

Diminishing Returns at Corporate U: Chinese Undergraduates and Composition's Activist Legacy

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In an October 2015 *Inside Higher Ed* article, University of Arizona professor Adele Barker shared a litany of concerns about UA's decision to enroll record numbers of Chinese international students. Almost half of the 3,696 international students on campus at that time were from China, and, in Barker's estimation, most were unprepared. For instance, all twenty Chinese students in Barker's recent Russian history course failed, she believed due to language barriers. "They couldn't understand my lectures," she claimed. "They were unable to read or write in English." Yet, despite their assumed academic difficulties, Chinese students continue to enroll at UA, leading Barker to ask, "What are these students doing here in the first place, and are they getting the education they have come here to receive?" In her estimation, Chinese students flock to UA and other universities because of the prestige attached to US higher education in China, where many believe that a US degree is key to success in the globalized economy. As a result, she explained, some go to great lengths to be accepted to US universities, enrolling in costly test preparation courses or hiring professional test-takers for their TOEFL and SAT exams. Moreover, US colleges and universities are eager to capitalize on Chinese demand for US higher education, driven by declining state support and dwindling endowments. The outcome, Barker argued, is a situation in which Chinese students are unprepared to reap the benefits they desire from a US degree—and in which the overall quality of US universities declines.

Barker's essay betrays an anxiety about the demographic transformation occurring at UA and other US universities. Between 2004 and 2016, the number of Chinese international students in the US grew from 61,765 to 328,574, a 432 percent increase ("Fast Facts"). During this time, articles like Barker's became frequent, often describing Chinese international students as intellectually dishonest and unsuited to the liberal values of the US university (Abelmann and Kang 384). For composition scholars, Barker's comments about these students' language preparation likely strike a familiar chord, resembling concerns on many campuses about multilingual international students (see Kang 92; Matsuda, "Let's" 141-2). Barker's characterization of many Chinese students as unsuited for higher education likewise rings familiar, echoing hostilities toward African American, Latino, and Asian American students in similar moments of demographic change (see Hoang, *Writing* 9-15; Horner, "Discoursing" 202). However, more than providing yet another example of persistent linguistic and

racial discrimination on US campuses, articles like Barker's also point to new sources for seemingly familiar linguistic and racial anxieties: the corporate and international turns of US higher education. Barker describes public universities driven to international enrollment in an era of unprecedented state disinvestment, reducing higher education to a consumer transaction in the process. Moreover, in the rush to admit international students, Barker argues that we have yet to address basic questions about who these students are and how we can best support them. What do Chinese undergraduates hope to gain by studying in the US, she asks, where they typically pay tuition far more costly than that of their domestic peers?¹ More importantly, do US universities support or hinder these students' educational goals, and with what effect?

In this article, I respond to pieces like Barker's, which mix curiosity about Chinese undergraduates' academic motives with deficit assessments of their languages and literacies not unlike those historically leveraged against other students of color. To do so, I draw on a qualitative study of Chinese undergraduates at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, which in the 2015-16 academic year enrolled more Chinese international students than any other US institution (Tea Leaf).² I focus in particular on these students' experiences in first-year writing courses, where they and other international students have disrupted the myth of linguistic homogeneity (Matsuda, "Myth") long governing college writing instruction (see Lu and Horner 582). More importantly, though, I situate Chinese undergraduates' classroom experiences in the twin forces of corporatization and internationalization that underlie Barker's description of them as academically and linguistically unfit. As higher education scholars have noted, many colleges and universities have turned to international enrollment (Altbach 8)—as well as corporate partnerships and sponsored research (Bok 145-6)—as states nationwide have reduced funding for public higher education. Similarly, private and public universities alike have faced mounting economic hardship since the 2008 financial crisis, which weakened endowments and reduced the availability of government-funded research grants (Howard and Laird; Stripling). It is during this time of fiscal uncertainty that Chinese undergraduates have accessed US higher education in record numbers, often because of revenue-driven international enrollment initiatives (Altbach 54). As a result, I argue, their institutional experiences cannot be fully understood separate from higher education's turn to corporate, revenue-driven logics.

I also locate Chinese international students in this corporate turn because my research participants routinely framed their US educations as precisely the sort of commercial transaction that concerns Barker. During my many conversations with Chinese undergraduates, they described their time at a US university as an expensive investment with diminishing returns, one they partially salvaged by asserting their power as consumers of US higher education. Given that the Chinese undergraduates I interviewed believe that US universities see them as little more than a source of income, such a perspective is not surprising. Moreover, as the case study at the core of this article demonstrates, the admissions process alone forces Chinese undergraduates to become savvy consumers in a global and complex higher education market. These students carefully select which universities to apply to and eventually attend, weighing which will best help them develop professional and cultural capital they can leverage in their future careers. Finally, they routinely evaluate whether the university has returned on their investments—and seek assistance from instructors and staff when they feel their

educational goals are not being met.

