



*Crossing Cultures
here and now*

Lisa Espineli Chinn

Friendships with International Students

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Haruki was deep in thought. He fingered the blue invitation card he had picked up in the student union. Earlier, he had overheard two of his American classmates talking animatedly about attending the party mentioned on the card. *If I go, he thought, it will be a good chance to meet American students. But I do not know anyone going to the event, and I am afraid no one will talk to me there.*

As a matter of fact, he had been on campus for two whole months, and no one had taken any initiative to talk to him. Although his English was quite good, he was not all that confident about how he would do in a party setting.

Haruki let out a deep sigh, picked up his coat, threw the card in the waste basket and headed toward his dorm.

You do not have to go very far to reach the world. God, in his sovereign purpose, has brought the world to your campus and neighborhood.

On U.S. campuses there are over 764,000 international students from around the world. Canada hosts over 193,000 international students. Sixty-four percent of the students come from Asia, with China, India, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia as the leading sending nations. Two-thirds of them

are students in the fields of business and management, engineering, math and computer science, social sciences, and physical and life sciences. Over 300,000 of them are graduate students. Another 72,000 students are in intensive English programs around the country. In addition, there are 116,000 international scholars conducting research or teaching at U.S. higher education institutions. The United States continues to be the leading host country to international students. (Source: *Open Doors 2012*, a publication of the Institute of International Education.)

In the next twenty-five years, many of these students will occupy leadership positions in government, business, and education—they will lead the communities and churches of their countries. Mr. Kofi Annan from Ghana, the former United Nations general secretary, is a graduate of Macalester College. Mrs. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, current president of the Philippines, graduated from Georgetown University. Dr. Peter Kuzmic from Croatia, the most prominent evangelical scholar and voice in Eastern Europe, attended Southern California College (now Vanguard University) and Wheaton Graduate School. There are thousands of other examples.

As North American Christians, we have an unprecedented opportunity to develop friendships with international students, to be God's ambassadors without leaving home.

WHAT ARE INTERNATIONALS LIKE?

Like you, many international students took rigorous tests and competed with others to have a place on your campus. They are bright and focused on their academic goals. One leading

sending country describes its overseas students as “*possessing academic brilliance, all-around personality, creative and persuasive skills to succeed.*” They are acquainted with life in North America through the internet, films, TV, music, and through observing the many North Americans they may have met who are living, studying, or working in their country. They are curious to see if what they were told about North Americans is actually true.

They are open to experiencing a new way of learning and living. Many come with preconceived ideas about the people and foreign policies of North America. For the most part, their interactions with the local people and culture will either confirm or modify those stereotypes.

In many ways, their lives are similar to yours. They wear jeans and T-shirts. Some of them play the same video games you do—perhaps better. Some text message their friends and walk across campus with their iPods, lost in their own music selections. A good number are well-traveled and world-savvy, speaking more than two languages.

They exhibit a wide range of spiritual attitudes. Many come from backgrounds where they learned little or nothing about Jesus. Or they think he is a God only for Westerners. Many are strong adherents and advocates of their faith. Some come from strong Christian contexts and are here with an opportunity to decide to make that faith their own.

Others come with a vibrant relationship with God and are eager to grow and make a difference in other people’s lives. My own life has been impacted by the love and vision of

Christian international students. They have modeled to me a strong faith, humility, and dependence on God. They have expanded my worldview and encouraged me in my walk with God. They have so much to offer to the body of Christ in North America. Their friendships are valuable. Seek them out. They too need a friend.

They live in your dorm or apartment complex, eat in your dining hall, sit in your classes and your computer lab. Some of them are your teaching assistants. The world has come to you!

HOW DO YOU BEGIN TO ENGAGE THIS WORLD? One international student at a time.

