

CHAPTER 5

SOCIAL LIFE

In his book called *Chinese Students Encounter America*, Qian Ning (2002) is critical of what he saw among fellow Chinese students in the United States:

Studying abroad could provide an opportunity for radically broadening a person's perspective on life. In fact, however, most [Chinese] students lived very confined lives. Frequently they lived in the same place for several years. On campus they met the same people, said the same things, and even bought the same merchandise from the same stores. During holidays the same families took turns hosting get-togethers. I spent several Christmases [when American schools have a holiday period] with the same people, but in different homes. The topics of conversation were the same as those of the previous year, except that the speakers could no longer remember what they had said the year before and the listeners did not recall that they had heard it before. (p. 138)

From this account it appears that many Chinese students in the United States had less than satisfying social lives. They deny themselves opportunities to improve their English and their ability to interact with Americans and people from other cultures. This can have negative effects on their academic performance, their possibilities for obtaining financial aid, and their prospects for internships and professional employment in the United States.

This section offers ideas for those who want to avoid the mold Qian Ning describes and have a more rewarding and beneficial experience in the United States. This section has four main parts:

- 5.1 Distinguishing Features of American Campus Life
- 5.2 Special Challenges for Chinese
- 5.3 Helpful Social Skills
- 5.4 Learning the Helpful Social Skills

5.1. Distinguishing Features of American Campus Life

Several features of American campus life deserve attention:

- 5.1.1 Freedom
- 5.1.2 Stratification
- 5.1.3 People's Busyness
- 5.1.4 Friends vs. Acquaintance
- 5.1.5 Students' Social Lives
- 5.1.6 Male-Female Relations
- 5.1.7 Gay Life

- 5.1.8 Presence of Disabled People
- 5.1.9 Limited Role of Gifts

5.1.1 Freedom

As is clear from their politicians' speeches, Americans prize "freedom." This "freedom" means living without significant constraints on their behavior. In the political area "freedom" means the relative absence of governmental regulation of their lives. In the social area, it means the relative absence of confining roles and expectations. Compared with Chinese culture, the U.S. culture provides relatively few prescribed roles and clearly defined boundaries for social behavior. This has implications for students' social lives. See Sec. 5.1.5.

5.1.2 Stratification

Whenever a large group of people occupy a particular space over a period of time, they tend to associate more with those who resemble themselves. On a U.S. campus, one can find evidence of groupings based on several points of similarity. Some examples:

Age. Undergraduate students rarely associate with graduate students. "Returning students," that is, older people who have become students later in life, rarely associate with younger students.

Socio-economic status. Students from wealthy families typically find themselves more comfortable around other "better off" students. This may be reflected in the "Greek system," where social fraternities and sororities may attract undergraduate students with wealthy parents.

Place of origin. Undergraduates, in particular, may gravitate toward other students who come from the same city, town, or high school. Chinese students strongly gravitate toward others from China. If the number of students from China is significant, they tend to develop informal groups based on the part of China from which they come—those from the Beijing area, the Shanghai area, and so on. Chinese students may also form informal groups based on field of study.

Field of study. Particularly among graduate students, field-of-study becomes a point of attraction to others.

Gender. Although males and females may associate more freely with each other on U.S. campuses than at universities in many other countries, it is still the case that students are more likely to socialize with others of their own gender. Beneath that, though, is the unspoken assumption that many if not most people would prefer to be with someone of the opposite sex.

Religion. Some students, particularly undergraduates who have a strong religious background, associate mainly with others of the same religion.

Interests. Some students, particularly undergraduates who have a strong affiliation with a sports team, social club, or musical ensemble, associate mainly with members of the same organizations.

Race. One may see more intermingling of races on some campuses than others, but in general students with particular racial backgrounds—blacks, Hispanics, American Indians, and of course foreign students—are likely to gravitate toward each other. Chinese students, generally raised to believe that the Han Chinese have a superior way of life, seem markedly inclined to associate only with each other (and preferably with others from their own parts of China, which they consider superior to other parts). Also, Chinese and many other Asian students seem to have strong, negative ideas about non-white people. There may be an element of fear in Chinese students' views of Black Americans. Some Chinese students take advantage of their time in the United States to become acquainted with individual non-white people. This helps them learn the limitations of some of their stereotypes.

5.1.3 People's Busyness

U.S. students are typically very "busy." Undergraduate students often have part-time jobs in addition to their studies. Some even have two or three part-time jobs to earn money to support their studies.

Graduate students have large quantities of material to study, and may also have jobs (graduate assistantships and others) and families.