I argue throughout that, as they work to secure some yield on their educational investments, my research participants unwittingly challenge narratives in composition about how students of color claim agency and institutional resources on US campuses. Such research tends to frame students' self-advocacy—as well as work in composition that challenges campus discrimination—as part of broader

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efforts since the civil rights movement to redress the exclusion of minority groups from higher education (e.g. Bruch and Marback). For instance, Haivan Hoang's study of a Vietnamese campus organization uncovered how student activists continue to draw on civil rights-era rhetorical strategies (“Campus” W402), and others have urged

writing instructors to inform their advocacy with that movement's insights (Horner, “Discoursing” 419-20; Kinloch 88; Wible, “Pedagogies” 469-70). The Chinese undergraduates I interviewed, on the other hand, emphasized their status as valued consumers of US higher education to justify their pursuit of campus inclusion and resources. For instance, in response to ethnic isolation that impeded the linguistic and cultural knowledge they desired—a form of segregation that was compounded in their composition classrooms—my research participants turned to their writing instructors and tutors, feeling entitled to such assistance because of the costly tuition they pay as international students. Through such claims to institutional support, Chinese undergraduates reveal emergent sources for student agency on our corporate and international campuses, even amidst continued segregation. Importantly, as I argue in this essay's conclusion, their narratives suggest a university in which difference is both valued and devalued, one where students who contribute financial resources to their struggling institutions can secure support historically withheld from students of color and linguistic minorities (see Lamos, *Interests* 6-8).

In making these arguments, I participate in ongoing efforts in composition to uncover how writing classrooms demean the cultures and literacies of multilingual writers and students of color (e.g. Horner, “Students”; Horner et. al.; Lamos, *Interests*; Lu, “Redefining”; Lu and Horner; Villanueva). My research participants' stories contribute most, though, to work that has identified the strategies through which these student populations confront marginalization in and beyond the required composition course ubiquitous on US campuses (e.g. Hoang; Kang; Kinloch). Because Chinese undergraduates have transformed the linguistic and racial landscape of many writing classrooms (Fraiberg and Cui 84), it is important for composition scholars and instructors to understand how common writing pedagogies can reinforce these students' segregation. Most significantly, though, I contend that these students' struggles against segregation make visible broader changes in how student agency is made available in our corporate universities, prompting composition scholars to adapt the field's sixty-year tradition of student advocacy (see Smitherman 354; Wible, *Shaping* 9) to our moment of fiscal turmoil and shifting institutional priorities. Consequently, I call composition scholars, writing program administrators, and instructors to exploit the revenue-oriented values of

the corporate university in their efforts to revalue student difference, an argument I outline in the conclusion. First, though, I introduce the larger study on which this article draws, outlining how my research participants' educational trajectories are shaped by the corporate and international turns transforming US campuses. The rest of the essay then examines how one of my research participants, Jingfei, strives to secure returns on her educational investment in face of segregation in and beyond her writing classroom.

Chinese Undergraduates in the Corporate University

The case study at the core of this article draws from a larger study of Chinese first-year writing students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. While Illinois in 2015 enrolled more Chinese international students than any other US institution ("Fast Facts"), the university's student body has historically been comprised of in-state students. Moreover, any plan to increase the number of out-of-state or international students on the campus has typically been met with resistance from taxpayers and policymakers, clear in the backlash against a 2006 proposal to raise the number of out-of-state students to fifteen percent of the overall student population (Abelmann, "American"). Yet, like many colleges and universities across the US (see Folbre 45-6), Illinois has experienced a precipitous decline in state support, exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis. Between 2002 and 2011, state support for the University of Illinois fell from \$804 to \$697 million, and the state is regularly behind in its payments to the university, owing \$500 million to the university by the conclusion of the 2010 fiscal year (*FY 12 Budget Request*). The university's financial situation has further deteriorated under Governor Bruce Rauner, whose calls for fiscal austerity—including a \$387 million reduction for higher education ("Public Universities")—resulted in political gridlock and left the state without a budget for the entire 2015-16 academic year. In April 2016, only the imminent closure of minority-serving Chicago State University compelled policymakers to release emergency higher education funding, but the state again failed to pass a budget by the start of the new fiscal year in July 2016.

Though Illinois has experienced a unique combination of fiscal and political pressures, colleges and universities across the US face similar economic hardships, causing many to turn to international enrollment as a source of income (Altbach 54). At Illinois in particular, the number of international students grew 102 percent between 2005 and 2015, driven by an expanding Chinese undergraduate population. Where only 63 Chinese undergraduates attended the university in 2005, that number had risen to 3,289 in 2016 ("Final"). These students are part of an international population that contributed \$166 million to the Urbana-Champaign campus budget in 2013-14 (Cohen), and, unsurprisingly, the university has intensified its efforts to recruit, enroll, and retain students from abroad: The university opened an office in Shanghai in 2013, hired the first-ever Director of International Student Integration in 2013, began holding orientations in three major Chinese cities in summer 2014, and now conducts a yearly "International Student Barometer Survey" to identify additional areas of student support. Importantly, the internationalization initiatives that have brought Chinese undergraduates to Illinois are not unique to four-year campuses, evident as community colleges are also seeking to capitalize on Chinese demand for US higher education (Zhang and Hagedorn 723).

