A satellite night view of East Asia, showing the glowing lights of cities and infrastructure against a dark blue background. The map covers parts of China, Korea, and Japan.

International Student Ministry in China

Phil Jones

華源協作
CHINA SOURCE

International Student Ministry in China

*Who will reach
this vast and strategic
yet invisible group?*

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Endorsements

Hidden in plain sight—in a country known more for religious repression than religious freedom—is an opportunity to reach the nations! With the third highest international student population in the world, China attracts future leaders from throughout Asia and Africa. Using the framework of diaspora missiology, this book examines how the challenges facing these students during their time in China can become entry points for the Gospel. The question is not whether the church can grow among them, but rather who will commit to serving in their midst. Creativity, partnership, and a willingness to view cross-cultural ministry through fresh eyes are the keys to addressing this pioneering opportunity.

Brent Fulton, Founder and President, ChinaSource

The international student population in China has become the third largest in the world, representing a huge mission opportunity for the gospel. Phil Jones has summarized the current situation clearly and realistically, from demographic data to a compelling call for the church inside and outside China to not miss this historical moment to change the world through courageous ministry to this strategic population. Inspiring!

Marc Papai, National Director ISM, InterVarsity/USA

Phil Jones' article provides the most compelling and comprehensive summary depiction and rationale of the opportunity and need for developing international student ministry in China. Equally significant and worthy of full attention are the practical questions to, yes, the Church in China, but also to the global Church, mission agencies, campus ministries, professionals in the marketplace, and to potential study-abroad students. Truly, the global scholastic harvest field in China is ripe and ready, and this publication provides the foundational perspectives to take some next steps towards ISM in China.

Leiton Chinn, ISM Mobilizer, Former Lausanne Catalyst for ISM

Long ago Nebuchadnezzar sought to extend Babylon's global footprint by enlisting the brightest and best from around his world for service. I am witnessing something similar in Beijing, China today. Indeed, the brightest and best international students from far away nations are here to study in China's universities. And just as the Lord of the Hebrews had a purpose bigger than Nebuchadnezzar's, the Lord of His Church has a grand kingdom purpose for many who will again scatter to be leaders. They are here now for us to serve. We're surprised but rejoice to see many find, follow, and bear fruit for the Lord Jesus Christ in our international fellowship! And we are hearing great things about their impact across the globe. Do you want to reach the far corners of the earth? The best vantage point might be a global-city such as this.

Mark Blair, Beijing International Christian Fellowship, Zhongguancun

An Indonesian Muslim encourages a struggling nominal Catholic Filipino to a Bible study through a testimony of a Zambian Christian classmate. Phil Jones passionately describes the cultural mix and unique contextual challenges that the Chinese situation

poses, and the unique opportunities to reach out and disciple international students. What a training ground China is for budding cross-cultural workers to scatter around the world! The trickle of testimonies of Cubans reached by Chinese returnees, Brazilians reaching out to Iranians, Nigerians re-engaging nominal Americans brings great joy, but with more mobilising what vast impact could those mobilised in China have back across the globe?

Nia Early, Beijing International Christian Fellowship

Phil Jones has put forth a strong and compelling case for shifting our sight to reaching International students in China. Using history, current Chinese realities and relevant global trends he asks thought-provoking questions about the role of the local and global church to this unprecedented opportunity to reach the world that has come to China's door. He understands the multi-layered challenges facing international students in China supported by numerous examples. Jones insists that this new population cannot be ignored and rightly so.

Lisa Espineli Chinn, Former ISM Director of InterVarsity/USA

I'm a fruit of international student ministry! And in China now we have a tremendous God-given opportunity to reach the nations. Seeing this epoch through the lens of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, we must live in the present, creatively using the freedoms we have, while holding eternal truth in mind. Global sending organisations must rethink their missiology, genuinely engaging with the diaspora of international students in China. God is calling both the Chinese church and the global church to reach and disciple these international students. Such workers can be strategic bridge-builders who "model the way" by living a life of Christ's love and sacrificial discipleship.

Patrick Fung, General Director of OMF International

International Students in China: Who Will Reach This Vast and Strategic Yet Invisible Group?