Xiao Min's life was going on successfully, and he was proud to have the opportunity to come to study in the United States. He said, "In my country I never got a good chance to know Jesus. I did not believe—I was educated not to believe anything other than science." He met some Christians on campus and started attending a Bible study group. Although he did not like reading the Bible by himself, he loved asking questions about it and discussing it with friends.

But his interest in God plummeted when his mother became ill back in his home country. He asked God to heal her, but she died. Xiao Min became angry with God. He realized for the first time in his life how helpless and powerless he was. He was trying to prove that God did not exist while at the same time calling on God for help. He recognized the contradiction and said, "At that time, inside my heart, I admitted God existed, but he didn't like me—and I didn't like him!"

His Christian friends stuck with him during his time of great skepticism and discouragement. They didn't push him to believe in God or to cheer up; they just walked with him. Xiao Min later said, "They were the light in my dark life."

The university campus can be a very lonely place for both North American and international students—more so for international students, who have been uprooted from their family, social network, and culture. They may be going through jet lag, serious culture shock (the emotional and physical response to cultural dislocation due to the absence of familiar cues and the presence of multiple and confusing new signals), or the nuances of a new language.

When I first arrived on my campus as a graduate student, I was impressed with how friendly the people were. They asked me, "How are you?" all the time. I answered by telling them how I was, all the time. Until I noticed that they were not paying attention to all the details of my response. It did not take long to figure out that "How are you?" was not really a question. It was more of a greeting, to be answered by a quick "Fine" or "Real good." I learned to give the expected response, but then I began to wonder, *Are any of these people really interested in how I'm doing? And how do I make friends in this culture?* Dr. Richard Levin, president of Yale University, addressed the incoming class of 2010 by saying,

When I greeted my first freshman class thirteen years ago, only one student in fifty came from a foreign country other than Canada. Today, the number is one in twelve...It means that each of you can, without much effort, become close friends with at least one classmate from a country quite

different from your own. This can be a very important start in broadening your perspective on the world. You each have a chance to begin your exploration of the world—its peoples and their diverse values—right here in New Haven. ...But forming friendships is only the beginning of the work that each of you needs to do to become an informed global citizen capable of bringing the world closer together.

These remarks highlight another important reason to develop a friendship with an international student: our need to grow by having our worldviews expanded and challenged. We each have a certain way of seeing the world, but it often takes meeting someone who sees the world differently from us to really understand our own worldviews. Friendship with an international student can help us see ourselves—and the world around us—more accurately. For this reason, it is crucial to make the friendship as mutual and reciprocal as possible.

There are so many opportunities to form friendships with international students on your campus. Xiao Min met Christians who took the initiative to get to know him and welcomed him into their campus fellowship. Similarly, you have a unique and strategic opportunity to welcome the world into your life and the life of your campus group—one person at a time. But where do you start?

ATTITUDE CHECK

Begin by asking God to enlarge your heart to be hospitable to people from other cultures. Here's a helpful definition:

Cross-cultural hospitality is making room in your heart and life to include others who are different from you.

Hospitality has very little to do with the size of your dorm room or the quality of the meals you can cook, but everything to do with the size of your heart.

In Acts 10, Luke records Peter's conversion to cross-cultural ministry. Peter was a devout Jew who followed strict dietary rules. He fell into a trance and saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven to earth with all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. A voice told him to kill and eat. "No way!" Peter said. He probably was thinking, *Those animals are unclean and impure. No Jew in his right mind would eat such things.*

But the voice spoke to him again: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." Peter was confronted with a new definition of what was clean and unclean. From then on, "clean" would be defined by this heavenly voice and not by Peter's cultural biases.

But Peter was not quickly convinced. Even after the vision and the voice came to him three times, he was still greatly puzzled. The account tells us that while he was wondering about the meaning of the vision, Gentile servants were already at the door asking for him to come and meet their master, Cornelius, a foreigner. Cornelius had had an earlier vision telling him that God had answered his prayers and that he should send for Peter. The Gentile was more ready to receive the good news about Jesus than the Jew was ready to share it!

