours. It's a notoriously intense period of study, and arguably one of the most demanding entrance exams in the world.

UK Universities in China

In recent years, the UK and China have built very strong academic links. Some UK universities have established branches in China which offer an experience which is comparable to studying in the UK. Other universities have made partnerships with Chinese HEI's in order to create a mutually beneficial study programme. Included in this would be such institutions as [Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University](#) and [The University of Nottingham's Ningbo branch](#).

[Other Foreign Universities operating in China and in other Asian countries](#)

Courses

Chinese universities provide degrees at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and postgraduate courses are showing particular growth in availability and prestige. The majority of institutions offer taught courses in English and these are popular with both domestic applicants and international students, although over 40,000 international students travel to China to study Chinese language and culture too. Admission to university is assessed by an examination called gaokao.

Internationalising the Curriculum

Importantly for foreign academic experts is the fact that Chinese universities are increasingly internationalising their curriculum. Part of this process is to provide Chinese students with knowledge of other systems such as common law legal systems in law. This means expanded opportunities for foreign experts to come and teach and conduct research in China. To accommodate this growing internationalisation, Chinese students are enrolling in foreign languages in record numbers and an increasing number of courses taught in English, German and other languages are being offered by Chinese universities. Considering the the growing number of international students coming to China for further study, the Chinese university experience is becoming increasingly internationalised for both students and faculty alike.



Teaching in China

It is important to acknowledge that no two students are exactly alike, and no two classes, universities or even departments within a university are identical. Accordingly, the comments below are general observations that should be viewed as a rough guide only. In all cases, it is important to take people and situations as they come and adjust to individual and contextual circumstances..

The Chinese university student

Chinese students get to university only after passing a very competitive national exam for which they study intensively. These exams and Chinese education, compared say to the US, emphasise more memory work. Culturally, the Chinese highly value education and most families are willing to invest their entire savings and give all their efforts to ensuring that their child has the best possible education.

In the Confucian tradition teachers are shown the highest level of respect. For example, I had students applaud after every class. They will always step back, hold the door open and let the teacher go first through a door. If you are carrying anything, they will always ask to carry it for you.

Parents have high expectations of their children and competition for jobs and positions is very keen once they graduate. All of this makes study a very serious activity for students. Chinese university students have more contact hours than American students. They might be in class more than 30 hours a week. Therefore lecturers need to adjust and set realistic and reasonable expectations about the time students can devote to homework outside of class.

The English language challenge and class discussions

Chinese students are generally hard-working, quiet and conforming. Part of being quiet is their frustration particularly with conversational English and their desire to avoid embarrassment when their English is not spoken perfectly. While most students at post graduate level have studied English since age 5 or 6, the teaching methods deployed are often largely rote exercise, mostly in writing and with little conversation and with few native speaker examples. This presents a challenge to a foreign teacher wanting to encourage class discussion.

In general, the key is to create a class climate that is encouraging and supportive and not threatening. For the teacher seeking to encourage class participation it is worthwhile to talk about the importance of students being willing to have a go, take the risk and not worry about whether their expression is perfect.

Encouraging class discussion

Another strategy is to divide students into discussion groups and have the ones with the best language skills to report back. This takes the pressure off the students with poor language skills and keeps the class moving to ensure a sufficient amount of content is covered. This approach is particularly useful with MBA teaching in which older managers are likely to have poor English skills but greater work experience. Pairing them in groups with a younger manager with good English skills enables both to participate and removes English ability from the equation.

Allow students to be critical

The great respect and deference shown to teachers means that students are very unlikely to challenge teachers or question them. They are heavily reliant on teachers and look for them to lecture and give examples showing how a problem can be solved.

Chinese students may worry about being critical and feel they are being disloyal. It is not being unpatriotic or disloyal to be able to understand and articulate well-argued and informed criticisms. Try to be balanced in analysing the Chinese system and while noting challenges, also highlight its best features while also noting the significant improvements that have been made.

Slow down

Given the limited English ability of some students and the fact that English is their second language it is important for teachers to speak slowly and clearly. For each class, consider appointing a student whose job it is to raise their hand if they feel the lecturer is going too fast. It is also a good idea to regularly take a poll to see how many students think the lecturer may be going too quickly.

Give visual clues

It also helps to give many visual clues. Accordingly, use more slides and put more 'words' on a slide so that students may read as well as listen. Try to stick pretty close to your slides so that students are not confused and to ensure that verbal and written components augment and don't interfere with one another.

The Chinese have no equivalent to articles (the, a, an). Mandarin Chinese does not have consonant blends like bl, cl, cr, sh. This is a major challenge for native Chinese speakers when they learn English. They express tenses differently. They rely on tone and each character is a picture and a monosyllable. This contrasts to English which uses polysyllables and inflection more than tone.