Phil Jones

Wearing her hijab, “Mounia” from Yemen heard the gospel and felt the love of God in our international church because of her Rwandan classmate’s invitation and her husband’s permission. Without Arabic or visa for Yemen, instead of flying to Sana’a, we walked two meters to welcome her. From a country with 0.03% evangelicals, could she take the gospel back home?¹

“Lazaro” from Tanzania said with resolve, “While in China, I want to fill my life with the Word of God.” He’s an active member of our fellowship, here with his wife and two little daughters, struggling with racism towards Africans, yet hungry to grow and return home equipped as a disciple of Christ. Could he strengthen the church in Tanzania?

These are some of the almost half a million international students in China, arriving from every corner of the globe into a context where cultural complexity meets contextual limitations and gospel opportunities. They form a mixed, dynamic and growing field of ambitious influencers of the next generation. Among them are the prime ministers, CEOs, policy-makers and leaders of the future. How can the global church embrace this opportunity?

Growth in International Student Population?

Who knew that China is the third largest destination for international students worldwide after the USA and UK?² With 442,733 international students in China during 2016, up 11.4% from 2015, this number has multiplied over the past ten years (figure 8.1). It seems that, with consistent growth, high numbers, and such diversity, China is becoming the “hub of hubs” for impacting the world through international students.

Sending Countries

Students come from virtually everywhere. This map (figure 8.2) from 2016 shows that international students at Tsinghua University were from 116 nationalities.³

Across China, almost 60% of international students come from Asia (including Central

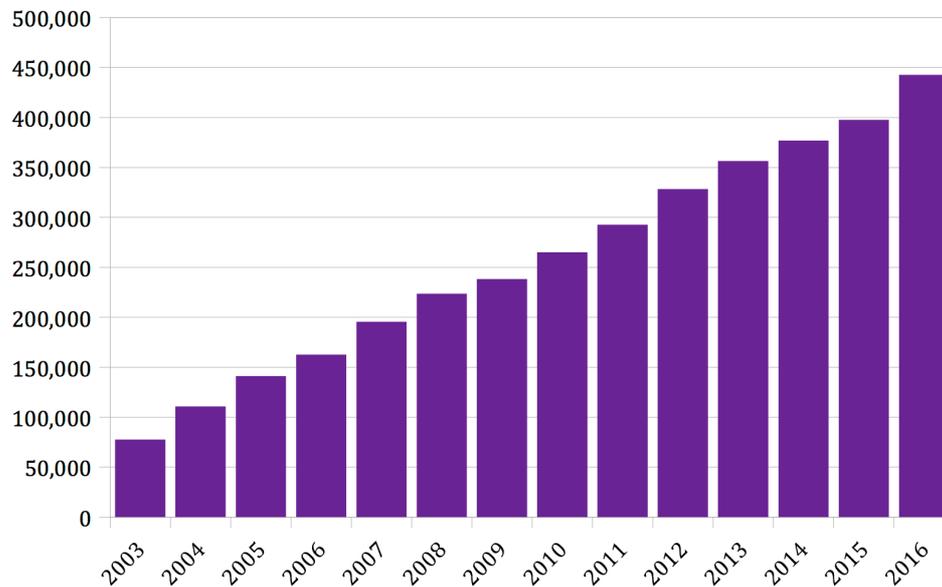


Figure 8.1
International Students
in China (2003–2016)