When Peter finally met Cornelius and his household, he shared his cross-cultural conversion: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right.” He then proceeded to speak about the Good News in Jesus! It was not about food after all! It was about God changing Peter’s heart. It was about exposing his prejudiced heart. It was about God calling the shots in expanding his kingdom. It was about inclusion, as we read in Ephesians 3:6: “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus.”

All of us, like Peter, may have unrecognized prejudices lurking in our hearts. Ask God to expose any prejudice in your heart which would keep you from reaching out cross-culturally, remembering that God forgives proud attitudes, ethnocentricity, and a sense of cultural superiority. Matthew 9:35-39 records that “Jesus went around the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowd he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” As you go about your life on campus, God will open your eyes to internationals around you who may be feeling harassed, helpless, and lost. They need compassion—your compassion.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE HURDLE?

Many international students speak English as a second or third language. They are required to pass an English proficiency test before being accepted to a degree course on any U.S. campus.

Some are comfortable speaking English. But not everyone has the same level of verbal fluency. Be sensitive to your friend's level of English. If you feel something was not understood, be ready to repeat words or clarify with simpler terms. When necessary, speak slowly (but not loudly). Encourage and affirm your friend's effort in speaking in English. You will be more patient and sympathetic if you imagine yourself learning a new language in another country and trying to converse with a native speaker!

The English language has many idioms that may not make sense to an international student. For example, you may need to explain expressions like *"Can't wrap your mind around it,"* *"Don't put all your eggs in one basket,"* *"You don't have to bend over backwards for this,"* or *"The ball is in your court."*

A group of Christian students on a West Coast campus began friendships with international students by volunteering to be English conversation partners. Check with the international student office on your campus to see if they have such a program you can participate in. One North American student wrote, "My conversation partner had a lot of questions, especially about God. She recently expressed her desire to know about more Jesus. I hope to be able to answer her questions. By the way, her English has improved a lot since we have been meeting, and I have picked up some Chinese words along the way!"

ASK QUESTIONS

Develop a healthy curiosity about people. A good reminder is *Ask, don't assume*. You may meet international students from countries you have not heard of. Take this opportunity to learn

about other peoples and cultures. One international student lamented the fact that she had been in classes where nobody bothered to sit by her or get to know her. She felt that even her contributions in class were ignored. That international student sitting in your class is a potential gold mine of information, culture, and experience that will change the way you see the world.

When introductions are made, pay attention to the person's name and how it is pronounced. If you need help in remembering, ask the international student to write it down for you. (You may also need to write your name, if it is unusual or difficult to pronounce.) Some international students have adopted Western names, making it easy for you to remember.

You may ask general questions about classes, upcoming school activities, world events, or the weather. Further questions may include: *"How do you like studying here?" "How different are students here compared with students in your country?" "What do you miss most about your country?" "What do you think about North American sports?" "What does your family enjoy doing?"*

GIVE AND TAKE

As you listen, watch for appropriate times to share your perspectives as well. Be willing to explain North American ways, but be eager to learn about your friend's society as well.

You may be a minority person living in a majority culture and can empathize with the feelings of marginalization. Or you may have lived or studied abroad and had similar experiences

of culture shock and the need for cultural interpreters. Or perhaps you identify with the person's questions about the meaning of life, God, Jesus, and forgiveness.

Jesus started a conversation with a Samaritan woman (a foreigner and an outcast in the Jews' eyes) with a need wrapped up in a question: "Will you give me a drink?" (John 4:7). It was not a trick question. Jesus was thirsty! His sincere need for a drink of water led to a deeper spiritual conversation. Like Jesus, you may start a conversation with a genuine request: "Do you have notes from last week's class?"

You may encounter some international students who are hesitant to engage in a conversation with you. Don't be discouraged. This may happen because they do not feel confident about their English, or they are suspicious about your intentions (they may not have met any friendly North Americans), or they have cultural hesitations. In order to avoid questions about your motivation, talk with someone of the same gender. Don't be pushy; be respectful of their linguistic ability and their social readiness.