This busyness limits their time for social activity and for incorporating new people into their social circles.

5.1.4 Friends vs. Acquaintances

Many Chinese and other foreigners in the United States come to believe that friendships among Americans tend to be shorter and less intense than those in their own countries. They notice that Americans tend to "compartmentalize" their friendships, having their "friends from class," "friends from home," a "tennis friend," and so on. Some Americans have what they call "friends with benefits" or "friends-plus." These are people with whom they share sexual activity even though they do not have an exclusive or long-term commitment to each other.

While some American students have close friends--people with whom they share intimate thoughts and feelings and with whom they share a deep sense of obligation--such relationships seem less common among Americans than among people in many other societies. Many of the people Americans call their "friends" would be called "acquaintances" elsewhere. Americans are likely to know many people, but not be especially close to them.

U.S. students tend to spend spare time with their friends (or acquaintances) rather than alone, unless they are shy individuals who prefer solitude. Several factors inhibit the development of relationships between U.S. students and students from other countries.

Among them:

- Cultural differences. See Sec. 3.2.
- Stereotypes. See Sec. 3.4.6.
- Language barriers
- Fear of people who are “different”
- Fear of being embarrassed
- Lack of perceived or real common interests
- Differing ideas of what is “fun” (see Sec. 5.1.5.1) or otherwise desirable for social activities
- Finances: Americans seem more willing than Chinese to spend money on social, recreational, and social activities.

As a result of all this, on most campuses foreign students tend to socialize more with students from their own or other countries than with Americans.

5.1.5 Students’ Social Lives

- 5.1.5.1 “Fun”: Going Somewhere, Doing Something
- 5.1.5.2 Weekdays vs. Weekends
- 5.1.5.3 Gathering Places
- 5.1.5.4 Organized Group Activities
- 5.1.5.5 Getting Together with Other People
- 5.1.5.6 Parties
- 5.1.5.7 Role of Alcohol
- 5.1.5.8 Role of Religion

5.1.5.1 “Fun”: Going Somewhere, Doing Something

The unstated purpose of most U.S. students’ social life is to have “fun.” For them, social life entails going somewhere outside their house or apartment and “doing something,” such as drinking alcoholic beverages (see Sec. 5.1.5.7) in a bar or at a party, participating in some sport or recreational activity, seeing a movie, having a picnic, going to a concert, or at least taking a walk. “Just staying home” and “visiting” or “playing games” would be the last resort of most Americans who want to socialize.

Chinese students are likely to have different ideas about what is “fun” and how important it is to have fun in one’s regular life.

What Americans Do for Fun

“What American do for fun does not go well with me,” said a female graduate student from China. “They go to bars and parties to socialize. They play baseball and softball. However, I play table tennis and badminton. In many ways, I don’t feel integrated into the society.”

5.1.5.2 Weekdays vs. Weekends

American students and Americans in general have the idea that weekends are the time for socializing. Weekdays and evenings are reserved for studying or some other more serious activity.

Traditionally, “the weekend” meant Friday night, Saturday daytime and evening, and Sunday daytime. Among undergraduate U.S. students, though, “weekend” may now include Thursday night (and sometimes even Wednesday night as well). So they might go “out” for three consecutive nights—Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.

Graduate students in general have more responsibilities and presumably more maturity, so their socializing is more likely to be limited to Friday nights and Saturdays.

5.1.5.3 Gathering Places

A large amount of socializing among U.S. students takes place in bars and involves drinking alcoholic beverages. (To Americans, the word “drinking” refers to consuming alcoholic beverages.) See Sec. 5.1.5.7.

Students from other countries generally seem far less interested in drinking, at least in public places, than U.S. students are. This fact erects a significant barrier to socializing between American and foreign students, and serves to drive foreign students toward each other for social activities.

Other common gathering places, besides bars, are recreation facilities, parks, and places to eat.

5.1.5.4 Organized Group Activities

Many free or low-cost activities take place on U.S. campuses, and participating in them can lead to conversations with Americans. These include lectures, film showings, readings of literature or poetry, musical performances, and intramural sports.

Student organizations form around a wide array of interests, including chess, Go (on campuses with many Asian students), martial arts, soccer, hiking, biking, folk dancing, various political issues or viewpoints, field-of-study or vocational areas, and many, many others. The web site of the school you will attend probably has a list of student organizations. Also you can get information about recreational activities and facilities.

Many religious organizations have clubs or activities aimed at students. See Sec. 5.1.5.8. Some groups of students meet regularly for Bible study. Many Chinese students join a Bible-study group even if they are not Christians because the group gives opportunities for meeting people, improving English, and getting to know Americans in a setting without alcohol and loud noise.

