

International Student Mental Health Before and During COVID-19

Ohio Program for Campus Safety and Mental Health (OPCSMH)

North East Ohio Medical University (NEOMED)

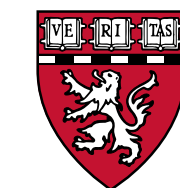
Rootstown, OH

May 19, 2020

Justin A. Chen, MD, MPH



MASSACHUSETTS
GENERAL HOSPITAL



HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL
AFFILIATE



The MGH Center *for*
Cross-Cultural Student
Emotional Wellness

Financial disclosures

- ❖ I am the Executive Director and Co-Founder of the MGH Center for Cross-Cultural Student Emotional Wellness, a volunteer-operated nonprofit organization (unpaid position)
- ❖ I do not have any other relevant commercial interests, financial relationships, or conflicts of interest to disclose



Agenda

1. Background: International students in the U.S.
2. Culture and mental health
3. Mental health experiences of Chinese international students
4. Challenges during COVID-19
5. Strategies for addressing international student mental health



Learning objectives

By the end of this talk, participants will be able to:

- Recognize factors that negatively affect international student mental health.
- Describe additional challenges faced by international students during COVID-19.
- Apply concrete strategies that can help support international student mental health.



Taking the temperature in the room



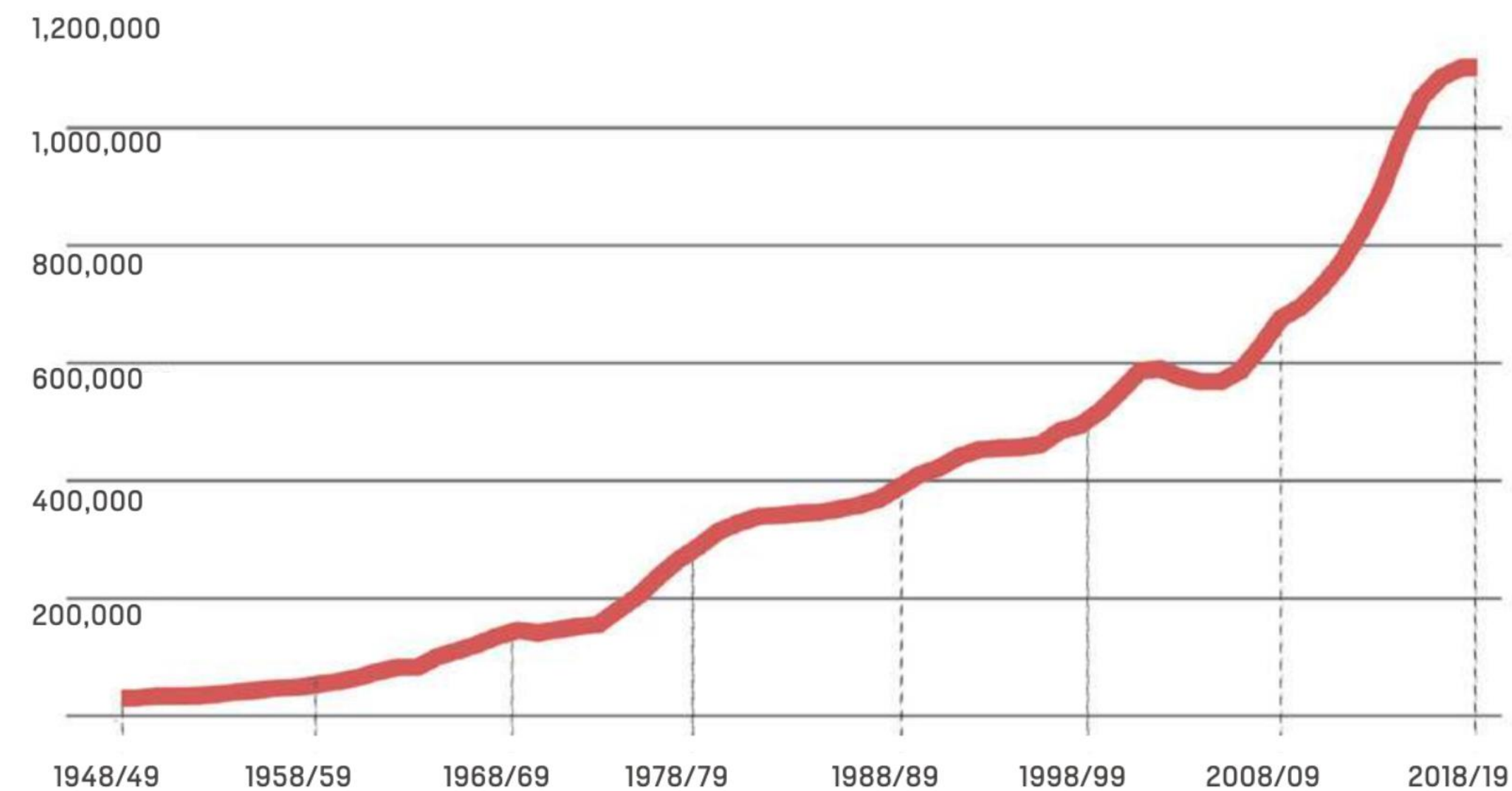
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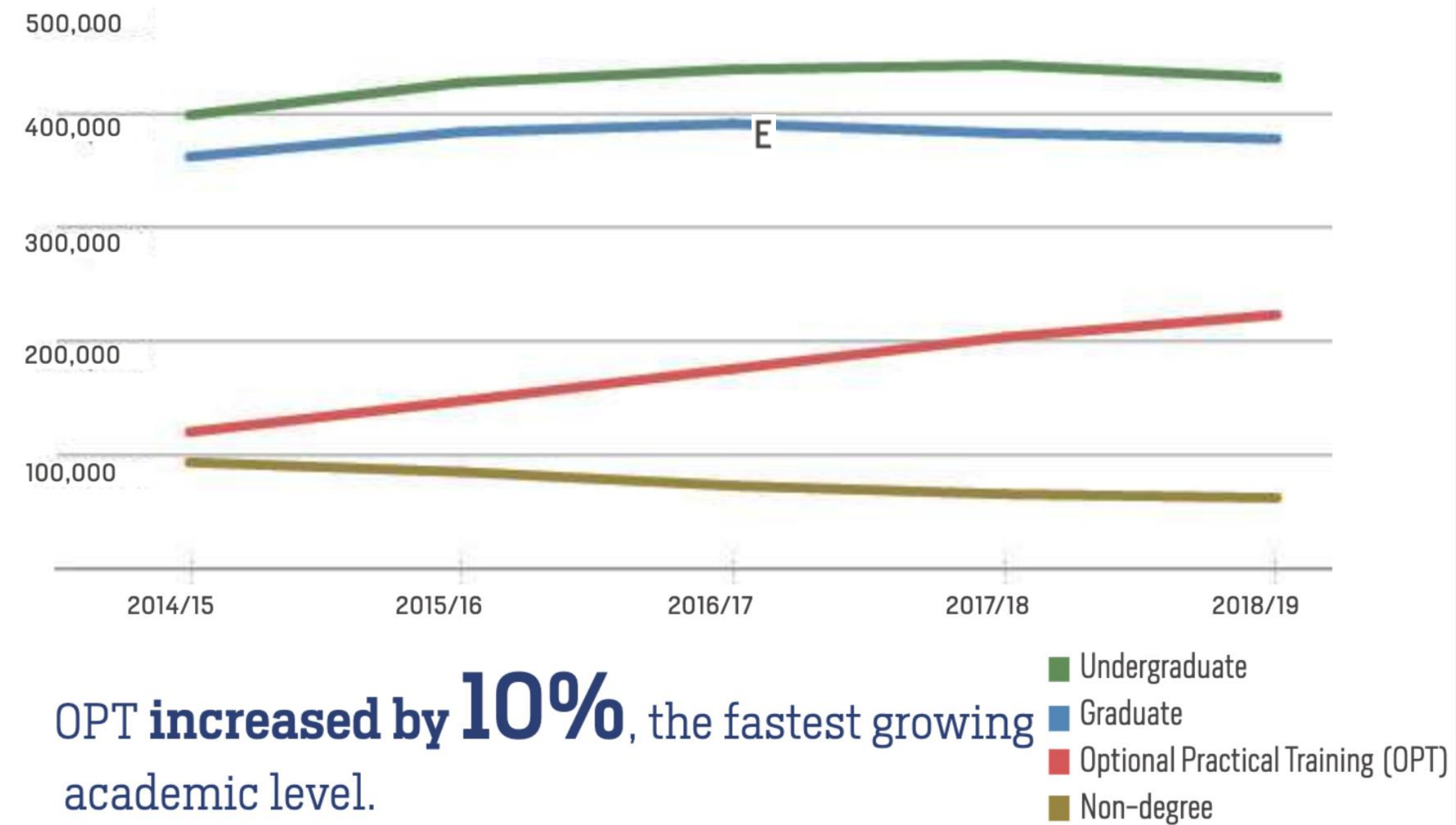
1,095,299 international students
were in the U.S. in 2018/19, including those in academic
programs and Optional Practical Training (OPT).

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE U.S. 1948/49 – 2018/19

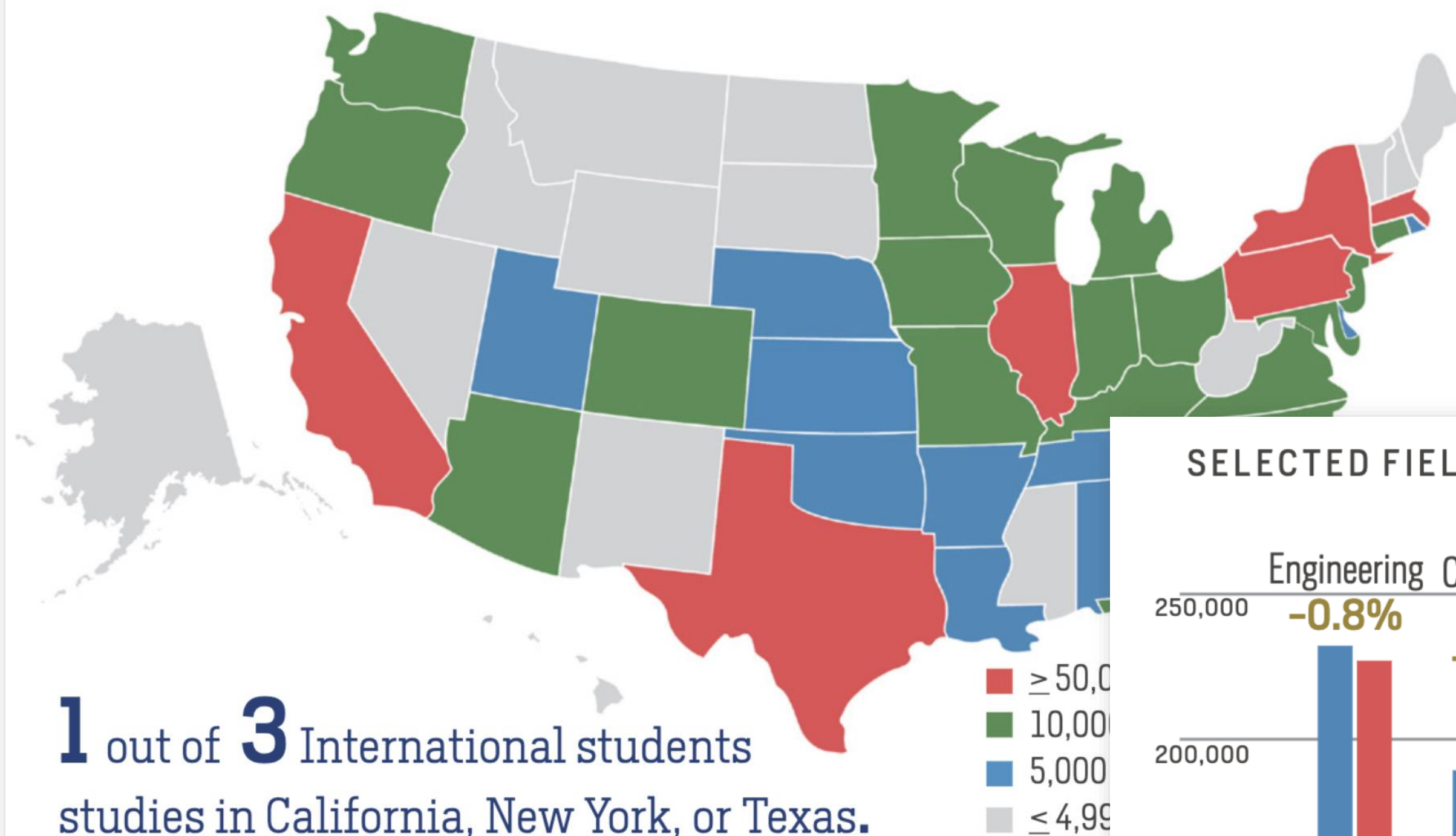


In 2018/19 there was an **increase of 0.05%** over the prior
year in the number of international students in the United States.