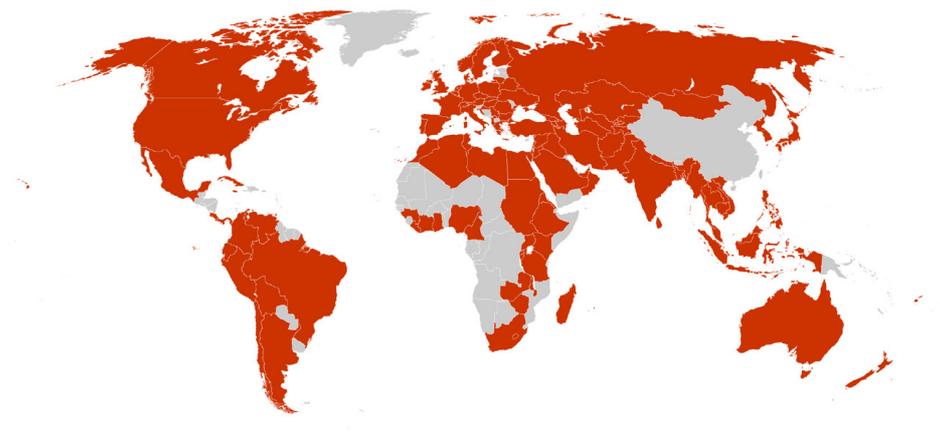


Figure 8.2
Highlighted countries
show international
students represented
at Tsinghua
University in 2016.

Asia and the Middle East). One explanation may be the growing phenomenon of “glocal” students—those who pursue a foreign education while remaining in their country or region.⁴ It is cheaper and culturally more comfortable than going to the West.

However, the staggering growth is from Africa, with a 23.7% year-on-year increase from 2015 (figure 8.4). Globally, China is the leading destination for Anglophone Africans.⁵ Though South Korea sends the most students from a single nation (15.93%), African students in total constitute the second largest group, with almost one in every seven being African. Scholarships from both China and sending countries drive this growth, as does China’s proactive and engaging geopolitical stance especially in strengthening bilateral economic relationships.⁶

Most of the top 15 sending countries are Asian, and they are incredibly mixed. Eight

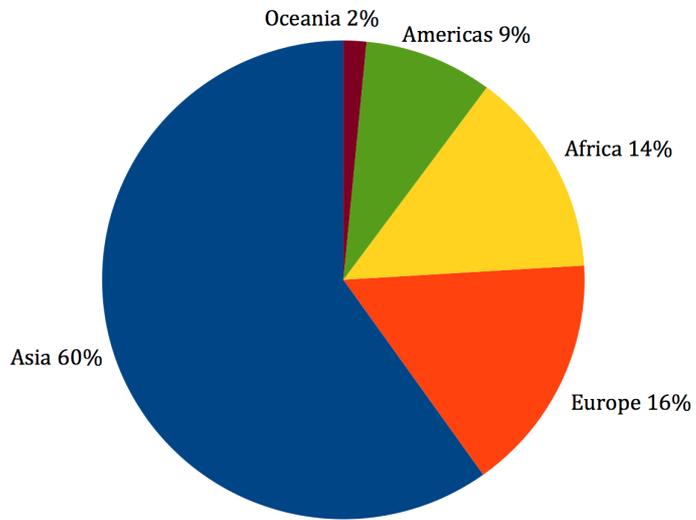


Figure 8.3
International Students by Continent (2016)

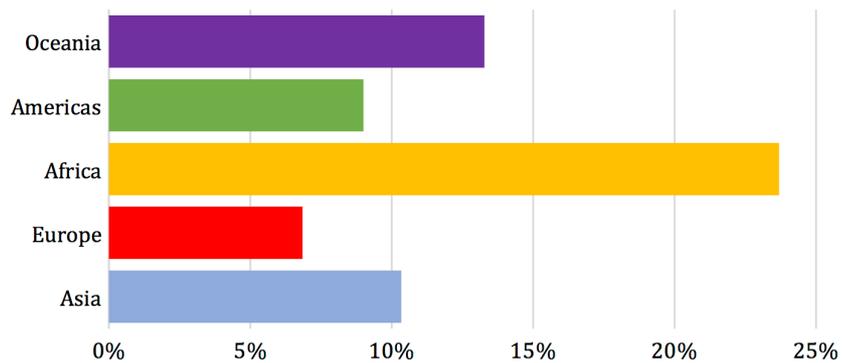


Figure 8.4
Yearly Increase of Students by Continent (2015–2016)

of these—totaling almost 120,000 students—are classified as “unreached” or “minimally reached” with the gospel.⁷

Yet, surprisingly, despite China’s reputation for control and constraint, these students can freely visit an international fellowship or engage with believing classmates. The young adult worldview exploration and reassessment engenders great openness. *Is this an opportunity to reach the unreached?*

Destinations in China

Though Beijing (17%) and Shanghai (14%) attracted the lion’s share of international students in 2016, there was a notable spread throughout the country.⁸