Local libraries may have readings, film showings, or lectures of general interest. Book stores often have readings of poetry, literature, or non-fiction.

5.1.5.5 Getting Together with Other People

Their concern with “freedom” (see Sec. 5.1.1.) leads to two patterns of behavior that Chinese students often notice: (a) a reluctance to make social commitments and (b) vague and shifting definitions in acquaintanceships, friendships, and dating relationships.

U.S. students tend to make social commitments only at the last minute. Many Americans want to have the freedom to do what they want, when they want, in order to maximize their chance of having “fun.” Chinese students sometimes feel frustrated by this approach. They feel personally insulted because they interpret it as a sign that the Americans are not truly interested in them.

The Americans’ vague and shifting definitions related to acquaintances, friendships, and dating or romantic relationships also bewilder Chinese students. U.S. students use the term “friend” very loosely, as mentioned in Sec. 5.1.4. They do not always clearly define their dating relationships as a monogamous couple relationship, even if they are sexually active together. They might have one or more friends with whom they have sex; calling them “friends with benefits” or “friends plus.” If asked about their availability for dating, they might say they are “seeing someone,” which is a vague term that can mean they are monogamously involved, casually dating a “friend with benefits,” or regularly but not exclusively dating someone. In such instances, monogamy is not necessarily expected or desired by either or both of the individuals. This fluidity in relationship definitions can be very perplexing and dismaying to someone from a culture that values clearly defined relationships between people.

5.1.5.6 Parties

Both undergraduate and graduate U.S. students have “parties” to socialize. The typical American party consists of people talking in small groups or pairs while drinking beer or wine (see Sec. 5.1.5.7 on “Role of Alcohol”) and perhaps snacking on some dry food or “chips and dip.” They might also play beer-drinking games that involve cards, ping pong balls, or other equipment. Music may be playing loudly.

Academic department receptions and parties often feature beer or wine, as well.

Many of the people at these parties may be strangers to each other. When invited to a party, Americans are relatively unlikely to ask, “Who will be there?” They are accustomed to meeting strangers and starting conversations with them. The parties usually do not include games or large-group interactions. So individuals must take the initiative to introduce themselves to strangers and talk with them. See “Meeting People” in Sec. 5.3.”

Many Chinese students find these parties boring or stressful. Chinese tend to be more accustomed to *dinners* as a way to get together with friends or acquaintances. Few if any strangers will be at a dinner. The atmosphere may be quieter and conversations deeper than at a typical U.S. student party.

If you avoid American students' parties, you will severely limit your chances of meeting non-Chinese people.

Note that children are usually not invited to student parties.

5.1.5.7 Role of Alcohol

The quantity of "drinking" and drunkenness on U.S. campuses is a major concern of educators and health officials. Many U.S. students, particularly undergraduates but graduate students as well, use bars as their main place to get together with friends or acquaintances. Among undergraduates, particularly younger ones, drinking with the aim of getting drunk is often a key component of social life. This is truer of males than of females, but females are not excluded.

Police are kept busy during the early-morning hours when bars close, as students under the influence of alcohol leave the bars and sometimes engage in fighting or other destructive activities.

Generally, groups of foreign students who drink (meaning that they are consuming alcoholic beverages) do so in students' rooms or apartments rather than in bars or other public places.

Chinese students who want to socialize with Americans but who do not want to drink alcohol can go to bars for conversation (although the noise level can make it difficult to hear others talking and the cigarette smoke can be irritating). They can drink something non-alcoholic or not drink anything. (A good strategy is to order a club soda with a lime twist, which looks like an alcoholic drink called a gin and tonic and will give the appearance that you are drinking alcohol. People who are drinking often feel more relaxed talking with other people who they think are also drinking.)

5.1.5.8 Role of Religion

Generalizing about the role of religion in U.S. students' social lives is difficult. At some church-affiliated colleges and universities, most students participate in religious services and in social activities related to their religion or involving others of their religion.

Religion seems to play a larger role in social and community life in the southern and southwestern parts of the United States and in some small towns in other parts of the country.

On most if not all campuses there are student organizations and activities based on people's religious beliefs and memberships. Some of these organizations make special efforts to attract students from other countries, sometimes but not always trying to "convert" those students to their denomination's point of view.

"Chinese churches" and Bible-study groups conducted in Chinese are fairly common on larger campuses with many students from China. Participants may or not consider themselves Christians. Many do consider themselves Christians, but many participate for the companionship rather than the spiritual message.