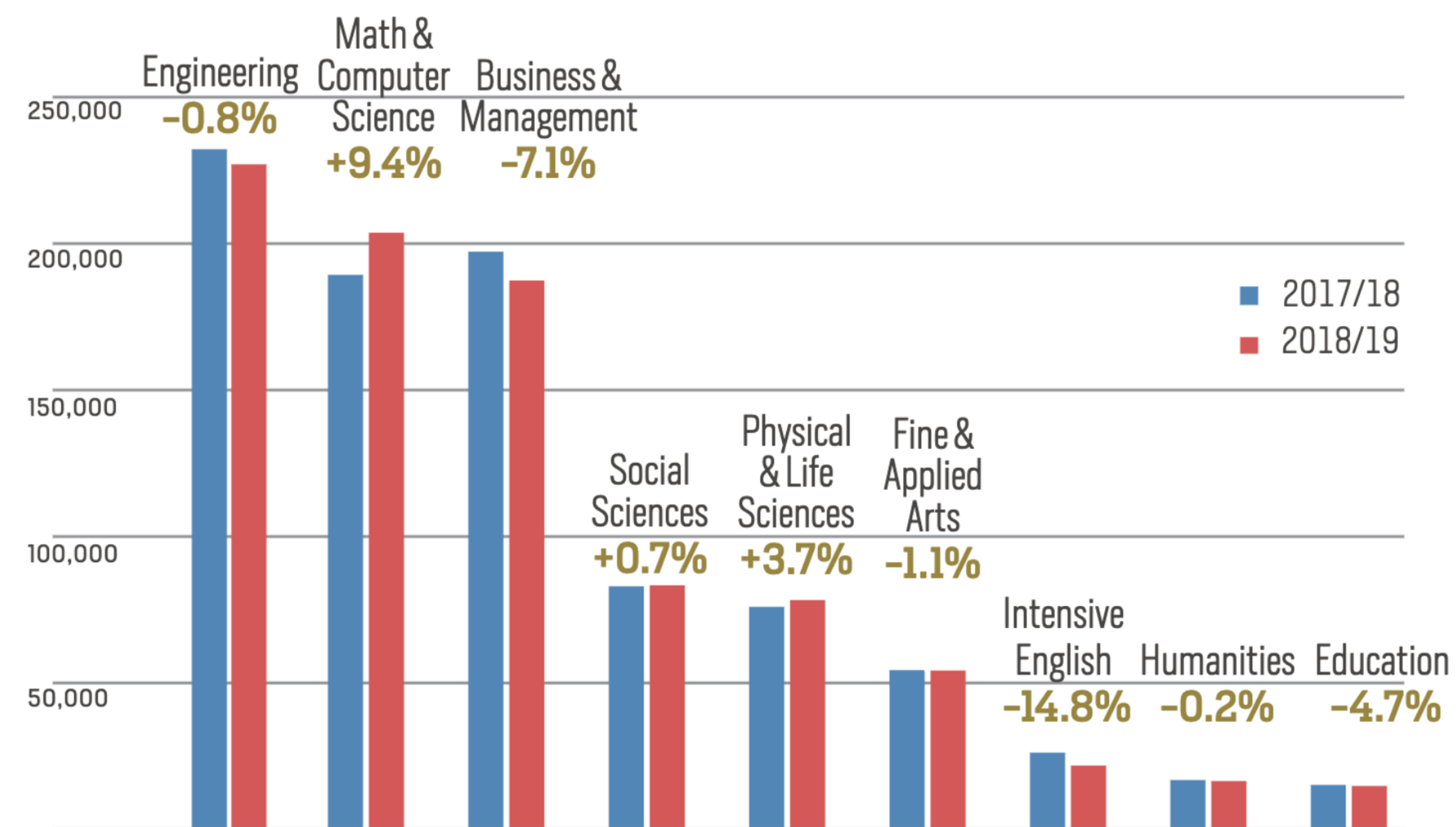
ACADEMIC LEVELS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS



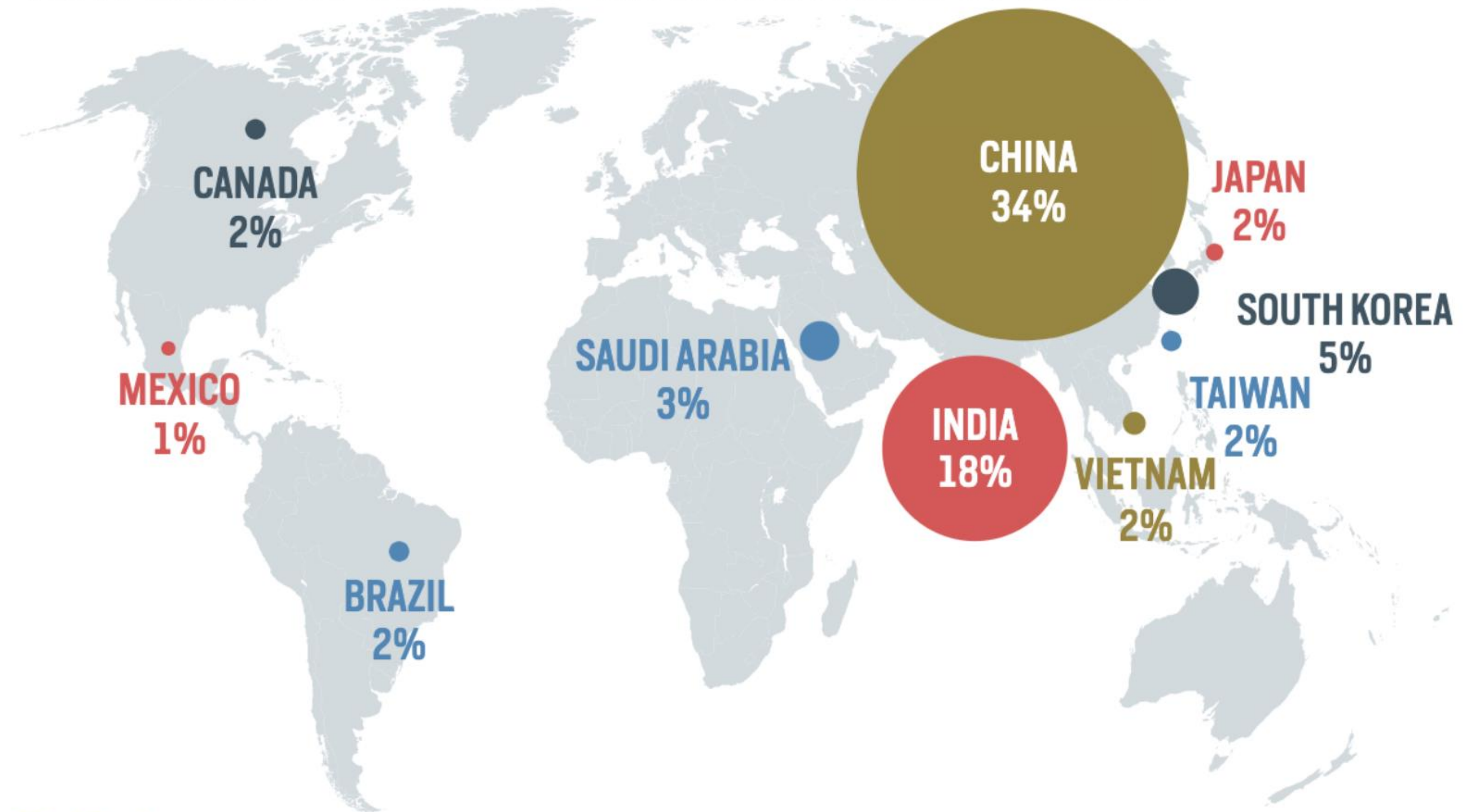
U.S. DESTINATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS



SELECTED FIELDS OF STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS



TOP TEN PLACES OF ORIGIN OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

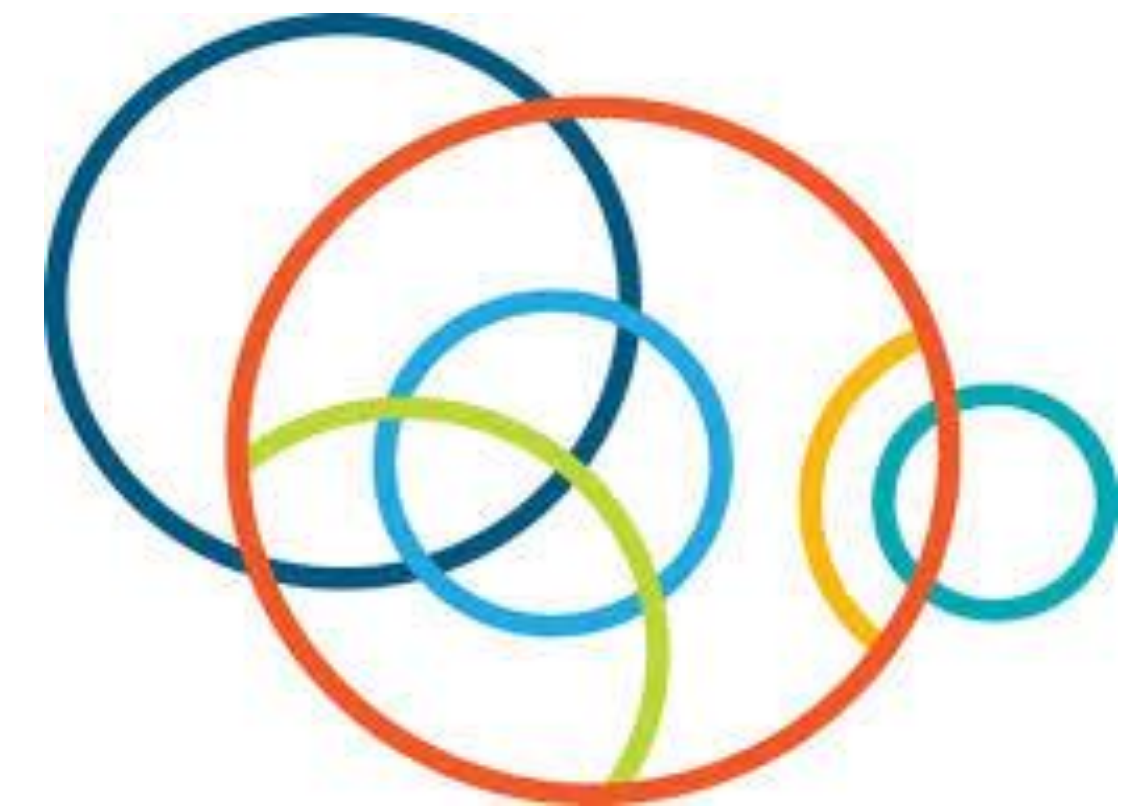


52% of international students come from China and India.