Building trust by making it personal

Students are more likely to be trusting if the teacher both shares information about themselves and spends time getting to know the students. Importantly, just as the teacher is learning about China, in learning more about the personal lives of teachers, students are also learning about another culture.

A little bit of Chinese and a sense of humour go a long way

A positive relationship with your students is also nurtured by simply making the effort to be friendly and learn basic phrases such as 'hello, thank you, I understand, Do you understand?, yes, no, maybe, I'm just kidding'. A sense of humour also helps, though you should be sure the jokes are simple. For example, put up a relevant cartoon and then ask students to explain the cartoon, why it was funny and the serious point behind it that its creator was trying to make.

Theoretical vs practical

Very few Chinese university students will have had work experience. This contrasts, for example, to the US experience, where students often have many part-time casual jobs (summers and during the year) by the time they graduate from university.

This means that students' soft skills and practical understanding of the world of work (negotiation, group work, leadership, initiative, etc) are under-developed. At the same time, the students are keen to learn and relish hearing from foreign lecturers about such experiences.



TAs and class monitors

Teaching assistants (e.g. post graduate students or senior students working with first and second year students) are in common use and good ones are worth their weight in gold. They know the system and can educate their foreign teacher about the customs, procedures, and expectations. Your students will likely refer to the student assistant as 'Big Sister' or 'Big Brother'. Students who are shy or those who need an explanation in Chinese can go to the assistant who can help make the small adjustments required to build student trust and address their concerns while at the same time making teacher expectations clear.

It is also a tradition in many Chinese universities to appoint class monitors who assist the lecturer with administration and act as a class representative to ensure things go smoothly. It is important to get to know and work well with your monitor and answer questions and resolve issues before they grow into problems.

Using the Course website

Few Chinese universities have a mainstream commercial facility for facilitating teaching online such as Blackboard., which records lectures, provides a comprehensive platform for course materials, has a discussion board, and empowers online assessment and recording of student information. Many teachers get around this by setting up an e-mail account on which you can organise discussion lists, distribute Powerpoints and other materials, make announcements and answer questions. The sky drive storage capacity in Hotmail is also very useful in distributing course reading materials to students. Another strategy is to make a CD of course materials which can easily and inexpensively be distributed to all students.

Involving the outside world.

Given China's general high level of infrastructure there is great opportunity for classes in China to interact far more than they presently do with counterpart classes in other countries. This provides not only be a valuable educational exercise but it also gives students practical skills at dealing with people from other systems and cultures asynchronously across national borders.

Teacher mandated as opposed to negotiated curriculum

In Western countries, the university teacher will often negotiate a curriculum with students, but in China the teacher is the authority - students expect the teacher to teach and their job is to learn. They are generally more comfortable with clear and specific directions and structure. Being used to a more prescribed and directive approach, Chinese students sometimes get overwhelmed when, for example, they are given too much choice. They want to see models and to be shown how to do a particular thing.

Student feedback

Generally, Chinese students receive more contact time with lecturers and have 18 week semesters rather than 15, though there are many exceptions to this. Chinese students also like - and expect to receive - regular feedback. For example, they would prefer a short assignment that is returned each week rather than one long assignment at the end of the course.

Grades

With high expectations of parents and themselves, Chinese students can be obsessed with grades. Sadly, many students will opt sometimes not to enrol in a foreigner's class for fear of receiving low grades. Teachers need to be sensitive to differing grading systems. In most universities in China, and perhaps reflecting the very competitive nature of the Chinese systems, students expect to be awarded high grades, e.g. the majority in the high 80s or 90s, which is a much higher expectation than in Australia or the US. So, it is important that foreign teachers are sensitive to such differences and communicate to the students that you will follow the grading customs and protocols that they are used to.

Student administration

Every university has its own student administration procedures. This includes assessment policies and guidelines and other rules that govern student conduct. In most cases, these rules will not be available in English. Accordingly, it is important for the foreign academic to work closely with their teaching assistant and office personnel who speak English in order to make sure that rules are followed and problems avoided. It is important to remain flexible and try to be as low maintenance as possible. The team that supports teaching is very important and academics could not function without them. Accordingly, it is also wise and appropriate to show your gratitude for their efforts by bringing along some cookies, a box of chocolates or anything that indicates your appreciation of their efforts.



Student Tips

Shu, LI – Postgraduate Student

Strategies that foreign teachers do that worked well:

Use own teaching materials rather than teach exclusively from a designated book.

Such teaching materials can be abstracts of the textbook. In this sense, the slides are important instruction to students. Students prefer to read slides because they are concise and focus on the highlights.

