

Chinese International Students' Application Strategy and the Change of Students' Identity Recognition of Institutional Cosmopolitanism in the Application Process

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Abstract: This paper focuses on Chinese international students' strategies during application process. Since each applicant presents a persona through their application, they present themselves as students who encompass institutional cosmopolitanism, belief that all students, regardless of nationality are the same in the application process, cause at the preliminary application stage diversity and globalization are prioritized. This paper analyzes data and application strategy of ten international students applying in 2022. They are divided into three categories according to their major choice and academic interests. All applicants are affected by cosmopolitanism, an ideology of equal human rights and multiculturalism, in both their application and identity recognition. Art students thrive by integrating cultural identity and "vibe-related" materials. STEM students stand out by breaking down stereotypes. Social science students lean towards wholistic education to succeed.

1. Introduction

Chinese applicants to American universities have doubled over the past ten years span, signifying a large outflow of students from China to America seeking higher education [1]. Through the process of preparing for applications, which often lasts for one to two years, Chinese students often faced the cultural and ideological particularities of American academic culture. Chinese students are exposed to more of the culture and ideology associated with American academics as they prepare to apply to universities in the U.S. This is because that students will learn more about the U.S. and keep it in mind than the average visitor in order to get a better application result. After a period of study, students will have a much profound and richer impression of American academic culture and ideology than the average person. This places important focus on how Chinese applicants cater American institutional cosmopolitanism, which means the "world's citizen" in Greek, that is, all students, regardless of nationality are the same in the application process to any school and how it changes the worldview of these applicants. For application stage, students provide their GPA, activity lists, extracurricular activities, and personal statements to each university. Applicants will have to present personas that impress the admission officers in ways such as being unique or corresponding to the culture or mission statement of the university. Therefore, setting up an impressive persona is important to applicants. Some of the Asian students, counted as international applicants, are generally disadvantaged compared to white and black students [2]. With a large population base in China and Asian, there will be a relatively large number of students applying to foreign universities. Thus, Asian students will face more competition than whites and blacks. Due to the rat race in Chinese culture, standing out purely by GPA or number of APs is not enough anymore. Many students previously applied to overseas universities not only to get a higher GPA or AP score but also to participate in various competitions for additional points in order to get a better application result. Therefore, standing out purely by GPA or number of APs is considered radical. With the increase in application difficulty, approaching the cultural expectations of admission officers and displaying American institutional cosmopolitanism ensures applicants a larger possibility of success.

Cosmopolitanism, developed to describe both a global cultural norm in lifestyle and identities and a person's view of the world [3]. Throughout history, cosmopolitanism developed during the Roman

era and was transformed by Christianity. During the Renaissances, Hugo Grotius claimed in an epoch-making appeal that nations were subject to the “natural law.” The natural law school believes that there is a higher law - natural law - that exists above the law made by the country. The recognition of the “natural law”, which a philosophy that certain rights or values are inherent by virtue of human nature and universally cognizable through human reason, called upon an ideology of equal human rights and multiculturalism, forming a belief that all humans, regardless of nationality are the same [3]. The “natural law” provides the underlying definition of cosmopolitanism approached in this paper: cosmopolitanism in international education. Mitchell K. Stevens provides a detailed description of how American colleges chooses applicants in creating a class, among which cosmopolitanism contribute as an underlying selection factor. Studies have also focused on how cosmopolitanism can act as cultural capital around the globe [4]. The study of cosmopolitanism, education, and social status has always been a popular topic. Many scholars such as Jongyong Kim suggest that Korean students’ pursuit of American higher education is a means to possess greater social capital, thus having a better chance to stand out from the competition in Korea [5]. The aforementioned studies mainly link the outcome and benefits of cosmopolitanism in global competition. Even less is seen from the perspective of Chinese applicants and the method by which they utilize cosmopolitanism during their application as an advantage. According to the definition of cosmopolitanism used in this paper, I will also analyze the extent to which cosmopolitanism shaped the Chinese applicants’ understanding of the world throughout years of application preparation.

This paper aims to discuss the effect of cosmopolitanism on Chinese applicants on both their application strategies and more deeply on their understanding of the globe. I used ethnography and interviews as the main sources of research. I focused on students from international schools in both Shanghai and Beijing (mainly in Shanghai) by interviewing students and participating in their school lives as they completed the 2022 application. Students are divided according to their position and learning ability (or popularity, indicated by school results in various subjects, competitions, and other indicators) in the school. The interview consists of questions about their application process, school and application choices, and their views of the world before and after application. Starting from the top students to average students, including art students, are often being interviewed to find a more general conclusion for the entire application community of China. Their application tactics including activity designs, major and school choices, personal statements, and world views are all considered during the investigation.