Disclaimers

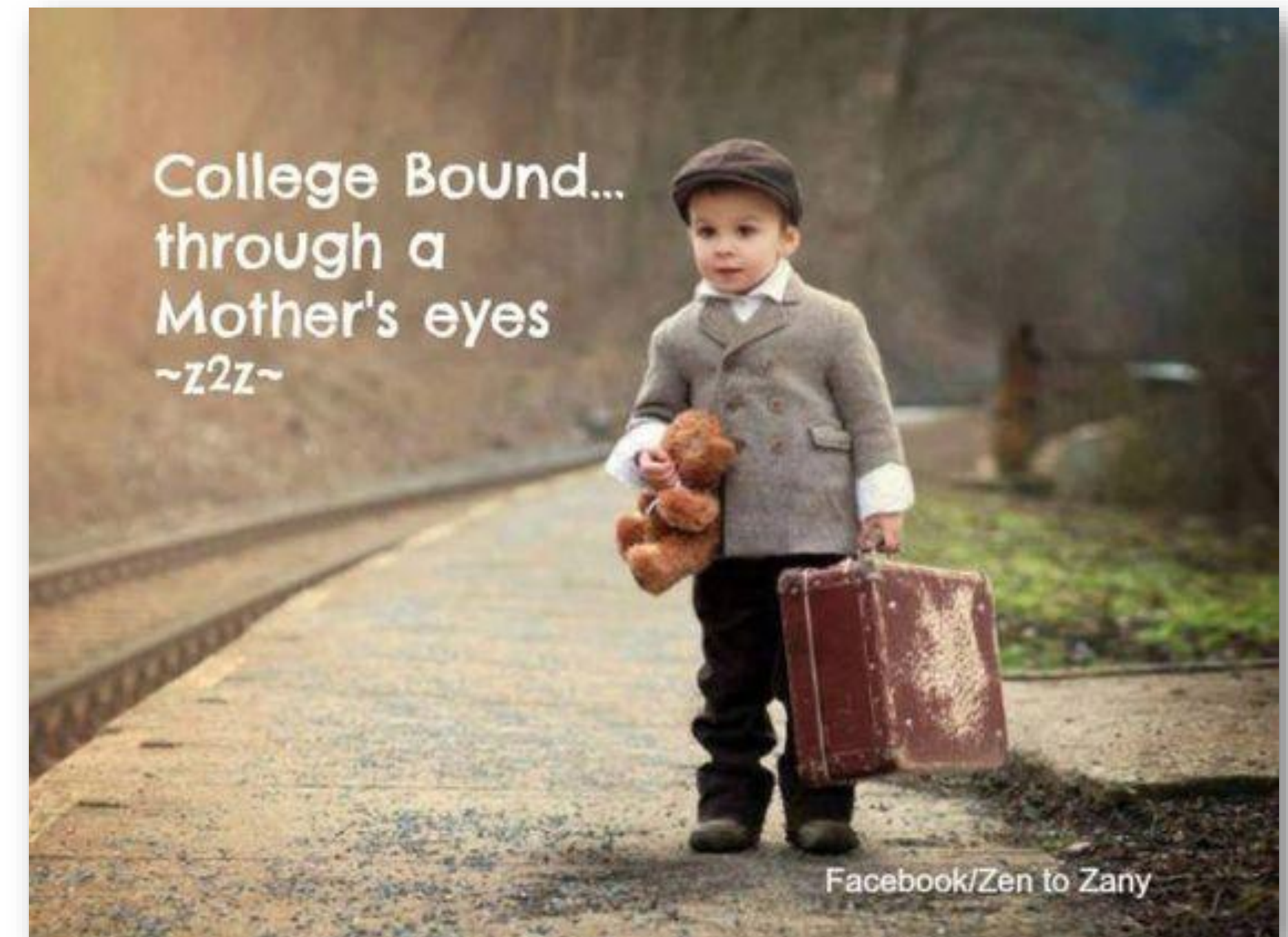
- ❖ **Heterogeneity**: Asia is the largest continent on earth comprising nearly 50 countries and languages
- ❖ **Multidimensionality**: Culture & identity ≠ race
- ❖ **Complexity**: Parental factors, degree of acculturation, socioeconomic status, religion, etc.

THERE IS NO SUCH THING
AS A SINGLE-ISSUE
STRUGGLE BECAUSE
WE DO NOT LIVE
SINGLE-ISSUE LIVES.
– AUDRE LORDE



East meets West on campus

- ❖ 1978: China's economic opening to the West
- ❖ Significant differences in culture, communication, pedagogy
- ❖ Social norms, 4-2-1 generation
- ❖ Vulnerable transition period for individuals of all cultures





EDUCATION

ALIENATION 101

There were hopes that the flood of Chinese students into America would bring the countries closer. But a week at the University of Iowa suggested to Brook Larmer that the opposite may have happened

BROOK LARMER | APRIL/MAY 2017



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Agenda

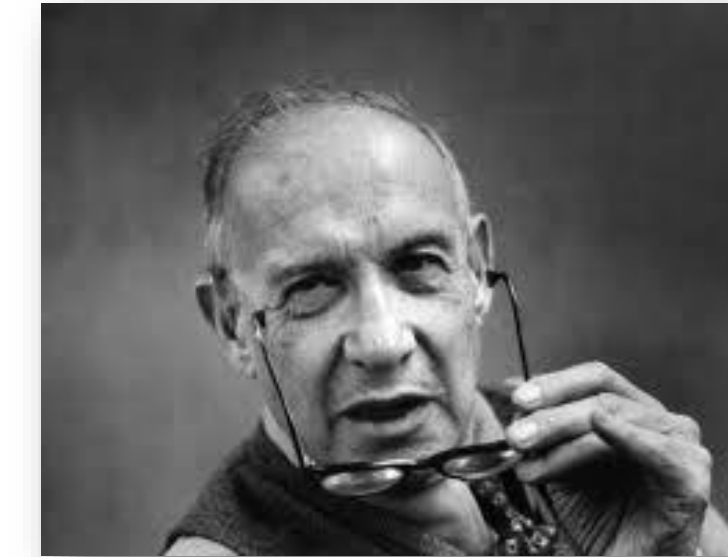
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What is culture?

“Culture eats strategy for breakfast.”

– Peter Drucker



“Whoever discovered water, it certainly wasn’t a fish.”

– Marshall McLuhan

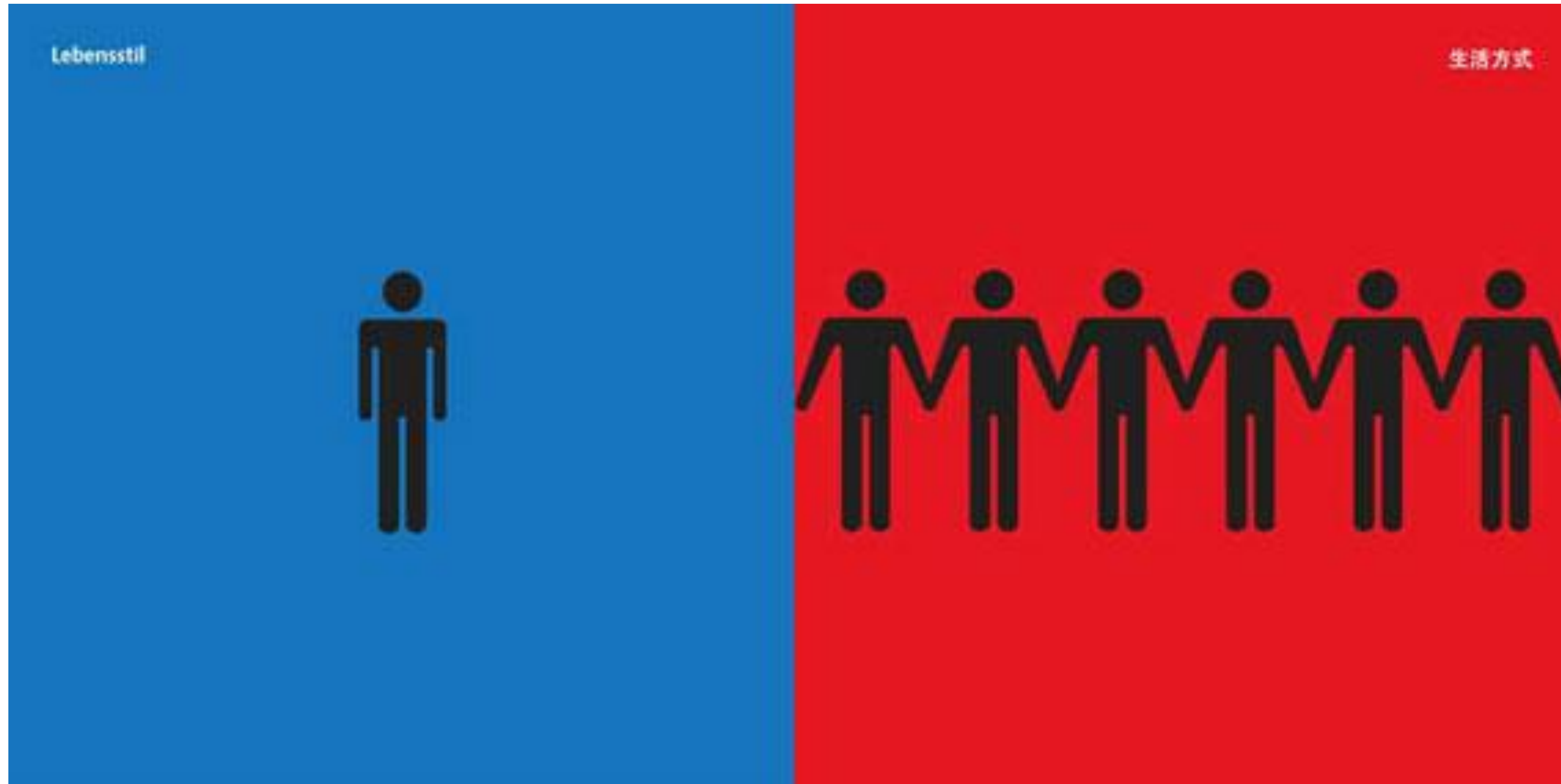


“Never look for a psychological explanation unless every effort to find a cultural one has been exhausted.”