As Paul Matsuda notes, these demographic shifts have profoundly impacted college writing instruction, with multilingual writers now constituting a majority in many composition classrooms (“Let’s” 142). Faced with such realities at Illinois, in fall 2014 I began a qualitative study of Chinese undergraduates who were enrolled in or had completed the university’s first-year writing requirement.³ Overall, I aimed to study the classroom experiences and literacy backgrounds of these students as they became a sizeable presence at the university. However, I was also interested in understanding how well-documented linguistic and racial discrimination at Illinois (see Abelmann, *The Intimate*; Farnell; Kang; Lamos, *Interests*; Williamson) impacted these students’ classroom and campus experiences, especially given longstanding concerns in composition about how writing classrooms marginalize students of color (see Lamos, *Interests* 11-3). To do so, I conducted twenty-eight literacy life history interviews (Brandt 9-11) with Chinese undergraduates, observed writing groups offered for international students at the campus writing center, and observed two first-year writing classrooms in which at least one-third of the students were from China. Jingfei, whose classroom experiences I turn to in the next section, participated regularly in the writing center’s international student writing groups and was also enrolled in a first-year writing course taught by one of the instructors I observed.

Importantly, I limited my research participants to students enrolled in science, technology, engineering, and business fields. Chinese undergraduates tend to be concentrated in such disciplines at US universities, with 69 percent studying in business, engineering, math, computer science, and the life sciences (Desilver). As Vanessa Fong notes, Chinese students often feel better prepared to study in these fields because of their high schools’ emphasis on science and math, worrying that they lack the linguistic fluency to major in the social sciences or humanities (112). Moreover, many Chinese students are attracted to STEM and business disciplines by the cultural cachet attached to them in China, and my research participants in particular believed that a degree from Illinois’s highly-ranked Colleges of Business or Engineering would later give them an advantage on the job market (see also Redden, “At U of Illinois”). By interviewing only students in these disciplines, I aimed to cultivate a participant pool reflective of the Chinese international cohorts enrolling at colleges and universities across the US, enabling my study to speak to the experiences of Chinese undergraduates and their writing instructors at other institutions. With that goal in mind, I also adhered to a case study methodology common in basic writing and second language research (e.g. Spack; Sternglass; Tardy) that affords close attention to students’ situated experiences, doing so also to avoid coding practices that abstract common words and phrases from interview data (see Packer 69). Such an approach was necessary especially because my interview transcripts included long passages when my research participants negotiated between English, Mandarin, and other languages they had studied, including French, German, Japanese, and Korean.

I share Jingfei’s case study in this article because her initial hopes for—and her gradual disillusionment with—US higher education reflect those shared by my research participants and captured in other qualitative studies of Chinese undergraduates. Like most of the Chinese undergraduates I interviewed, Jingfei believed in the superiority of US higher education, expecting also that her time at Illinois would give her access to cultural and linguistic knowledge unavailable in

China (see also Fong 11). Yet, Jingfei very quickly came to see enrolling at Illinois as a faltering investment,⁴ believing that the segregation she experienced would prevent her from expanding her linguistic and cultural horizons. Significantly, as I detail in the next section, Jingfei shared with my other research participants a belief that their writing classrooms were not providing the linguistic and cultural knowledge necessary to participate more fully in campus life, and she often evoked her institutional position as a consumer to justify her pursuit of additional language support. Jingfei's efforts to secure campus resources and

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visibility thus diverge from the rights-based framework composition scholars have relied on to understand the contexts in which multilingual and non-white students make claims to institutional belonging and resources (e.g. Kang 89; Kinloch 97; Hoang, “Campus” W402). Of course, such differences are not wholly surprising, given the different institutional and socioeconomic positions of Chinese undergraduates compared to domestic students of color—or even international students from countries like South Korea with a longer history of engagement with the US (e.g. Abelmann, “American”). Yet Chinese international students' experiences are instructive because their educational trajectories are shaped by forces transforming US campus life, an argument I develop in the conclusion. More broadly, Jingfei's emphasis of her consumer relationship to the university invites composition scholars to adapt rights-based frameworks to the rhetorical contexts of our increasingly corporate institutions.

Securing Educational Returns in Contexts of Segregation

Like most of the Chinese undergraduates I interviewed, Jingfei had expected that studying at the University of Illinois would allow her to form friendships with domestic peers, developing valuable linguistic and cultural knowledge in the process. Yet she quickly discovered that Chinese students at Illinois had little contact with students outside of their ethnic cohort, describing an isolation similar to that experienced by other students of color at the university (see Abelmann, *Intimate* 80-1). In response, Jingfei turned to her instructors and university staff as cultural and linguistic informants (see Cogie et. al.; Powers), emphasizing her status as a client of US higher education to claim such support. Jingfei did so because her writing class further convinced her that she lacked the linguistic and cultural knowledge necessary for fuller participation in campus life. Specifically, although Jingfei described kind instructors and tutors—and was relieved that her writing instructor did not penalize her grammar—she worried that she was not expanding her linguistic repertoire or developing knowledge of what vocabulary was appropriate for certain situations. “I want to know how to express, I want to know how you say it,” she said, offering as an example her confusion about different words that can express anger. “We have not only dictionary but vocabulary books to tell you all these words express your anger. So, they are all the same meaning as angry, but to what extent? I want this class to teach me this.” In the rest of this section, I detail how Jingfei leveraged her status

as a client of US higher education to pursue such linguistic and cultural knowledge, unwittingly complicating narratives in composition about how students achieve institutional visibility in contexts of segregation.