Reasons for Coming

Due to a combination of diverse factors, China will continue to grow as a destination for

Table 8.1 Top 15 countries sending students to China

Rank	Country	Total Students in China from this country/region	Percentage of all international students in China	Evangelicals in that country
1	South Korea	70,540	15.93%	16.44%
	Africa (all countries)	61,594	13.91%	
2	USA	23,838	5.38%	26.45%
3	Thailand	23,044	5.20%	0.51%
4	India	18,717	4.23%	2.20%
5	Pakistan	18,626	4.21%	0.60%
6	Russia	17,971	4.23%	2.20%
7	Indonesia	14,714	3.32%	3.76%
8	Kazakhstan	13,996	3.16%	0.63%
9	Japan	13,595	3.07%	0.58%
10	Vietnam	10,639	2.40%	1.83%
11	France	10,414	2.35%	1.08%
12	Laos	9,907	2.24%	2.33%
13	Mongolia	8,508	1.92%	1.64%
14	Germany	8,145	1.84%	2.13%
15	Malaysia	6,880	1.55%	3.25%

international students. It has some of the world's top universities,⁹ boasts a great diversity of institutions and programs, and is much cheaper than western destinations.¹⁰ Well over 800 colleges and universities in China accept international students,¹¹ with many offering accessible undergraduate and postgraduate courses entirely in English.

Moreover, Chinese universities are gaining a reputation as attractive research environments.¹² An outward-facing international education strategy for 2020¹³ combined with massive investment (49,022 scholarships in 2016)¹⁴ has attracted many students. In China, international students account for only 0.9% of total higher education students, compared to over 20% in the UK and Australia, leaving significant capacity to welcome more foreign students.¹⁵

Student Diversity

Compared to many western contexts, the international student population in China seems more culturally diverse, so there is more potential for intercultural conflict. What is acceptable to one student may offend another. In addition, cultural naiveté makes it hard for students from culturally homogeneous societies to comprehend, accept, and befriend the other.

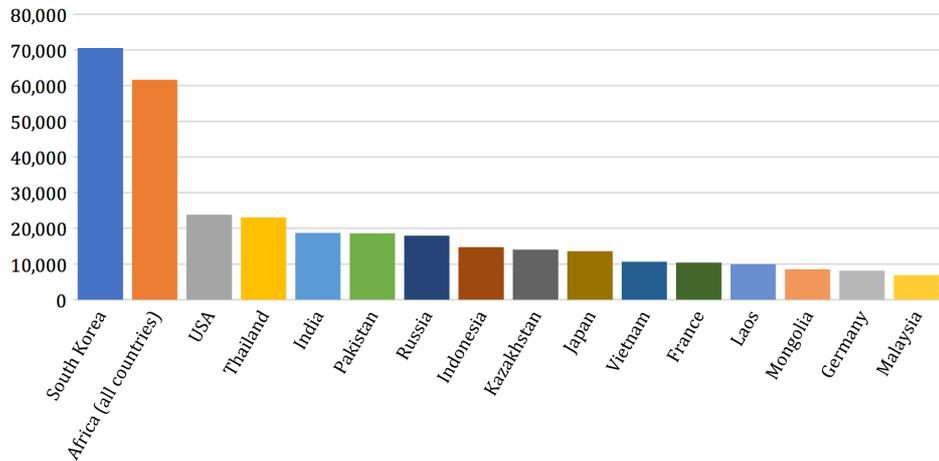


Figure 8.5
Top 15 Countries
Sending International
Students to China (2016)