– Margaret Mead



Lifestyle

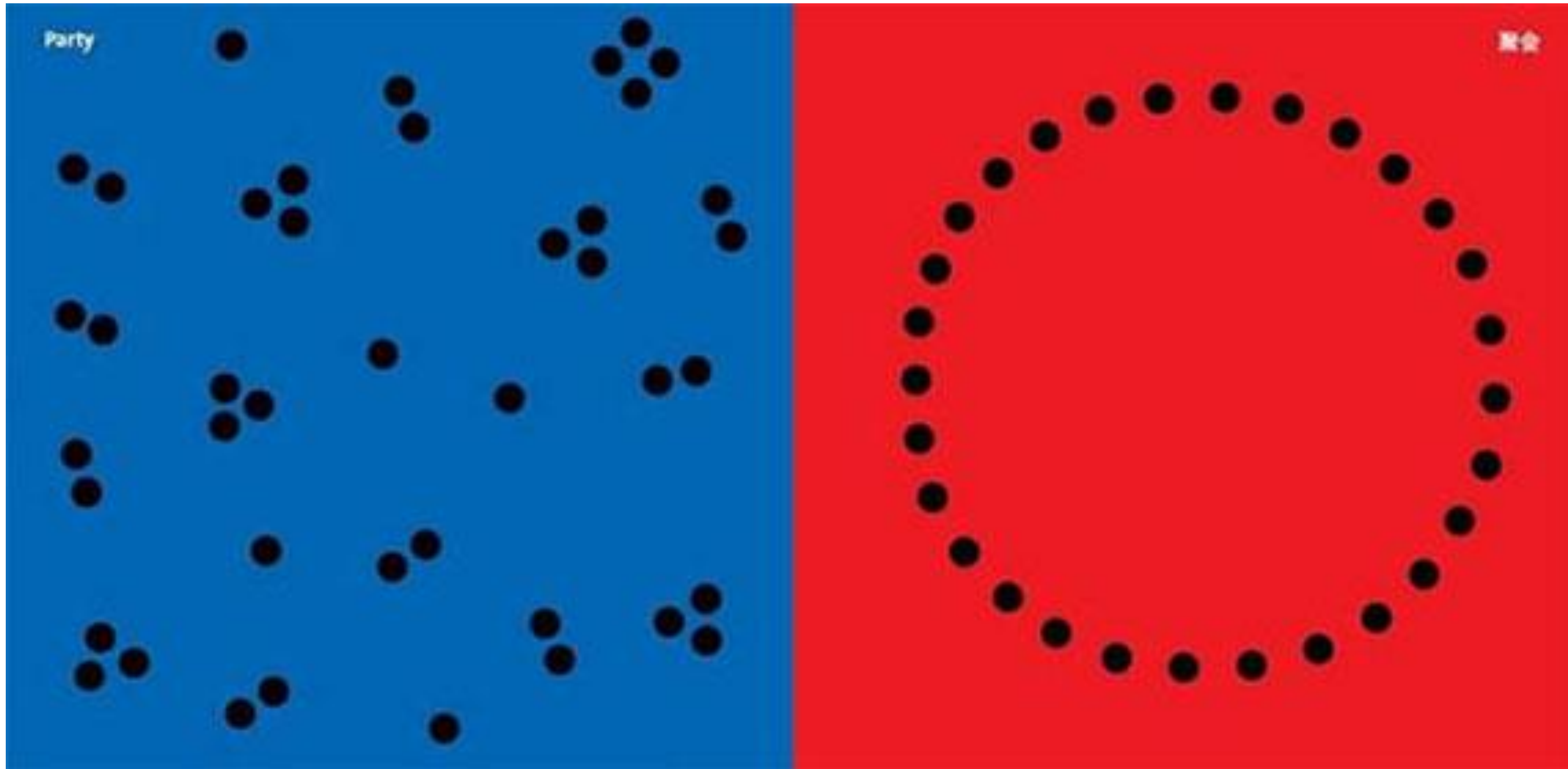


Images by Yang Liu



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Party

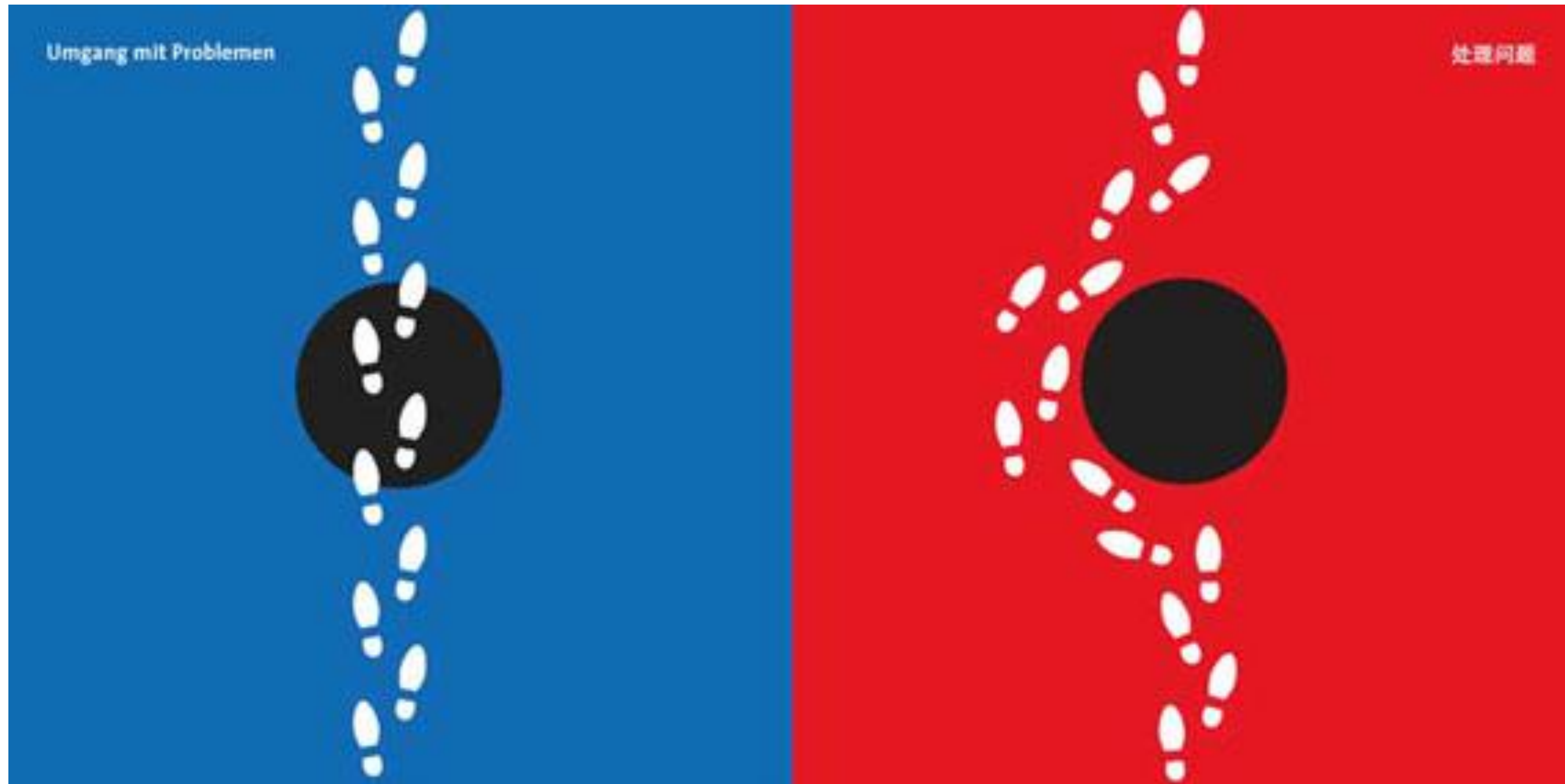


Images by Yang Liu



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Dealing with problems

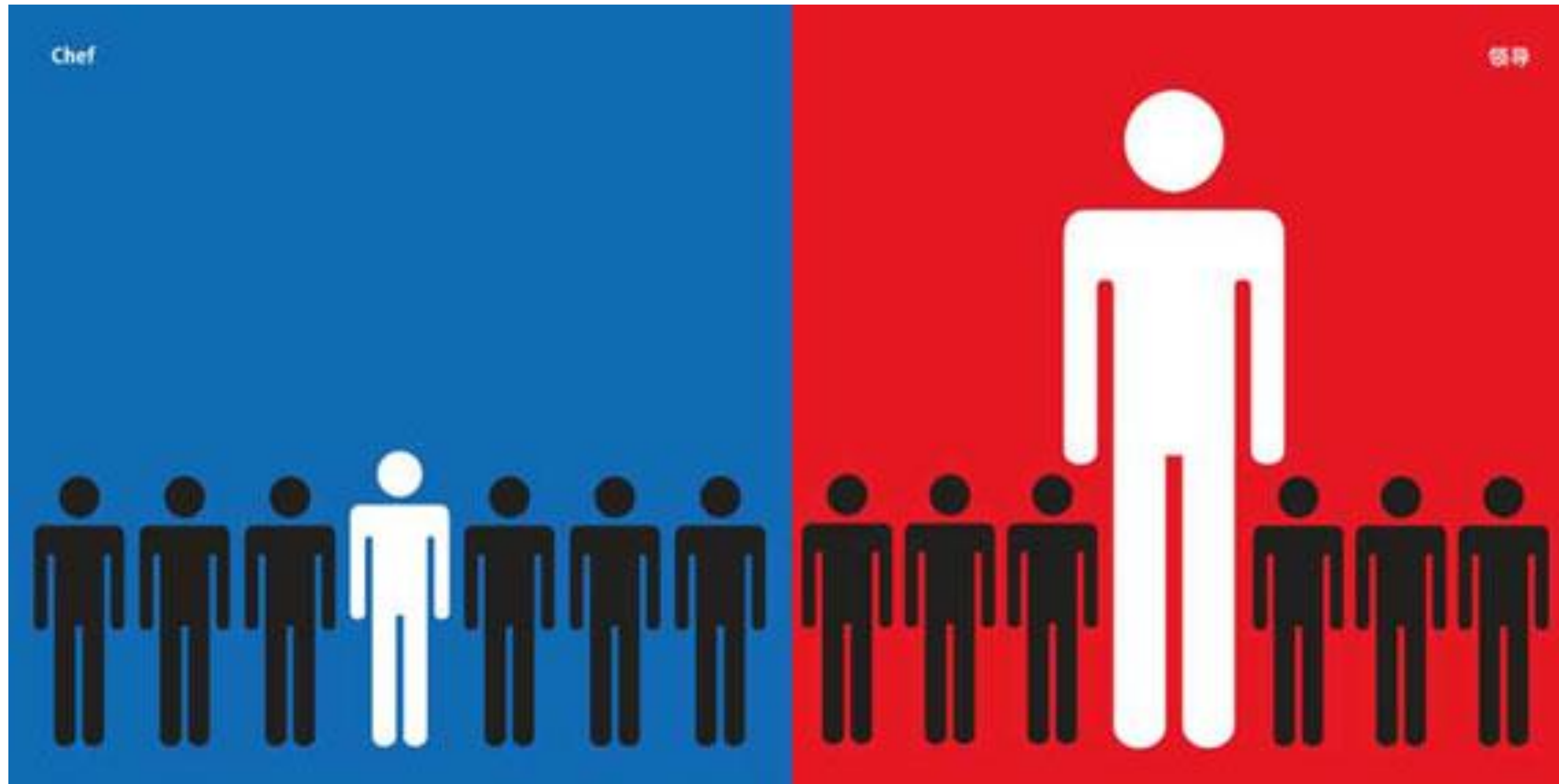


Images by Yang Liu



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The boss (or teacher)



Images by Yang Liu



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Culture in the classroom: Kindergarten