The first section of the paper will present a literature review on cosmopolitanism and its effects on application and education. Then, the methodologies description and interview recordings are presented. Lastly, the research results and topic discussion will follow.

2. Literature Review

After the breakout of the COVID pandemic in 2020, the hatred towards the Chinese communities increased. The decreasing economy also triggered people’s depression. Along with politicians’ purposefully concluding that the virus was the fault of the Asian community, people’s depression transformed into hatred towards the Asian community. This made the situation of Chinese students more difficult for those still in the application phase and those living in the United States. Chen thus argues that in American society today, the approach of identity politics cannot solve the discrimination problem resulting from economic issues that the United States was enduring after the pandemic [6].

The growing racial discrimination that derived resulting from economic issues that America the United States was enduring after the pandemic has led to a rethinking and revulsion in the community at large. Thus, more and more people in American society agreed upon the central idea of cosmopolitanism. Different labels of food areas in supermarkets, popularity of K-pop music and similar examples all showed that diverse cultures and identities are thriving in America. Cosmopolitanism is then also inevitable in discussing the application preference and students’ self-identification.

One way to interpret cosmopolitanism in applications is to view it as a representation of “cultural

capital,” a concept conceived of by Bourdieu [7]. Institutional cosmopolitanism represents important cultural capital because of globalization. Cosmopolitanism incorporates people with transnational identities [8]. Both studies argue that the accumulation of such cultural capital exasperates the stratification between different social classes. However, this paper focuses exclusively on the benefits that this cultural capital brings to students during application. During application season, cosmopolitanism can act as an advantage for students applying from non-Western countries [8]. With the increasing connectedness of people around the globe, obtaining cultural capital, or cosmopolitanism, in this case, could serve as a characteristic that increases the chances of students of standing out from all other Asian applicants and of being admitted to top American universities.

In terms of persona, one may notice that the students are applying as if they are performing their personalities. This leads to dramaturgy, a theory established by Erving Goffman, can be used to describe the application process. According to the theory, individuals play different roles using scripts like an actor on stage in different situations [9]. For example, a salesman will show that he or she is professional or enthusiastic to create the impression of a credible salesman to the customers. A similar case is established in the application process. The applicants become the actors, the stage is the application process, the audience is the admission officers, the role is a student that adheres to cosmopolitan values, and the scripts are the personal statement and activity list. Through analyzing the personal statements and application material, this paper will be able to dissect the role or persona that the student has played and how he or she has played the role.

According to Mitchell L. Stevens, the rise of institutional cosmopolitanism inside American higher education was motivated by the need for more diverse students outside of upper-class students or family members of the alumni (2007). In his research, Stevens found that elite universities tend to favor sports students, especially football students, because of their chase for masculinity [10]. However, a fixed selection preference has its problems. The universities start to decline because of the decrease in student numbers [11]. Therefore, the best choice was to turn to increase the acceptance of students with different classes, races, and strengths. Similarly, the acceptance of students of different races and talents allows universities to demonstrate diversity [10]. Further, universities maintain a strong preference for students talented across all subjects and activities. Thus, for international students including Chinese applicants to American universities, choosing cosmopolitanism provides them with more opportunities.

However, according to the “Excellent Sheep” theory describing the process of selection of students in elite universities, schools focus on students’ well-roundedness in all areas including good academic performances, communication skills, talents in sports or music, and leadership. Only students that exhibit extraordinary talents in one subject or students who excel in all subject areas can become good competitors in the application process [11]. For all applicants, the goal is to become better than their competitors. According to the Harvard admitted class of 2025, only 15.6% of students are international students [12]. International students face intense competition and fewer opportunities. Especially Asian students, who come from a larger population, approaching a persona with diverse interests and abilities could be the only way that makes them stand out.

The main pattern in American university applications indicates that there is a need for diversity and cosmopolitanism. Analyzing the curriculum of a high school that Liu investigated, I found activities such as “thematic activities, school clubs, and community service help show the diversity of students. Similarly, curricula such as “cultural exploration” and “international exchange” help develop cosmopolitanism [13]. The school’s design of activities and curriculum is a way of building cosmopolitanism as cultural capital for students. Liu admitted in her study that extracurricular activities and travel abroad serve as good materials for students to write about in their personal statements. In obtaining diversity in activity preparation/ social contribution and presenting a vivid personal statement is common in university application.