5.1.6 Male-Female Relations

Male and female American students associate with each other rather freely. (This does not mean they are all readily available for sexual activity, as the media sometimes imply, although an estimated 75 percent of U.S. undergraduates are sexually active.) Many view "the college years" as a natural time in life for finding a spouse. Even if they are not seeking a marriage partner, they try to become acquainted with members of the opposite sex. They may do this in pairs or in small groups. See Sec. 5.1.5.5 for more discussion of male-female relations.

5.1.7 Gay Life

"Gay" is a colloquialism for homosexual, a person whose feelings of sexual attraction are toward members of their own sex. (A "lesbian" is a homosexual woman. A "bisexual" is a person who feels attraction toward members of both sexes.)

On many U.S. campuses gay students are becoming more open and visible. So are gay faculty and staff members. There may be organizations of gay and bisexual students, and even an organization of gay professional people. This can come as a shock to Chinese students, who (like many others) come from a place where open homosexuality is uncommon. Many Chinese students have never been aware of anyone around them who was gay. For them the opportunity to become acquainted with gay people and learn about the issues they face can be very enlightening.

One thing to be learned is that with very rare exceptions gay people do not try to encourage heterosexual people to experiment with gay life.

5.1.8 Presence of Disabled People

Students from China and most other countries are often startled to see on U.S. campuses people who are in wheelchairs, are blind and have a dog leading them from place to place, or are otherwise "physically challenged."

Various federal, state, local, and institutional laws and policies prohibit discrimination against disabled people. The disability may be physical (for example, having paralyzed

legs, blindness, or deafness) or mental (for example, depression, schizophrenia, or a learning problem such as dyslexia or attention-deficit disorder).

Thus, disabled people are to be found among the students, staff, and faculty of most if not all U.S. institutions of higher education. And like other U.S. institutions, colleges and universities are required to provide special accommodations to give disabled people equal access to their facilities. These include ramps, designated parking spaces, “cuts” in sidewalks, lifts on busses, and wheelchair-accessible rest rooms.

5.1.9 Limited Role of Gifts

Americans give gifts mainly to relatives and close friends. Sometimes they give gifts to people with whom they have casual but friendly relationship, such as hosts or hostesses. Gifts are *not* usually given to teachers or others who hold an official position. Offering gifts in these situations is sometimes interpreted as an effort, possibly improper, to gain favorable treatment from that person. However, if a gift is given in an appropriate manner, Americans usually accept it graciously.

Christmas is the only national gift-giving day, when most Americans, with the exception of some adherents of non-Christian religions, give gifts. Otherwise, gifts are given on occasions that are special to the recipient--birthdays, graduation from high school or college, weddings, and child-births. Gifts are sometimes given when someone has a new house or is moving away.

Americans give cards rather than gifts to acquaintances who are not close friends. This is especially true at Christmas, when people commonly send cards to their acquaintances and business or school colleagues.

Americans generally try to select a gift that the giver knows or supposes the recipient needs, wants, or would enjoy. The amount spent on the gift is something the giver can afford. Generally, people on limited budgets are not expected to spend large amounts on gifts.

Americans will unwrap a gift in the presence of the giver, and will normally express strong appreciation for it. This is considered polite.

Obviously, many of these practices differ from typical Chinese practices. Chinese students will want to be aware of these American customs, and, in particular, to be cautious about giving gifts to people in official positions.

5.2. Special Challenges for Chinese

Since the cultural differences between Chinese and Americans are so significant, Chinese students find many special challenges in their social lives on U.S. campuses:

- 5.2.1 Stereotypes
 - 5.2.2 Having Appropriate Expectations
 - 5.2.3 Using English
 - 5.2.4 Taking the Initiative
 - 5.2.5 Separating from Other Chinese
 - 5.2.6 Apparent Absence of Guidelines for Interaction
 - 5.2.7 Distinguishing between Superficial Friendliness and Genuine Interest
 - 5.2.8 Finding People to Talk With
 - 5.2.9 Finding Potential Romantic Partners
 - 5.2.10 Race
 - 5.2.11 Domestic Issues

5.2.1 Stereotypes

People's over-generalized ideas about other people interfere with developing relationships. Stereotypes contribute to unjustified hopes, unjustified fears, misinterpretations, and misunderstandings.

Most Americans have stereotyped ideas about Chinese students (see Sec. 3.4.6). Chinese students, in turn, have their stereotypes about Americans, often considering them loud, aggressive, clever, superficial, and untrustworthy. Chinese often have a very negative stereotype of Black Americans, and they have negative stereotypes of some of the other nationality groups they find on U.S. campuses.