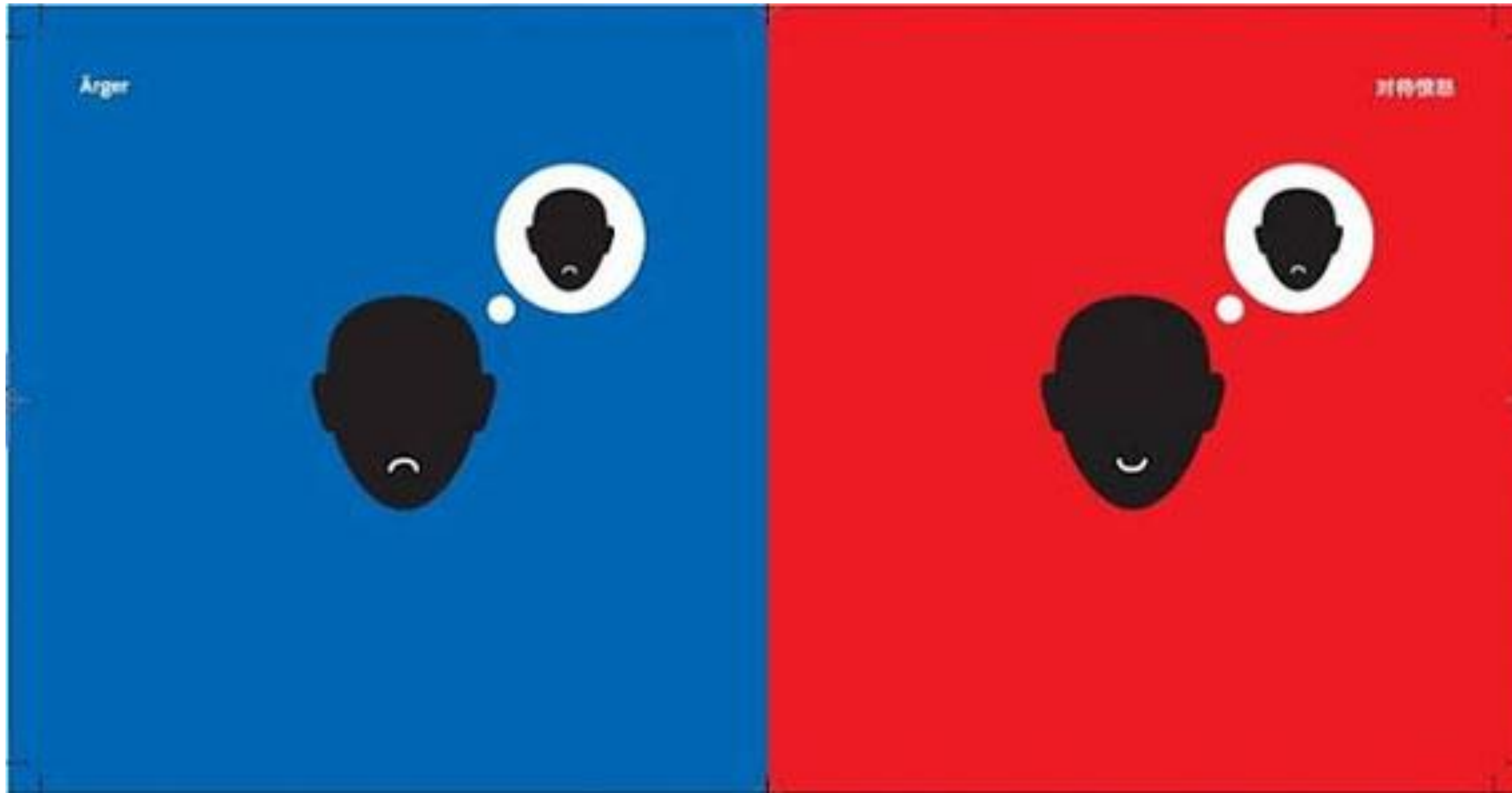


U.S.



Japan

Expressing emotions



Images by Yang Liu



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Cultural differences in communication

- ❖ *The superior man is modest in his speech, but excels in his action.*
君子欲訥於言而敏於行
- ❖ *Fine words and an insinuating appearance are seldom associated with true virtue.*
巧言令色、鮮矣仁



Culture and mental illness

Psychiatry must learn from anthropology that culture does considerably more than shape illness as an experience, it shapes the very way we conceive of illness.

– Arthur Kleinman, 1977



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Opinion | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

Chinese, Studying in America, and Struggling

[查看简体中文版](#) | [查看繁體中文版](#)

By HELEN GAO DEC. 12, 2017



Matt Chase

搜 狐
SOHU.com

26岁中国留学生斯坦福大学自杀身亡：天之骄子背后的压力究竟有多可怕？

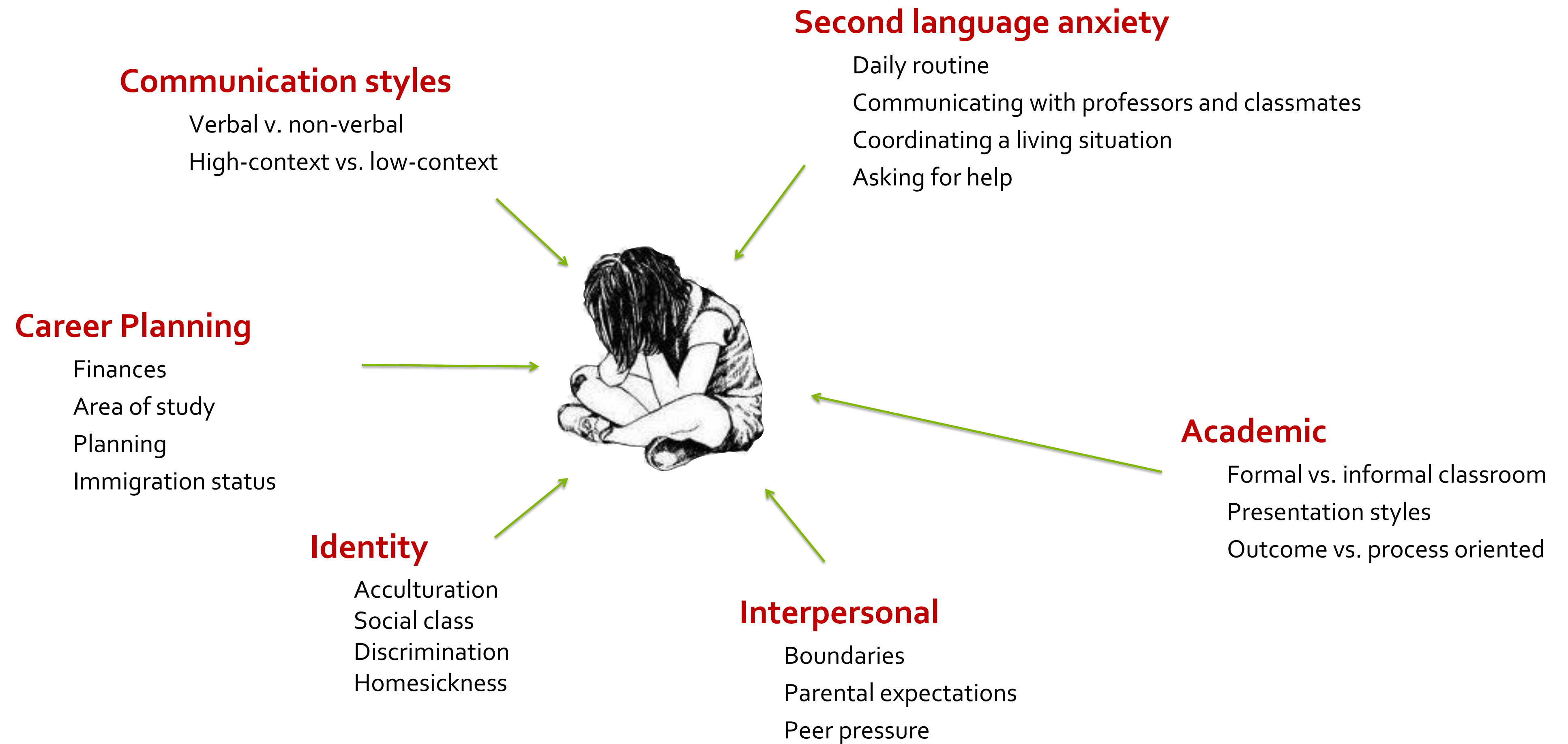
北美学霸君
11-20 21:13

最近翟天临“学术不端”事情闹得沸沸扬扬。与此同时，博士所面临的压力也逐渐被大众所知晓——写论文做实验，整日愁得掉头发。就在2月11日，斯坦福一名材料科学与工程系的博士用自杀告别了这个世界，根据警方确认其为26岁的中国留学生。我们只看到了表面的光鲜亮丽，殊不知他们背后经历了多少无助与痛苦... 学霸君真心希望无论是申请党还是已经在国外就读的留学生都要关注自己的心理健康，学霸君理解你们的压力，希望你们可以照顾好自己。

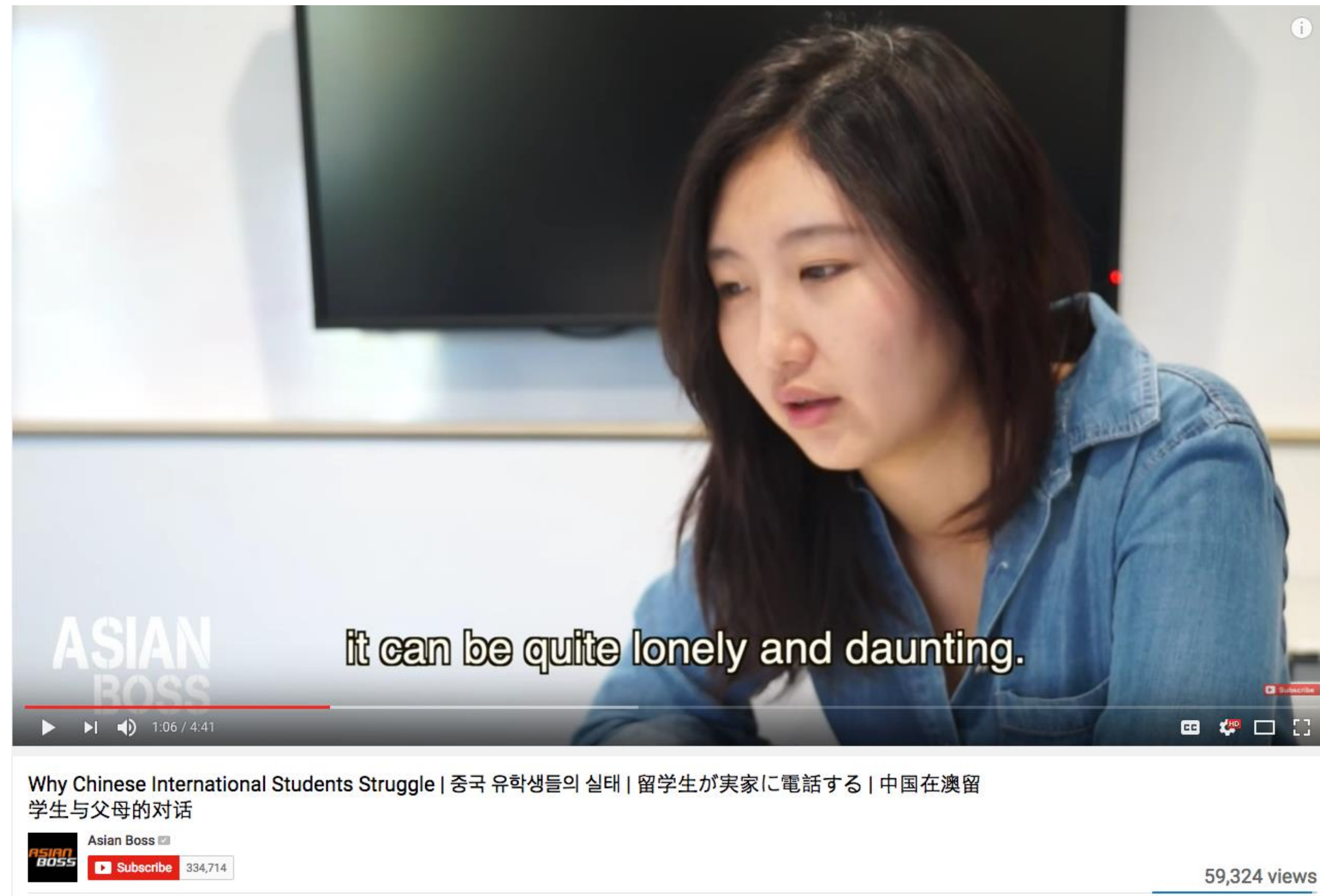


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Common issues



Common issues



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xj3TYYmLGog>



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A range of motivations for study-abroad

- ❖ Status and success
- ❖ Struggle within the Chinese educational system
- ❖ Compensation syndrome
- ❖ Sending away marital problems



Students' perspective

- ❖ Regret or resent studying abroad
- ❖ Feel left behind by parents
- ❖ Apathy toward family bonds
- ❖ Perceive parents as clueless, unsupportive, or intrusive
- ❖ The money issue
- ❖ Lonely, isolated, bored



Psychological challenges

1. Separation from parents
2. Face and shame
3. Clash of cultures
4. Identity formation



2. Face and shame

- ❖ “Face” (面子/臉) – “the guiding principle of the Chinese mind.” (Lu Xun, 19th century Chinese writer)
- ❖ “Men cannot live without shame. A sense of shame is the beginning of integrity.” – Mencius (孟子)
- ❖ Comparisons → Focus on external
- ❖ Hiding problems → Isolation
- ❖ Shame linked to suicide



3. Clash of cultures: What is success?

Asian

Stability
Obedience
Impressiveness
("Face")



Education
Security
Relationship/family
Health
Wealth

Western

Follow your dreams
Independence
Make a difference





“Pursuing one’s passion... **How American.**” 



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Chinese cultural narrative

勤能補拙



"Diligence can make up for lack of intelligence."