Through a few background trends of United States applicants as well as popular analyses on concerns regarding cosmopolitanism increasing inequality and affecting a person’s understandings, this paper aims at answer the following questions: is the cosmopolitanism in the application is beneficial for student societies; how do students themselves view this trait; and how does it affect the

entire Chinese students' application process? This paper will use ethnographic methods in the form of interviews to unpack how cosmopolitanism is being utilized in students' applications. Further, this paper will explore shifting student identities as they work through their applications.

3. Research Design

This paper mainly relied on ethnographic interviews. In the process of sampling, I divided my samples into three main categories based on their major choice and academic interests. These categories include art students, science students, and social science (plus humanities) students who all went through the same application process. In the following analysis, I will also present my findings with descriptions of their application process to highlight the application process impact on student's as well as future students.

3.1 Sampling

Most interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 70 minutes. Although all interviews were conducted online, I noted their facial and body expressions during each interview, wrote field notes, and recorded the interviews for accuracy. For each interviewee, I evaluated their application strategy combined, while considering assistance from application agencies (*zhongjie*) and school advisors, and their students' worldview during the process.

3.2 Data Collection

The samples I selected consist of students who recently completed the 2022 US application cycle. The research was conducted mainly at an international school in Shanghai. The overall style of the school showed that, although using similar textbooks and teaching curricula to American high schools, this international school retained a Chinese cultural education system. Most of the students focus more on testing and GPA while most of the schools' focus is also on students' AP, TOEFL, and ACT scores. Because of the lack of opportunity in activities at school, most students build their activities on their own, along with the help of application agencies (*zhongjie*), causing the application being a market-personalized environment. However, the homogeneity of the application process may lead to some disadvantages: admission officers will not consider admitting a large number of similar students, thus reducing the success rate of applications. Thus, I will continue exploring how different students establish their unique application profiles and explore their applications' outcomes based on institutional cosmopolitanism in the application.

3.3 Data of Interviewees

Although some students chose to go to college in the United Kingdom, all applicants went through the same process as though applying to the United States and felt the necessity of being cosmopolitan in the application process. Most of the population samples are from my school, an international school in Shanghai, as Table 1 shown. The previous results of my high school applications were that 95% of the students got into the top 50 US universities and 70% of the students got into the top 30 US universities, which may show a good quality education and represent the overall application trend in recent applications. Actually, it is representative of the common methodology or application strategy used by many international schools. Few samples are from other international schools in both Beijing and Shanghai. Although COVID made application season more difficult, these schools kept good application results. I positioned myself as a junior student experiencing the same process with my samples. From my observation, the school provides considerable freedom of activity and subject choices each year. The freedom allows students have more time to learn more in the subjects they are interested in or, alternatively, allows them to organize their time reasonably and take extra circulars to gain more knowledge, etc.

Students in Shanghai and Beijing undergo a highly competitive environment in regards to US applications. I am personally involved in the application process as a student at a Shanghai international school. As someone going through the process, I could present more intimate familiarity with the application process. As a result, I can provide a deeper understanding and more systematic

findings.

Table 1 Ten international students' university application in 2022.

Name	Gender	Major	High School location	University	Classification
Phoebe	Female	History	Shanghai	Duke University	Humanities Student
Laura	Female	Economics	Shanghai	Emory University	Social Science Student
Leo	Male	Economics	Shanghai	University of Oxford	Social Science Student
Odyssey	Male	Electric Engineering	Shanghai	Boston University	Science Student
Ken	Male	Engineering	Shanghai	University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign University	Science Student
Jeffery	Male	Physics	Shanghai	University of Oxford	Science Student
Katie	Female	Psychology	Shanghai	Brandies University	Social Science Student
James	Male	Psychology	Beijing	(Rutgers) The State University of New Jersey	Social Science Student
Harry	Male	Song writing	Shanghai	Berklee University	Artistic Student
Annie	Female	Art	Shanghai	Carnegie Mellon University	Artistic Student

4. Research Findings

I discovered that most of my samples approached American cosmopolitan expectations to some extent either voluntarily or subconsciously. All applicants admitted that their values and viewpoints of the world and themselves have become more thorough and mature after their applications. Artistic students took advantage of integrating Chinese culture in their music or artwork and tried to approach the culture of their dream schools in their personal statements. The science students showed a very typical Chinese applicant persona (good at math and calculation) by excelling at STEM subjects, but both of them took distinct approaches in their personal statements that varied their application results. All elite students (in terms of academic performance) took careful consideration of their major and school choice and had a clear activity list building contributing to their well-roundedness. Average students did not clearly consider their school choice and contributed to more general cosmopolitan beliefs, leaving them unable to demonstrate themselves as “well-rounded” students.