And don't be dismayed if things fail to work out the first time around. Remember this is a cross-cultural encounter. You may make some cultural blunders, like offering bacon to your Muslim friend or beef to your Hindu vegetarian friend, or being too casual and greeting your friend with a slap on the back. Your international student friend may in turn make cultural mistakes, such as walking into your room without knocking on your door, holding your hand as you walk together, or not realizing that people have to wait in line.

BE A LEARNER

Become an eager culture learner, and you will find yourself greatly enriched by the friendship. Emphasizing mutuality will also help to deepen the relationship in ways that nothing else can.

When crossing cultures, refrain from making hasty judgments. A behavior may not necessarily be wrong, or right—it may just be different! Be patient with your new international friend and with yourself as you are both learning each other's culture. Better yet, agree to be each other's cultural informants. Help your international friend with the do's and don'ts of your culture as he assists you with avoiding faux pas related to his culture.

Many times, the best “teachers” of your own culture are those from outside the culture. They see your culture from a different perspective. They may describe it in a fresher and clearer way than you would because you live and breathe it on a daily basis. They notice things that you take for granted (Why are people always in a hurry? Do you always have to make an appointment to see people? Why do you have special homes for older people?). Borrowing their eyes for a moment will help you see your own culture and critique or explain it in a new way.

It is unavoidable that “hot topics” will come up in conversations. For example, the international student may criticize your government's policies. Do not be quick to defend it. Listen attentively. Your friend's comments may help you understand how the rest of the world regards your country and expand your view of power dynamics in a global economy. Be honest if you have not formed any opinions

on the subject, and be willing to look into it for the next conversation. Say something like, “Frankly, I have not thought about that issue. But I’m beginning to see why you would feel the way you do.”

MEALS TOGETHER

Food is an international currency which can be cashed anytime. Invite your international student friend to share a meal with you at the cafeteria or a nearby restaurant. If you are able to cook in your apartment, invite the person to enjoy a simple meal with you. As the friendship progresses, the international student may want to return the favor and invite you over for a meal also.

Be sensitive to food restrictions. Ask ahead of time what dietary rules your guest may have due to religious convictions or personal preferences.

If your new friend has no plans for the holidays, consider inviting him or her to your home. This may be the only chance he or she will have to experience Thanksgiving or Christmas in a North American home. This experience will forever be instilled in your international friend’s memory. I am very grateful for my American classmate who invited me to spend my first Thanksgiving with her family in Michigan. I had my first snow sighting and an elaborate Thanksgiving meal. Now, years later, I still treasure the memory of the warm welcome and generosity of my hosts.

GO WHERE THEY ARE

Consider going with other Christians to meet international students. There may be events on campus to attend (e.g., international coffee hour) or activities sponsored by international student groups like the Muslim Student Association, the Indian Student group, or the German club where you can naturally meet them. Drop by the International Student Office and find out what international events are happening. Or if international students congregate in certain areas of the campus, go and meet them there.

However, you do not want international students to think you are targeting them (you would not want that done to you either), so be careful how you approach them and how you ask your questions. You are not God's secret agent. Neither are you an insensitive peddler who pushes the gospel on people. You are a witness to what Christ has said and done, and so you are held to a very high standard of honesty and integrity. You walk and work under the Holy Spirit's leadership. (For help on this point, read through InterVarsity's Code of Ethics for Christian Witness, which you can find at evangelism.intervarsity.org/how/calling).

The best way to connect with international students is to meet them in natural and spontaneous settings on campus, keeping alert to God's timing and open doors.

PARTNER WITH OTHERS

Two summers ago, six college students from one campus returned from different short-term missions trips. As they

e-mailed each other, they discovered one thing in common: they all wanted to reach out to international students. Their experience abroad opened their eyes and enlarged their hearts towards this often overlooked student population. Today they lead their InterVarsity group in planning events specifically for international students.