不能輸在起跑線上



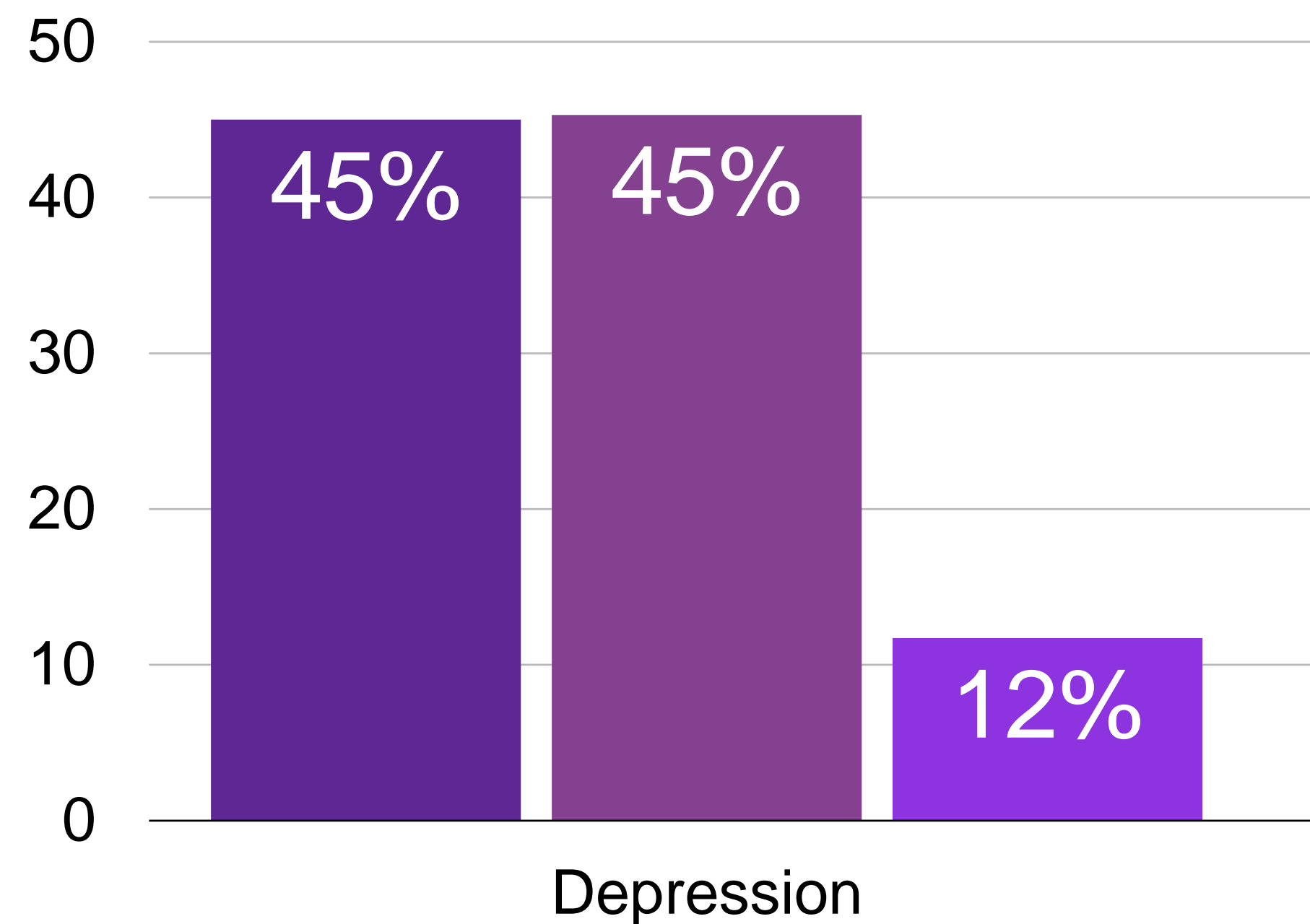
"Do not lose at the starting line."

光宗耀祖



"Bring honor to your ancestors."

Psychiatric symptoms in Chinese students



***Much more
research is
needed!***

- Yale 2013 (N=130)
- Delaware 2019 (N=490)
- Harbin 2019 (N=5,245)

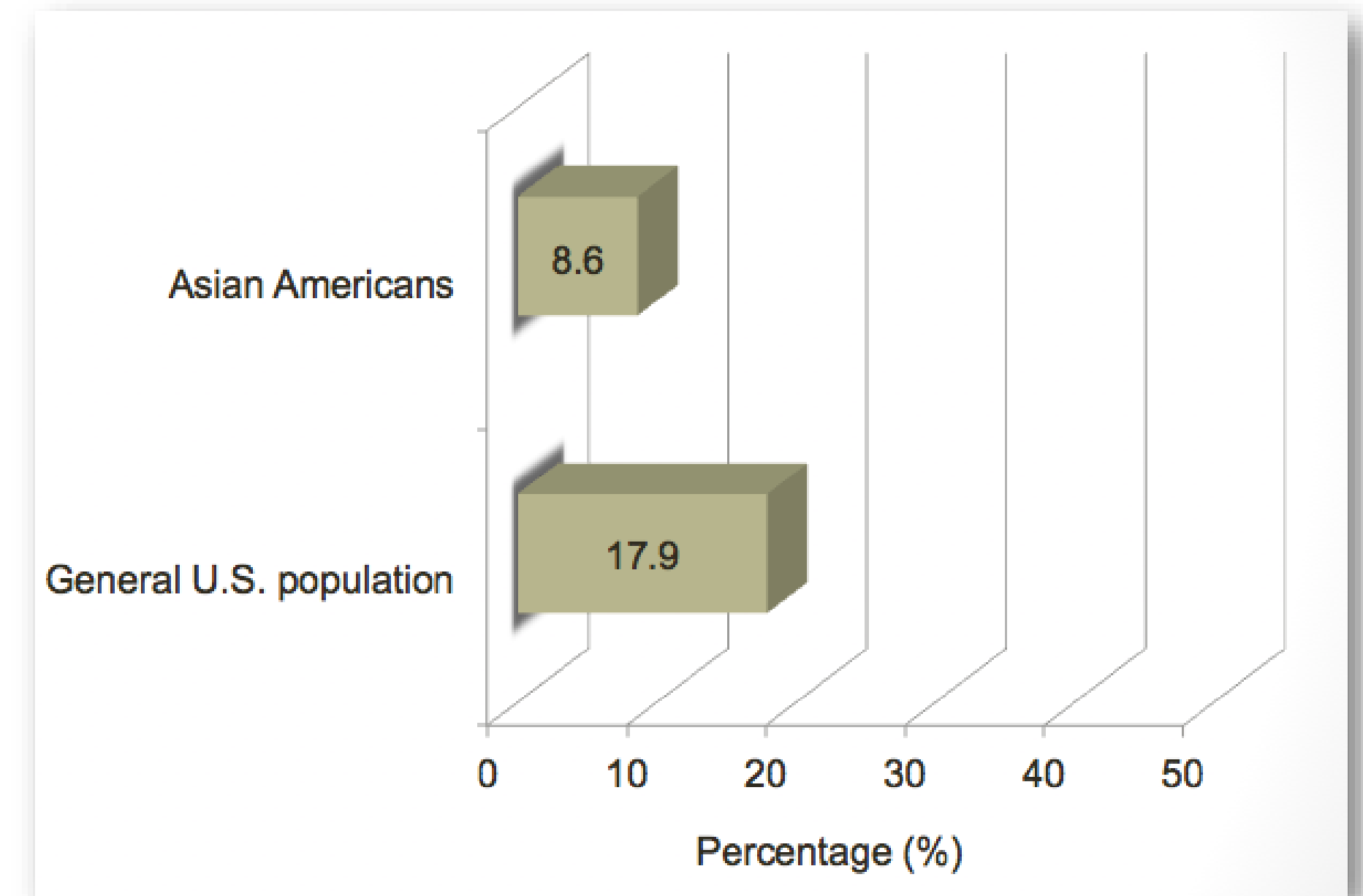
Han X, Han X, Luo Q, Jacobs S, Jean-Baptiste M. J Am Coll Health. 2013;61:1-8.
Chen L, Wang L, Qiu XH, et al. PLoS One. 2013;8.
Shadowen NL, Williamson AA, Guerra NG, Ammigan R, Drexler ML. J International Students. 2019;9(1):129-148.



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Mental health disparities

- ❖ First- and second-generation Asian Americans, including international students, much less likely to seek mental health treatment compared to the general population
- ❖ More likely to rate psychiatric services as unhelpful



Use of Mental Health–Related Services Among Immigrant and US-Born Asian Americans: Results From the National Latino and Asian American Study

Jennifer Abe-Kim, PhD, David T. Takeuchi, PhD, Seunghye Hong, MA, Nolan Zane, PhD, Stanley Sue, PhD, Michael S. Spencer, PhD, Hoa Appel, PhD, Ethel Nicdao, PhD, and Margarita Alegria, PhD



Mental health disparities

- ❖ Asian/Pacific Islander and multiracial students: Fewer diagnoses, more concerning psychiatric symptoms and behaviors
- ❖ “Psychiatric illness affects all students, but students from minority groups appear to be particularly vulnerable to being left behind by mainstream providers of mental health support.”

[Download](#)

Psychiatric Symptoms and Diagnoses Among U.S. College Students: A Comparison by Race and Ethnicity

Justin A. Chen, M.D., M.P.H., Courtney Stevens, Ph.D., Sylvia H. M. Wong, Ed.M., Cindy H. Liu, Ph.D.