Having stereotypes seems normal and unavoidable for human beings, even though stereotypes have many undesirable results. It helps you to *be aware of your stereotypes*. It helps to *be willing to change and refine your stereotypes* as you interact more with individual member of a "foreign" group. Through the interactions you will come to see at least some of them as individuals rather than as representatives of a category of people.

5.2.2 Having Appropriate Expectations

Chinese and other foreign students in the United States sometimes arrive with unrealistic expectations about "friends." They expect to make friends quickly. They expect to have "friends" of the kind they left behind.

The reality for most Chinese and other foreign students is that making new friends takes time—not just days or weeks, but many months or even years. And most find it easier to become friends with other students from their own or another country.

Part of the explanation for this lies in the expectations Chinese students sometimes hold about "friends." Americans often feel "too close" or worry that a friend is "too dependent" if they see or talk to that person every day, as Chinese might expect friends to do.

In addition, many Americans do not like to make social commitments far in advance. This does not usually reflect their feelings about a particular friendship. But Chinese students often feel unimportant and disrespected by friends who wait until the last minute to make social plans with them.

Despite the many difficulties, Chinese students who do develop close relationships with Americans usually find that the effort has many rewards.

5.2.3 Using English

Having a social life outside the Chinese community requires using English, whether one's companions are Americans or people from other non-Chinese-speaking places. For a variety of reasons (see Sec. 2.3) many Chinese students have difficulty improving their English after they get to the United States.

Several ways to improve English are available to Chinese students in the United States. See Sec. 2.4. Those who want to develop relationships outside the Chinese community will probably need to study and practice English regularly.

5.2.4 Taking the Initiative

As psychologist Richard Brislin suggests (see box in Sec. 3.2.2), students from China may not have experience initiating social interaction with strangers. They may not be comfortable introducing themselves to new people or starting and maintaining a conversation with them. Unless they take some initiative, though, they are likely to be left out of conversations and social activities.

5.2.5 Separating from Other Chinese

Even if they want to, many Chinese students find it difficult to leave the safety of the Chinese community. Leaving requires the courage to take initiative with Americans or people from elsewhere. It also requires the courage to act against the pressure from other Chinese to remain within the community. Chinese (like Americans when they are overseas) tend to take a negative view of other Chinese who make it a point to spend time with the locals and try to get to know them well.

5.2.6 Apparent Absence of Guidelines for Interaction

Traditional China is a place of harmonious social interactions. People have roles to play (see first box in Sec. 3.2.1) and they know the rules and guidelines for those roles, so they know how to act. They know what to say (see the box on the next page) in many different situations.

They Say the Same Things

“Visitors to China eventually notice the endless repetition of exactly the same courteous phrases,” writes Carolyn Matalene (1985), an American who taught writing in China. She continued:

But visitors also notice that the Chinese always seem to know how to behave: they have memorized the fixed and traditional forms of Chinese culture—the *li* or the way—along with the set phrases and the characters of the Chinese language. (p. 793)

The Americans also have some guidelines for behavior. Like the Chinese, they have set phrases—but not very many of them. They have what they call “manners,” referring to informal rules for certain social situations.

But, compared with traditional China, Americans have very few guidelines for interacting with others. This can cause considerable stress for Chinese (and some other Asian) students, who are likely to assume there are guidelines when there are none. Much more often than Chinese, Americans rely on spontaneous comments and actions when they are with other people. They use humor more often than Chinese typically do, often mystifying Chinese visitors who do not understand either what makes a “joke” funny or what role joking plays in social interactions.

5.2.7 Distinguishing between Superficial Friendliness and Genuine Interest

Chinese and other foreign students in the United States often feel misled and even betrayed by Americans who seem so friendly at first but then turn out to be uninterested and perhaps cold and distant.

Most Americans will fairly readily meet new people in a warm, friendly manner. They will smile, say hello, introduce themselves, and carry on a friendly-seeming conversation about some simple topic.

Later, though, those same Americans may forget entirely about the interaction, and not even remember they have met the new person.

This leads some foreigners to conclude that the Americans are superficial, devious, dishonest, “not really human.”

Foreigners need to realize that the initial, warm greeting and conversation is part of a social ritual. It does not normally convey, to other Americans, any special interest or any intention to pursue the relationship later.

Foreigners need to pay particular attention to what is said in these initial conversations. If the conversation goes into some detail about people’s personal situations, or if it contains

explicit statements about seeing each other again, then the foreigner can suppose the American has genuine interest in meeting again.

Otherwise, the apparent friendliness is simply polite behavior.