4.1 Artistic Students: Utilizing Identity Politics

In all four groups, the artistic students showed more approach to identity politics, that is, to take on a role and pretend to possess certain traits, during their application than other students. Music student Harry told me explicitly that in his personal statement he pretended to be a “sissy boy,” trying to convey his message that masculinity is a stereotype about men that should be subverted. The story of breaking stereotypes is a typical politics-inclined application strategy because accepting diversity is one of the core values in American institutional cosmopolitanism. A similar situation happened to Annie. When talking about her application, she informed me that she wrote about LGBTQ rights in one of her essays. She was one of the only interviewees that showed their support for minorities openly in their essays. The problem of LGBTQ and minor communities' rights is of highly sensitive, and for most universities, respecting minorities is a means through which they show cosmopolitanism.

For example, Brown University has an “LGBTQ Center” for its students. Despite their personal profiles, Brown University’s work also showed implications for cosmopolitanism and cultural expectations. For Harry, he explained Berkely, a US music conservatory, established a department teaching Asian traditional music. Thus, he thinks that it would be an advantage for students to apply to American colleges with focuses on traditional instruments. Annie was also straightforward on this subject:

You have to appeal to the expectations of the universities. I used some traditional arts in my folio... When applying to CMU, I used some “skills” in my essay and work. It is natural. I would try to fulfill cultural expectations as long as it is still me. I would not pretend to be a member of LGBTQ or anything...

How cosmopolitanism can affect artistic students can be seen mostly from their personal statements and their works of art. For the two interviewees, combining identity and politics is beneficial to their overall application results, and they are willing to fulfill certain cultural expectations when it does not sacrifice their personal identity.

4.2 Science Students: Jumping Out of the Box

For middle students, two male applicants chose engineering. Both of their major choices result in the same challenges, which include competitiveness during the application process. Odyssey opened by saying, “You know it is true that applying to STEM subjects is hard. But the payback is worth it. Students taking humanities or literature face more rigid competition at work.” Notably, Ken had a similar GPA and talents as Odyssey. However, Ken was admitted into universities with higher rankings in engineering. Through the process of interview, I found a fundamental difference between the two applicants.

Although both Ken and Odyssey focused their activities and AP’s subjects on engineering and physics, Ken seemed to occupy more artistic talents such as dancing. He focused his personal statement on how dancing influenced his life journey, while Odyssey focused more on helping classmates in a club. The former presented the admissions officer with a more interesting story and more importantly, a persona that is more vivid than that of Odyssey. Ken was not a “typical nerdy” STEM student in his application profile. By breaking such stereotypes, Ken had a better chance of standing out from all competitors. Breaking down stereotypes is similar to Harry’s approach, yet both cases showed that the action of “thinking outside of the box” and being unique adheres to the values of cosmopolitanism: being different and diverse.

Jeff only built his image as an advanced Physics student with almost no leadership activities or any other factors that make him distinct. Although he got into Oxford due to his academic excellence, he was not admitted to top US universities. His application results suggest the importance of approaching cosmopolitanism in US application.

4.3 Social Science Students: The Dialectics of Wholistic Education

For these students, a holistic persona is the best method they can turn to while applying to the top ten universities including ivy league institutions. This method was especially important for Laura and Leo. Examining their activity list, I saw leadership roles such as economic club founder, head of a student council, cheerleader captain, football captain, runner, violinist, and volunteer. Their talents in sports, music, art, and characteristics such as confidence, leadership skills, optimism all showed that they are well-rounded students. Their personal statements also proved that they wanted to link all activities that they have done to convince the admission officer that they are students that occupy diverse interests. This approach proved to be effective as they both stood out for their intended economics major. Phoebe took a relatively different approach. She showed me her interest in history and all her class choices, and activity lists are centered around history, sprinkled with some elements of debate and leadership. Her persona demonstrated a strong interest in her intended major and a very focused profession, which showed her honesty and persistence in the subject. However, this approach is more difficult because she had to demonstrate herself as highly professionalized within her intended major. Like the other two applicants, Phoebe is certain about her goal, which is the reason why she may succeed. Unlike Jess’s application, she seemed more sincere and honest. Sincerely and honesty

are important factors since actually only when there is integration between persona and the person itself does the application result goes better. This is because even if you get through the preliminary application stage by falsifying your application, there is a chance that your teacher may spot your lies in the next application stages and this may affect the final result of your application.