“Somewhere can make me grow”

Initially, Jingfei limited our conversation to her professional and academic motives for pursuing a US degree. As her interview continued, though, it became clear that Jingfei was attracted to the US by more than the academic strength of its colleges and universities. Jingfei was a transfer student and had studied for two years at one of China’s most selective universities. Moreover, as a finalist in China’s national physics competition, she had also been exempted from the gaokao, the country’s college entrance exam that has been in recent years blamed for student anxiety and suicides (Roberts). When Jingfei first disclosed that she had bypassed the gaokao, I misunderstood and thought she was the highest-scoring participant in the physics contest nationally. Jingfei laughed and, demonstrating her awareness of the US academic hierarchy, commented, “If I am the first, I would be in MIT. No offense.” Despite attending one of China’s most prestigious institutions, though, Jingfei decided that she wanted to complete her bachelor’s degree in the US, motivated to do so by the academic flexibility of US higher education. In particular, Jingfei had been disappointed that she could not major in physics at her Chinese institution, having been tracked instead into a closely related field. Consequently, she spent her second year at university preparing for the SAT and TOEFL.

Jingfei also emphasized that completing a US undergraduate degree would make her a stronger applicant to US graduate programs, selecting which US university to attend with that goal in mind. During the admissions process, she paid close attention to academic rankings and consulted with her professors in China, who she said were knowledgeable about different US institutions’ strengths and weaknesses. This process began anew when Jingfei started to receive acceptance letters, forcing her to “do all those work again to decide which one.” As Jingfei discussed her goals for studying in the US and her experiences of the application process, the cultural benefits she associated with a US degree began to emerge, albeit slowly. In particular, Jingfei was invested in the US university’s promise of personal and cultural growth (see Abelmann, *Intimate* 6). “This country is the superpower,” she said. “I don’t want to go somewhere that’s really quiet, it’s comfortable. I want somewhere can make me grow. It can move really fast so I can run there, but not a place so quiet everyone’s enjoying their life but not moving forward.” Moreover, Jingfei sought the exposure to cultural difference that a US university offered, believing that coming to the US as an undergraduate would allow her to forge connections with domestic classmates and become involved on campus. In contrast, the Chinese graduate students she knew “spend a lot of time in the research, but they didn’t get a lot of connection to the US society,” and Jingfei wished to “try to experience the American culture.” Importantly, this desire for personal, cultural, and intellectual growth shaped her expectations for the first-year writing class she enrolled in during her first semester at Illinois.

“As long as I ask, people like you just come to help me”

Early during her time on campus, Jingfei encountered a number of roadblocks to the professional

and cultural growth she desired, which she attributed largely to her campus's segregation. In response, Jingfei sought out resources that could mitigate her ethnic isolation, often marshaling her position as a consumer to do so. Her ability to access campus services and even informal support reveals emergent forms of institutional agency not yet accounted for in composition studies. In particular, Jingfei's experiences suggest a university in which financially powerful students are provided services to maintain their consumer satisfaction (see also Tuchman 149; Wellen 25), even as full participation in campus life remains out of reach. It is important to note, though, that Jingfei described a writing classroom that was in many ways open to her linguistic and cultural differences: She felt that her instructor and peers did not stigmatize her accented English, even as she believed that her classroom compounded her segregation by not preparing her to traverse perceived linguistic and cultural barriers. Jingfei thus navigated an altered racial landscape at Illinois, one where her differences were seemingly accommodated and where she could secure additional support when she felt her educational goals were not being met.

Jingfei was especially surprised by her instructor's attitudes toward language difference, which conflicted with the expectations she had formed in China about English classrooms. Her college English course there, taught by a visiting scholar from the US, led her to expect that writing instruction at Illinois would focus on grammatical and other lower-order concerns, reflecting the global influence of mass-produced textbooks (Canagarajah, *Resisting* 83; Lu, "An Essay" 20) and the tendency in China for English to be taught as "a neutral, objective technology governed by static, mechanical rules" (You 136). To Jingfei's surprise and relief, though, her writing course at Illinois focused little on such issues. Instead, her instructor persuaded her that, "It's not how I speak or how I put the language, put the words together matters, but how I think matters more." Later, Jingfei added that she learned in her writing class, "I can use child English to write my essay, but I have to express my meaning clearly . . . I think that the idea matters more than the language." While Jingfei welcomed this de-emphasis of language, she still wanted to increase her vocabulary, seeking language instruction through her visits to the writing center and her instructor's office hours. Outside the writing classroom, Jingfei similarly reported little concern about her language differences, finding that her domestic peers and instructors were willing to struggle over meaning with her. As she discussed her experiences communicating with native-English speakers, she laughed, saying, "It's fine, I just. When I don't understand, I just go, 'What?' again and again. 'Pardon me?' again and again."