Team up with full-time ISM (International Student Ministry) staff on your campus. They will be delighted to have you volunteer with them. One student attended a hayride event organized by a local ISM staff and met many internationals, some of whom she has befriended and has been meeting with on a regular basis.

Work with the Christian international students in your fellowship. They provide a vital link to other internationals. Their cultural sensitivity and proximity, spiritual insight, and shared experience with internationals will help you navigate the internationals' world. Your partnership with them will bear fruit in your life and theirs. Join international student activities sponsored by your church or a church near your campus.

EXPECT SPIRITUAL HUNGER

Swati's interest in Christianity started when she was seven years old, back home in her predominantly Hindu country. Riding her bike one afternoon, she noticed a church and stopped to look in. She saw people praying and waiting in line for something (they were having communion). She stepped inside.

The priest asked if she was a Christian, and without a thought she said yes. Then, knowing she had lied, she quickly slipped

out. But that interest in church would remain with her. When she first visited the United States, one of the first things she noticed was a small church by a park. She wrote, “Soon it became a routine for me to go there after my walk, when all was quiet and no one was there. I would walk in, pray—talk to God—and almost every single time sing ‘Silent Night.’ That was the only Christian hymn I really knew.”

Years later she returned to the United States as an international student. She met other Christians at the international student orientation who welcomed her and introduced her to the International Christian Fellowship group on campus. During their spring retreat, Swati made a decision to follow Jesus. She wrote,

It has been a long journey since my first interest in Christianity was kindled as a child. I feel the hand of God traveling through these years, and when he knew I was “ripe” he placed me in the right hands—hands of International Christian Fellowship members, who introduced me to the Bible and the life it had to offer.

I feel reborn again. I now have a hope, a friend, a Father to whom I can go anytime to seek comfort, advice, love, forgiveness and rest. It is a privilege to have Christ, my Abba, in my life.

God is bringing students like Swati to your campus.

WORLD RELIGIONS: EXPERTISE NOT REQUIRED

You may wonder if you need to master all the world religions to begin reaching out to international students: *How can I talk with them about their faith if I am not familiar with it?*

Studying the belief systems of the major religions is not a must for starting a friendship cross-culturally, but it is helpful. Check the web or your local bookstore for resources on different faiths and how Christians are to relate with them. Your best teacher may be someone from that religion, your international student friend. Ask questions about faith: Do you believe in God? What kind of God do you believe in? Where do you get information about your God? What difference does your religion make in your daily life? Is your God knowable? How do you please God? How important is faith in God in your life? What is humanity's purpose on earth? What happens when you die? Does it matter how you live your life on this earth?

You will be surprised how your own Christian faith will be strengthened as you wrestle with the questions your international friend is asking you.

As you meet people from other faiths, be willing to engage them in true dialogue. InterVarsity's Code of Ethics for Christian Witness says that true dialogue means *"we acknowledge our common humanity as equally sinful, equally needy, and equally dependent on the grace of God we proclaim. We seek to listen sensitively in order to understand, and thus divest our witness of any stereotypes or fixed formulae which are barriers to true dialogue."*

INVESTIGATE GOD TOGETHER

Invite international students to investigate Christianity by reading and studying the Bible with you. Encourage them to also read the Bible in their native language (find Bibles at tiny.cc/ibible). Many international students have not seen or owned a Bible for themselves. One graduate student from China, upon receiving a Bible as a gift at a Christian meeting, exclaimed, "A Bible! I've never touched one before! Thank you so much. I will read it!"

You may want to start with the I-GIG Guide (stands for *International Groups Investigating God*), a booklet with four Bible studies written with internationals in mind. It is available from the InterVarsity store at tiny.cc/i-gig. Or you may want to use *Passport to the Bible*, a series of Bible studies written by InterVarsity staff who work with international students. It explains the Bible and its message to people who have no understanding of Christianity. It is available from amazon.com. Other Bible study resources are available at interVarsity.org/ism.