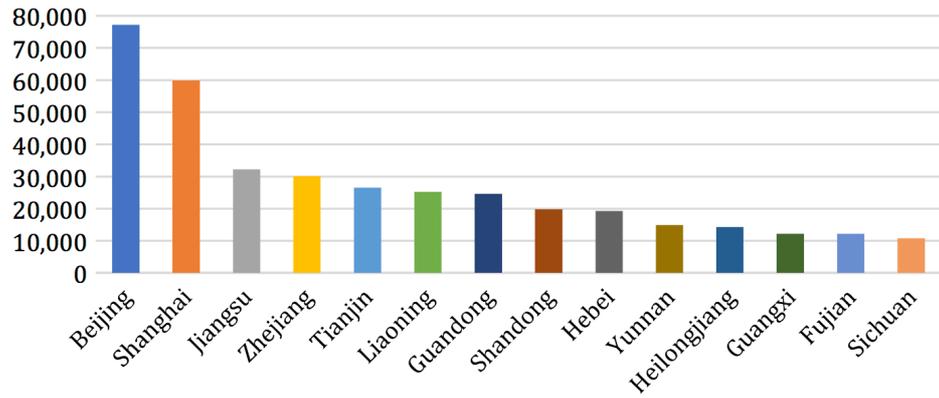


Figure 8.6
International
Students in China
by Province (2016)

It is widely assumed that all international students in China speak English. They do not. In fact, many international students, like the growing number from Central Asia, do not have functional English. Furthermore, even those who speak English cannot always understand one another. So, sometimes the best way to communicate is with limited Mandarin—the new *lingua franca*. Linguistic diversity means that ministry is not just in English. When an American Christian international student recently gathered over a dozen classmates and friends together for a Christmas party—from the USA, South Korea, Thailand, Japan, UK, Australia, Mongolia, Uruguay, Russia, and China—the conversation was entirely in Mandarin. Though the most effective ministry is of course in someone’s heart language, anyone—foreign or local—who can speak Mandarin can easily connect with vast numbers of non-English-speaking international students.

Religious diversity means international students include Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists, agnostics, and Baha’i. Amongst those identifying as Christians, one finds all affiliations and levels of commitment. Various cults also have an established presence, attracting lonely and stressed students.

All this precludes a “one size fits all” ministry model and demands creativity. Despite the challenges, international student ministry offers wonderful opportunities for gospel proclamation. With the control of family and home culture replaced with intriguing new freedom, students are asking, “What do I believe and why?”

Leadership and Ministry Potential

Furthermore, a surprising number of Christian students come to China with church leadership experience. While some are confused or lukewarm in faith, others are eager to be equipped for ministry and are incredibly responsive to capable, intentional, and loving ministry training. A Pakistani Christian student wrote, “Just need more prayers so I could work more for Christ and become a source of light for others.” Is this an opportunity to strengthen churches and train people for ministry?

Simply by being an international student and navigating all of the challenges listed above (unless they collapse under the strain), students become culturally adaptive and resilient. Is this an opportunity to train international students for cross-cultural mission beyond the diaspora in another culture?¹⁶

Many international students will become influencers of culture and society in their home countries, as some already are. China’s scholarship policy attracts a higher proportion of graduate and postgraduate students compared to the West. Is this an opportunity to influence students’ home cultures with the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Pressures and Isolation

However, there remain significant China-specific challenges facing students. The long-term homogeneity of Chinese culture heightens the culture stress of international students. Anyone who is not Chinese-looking is a 外国人, an “outside person,” and cultural integration proves difficult. Conversely, Asian students without the often-presumed language and culture smarts can face ridicule and stress.

Africans feel alienated, fearful, and powerless in the face of racism towards them. A Kenyan student sadly reported that often on a crowded bus both her adjacent seats would be empty—as people avoid sitting next to a dark-skinned person. Depression is widespread and suicidal tendencies not uncommon, but mental health and medical services are either rarely available or prohibitively expensive.

Dormitories rarely have spaces to congregate and socialize, while students’ financial, academic, and time pressures work against forming deep friendships. The most popular messaging apps that students use—Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp—are blocked in China, choking the connection back home.¹⁷ Restricted freedom of association and university rules against proselytizing can leave students confused and fearful.

All these challenges contribute to isolation and loneliness which can weaken Christian international students, who may then drift towards unhelpful influences. Some students are entirely unaware that healthy international churches exist, or that a Bible study might meet on their campus. In the midst of these challenges, there is an opportunity to show the compelling love of Christ and embrace students in loving community.

International student ministry in China inevitably means it is pioneering. Yes, the challenges are immense, but so are the opportunities. *Who will commit themselves to reaching, maturing and equipping these students to be salt and light throughout the world?*

Lessons from History

The conviction that God calls people from every nation, and that the nations had come *to them*, motivated the pioneers of international student ministry (ISM).¹⁸

Why and How did ISM Movements Start?