5.2.8 Finding People to Talk With

Foreigners anywhere may have difficulty finding local people to have conversations with. The difficulty might be greater in the United States than in many other places, because Americans are so “busy.” Also, Americans tend to be cautious about getting involved with other people. And they do not place a high value on being good hosts in the way people in some other parts of the world do.

Foreigners in the United States typically find it easier to get to know people from their own or other countries than with Americans.

5.2.9 Finding Potential Romantic Partners

A common complaint among male Chinese students in the United States is that there are not enough Chinese females available. This may be one reason why newly-admitted Chinese students who are in a position to do so marry before they leave China and arrange to have their spouses join them as soon as possible.

Most male-female relationships on U.S. campuses involve people of the same race, religion, and socio-economic level. But interracial, inter-religious, and intercultural relationships certainly do exist. When Chinese are involved in intercultural relationships it is far more often an American male and a Chinese female than an American female and a Chinese male. While many Americans view Chinese women as desirable romantic partners, they rarely regard Chinese males in that way. This seems partly due to the stereotype of Chinese men being sexist, controlling, and unromantic. Chinese men who are outgoing and persistent can sometimes overcome these stereotypes.

At any rate, Chinese men are often left looking in vain for Chinese females with whom to socialize and perhaps develop a romantic relationship.

5.2.10 Race

Racial prejudice is a part of life everywhere. Generally speaking, Han Chinese, like people in many other places, are raised to see themselves as superior to other people. This makes them prejudiced against non-Han Chinese and against nearly everyone else. They seem particularly prejudiced against dark- or black-skinned people.

When they arrive in the United States, many Chinese students have their first experience as “victims” of racism, because they are in a country where the local people think *they* are superior (except, perhaps, in the area of mathematics!). Chinese students may find

themselves being overlooked, singled out for special scrutiny, and generally not taken seriously.

He Hung Up the Phone

“Once I called [the state Motor Vehicle Department] to get some information about car registration,” A Chinese graduate student said. “The guy [who answered the phone] was very much annoyed when I did not catch him well. When I asked politely, ‘would you please repeat that?’ he hung up the phone.”

And of course Chinese students see racism in the way some white Americans treat non-whites.

5.2.11 Domestic Issues

Three domestic issues occur reasonably frequently among Chinese students in the United States: marital problems, tensions with visiting parents, and domestic violence.

Marital Problems. Married Chinese students often arrive alone in the United States and arrange to have their spouses join them later. Tensions resulting from the separation, from the demands on the student, from the spouse’s inability to work, her separate needs and interests, and from the stress and expense of living in a new culture can cause serious problems in a marriage. Divorces among Chinese students in the United States are not rare.

Tensions with Visiting Parents. Chinese students fairly often invite their parents to visit them in the United States, often to help care for a new baby. The visit is likely to occur after the students have become accustomed to having more space and privacy than they had at home.

The visits frequently last a half a year or longer. During this time, everyone lives in a small space, the student and spouse (who has often become a student too) are very busy, and the parents are away from their friends and living in a strange place where they do not know the local language. The parents are often quite unhappy living under these conditions. Their unhappiness can affect the entire family.

Domestic Violence. Most U.S. states have laws against “domestic violence.” These laws tend to be strictly enforced. Under these laws, people who physically injure their spouses are taken to jail and are subject to legal proceedings. Thus, hitting one’s spouse is likely to cause major problems in the United States.

5.3 Helpful Social Skills

As social psychologist Richard Brislin observes (see the box in Sec. 3.2.1), people in an individualist society need some “social skills” that are less important in collectivist

societies. People everywhere can use social skills, of course, but the kinds of situations they encounter and the skills they need may vary.

Social skills that will help Chinese students in the United States include the following, each of which is discussed briefly below:

- 5.3.1 Attending to Personal Hygiene
- 5.3.2 Meeting People
- 5.3.3 Managing Conversations
- 5.3.4 Attending to Nonverbal Behavior
- 5.3.5 Handling Disagreement and Conflict
- 5.3.6 Developing Relationships
- 5.3.7 Knowing the Social Don'ts

5.3.1 Attending to Personal Hygiene

Many people from other countries are struck by the Americans' strong sensitivity to body and breath odors. Americans may quickly back away from a person who has "body odor" or "bad breath," and they are likely to try to avoid that person in the future.

If you want to avoid these negative reactions from Americans, you may want to consider:

- brushing your teeth two or more times daily
- changing your clothes each day
- taking a shower in the morning before going to school
- taking a shower in the evening if you plan to be in public

An especially sensitive topic among Americans is women's body hair. Most American women shave the hair in their armpits and on their lower legs. Many Americans react negatively to the sight of a woman with unshaved armpits and legs. Women from countries where shaving is not the custom face a very personal decision about whether to follow the American custom.