UNCONDITIONAL FRIENDSHIP

What if your international student friend is not serious about spiritual things? What if she or he does not become a Jesus follower while in North America? Will you continue being a friend? Of course! Your friendship is not conditioned by their acceptance or rejection of Jesus.

Your friendship is based on mutual respect and commitment to each other. You have discovered and developed a variety of interests. So even if your friend does not share your spiritual

beliefs, you can continue to enrich and enjoy each other's lives. And who knows, maybe down the road, he will make steps towards Jesus, or possibly his family members will.

A graduate student in the Midwest wants her young son, back in her country, to learn about Christianity, even though she herself is just beginning to learn about Jesus.

A professor in Asia had a positive encounter with a Christian English teacher in his country. That opened the way for his daughter to have Christian hosts when she came to North America as an international student. Her Christian exposure eventually led to her own understanding of the claims of Jesus Christ.

Many international students return to their home countries without making a commitment to Jesus. That's fine. But they will return with a different view of Christians because of the quality of friendship they experienced with you. They will return home with hearts soft towards God.

Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 3:6 that the Lord has assigned to his servants different tasks. He writes, "I planted, Apollos watered, and God has been making it grow." Your part may be at the front end or the middle of the spiritual journey of an international student. But whatever role you play, it is God who will bring life and lasting fruit.

BIG CHALLENGE, BIG OPPORTUNITY

Friendship with an international student is a life-changing adventure. You will become more globally conversant.

Your international friend will be more informed about North American life, worldviews, and values. You and your international friend will acquire new cross-cultural skills. You may expand your culinary choices, while your international friend may begin to appreciate North American cuisine. You will feel God's pleasure as you obey his commands in Leviticus 19:33-34: "When foreigners reside in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigners residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God." In return, your international friend will experience genuine Christian love and hospitality.

Remember Xiao Min? The Christians continued to love him in the midst of his doubts and discouragement. They continued to pray for him. After quite some time, he became a follower of Jesus. He still has many questions, but he says, "If God opens the doors for me, it means he accepts me as I am. If God opens the door for me, he will also show me the way." For Xiao Min, his Christian friends have made the difference between a life of despair and a life of faith.

Look for the Harukis, the Xiao Mins, and the Swatis around you who need a Christian friend. Perhaps, because of you, Haruki would not hesitate to attend the party. He might even invite you to go with him! God is bringing the world to you. And a life-changing adventure awaits you!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Overviews

- Get a more in depth introduction by reading *The World at Your Door* by Phillips, Norsworthy, and Whalin or *God Brings the World to Your Doorstep* by Lawson Lau
- Find many online resources for international student ministry at InterVarsity (intervarsity.org/ism) and ReachingInternationals.com
- Connect with others through the ACMI Network and annual training conference (acmi-net.net)

Crossing Cultures

- Help new internationals adapt by sharing *Coming to America* booklets (tiny.cc/c-t-a)
- Learn more with *A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures* by Patty Lane (tiny.cc/bgcc)
- See the Bible through a non-Western lens after reading *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* by Kenneth E. Bailey (tiny.cc/jtmee) or *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* by Richards and O'Brien (tiny.cc/mswe)
- Reference the *Pocket Guide to World Religions* by Winfried Corduan (tiny.cc/pgwr) or download religion profiles from ISI (www.isionline.org/Resources/FreeMaterial/ReligionProfiles.aspx)

Discipling Christian Internationals

- Lead or coach an I-DIG International Disciples Group (tiny.cc/idig)
- Prepare internationals to return home using the *Think Home* workbook (tiny.cc/t-home) and *Back Home* devotional guide (tiny.cc/b-home), both by Lisa Espineli Chinn



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