John R. Mott was moved to care for and evangelize foreign students in the USA. In 1911 he founded the Committee on Friendly Relations Among Foreign Students.¹⁹ As an international student in China in 1948, Bob Finley noticed the political impact of Chinese students returning from Russia. The strategic opportunities drove him to establish International Students Inc. on home soil “to evangelize, train and deploy foreign students back to their home countries for ministry.” And in 1954 Mark Hanna and John Bjorkland launched American Citizens Residing Overseas for Study and Service (ACROSS) “to empower Americans to study overseas and thereby evangelize in close[d] countries.”²⁰

Diaspora Missiology

In the last fifteen years, there has been significant development in diaspora missiology, which offers a biblical rationale and strategy for ISM, and gives us a framework for *missions to, through, and beyond the diaspora*.²¹ Leiton Chinn writes compellingly about the biblical basis and strategic value of ISM as part of diaspora missions.²² Elsewhere he describes his own journey and that of some churches in the USA from not seeing or caring about international students to now noticing and actively reaching out to them.²³ With the same zeal, he points to ISM in Asia as “a most strategic yet least expensive global mission opportunity.”²⁴ Is this a journey on which the church in China has now embarked?

Although there is a mind-boggling diversity of cultures and languages amongst international students in China, in many ways they can be considered together as a diaspora—a group of people maintaining strong connections with their home culture but living temporarily in another.²⁵ However, this is a *heterogenous diaspora* gathered from almost every country and region of the globe.

From a kingdom perspective, the theological necessity and strategic value of ISM have been well established. But compared to the West, very few churches, organizations or individuals are dedicated to serving international students in China. *If ISM in China is commanded by God, has encouraging historical precedents, and makes sense strategically, who will reach them?*

Church in China

Christians in every place have a joyful responsibility to reach *everyone in that place*. So, is ISM a gift to the church in China? “Church in China” here means any local expression of the church inside China, including the national TSPM church, house or family churches (including returnee-based churches), international churches, and campus ministries. ISM is inexpensive yet high-impact; it provides global connection locally and allows every member to be involved through using their gifts. Those unable to serve abroad can still engage in international missions at home, while others can prepare for working, serving and studying abroad.²⁶

Notwithstanding existing pressures, it could be argued that the Chinese church bears the primary responsibility to welcome these temporary neighbors with the gospel.

China's international engagement is growing economically and politically. Perhaps Chinese believers could follow this trend and get more involved with internationals within their borders. Some Chinese brothers and sisters conclude they have no facilities or legal context for ISM, or that they lack experience and don't know where to start. Others believe ISM is only for well-educated church members, and probably requires significant funds and highly organized teams. Many equate cross-cultural ministry with going outside of China or at least to remote domestic minorities. It takes courage to pray for, listen to, respect and discern the needs of international students in the megacities of China.²⁷

Some international students attend national TSPM churches which occasionally hold English services, but broader contextual constraints may make it difficult for these churches to reach international students effectively. Though notionally receptive to welcoming internationals, these churches appear to be doing very little in this area.

Vast numbers of Chinese have been converted while studying abroad. The challenges of reintegration into society and connecting with a local church are immense, so some churches have emerged which are mostly composed of returnees. Could the culturally and linguistically adept Christian returnees embrace this ministry opportunity?

A handful of house churches, both open and more discreet, are recognizing the joyful duty of sharing the gospel with international students living in China. While at times feeling ill-equipped, culturally uncertain and under-resourced, they have an excitement about reaching out. Some fellowships have quite a few academics and professors at universities where international students are located. Churches have set up "Chinese corners" (akin to English corners or conversation classes in the West) through which they hope to build friendships with international students who are looking for community and the opportunity to improve their Mandarin. However, some are unclear where the international students actually live, don't know how to connect with them, and are fearful about inviting in the foreigner.

Encouragingly, despite language and cultural barriers and other hindering factors, some churches have been prioritizing reaching international students. One leader recently said that if the local church doesn't preach the gospel to the nations, especially when they've come to China, then "we are sinning against God."