Although Jingfei was relieved that her writing instructor did not assess grammar and vocabulary, she still desired that kind of instruction, saying, "I thanked her a lot by not grading on my grammars. But I want to improve my grammar and vocabulary, so that's what I do when I meet with her or with the [writing center]. I would require her or the [writing center] to help me correct the grammar and tell me the vocabulary is wrong." Such control over her language learning was also evident as Jingfei evaluated the writing center services she had utilized. Jingfei first became aware of the writing center at one of the many orientations she attended during her first semester, even though she said her Chinese peers often saw orientations as a "waste of time." When Jingfei first learned about the writing center, she thought, "The [writing center] is exactly what I need." By the middle of her first

semester, Jingfei had used the center's tutorial services and had participated in its writing groups for international students, which were developed to accommodate the university's growing multilingual student population. Jingfei's writing group, which met over four weeks, began each session with a presentation on topics ranging from organization and thesis statements to brevity. After the presentation, the participants were urged to work in pairs while the group leader circulated and answered questions, though they often ignored the leader's instructions to collaborate and instead worked alone. To Jingfei, the group provided a useful introduction to US academic writing, but she disliked that they had to compete for the leader's attention in the second half of each session. "I personally prefer the presentation, because that's why I come to the group instead of the one-to-one individual meeting. Every time we work on our own, I just think, 'Why don't I just have a one-to-one appointment? I want to learn something.'" Importantly, such pursuit of additional support was not limited to official campus services, which was clear as Jingfei repeatedly referenced her comfort asking even passersby on the street for assistance: "I sometimes just randomly pick someone on the street and say, 'Sorry, I don't know about something. Can you help me?' 'Yes, I would love to!'"

As Jingfei narrates her use of the various resources available to her—chronicling her desire to take advantage of each orientation, her belief that writing instructors and tutors should help facilitate personal language goals, and her willingness to ask strangers for assistance—she describes a university in which she can marshal institutional support for her language-learning and other needs. More importantly, though, Jingfei claims institutional resources and visibility that have historically been out of reach for multilingual and non-white students, drawing on the agency available to her as a consumer of US higher education to do so. For Jingfei, the university is receptive to her pursuit of educational resources and assistance, coloring her overall evaluation of the campus: "That's the best part I love here," she said, "because everyone's just trying to be helpful. And as long as I ask, people like you just come to help me." Jingfei's use of and attitudes toward campus resources reveal a shift in how students' racial and language differences determine institutional belonging, clear in the support she claims amidst familiar forms of segregation. Importantly, her story invites composition scholars to reconsider the narratives of marginalization they have typically forged about linguistically and racially different students—and how they imagine that students can contest such marginalization. She describes not a hostile university but one that at least somewhat meets the educational goals of students on the linguistic and racial margins.

Yet, despite the agency Jingfei exerted, she still experienced institutional exclusion similar to that of other East Asian international students (see Abelmann, "American;" Kang 86) and even domestic students of color. These student groups navigate campuses where their languages and cultures are

routinely denigrated, and, as composition scholars have documented, writing classrooms and programs have been historically complicit in such denigration (see Lamos, *Interests*). Even amidst such segregation, though, Jingfei's story points to how our students' institutional

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experiences are being reshaped in our increasingly corporate universities, which welcome student difference even as they continue to protect white interests (see Prendergast and Abelmann 39). Importantly, because Jingfei is studying at a large research university—the type of institution that sets trends followed by universities and colleges of all tiers (see Bok 14; Lamos, “Toward” 363-4; Tuchman 54-6)—and because she is part of a student population increasingly recruited to US universities of all types, her experiences reveal shifting attitudes toward difference that are likely to become more common as institutions enroll larger numbers of students from outside the US. In the next section, I detail how Jingfei’s writing classroom supported this uneven distribution of campus resources and belonging, suppressing opportunities to confront notions of cultural difference that naturalize student segregation.

“I want this kind of class to teach me what should I say when I meet people”

Despite her satisfaction with the academic opportunities and institutional support available to her, Jingfei was uncertain about her place in the wider university community, and her experiences learning and using English reinforced the distance she felt from her domestic classmates. As Jingfei described her marginalization on campus—and how her writing instruction withheld linguistic and cultural knowledge that she felt could help her engage with domestic peers—the conflicted position she occupied on campus came more squarely into view: Jingfei subscribed to a liberal imaginary of the university in which higher education provides the keys to financial, intellectual, and social success. Jingfei also found that the university was generally accommodating of that pursuit, encountering levels of institutional support historically not available to multilingual writers and students of color. Yet, Jingfei still experienced marginalization, discovering that certain dimensions of campus life were out of reach despite the support and institutional visibility she enjoyed. Jingfei’s perceived inability to participate in campus life makes clear that the agency and institutional recognition she can claim is partial. Moreover, her reflections reveal how writing instruction can withhold the cultural and linguistic knowledge necessary to critique and make visible such conditions.