The attempt to approach a well-rounded persona is also prevalent in other students' applications that did not enjoy much success. The difference is that the latter showed more ambivalence and uncertainty while choosing their major or preparing for their activities. James told me "I did not know what to do before submitting the application. I was in a hurry. I found my *zhongjie* at the beginning of G12 and we quickly settled on psychology." His application seemed to be a mess trying to link his past activities and his interest in singing. James did not have a plan to create a cosmopolitan profile; his personal statement only emphasized his interest in singing, which is a generic essay for the admission officer. The main factor that separated James and Katie from Laura, Leo, and Phoebe is that they did not prove a strong enough relationship between their passion for their activities and what they had written in their application.

Notably, Katie wrote about organizing traditional Chinese latten festival celebration in her activity list, which she believed is something that made her more stand out from other competitors. She also participated in this activity for over two-years, which added to her sincerity. Although both students did not have a high GPA or outstanding personal statements, Katie had a better application result.

From these observations, one may summarize that merely approaching cosmopolitanism at the surface level is not enough for US application. Only by showing concentration and passion can one make their persona more vivid and sincere.

5. Conclusion & Research

Through research findings, I discovered that most interviewees have applied institutional cosmopolitanism in their application process. I do believe that it is an effective approach because most students found their true interest while writing their applications. Students who better combined their application persona with their identity showed to have better admissions results because their sincerity impressed admission officers. From the art students that utilized identity politics to the science students that defied stereotypes, and social science students that approached a holistic persona, all students that tried to approach cosmopolitanism received some benefits. The extent of these benefits depended on their GPA, and how honest they were in their personal statements.

Art students used their portfolios to directly represent their diverse cultures, identities, and activities. Science students showed completely different application results when breaking stereotypes become a choice. It turned out that being a unique candidate demonstration a cosmopolitan background increased acceptances into higher-ranking US universities. Social science students all wanted to create a holistic persona, and if they do so passionately, they had better admissions results. This suggests that the cosmopolitan approach is a common approach to applications and that admissions officers notice if it was sincere or created exclusively for applications.

The traditional Chinese education aims towards gaokao (The National Higher Education Entrance Examination in China), while the international education aims towards application. When asked whether each applicant regretted their choices in transferring from traditional systematic high school to international high school, none of the interviewees felt regret. The reasons behind may vary, but the commonalities show that they felt more freedom in exploring their academic passion, saw a broader worldview outside of standardized tests, and became more comfortable sharing their own ideas and expressing themselves. Instead of being homogeneous student figures, these interviewees showed that they were distinctive, for example, that they thought in a more efficient way and that they saw things from a very particular perspective, etc. The interviews with these students convince me that obtaining cosmopolitanism did not alter their identity and even made their passions and worldview more concrete.

The future main concern is that as more students try to incorporate a cosmopolitan persona in their application, this will become the new norm and no longer offer any advantages. When this application strategy becomes commonplace, there might be a new developing application strategy that allows the

applicant to stand out. Students may become over-burdened by expectations as they have to present university level success before enrolling in an undergraduate program.

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Appendix

- 1) Which high school are you from? Which college did you finally get admitted to?
- 2) Why did you choose this high school? Why did you choose to apply to a U.S. university? Was it decided by your family when you were young or did it change in the middle of making decision?
- 3) What AP courses did you choose and why did you choose them? What was your favorite subject?
- 4) Did you find any agent for help during the application?
- 5) Can you briefly describe your personality and interests?
- 6) Do you think you are popular in your school? Can you briefly describe your friends?

- 7) What major did you choose? Was it difficult to make this decision? When did you start making this decision?
- 8) How did your mind change between last summer and this summer?

Application related:

- 1) Is the school you were accepted to your dream school? Why did you choose it? Was there a common vibe that influenced you? How do you feel about choosing a school? Did you look for a school with the same vibe as yourself or did you not care about that at all and focused more on school ranking, then tried to get closer to the vibe of the college?
- 2) What activities did you add in your PS? What qualities do you show to the AO?
- 3) Do you have any special ones in your activity list that you would like to share? What activities do you think helped you stand out from the rest of the applicants?
- 4) How do you think about AO's preference or each school's identity in the U.S. school application?

Identity recognition related:

- 1) What is your opinion about the current world situation? Have your views on these things shifted before and after you applied any school? Did you make the same judgments as you do now? (If there was a shift: have you thought about what caused the shift)
- 2) What do you think is the difference between you and the students in traditional high schools? Have you ever envied their lives or regretted your choices? What do you think you have that they are missing?
- 3) What is your overall view of high school life? Was it more stressful than rewarding? Or did you feel fulfilled? How did this time period bring about a change in your life or learning style?
- 4) Did you ever feel lost during the school application? Did you think about what this stemmed from? How did you finally deal with the anxiety or confusion?
- 5) Do you have any concerns about going to college? Do you have any strategies for dealing with coming to a completely different culture? Does any experience of communicating with foreign students help you?