

Beyond Baylor

Baylor's international community contributes diverse narratives to the city of Waco. Originally from China, Baylor junior Wen Dou is a thriving business student, but his journey to the U.S. was no less than challenging. Dou described his experience leaving China as painful but ultimately rewarding.

"I could not take the agony of hearing my mother's cries from behind me as I approached the tarmac," Dou said. "I did not have the strength to look behind me for a last goodbye. I knew I would not be able to board the plane if I saw the look on her face as I left everyone I have ever known."

International students like Dou overcome numerous impediments on their journey to Baylor's campus. Some struggle with the complicated documentation process, while others face the emotional toll of culture shock.

According to Baylor's Center for Global Engagement, about 4 percent of undergraduates are international students and represent 73 countries. They join clubs; they're collegiate athletes; they commit themselves to academia, and they call Waco home.

Dou was 14 years old when his parents said goodbye to him at the airport in China. Dou said he chose to leave Beijing to explore a new culture, pursue his education and fulfill his childhood dreams of living in the U.S.. He said his

understanding of American culture and values derived from watching the NBA, especially his childhood hero, Michael Jordan. Dou chose to attend high school in Jordan's home state, North Carolina.

Dou said he felt hopeful, excited and prepared as he flew in an airplane toward American soil. However, once reality set in, he said he felt lonely, emotionally overwhelmed and utterly culture shocked. Dou's interests were different than other students', and he struggled to keep up with fast-paced communication. "By Chinese standards, my English was excellent. I soon realized that my English in America was comprehensible at best," Dou said. "I'm a pretty funny guy, but my jokes were not well-received. No one understood me."

Despite experiencing a low point on his international journey, Dou said he chose to persevere. He resisted the temptation to speak Chinese with other international students so that he wouldn't miss opportunities to improve his English skills. He only watched American television. He listened to rap music to understand colloquial expressions. Gradually, Dou adapted to a new culture, overcame obstacles and displayed courage in the face of adversity.

Dou said the new opportunities available to him were worth the fear and hardship he experienced. "There's no other place I can think of that offers this much opportunity," Dou said. "I have made a huge connection here."

Today, Dou is double majoring in finance and management information systems, joining a fraternity and volunteering to help other students adjust to college life. He visits his family frequently and intends to stay in America upon graduation.

Baylor offers a number of programs to help students like Dou adjust to life in America. Dr. Mark Bryant, Director of Baylor's International Student and Scholar Services, oversees programs that help international students connect with other Baylor students and families in Waco. Bryant graduated from Baylor with a Bachelor of Arts in psychology and has lived abroad in Kosovo.

Bryant summarized the process international students endure in order to study in the U.S.

"It's a big deal to get accepted to Baylor. It's an even bigger deal to go through the entire process of passing through all the national security barriers," Bryant said.

Most students seeking to study in America must pass an English language proficiency exam and provide detailed information about how they plan to fund their education. They proceed to submit their applications to the colleges of their choice and complete an I-20 document, formally known as the "Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status for Academic and Language

Students.” The I-20 is processed by the Department of Homeland Security and can take upwards of one year to be approved. This is followed by a visa application.

In the U.S., with luggage and approved documentation in hand, and a university awaiting them, future students present all of their documents to the Customs and Border Protection Agent. Students have spent months, if not years, studying English, compiling their paperwork and saying farewell to loved ones. Bryant said students at this stage in the process can still be rejected by the border agency in the airport. The agents hold the final authority on whether a particular student can enter the U.S.

Bryant said one of the most rewarding parts of his job is observing students’ successes after pursuing the long and winding road to arrive in the States. “It brings a level of confidence that no one can ever take away from them,” Bryant said. “Their strength and growing confidence are unparalleled.”

In addition to offering direct services, Bryant said Baylor’s Department of International Student and Scholar Services also helps students acknowledge their fortitude. “Oftentimes, it’s hard for the students to recognize their own strength because they are in the middle of it all. Sometimes they need that third-party observer to tell them that they’re doing incredible things,” he said.

Baylor senior Bruce Lee, another international student from China, said he experienced loneliness before gaining friendships and recognizing his strength. “I went through a phase of being lonely, but then I found my way around and gained strong friendships,” he said.

Lee came to America on different terms than Dou. “At first, it was not by my choice to come here,” Lee said. “It was my parents’. They wanted me to experience a different culture.”

According to Lee, some students choose to study abroad to experience a different culture, while others study elsewhere to avoid high school exit exams. Upon high school graduation in China, students are required to take a scholarly aptitude test that places them in a college of the government’s choosing, meaning their career path is automatically selected for them. Because of this, Lee said many Chinese parents and teachers place an enormous amount of pressure on students.

“High school is super hard in China. I like it here because you are more independent, and you have more ways to help you succeed,” Lee said. “There is more freedom to reach your own goals. I didn’t study well in the Chinese schools, but I studied really hard for the SAT to get here. This was my only chance to have a bright future.”

Bryant said many of the students maintain their cultural identities while still participating in American traditions. “Some manage to live here and obtain their degree, and this is exceptional,” Bryant said. “But there are others who come here, and they not only accomplish their degree, but they learn to excel. They reach for more. They embrace the full Baylor experience by joining traditions such as running the line, and some even choose to join Greek life. They contribute.”

Despite experiencing loneliness, Lee said he was able to navigate his way through American and Texan culture. “I embraced the culture of Texas by shooting guns and trying barbecue food,” he said. Lee acquired a deep appreciation for the unique opportunities he had been afforded by moving to the U.S. “I cherish every class that I take here because God has given me a second chance to start a new life,” he said. “My faith has brought me through this difficult transition. I have faith that I can conquer every problem.”

Bryant echoed this sentiment, reaffirming the value of diversity on Baylor’s campus and in Waco. “Baylor international students are remarkable,” he said. “We need them. We are a better place because of them.”