Jingfei initially worked to restrict our conversation to her academic motives for studying in the US, refusing to disclose information about her hometown, her Beijing high school, her parents’ feelings about her decision to leave China, and the cultural benefits she believed she could accrue by studying in the US. Despite her initial guardedness, Jingfei eventually began to share more about her desire to participate in campus life, which she admitted was a source of disappointment. Jingfei did attempt to become involved on campus, joining a student organization through which she met domestic, Korean, and other Chinese students. “I’m representing this school,” she said as she discussed the group’s volunteer work with local elementary and high school students. “And that makes me feel proud.” She also tried to socialize with domestic classmates outside of her academic and extracurricular activities. Despite these efforts to, as she put it, “feel like I’m part of the school,” Jingfei still felt distant from her domestic peers, believing that her language and cultural differences were at the core of her difficulty connecting with students from the US.

Importantly, Jingfei believed that her writing classroom did little to help her confront the linguistic barriers she encountered on campus. Again, Jingfei was grateful that her instructor

focused only slightly on grammar and other language issues, believing that attention to such issues would adversely impact her grade. Moreover, Jingfei valued her instructor's focus on the rhetorical conventions of scholarly writing, which helped her to become more familiar with US academic culture. "I'm not only learning how to write," she shared. "I'm learning the culture." Yet, she also believed that, by not attending closely to language outside of a few brief lessons on style, her class withheld important knowledge about the cultural connotations of specific usages. For Jingfei, her unfamiliarity with such subtle connotations of English vocabulary was at the core of her halted and awkward interactions with domestic peers, a reality she felt her writing classroom left her unprepared to change. In other words, even as Jingfei was relieved to not focus on language in her composition course—and though she valued that her course helped her to become more familiar with US academic culture—she still desired the opportunity to closely study language. "Language is a tool to express the mind," she claimed, and without greater familiarity with English, she believed herself unable to fully forge any connection with her US peers.

Jingfei's comments reveal how language continues to mediate institutional belonging for students of color even as universities cultivate images of themselves as diverse and international (see Prendergast and Abelmann 50-1)—and even as she praised her writing instructor. In everyday interactions and in her writing, she said, her instructors and peers minimized attention to her language differences, concerned more with her ideas than her language. Yet, Jingfei's narrative shows that, despite the accessibility of institutional resources and the apparent openness of peers and instructors to her language differences, the writing instruction she received withheld linguistic and cultural resources that she hoped would enable her to forge relationships across difference. In other words, Jingfei's story reveals an instructional void, suggesting that writing classrooms can reinforce students' marginalization when they do not provide spaces for productive struggle over language and cultural differences. For Jingfei, this void became especially clear through her research in first-year writing. Her instructor drew on a tradition of first-year writing instruction at Illinois that encourages students to critically examine the university and engage in semester-long research of student organizations, curricula, and institutional history (see Prendergast, "Reinventing"). During her research of Chinese undergraduates' transitions to US universities, Jingfei explained, "I always think what I want, what I need to help me be involved in this campus, to help me feel better." Much of what she needed, she believed, revolved around language. "I want this kind of class to teach me what should I say when I meet people. What's happening is 'What's up?' 'Nothing much' and 'thank you,' 'how's it going?'"

Jingfei's reflections suggest that, although composition scholars have rightly critiqued language pedagogies for excluding linguistic and racial minorities from fuller participation in academic life (Lu, "Professing" 446), we can remove opportunities to productively grapple with cultural difference when we do not attend to language in our courses. Additionally, even as Jingfei marshals her consumer positionality to claim additional support, she still feels ill-equipped to contest her exclusion from campus life and pursue the institutional belonging she desires. More significant is that her marginalization is compounded even as she describes a classroom that reflects common approaches to language difference in composition studies, evident as she described instructors

and tutors who emphasized rhetorical knowledge over linguistic conventions. Such an approach reflects the emphasis on rhetoric and argumentation in documents like the CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers (“CCCC Statement” 12) and the WPA Outcomes Statement, which remain influential even amidst calls for critical and fine-grained attention to dialect and language difference (e.g. Horner et. al.; Lu and Horner). As Jingfei describes a classroom that both acknowledges and suppresses difference, she reminds us that language is a site of cultural transmission and that examining language can provide opportunities for students to struggle productively with difference. As I conclude this essay in the next section, I consider how attention to language and cultural difference can help students attain their educational goals while also becoming critical of how our institutions protect white educational interests. Perhaps most importantly, I also consider the implications of experiences like Jingfei’s for other student groups who likewise experience campus segregation.

Conclusion: Student Advocacy in the Corporate University

A few weeks prior to my interview with Jingfei, she attended an orientation program for international students, and one of the sessions focused on common US idioms. When Jingfei left the session, she felt no more prepared to communicate in English than she had before. “We have learned some basic proverbs like, ‘It’s raining cats and dogs.’ But it’s not useful.” She continued, “Who say that? No one is saying that. If I say that, it’s much more embarrassing than if I don’t say it.” Jingfei’s comments reflect her desire for language instruction that would allow her to communicate across cultural differences, confronting the campus segregation that obstructed her educational goals. Yet, as her narrative suggests, her writing classroom and the other forms of institutional support she sought did little to support her language needs—and sometimes even reinforced the segregation that defined her campus life. More troubling was that such marginalization occurred in a classroom that Jingfei described in terms familiar to many writing instructors. Jingfei’s course, for instance, culminated in a researched argument, an assignment ubiquitous in writing programs nationally (Hood). She also described an instructor concerned less with language than argument and critical thinking, reflecting the field’s general movement from language instruction since the 1970s (Connors 96-7; Myers 611-2; Peck MacDonald 85-7).