Be aware of what students want to gain from the class.

Understanding their motivations for learning is an important step in devising an effective teaching methodology.

Speak slowly.

English is the second or third language for most of Chinese students. They are inclined to translate it to Chinese when they hear the contents.

Take various measures to motivate students.

Multimedia is a good tool. Students especially welcome hearing inspirational thoughts that encourage debate.

Focus on a comparative perspective.

Chinese students have an inclination to make a comparison when they are taught about some foreign subjects. Therefore, teachers should provide students with the comparison. Or instead, if the teacher is not familiar with the relevant Chinese provisions, he or she would ask students to give the comparison. If the teacher shows great interest in Chinese subjects or traditional conventions, students are motivated to interact with him or her.

Encourage students to convey their personal opinions.

In this sense, students will feel that they are a part of the class.



Teaching strategies

- **Use bi-cultural examples.** For example, when teaching Company Law, you might use examples of best practice as illustrated by great Chinese companies such as Alibaba and Hier. Students immediately recognise these companies and it helps build pride in their own accomplishment.
- **Show examples and sample solutions.** Chinese students are keen to copy best practice. Show them what it looks like and take them through some concrete examples so they know exactly what to expect. Show them some poor ones too so that by comparison and contrast it is clear what you expect. This is especially important in demonstrating examples of good projects and good writing.
- **Be wary of varying styles in written assignments.** In contrast to the conventional English structure of introduction, body and conclusion, with thesis and topic references in each paragraph, the Chinese style is different. The support for the major thesis is more subtle in the Chinese writing style. It is better to have a shorter word length too as a Chinese student will have to be checking each word and writing the assignment in both Chinese and English.
- **Effective teaching also recognises differences in learning style.** Use a variety of methods to explain things, including: lecture, discussions, practical demonstration, case study, debate, cartoons, film/documentary, creation of models, and so on.

- **Flowcharts and Tables.** Flowcharts are one way to assist students, especially those who are predominantly visual learners, in gaining a better understanding. It can also be a powerful tool for those who are more accustomed to seeing things represented in the form of process maps and other visual representations. Proprietary software such as VISIO or MindMaps are very helpful in developing flowcharts, though basic charting facilities come today with most software. Microsoft Excel can also be useful in preparing tables or charts.

- **Checklists** are among the oldest of tools, but are needed more than ever in today's complex world. It is not surprising that surgeries, airplane pilots and other areas of activity that require the highest levels of execution and consistency use checklists. Having students draft check lists for each chapter of the text would be an excellent exercise. Alternatively, teachers might give students a simulated example and have them draw up a checklist of all the things that must be considered. **Use peer-group work, for example, in revising/editing assignments**

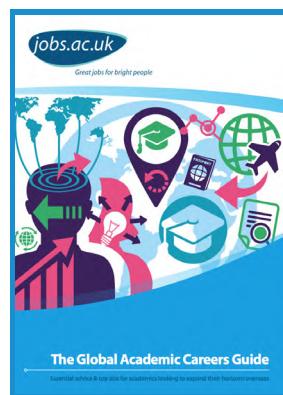
These take advantage of the fact that the best way to learn something is to have to teach it. Setting up situations where students teach and learn from each other is one of the most powerful models of learning. In fact some argue that being in a good study group is a major factor in predicting student success. Study groups can also provide emotional support and mentoring that deal with the very important, but sometimes neglected emotional aspect of learning. Remember that students may not ask questions even when they have them. Be super sensitive to small, informal gestures on the part of students that they may not understand.

Conclusion

In the end, effective teaching is as much about attitude as aptitude. It requires being sensitive to differences, doing your homework and making the continual adjustments required to make sure that students are learning and engaged. It is hoped that this reflection on the authors' experiences in university teaching will prove to be valuable. This ebook should have conveyed what an honour, privilege and joy it is to be a university teacher in China. Finally, the authors want to thank our Chinese students who taught us far more than they will ever know.



Recommended reading:



The Global Academic Careers Guide

Essential advice & top tips for academics looking to expand their horizons overseas. This ebook will tell you more about the scale of new global market, help you consider the pros and cons of seeking employment outside your nation of origin, and give you important information that will improve your success rate if you do decide to give working abroad a try.



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Eugene Clark

Eugene Clark has enjoyed many research opportunities as a result of his China experience. He has had the benefit of several excellent research assistants and library support and has been invited to be an opinion columnist for the highly influential China.Org.Cn. He has represented a Chinese organisation at the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) workshop for experts on e-commerce. He has been involved in the establishment of the Asia Academy of Comparative Law and received funding to participate in leading international conferences.



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