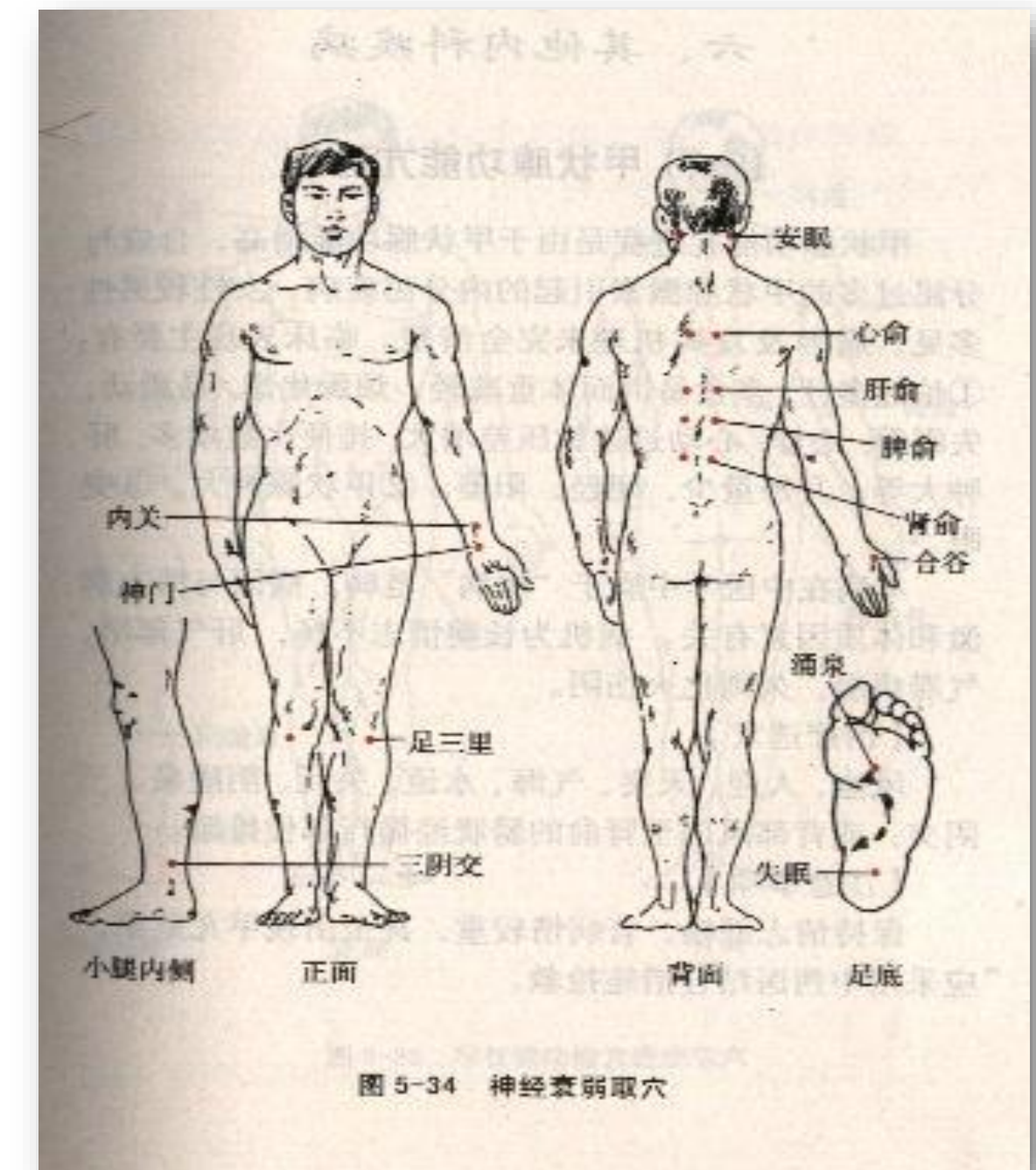
Barriers to treatment

- ❖ Belief that depression and anxiety are personal weaknesses rather than illnesses
- ❖ Emotional inhibition rather than expression
- ❖ Low awareness of services and help-seeking
- ❖ Language/cultural barriers
- ❖ Role of psychiatry in many Asian countries
- ❖ Stigma/shame



Culture and mental health stigma

- ❖ Mental illness is highly stigmatized in Chinese culture (~ psychosis)
- ❖ Implications for marriage (social distance)
- ❖ “Neurasthenia”(神经衰弱)
- ❖ Emphasis on somatic rather than psychological symptoms



Cupping points for treating neurasthenia.

Common mental health myths

Counseling is for
crazy people.

"Everyone will know I
saw a counselor."

Only someone from
my home country
will understand my
problem.

I can handle my own mental
health problems. If I can't,
that means I'm weak.

I could lose my
visa status.



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Educational logistics

- ❖ Return to home country or stay in US?
- ❖ Travel bans and flight cancellations
- ❖ Quarantine in home country—fear of infection, stigma, cost
- ❖ Visa appointment cancellations
- ❖ Closure of testing centers for TOEFL, IELTS, GRE/GMAT
- ❖ Must be in US to apply for OPT



Learning environment

- ❖ Shift to online learning
- ❖ Quiet place to study?
- ❖ Lack of privacy—mental health concerns
- ❖ Challenging family dynamics
- ❖ Time zones (College Board)
- ❖ Is this worth the price of admission?



Stereotyping and bias

- ❖ Masks as visible marker of difference
- ❖ Rapid change in stigmatizing beliefs



Sheikh, K. More Americans Should Probably Wear Masks for Protection. New York Times. March 27, 2020.



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Woman wearing face mask attacked in possible coronavirus

hat **'NO CHINESE ALLOWED'** Coronavirus
fuels racist backlash with calls to 'nuke'
China and shops banning Chinese
customer

By Anabel

Asian
hate c

Felix Allen

30 Jan 2020, 10

Berlin-Moabit

Chinesin (23) von z
beleidigt, bespuck

Texas
fami

By Danielle Wallace | Fox News

Search

The Guardian

Calla Wahlquist and
Australian Associated Press

@callapilla

Wed 26 Feb 2020 21:13 EST



373

Doctors and nurses at Me hospital racially abused o coronavirus panic

Parents at the Royal Children's hospital have ref
and nurses of 'Asian appearance' treat their child

● [Coronavirus crisis - live updates](#)

Rar
has
the l

The Slur I Never Expected to Hear in 2020

As an Asian-American, I've been conditioned to a certain kind
of unspoken racism. This pandemic has unmasked how vicious
it really is.

New York Times

The S

npr

89.7 WGBH
Boston's Local NPR

SIGN IN

NPR SHOP

DONATE NOW

Leaks, Taps, Bathrooms
Blocked Drains

Outbreak

NEWS

ARTS & LIFE

MUSIC

SHOWS & PODCASTS

SEARCH

s > Crime

Chinese stud

Politicians' Use of 'Wuhan Virus' Starts a Debate

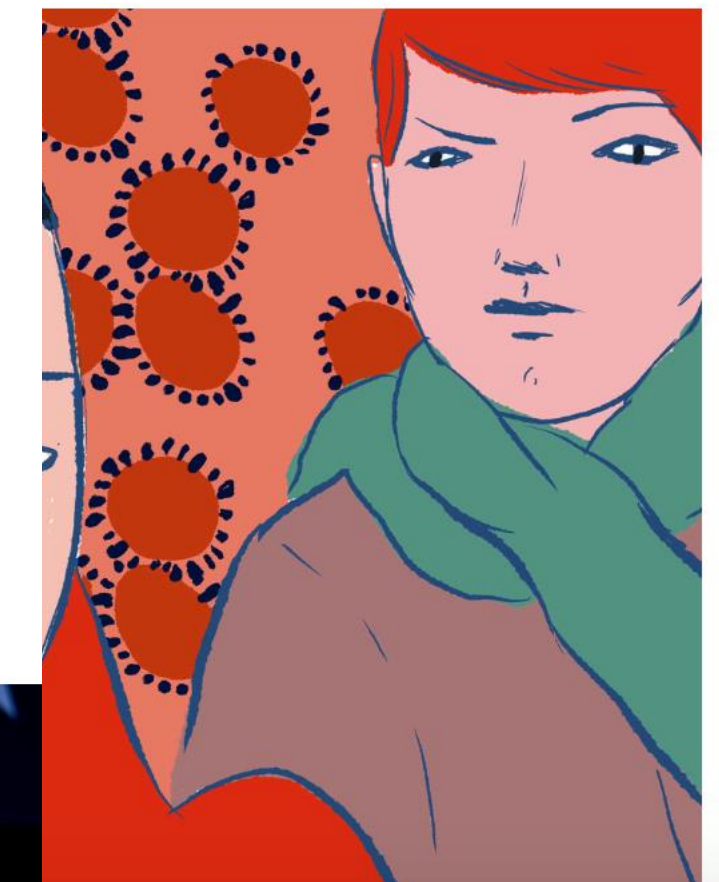
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Assaulted in es Accused virus

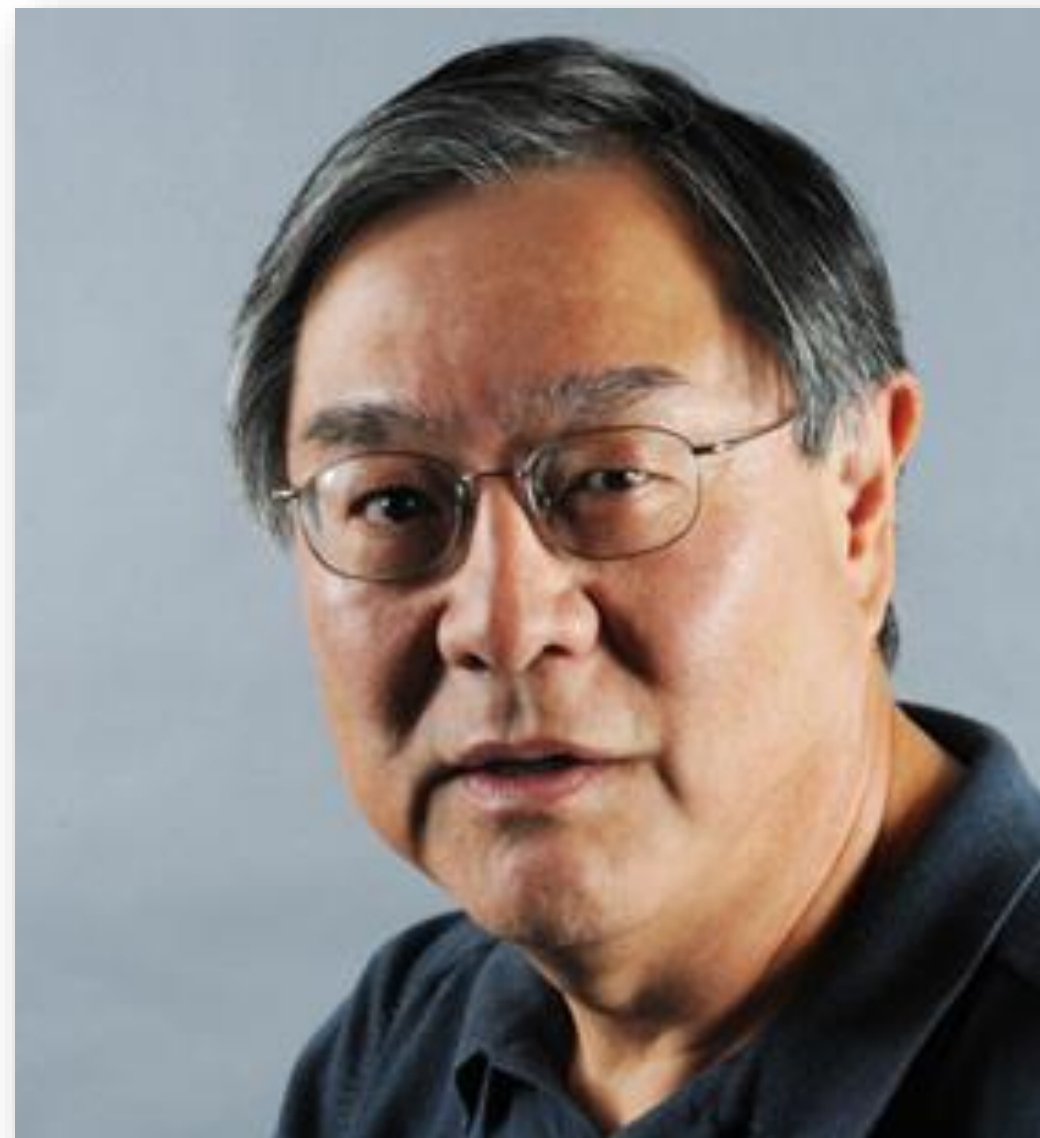
edly taken to the emergency

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ich for The



Cross-Cultural Student
Emotional Wellness

“I think people are acting out their frustrations and their racism and their stereotypes and prejudices, [and] that the floodgates are lifted when situations like this arise.”



Dr. Paul Watanabe

Professor of Political Science

Director, Institute for Asian American Studies

University of Massachusetts-Boston



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Emotional Wellness

Opportunity in crisis?