Importantly, even as Jingfei demonstrates how some of our most common pedagogies can inadvertently marginalize, her story likewise reveals how writing instructors might mitigate the segregation she and her Chinese conationals experience. In particular, the support Jingfei pursues from her writing instructor and tutors suggests that we might direct classroom attention to an area often deemphasized since composition’s repudiation of current-traditional pedagogies: language (see Peck MacDonald 599-600). In making such a claim, I am in no way advocating the return of classrooms focused narrowly on correctness and convention. Instead, Jingfei’s experiences add urgency to calls for students and instructors alike to grapple with language difference and the plurality of dialects present in all communication. For scholars like Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu, Suresh Canagarajah, and Ana Maria Wetzl, such pedagogy can expose oppressive communicative norms and empower students to contest them, beginning the long task of dislodging language ideologies

that reify standard English and devalue speakers of other dialects. Moreover, as Canagarajah notes, such an approach “demands more, not less, from minority students” (“Place” 598), enabling a student like Jingfei to both gain the linguistic knowledge she desires and resist the marginal position offered her within the university.

However, Jingfei’s story also demonstrates the challenges posed to such approaches—and to composition’s activist legacy more generally—by corporatization and the consumer attitudes it promotes. For instance, Jingfei’s goals for engaging with language difference are markedly different from those of composition scholars: She desires not to combat her campus’s devaluation of difference but instead wants to become part of the campus mainstream, even as she believed she had been excluded from that mainstream by virtue of her linguistic and cultural differences. Experiences like Jingfei’s thus caution us that the language work envisioned by Canagarajah and others must be persuasive, since students may desire to assimilate to rather than contest oppressive language norms. One way that instructors might create space for such persuasion is by opening up students’ campus experiences to critique, encouraging student research and classroom discussion that analyze linguistic and racial discrimination on campus. Importantly, this approach has implications beyond the Chinese undergraduates who feature in my study: When our classrooms make visible how different student groups are granted or denied institutional belonging—and how language mediates such belonging—we can create rhetorical borderlands (Mao 3) or contact zones (Lu, “Conflict” 888) from which students expose and challenge linguistic and cultural norms that place some on the fringes of campus life. Also important, such attention to language difference can challenge students to become ethical and effective communicators in communities, workplaces, and academic disciplines where taken-for-granted linguistic conventions are being transformed by the ubiquity of “Global Englishes” (see Canagarajah, “Place” 590; Rozycki and Johnson).

Beyond such pedagogical shifts, though, experiences like Jingfei’s also invite composition scholars and instructors to reconsider how they theorize racial and linguistic difference more generally. Jingfei’s status as an international student obviously affords her greater institutional recognition and support than domestic students of color, who continue to face hostility on predominantly-white campuses (see Kynard, “Teaching” 3; Mangelsdorf 120-1). Yet, Jingfei’s and her Chinese conationals’ experiences still offer insight to the broader experiences of students of color in our moment of shifting institutional priorities. As Asian American Studies scholars Claire Jean Kim and Yen Le Espiritu remind us, Asians of different nationalities, whether citizens or not, are often viewed as a homogenous racial group in the US and subjected to similar forms of discrimination (Espiritu 6; Kim 35). For Chinese students like Jingfei, this means that they are likely seen on our campuses as part of a unified Asian racial group, a reality Nancy Abelmann captures in interviews with Illinois domestic students and in online forums: Chinese international students are simultaneously praised and scorned by their white counterparts, subjected to familiar model minority stereotypes historically leveraged at Asian Americans (“American”). Despite their particularities, then, these students are racialized as part of a unitary Asian group, one whose ambiguous position in the US racial hierarchy has been said to reveal broader shifts in post-civil rights racial politics (Koshy 159). Because these students are part of a population whose experiences reveal much about the reconfiguration of racial power

more generally (Koshy 155)— and because their educational trajectories are facilitated by higher education’s corporate turn—their experiences draw attention to broader shifts in how marginalized groups access higher education and institutional resources in our moment of fiscal turmoil and institutional flux.