5.3.2 Meeting People

Americans have typical ways of finding people to talk with and perhaps develop relationships with. Chinese students can use these same approaches, which are discussed in Sec. 5.4.4.

Once you find people to talk with, you will need to be able to *introduce yourself to a stranger* and *have some conversation topics ready*.

Introducing yourself normally involves looking the other person in the eye at least briefly, smiling, and saying something like, "Hello. My name is XXX. I am YYY."

For example: "Hello. My name is Yao Ming. I am a basketball player."

Or, more informally, “Hi. I’m Bill Clinton. I’m a retired president.”

If you are a male meeting another male, you should shake hands with the person. Females may or may not shake hands, based on their preferences. If a female offers her hand to shake, you should shake it. Americans regard a “firm handshake” as a sign of sincerity and a “weak handshake” as a sign of a weak personality.

If Americans have trouble understanding or pronouncing your name, be ready to help them. “It’s pronounced like ‘Joe.’” Or, “You can call me ‘Joe.’” Many Chinese students use English-language names so that Americans can remember them.

Once you have given your name and heard the other person’s name, you need to *have some conversation topics ready*, as discussed in Sec. 2.4. You can use one of your prepared topics, or you can simply follow up on what the person you just met says about himself or herself.

You will quickly learn that Americans do not normally carry business or name cards. Professional people usually have cards with them in “professional” situations or social situations attached to their work, but in general you cannot expect a card that would help you learn or remember someone’s name.

5.3.3 Managing Conversations

Once you have located someone to talk to, you need the skills for what linguists call “conversation management.” These include the abilities to *start a conversation*, *continue a conversation*, and *end a conversation*.

One common way to *start a conversation* is to *ask a question* based on what the person has told you about himself or herself. For example, ask Yao Ming how his knees are feeling after so much running and jumping. Ask Bill Clinton if he has taken any interesting trips lately.

You can also use one of the common American “small talk” topics--the weather, whatever it was you had in common that brought you to the place where you are talking, or some current event. You can ask about one of your prepared topics. Or you can say something like, “I am new here and am not sure what to talk about in a situation like this. What would be a good thing to talk about now?”

Be aware that Americans do not have the idea, common in traditional Chinese culture, that it is impolite to ask too many questions when two people meet for the first time. On the contrary, Americans consider it natural and appropriate to ask and answer questions when they meet a new person. In their minds they are not being rude; instead, they are showing their interest. The new person, to show interest, is expected to ask questions too.

Probably the easiest way to *continue a conversation* is to ask the other person questions based on what you have learned about him or her, or on something he or she has just said. Of course you can add your own opinions or information.

To *end a conversation*, you can offer some reason for closing the conversation (“I want to get some more to eat.” “I need to meet a friend now.” “I see someone over there I have been looking for.”) Then express a common phrase for conversation-ending, such as “I enjoyed talking with you.” Shake hands again if you shook hands when you first met, and then walk away.

5.3.4 Attending to Nonverbal Behavior

Nonverbal behavior is too complicated a topic to discuss in detail here. It includes any aspect of behavior that conveys some message but that is not expressed in words.

Examples:

- Your tone of voice
- How you dress
- How you smell (See Sec. 5.3.1.)
- Your posture (erect, slouched, etc.)
- Expressions on your face (smiles, frowns, etc.)
- Where you direct your eyes while you are talking
- How near the other person you stand or sit
- Whether you touch the other person and, if you do, where and how you touch

The first step in learning the nonverbal patterns of other groups of people is to be aware of what these elements are. Then you can begin to pay attention to them and learn what the local people do.

5.3.5 Handling Disagreement and Conflict

Chinese traditionally make great effort to avoid open conflict or disagreement with another person. While in general Americans may be more open and direct than Chinese, they are usually uncomfortable with open conflicts and disagreements. They will try to avoid topics they expect to bring out differences of opinion on important matters.

If conflict and disagreement arise, Americans may laugh lightly and say something like, “Well, I guess we don’t agree about that,” and then change to another subject.

Of course, some people are more argumentative than others, and will pursue controversial topics and seem to enjoy an open disagreement.

5.3.6 Developing Relationships

Generally speaking, Americans are cautious about getting into close relationships with other people, including other Americans. They value independence, privacy, and self-reliance. They generally do not want to become dependent on other people or have other

people dependent on them. This contrasts noticeably with the Chinese orientation, in which interdependence with other people is generally considered necessary and desirable.