- ❖ Engaging different/wider audiences (just like today)
- ❖ Learning more about students' home environments
- ❖ Engaging different learning styles
- ❖ Growing recognition of racial identity and shared oppression

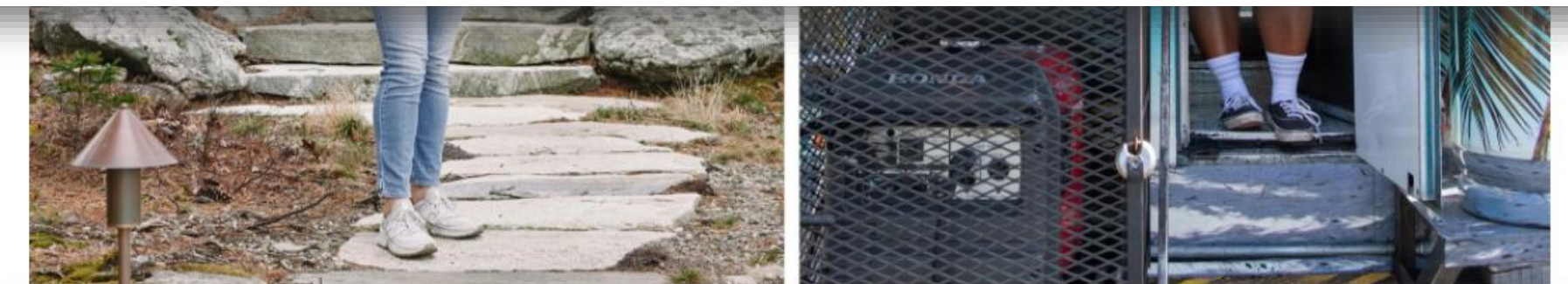
The New York Times

College Made Them Feel Equal. The Virus Exposed How Unequal Their Lives Are.

When they were all in the same dorms and eating the same dining hall food, the disparities in students' backgrounds weren't as clear as they are over video chat.



I would like to hear more discussion and experience sharing with regard to education of our young children who born / educated as Americans, on the topic of racism against asians. For example, my children are fortunate enough to have not directly experienced their own racism moment yet, how to bring up this topic in a way that raise their awareness about the real world they live / will be living in, without causing unnecessary fear, anxiety and depression?



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ONCE YOU'VE MASTERED THIS
SIMPLE TECHNIQUE, WE'LL
MOVE ON TO SOMETHING
MORE CHALLENGING, LIKE
CHANGING YOUR CORPORATE
CULTURE.



University level

- ❖ Partnership between Counseling + International Student offices
- ❖ Pre-departure: Email communications, social media engagement
- ❖ Arrival: Pick-up services, orientation, engagement
- ❖ Ongoing: Education, integration, support, services



University level

- ❖ **Inform** students of challenges and cultural adjustment
- ❖ **Invite** counseling center or other mental health professionals
- ❖ **Educate** about campus/community resources
- ❖ **Train** peer leaders and mentors
- ❖ **Provide** culturally/linguistically diverse mental health services



Programming that helps

- ❖ Buddy/Peer mentor programs
- ❖ Workshops (e.g., “Decoding U.S. Culture”, “Lost in Translation”, “Culture Shock”)
- ❖ “Let’s Talk” Drop-in Hours
- ❖ University 101-type courses
- ❖ Summer/Holiday programs
- ❖ Friendship family programs
- ❖ Discussion/Support Groups
- ❖ Creative initiatives (e.g., “Welcome to My World Photo Exhibition”)



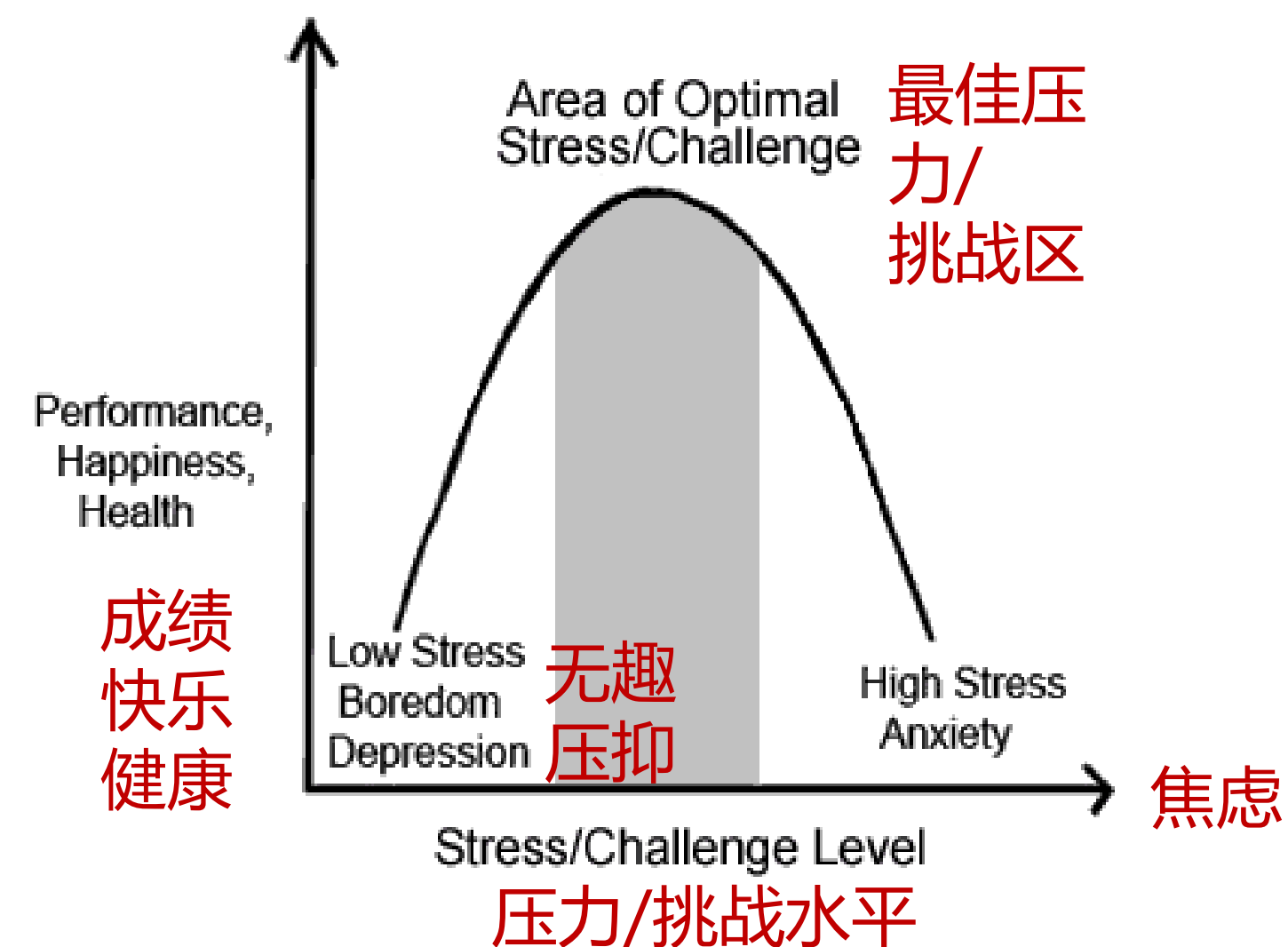
Creative examples

Institution	Program Details
Appalachian State University	<p>Football 101 for International Students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Students are given an opportunity to tour ASU's state of the art training facilities, locker room and media room. The real action begins when participants take the field and suit-up for the full football experience. Football basics are outlined and students are given an opportunity to play a pickup game of touch football. The event concludes with a pizza social where students recapped their experiences. <p>Source:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">appstate.edu – Football 101 for International Students



Differences in clinical presentation

- ❖ May not acknowledge depressed mood
- ❖ Increased somatic complaints (disruption in sleep and appetite, stomachaches, headaches, dizziness)
- ❖ Avoidance, procrastination, academic decline (?)
- ❖ Cross-cultural bridge: “Stress” (压力)



You know much more than you know!

- ❖ Basic counseling skills: Empathy, reflection, respect, confidentiality
- ❖ Dispel myths, normalize challenges, make connections with mental health/counseling office
- ❖ Identify mental health problems and help students connect to treatment



About our Center

- ❖ Founded November 2014 by three Boston-area psychiatrists
- ❖ Increasing referrals of Chinese international students
- ❖ Perspectives informed by cross-cultural clinical work, public health, parenting, personal experiences
- ❖ Lack of research or guidelines

The screenshot shows the website of The MGH Center for Cross-Cultural Student Emotional Wellness. The header includes logos for the center, Massachusetts General Hospital, and Harvard Medical School, along with language options (ENG, 中文, 한국어). A navigation bar lists HOME, MISSION, TEAM, SERVICES, RESOURCES, and GIVING. The main content area features a 'Hello,' greeting, a welcome message, and a 'BEST HOSPITALS' award badge from USNews for National Psychiatry 2016-17. Below this, there are three sections: 'Did you know?' with statistics on Asian Americans, 'Featured articles by our staff' with links to articles on Chinese international students and mental health challenges, and an 'Events' calendar for October 2017.

Did you know?

- Asian Americans age 15-24 have higher rates of suicidal thoughts than Caucasian Americans in the same age group
- Asian American women age 15-24 have the second-highest rate of completed suicide of any race/ethnicity in that age group—second only to Native Americans
- Chinese students now make up nearly 30% of all international students in the U.S. – a 6-fold proportional increase over the past 15 years
- “Tiger-parenting” is utilized by only a minority of Asian

Featured articles by our staff

[Chinese International Students: An Emerging Mental Health Crisis](#)
Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, November 2015. Volume 54, Issue 11, Pages 879–880

[Mental health: Four unique challenges facing Chinese international students](#)

Events

OCT 2017 GMT -04:00

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
25	26	27	28	29	30	1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8





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MGH INSTITUTE
OF HEALTH PROFESSIONS

Let's Talk! Supporting Asian and Asian American Students Through COVID-19 WEBINAR SERIES

Anti-Asian Racism during the
COVID-19 Pandemic

Tues 4/21
5-6:30pm EDT

Please note
date change!

Living through a Pandemic:
Understanding, Coping, and Finding Meaning

Weds 4/29
7-8:15pm EDT

Predictable Parenting for Unpredictable Times:
Promoting the Success and Wellbeing of
Asian and Asian-American Students through COVID-19

Weds 5/6
4-5:15pm EDT

The Challenges International Students Face During COVID-19
and How Parents Can Be Supportive (Mandarin session)

疫情下留学生们正在经历什么? 父母该如何支持帮助ta们? (中文专场)

Sat 5/9
9-10:30pm
EDT

Understanding and Supporting
Asian International Students during COVID-19

TBD

Join the MGH Center *for* Cross-Cultural Student Emotional Wellness Consortium!

Now accepting applications for the 2020-2021 academic year

The **Consortium** is a year-long virtual institute that helps educators support international student mental health through:

- Partnership with our expert clinicians
- Membership in a community of like-minded professionals

Consortium membership benefits

- Monthly lecture-discussions
- Case conferences
- Complimentary individual case consultation with your campus
- Timely strategies for COVID-19
- Longitudinal communication with our clinicians and other Consortium members
- Exclusive partnership opportunities

For more information or to apply (*deadline July 31*), contact info@mghstudentwellness.org or visit <https://www.mghstudentwellness.org/consortium>



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Testimonials for the MGH Consortium

- “With increasing numbers of international and domestic students of Asian heritage choosing our school, the partnership with MGH CCCSEW has been invaluable.”
- “I look forward to these meetings every month!”
- “The MGH Consortium provided us with essential tools to improve the ways in which we work to support both our international and domestic students and parents.”
- “Helping us to understand the special challenges rooted in culture and family systems for these adolescents has improved our effectiveness in recognizing signs of distress and has enlightened our plans for intervention.”
- “One reason I find the meetings so successful, regardless of the topic, is the fact that attending the meetings puts me in the zone of thinking about our international students, forces me to focus for an extended period of time on the topic, and because it allows me to “geek out” on a topic (cross-cultural psychology) I find fascinating!”
- “...the resources have been excellent and I come away from each session with an enhanced perspective.”



Thank you!



mghstudentwellness.org



/mghstudentwellness



info@mghstudentwellness.org

Please follow us online and contact me to get involved!

Justin Chen: chen.justin@mgh.harvard.edu



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