Some local campus-based college ministries are also beginning to put international students on their radar. The idea of cultural exchange centers is growing as both a legitimate and strategic context in which to build friendships with international students. Undoubtedly there are lessons from the successful indigenization of college ministry in China which could inform a "sideways" development into ISM.

Although international churches in China are minor players within the "Church in China" category, healthy ones do operate in many major cities and have relative freedom to meet openly. Some have non-English congregations. Unfortunately, some Christian students arrive with the preconception that there is no church in China, so they hide and read their Bible secretly in their dorm room. For others, the neon lights of new liberties distract them from seeking out fellowship.

And though these international churches certainly welcome any international student who attends, there remain significant political and capacity limitations. And there are challenges of doing church in a non-first language, a church culture that's radically different from "back home," and an environment with strong ethnic cliques and cultural

misunderstandings.

However, students who do integrate into these fellowships often encounter great encouragement from meeting with those who are culturally similar and others who can sympathize with them. And to many, it is also a surprising and glorious thing to witness the unity with diversity of the nations worshipping together, as described in Revelation 7.

Church Outside of China

Finally, how can the global church outside of China be part of this ISM vision in China? First and foremost, brothers and sisters could commit to praying for this.

Experienced ISM workers could be sent to China to support international churches or to come alongside local Chinese fellowships and campus ministries. Networking could be established between healthy national ISMs, pioneering ISMs outside of China, international churches within China, global sending organizations, and the nascent Chinese ISM movement.

The idea of sending people to a place to minister to those *who are not of that place* can be a challenge. Some sending organizations have historically focused only on strengthening the Chinese church. Quite apart from recognizing the reality of diaspora mission “from everywhere to everywhere,” could embracing ISM be a strategic way for them to grow the Chinese church’s cross-cultural vision and capacity to fulfill the Great Commission? The reality of diasporas raises healthy questions about the best shape and mode of sending agencies.²⁸

Today programs exist to facilitate mission-minded students to go abroad for study in China. Up until now, they have focused on reaching Chinese, not international students, but gradually they are embracing the strategic value of ISM-focused study-abroad students. For example, the Nigerian church is considering sending graduate students who are eager to reach internationals. Since the Christian center has shifted to Africa, Asia, and Latin America, there may be a responsibility for those regions to send ISM workers and mission-minded students to China.

The Road Ahead

Let the global church together with the people of God in China pray for international students in China. We must repent for lack of vision and action, and now joyfully take up this opportunity.

There may be much gospel fruit from listening to Chinese Christians’ hopes, fears, and needs in the area of reaching international students. Together we need to understand the context better, identify those on whom the Lord has placed a burden for international students, discern opportunities, and develop practical ministry models.

Perhaps God is giving us the compassion Jesus had, placing international students squarely on the agenda of both the local church in China and the global church beyond.

“Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matthew 9:38). International students in China are this field, ripe for harvest. Who will love them? 

Phil Jones (pseudonym) and his wife have been working amongst international students for over twelve years, both in their home country and for three years in China. They are growing in their awareness of the opportunities to reach the nations who have come to China.

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Resources for the Global Church

This ebook has been made available in multiple languages and multiple formats. [All are available at ChinaSource.org](http://ChinaSource.org).

- English: “International Student Ministry in China”
- Français: “Les Étudiants Internationaux en Chine”
- 한국어: “국제학생들의 중국에서의 선교와 사역”
- Русский: “Международные студенты в Китае”
- Português: “Estudantes Internacionais na China”
- Español: “Estudiantes Internacionales en China”
- 中文: “留学生在中國”

How can the global church be involved in this strategic ministry to reach international students in China? Here are six ways:

1. **Find out more and pray** for international students in China, and for those reaching them.
2. **Share** with others about the needs. You can share this ebook, or [some shorter articles here](#).
3. **Study in China as a mission-minded international student**. There are many scholarships available at world-class universities at all levels.
4. **Encourage university students** in your ministry to consider studying in China, and connect to various study abroad programs.
5. Do a **ministry internship** in China reaching international students.
6. Consider **coming long term**, committed to learning and serving amongst international students.