In principle, developing an intercultural relationship requires sensitivity to a number of factors, including:

- the reasons people are seeking relationships in the first place
- what it is that draws people toward each other
- the pace at which relationships can comfortably develop
- the steps or phases in relationship-development, that is, what people do and talk about as their relationship becomes closer
- the limitations people put on the extent of their involvement in other peoples' lives

5.3.7 Knowing the Social Don'ts

Americans will generally tolerate a fairly wide range of behaviors, but there are certain things anyone dealing with Americans will want to avoid.

Do not ask about personal financial matters such as the cost of something a person bought or the amount of a person's income. Chinese may readily discuss these matters, but Americans regard them as intensely private.

Do not ask other people, particularly women, how old they are or how much they weigh.

Do not argue too vigorously (with raised voice and conspicuous gesturing), or Americans will assume you are too opinionated, are unable to "control yourself," or might become violent.

Do not accept an invitation to go to someone's house and then not go. If you genuinely cannot or do not wish to go to a home to which you have been invited, say "no, thank you" to the invitation. Do not say "yes" and then fail to appear. Nor should you take a friend with you unless the friend has also been invited. When you receive an invitation, you can ask, "May I bring a friend?"

Take care not to emit strong body or breath odors. Americans are often "put off" by the smells of garlic and cooking oil that surround students from China. Follow bathing, tooth-brushing, and laundry habits that will minimize these odors. See Sec. 5.3.1 for more on this topic.

5.4 Learning the Helpful Social Skills

5.4.1 Observe Americans Interacting

5.4.2 Get ready

5.4.3 Get into Helpful Situations

5.4.4 Practice

5.4.5 Ask Questions

5.4.1 Observe Americans Interacting

Some Americans (like people in China or anywhere else) are more socially active and more socially skilled than others. Probably you can identify those who seem more at ease in social situations. If you cannot, you can ask Americans to help you identify individuals who are “popular” or “good with people.” Then watch them and listen to them as they interact with others. What expressions do they have on their faces? Where do they direct their eyes when they talk to someone? How do they start, maintain, and end a conversation? How loudly do they talk? With what tones of voice? How close do they get to other people?

Observe them carefully, and try to use their behaviors yourself. You might even be able to ask them to help you, since they are ones who are good at doing what you want to do.

5.4.2 Get Ready

“What should I talk about?” foreigners often wonder when they want to talk with local people. If you want to talk with Americans or people from other countries, you will want to have some topics ready. They can be *topics of general interest to people in cross-cultural situations* (see Sec. 2.4). Or they can be *topics based on current events or issues*. Read the campus newspaper, or listen to the news on radio or television. Be ready to ask people’s opinions about what you read or hear there.

5.4.3 Get into Helpful Situations

You cannot meet new people or develop a social life if you spend all your time in your room, the library or laboratory, and classrooms. You need to get yourself into situations where interacting with new people is a natural thing to do.

Attend social activities such as receptions, parties, picnics, and open houses, where people go with the intention of socializing. Encourage your spouse to do the same.

Attend public events such as lectures and performances, where you can talk with other people who share your interest in being there.

Join an organization based on some interest of yours—academic, avocational (that is, related to a hobby such as photography or dancing), sport, service, or any other. Take an active part in the organization. Be on a committee; help plan an event; do things to enlarge your chance to be around other people.

Volunteer at a campus or community organization that uses volunteers to carry out its activities. The local public library can be a good place to start, either to volunteer there or to get information about other possibilities in your location.

Find a mentor, someone who will agree to spend some time with you regularly, sharing activities, talking with you, answering your questions.

Take Advantage of Casual Opportunities. Some ideas for arranging informal conversations are in Sec. 2.4.

5.4.4 Practice

Some people find it helpful to prepare for future situations by practicing in advance what they will say and do. You can practice in front of a mirror or with another person. You can practice looking a person in the eye, shaking hands, introducing yourself, asking questions that are intended to keep a conversation going, and making statements that are intended to bring a conversation to an end.

5.4.5 Ask Questions

You will certainly have questions about how to proceed in your social-life situations and in your relationships. Do not hesitate to ask your questions. You are the one who will benefit from knowing the answers. You can always begin a question to an American (or an experienced foreigner) by saying, “*Excuse me. I’m new here. I have a question about....*”

Beginning a question in this way will make clear why you may not know something that everyone else seems to know. Also, it will bring out the helpfulness in the person you are

talking to. Most Americans (but not all of them) will try to answer your questions. If you encounter an American who is not helpful, ask another one.