Jingfei and her Chinese conationals thus reveal the extent that race continues to shape the institutional experiences of students of color and linguistic minorities, albeit along shifting lines. Of course, my intent here is not to detract attention from how some student groups are more vulnerable to racial discrimination on our campuses than others. Instead, I want to suggest that, even as our campuses are undoubtedly shaped by US histories of racism, our students are also subjected to an altered racial logic in which their cultural and linguistic differences are valued relative to their financial power. Experiences like Jingfei’s thus suggest that racial privileges are distributed on our campuses in ways similar to that on the global stage. As anthropologist Aihwa Ong argues, we live in a moment when

mobile individuals who possess human capital or expertise are highly valued and can exercise citizenship-like claims in diverse locations. Meanwhile, citizens who are judged not to have such tradable competence or potential become devalued and thus vulnerable to exclusionary practices. (6-7, see also Melamed 42)

On US campuses, such shifts are visible in the differences between stories like Jingfei’s and the experiences of domestic students of color. While Jingfei is part of a much sought-after student demographic—and while she secures institutional resources amidst familiar segregation—the number of African American students attending Illinois has stagnated at levels below civil rights-era benchmarks (Des Garennes). Such demographic realities are the result of policy trends nationally that have favored merit-based over need-based financial aid, alleviating college costs for the middle class rather than increasing access for low-income students (see Long and Riley). On flagship campuses like Illinois, this means that fewer low-income and minority students enroll—and that those who do are often from the middle class themselves (Jaquette et. al. 29-30).

Such changes in who can access higher education—and in how students access institutional resources and campus belonging once they are enrolled—suggests that composition scholars must rethink advocacy work that has traditionally relied on a language of rights, placing that tradition in tension with our students’ altered institutional experiences. In particular, we might borrow some of the consumer language that Jingfei marshaled to justify her pursuit of additional resources and support, even as such language has been rightly criticized for reducing teaching and learning to a market transaction (e.g. Saunders 63-4). Such language can help us advocate for our students in a moment when administrators are preoccupied with programmatic survival and contracting budgets. The language of the market, for instance, can enable us to make a case that seemingly costly measures to support our students and foster inclusivity can make long-term financial sense, perhaps improving time-to-degree and retention or paying off in alumni donations down the line (see Lamos, “Toward” 373-4). We might stress in particular the importance of expanding access to domestic students of color given the premium placed on diversity by our campuses’ corporate backers (Prendergast and Abelman 37)—and given that diversity like that sought by Jingfei is impossible to achieve without

the physical presence of students from multiple backgrounds on our campuses (Park). Writing Program Administrators are already well versed in making such arguments and have been criticized for relying on such logics to secure support for their programs (Bousquet 495-6). Yet, such strategies may provide the rhetorical tools to advocate for students as our institutions seem increasingly immune to some of the more radical aims of composition pedagogies.

“Advocating for students in our moment of corporatization and internationalization thus requires that we be constantly aware of the changing undergraduate experience, paying close attention to students’ educational goals and how they are sometimes prevented from attaining those goals along familiar but shifting racial lines.”

Advocating for students in our moment of corporatization and internationalization thus requires that we be constantly aware of the changing undergraduate experience, paying close attention to students’ educational goals and how they are sometimes prevented from attaining those goals along familiar

but shifting racial lines . Luckily, many common composition assignments and classroom practices position us well for such work. For instance, we can reshape the literacy narrative assignment common in many first-year writing courses so that students probe their educational and language learning goals, inviting them to examine the origins of those goals and what they gain and lose in their pursuit. Or, we can transform literacy narratives into literacy profiles, requiring students to interview and write about their classmates’ literacy backgrounds. Doing so can allow domestic and international students alike to begin exploring how their English education and expectations for the writing classroom have been impacted by standardization, given the ubiquity of China’s emerging English-language industry and the increasing presence of high-stakes testing in US classrooms. Moreover, research essays can be reenvisioned as ethnographies of language difference on our campuses, and we can also shape peer review so that students focus less on what their peers can do better and more on how classmates’ linguistic choices productively support their rhetorical goals (see Lu, “Professing”). Importantly, such approaches require that we as instructors become ethnographers of our own classrooms, working to understand our students’ experiences in institutions far different from those that have historically shaped our work.⁵⁻

NOTES

¹ International students attending US universities pay higher tuition than their domestic counterparts, especially at public institutions. At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, for example, international students' tuition can range anywhere from \$10,000 to \$17,000 more than tuition for an in-state student, not including additional international student fees (2015-2016 Academic Year).

² The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is part of the University of Illinois system, which includes campuses in Urbana-Champaign, Chicago, and Springfield. Per university branding recommendations, I use "Illinois" throughout this article to refer to the Urbana-Champaign campus (Writing Style Guide).

³ My study focused on students who had completed the first-year writing requirement in the English department's Undergraduate Rhetoric Program. Students at Illinois can complete the first-year writing requirement in the English, Linguistics, or Communication Departments. During my work at the campus writing center, Chinese undergraduates often shared their concerns that linguistics courses, in which only "ESL students" could enroll, were too segregated—and that the only students who enroll in such courses do so because of low SAT or TOEFL scores. On the other hand, these same students often believed that rhetoric courses offered opportunities to interact in English with domestic peers. Such conversations shaped my initial interest in the role of writing instruction in Chinese students' US transitions, especially given composition research and pedagogy cognizant of the cultural demands literacy instruction places on students.

⁴ Other qualitative and ethnographic researchers have similarly captured Chinese international students and their families describing themselves as potential objects of financial exploitation by US universities. In Fraiberg and Cui's study of Chinese undergraduates' social network communities, for instance, their research participants saw required remedial coursework as a way for the university to extract further profit from their transactional relationship (96). Such anxieties have also been documented extensively in the Chinese and US presses (see Abelmann, "American"; Abelmann and Kang 8).

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