

Beyond the Language Barrier

When freshman Tracy Xie first arrived on Wake Forest's campus from Shanghai, China, she was struck by the beauty of the place—the small size, the trees, the calm. But beauty, as she quickly found out, didn't always equate to belonging.

"I struggled to communicate with people in this culture," said Xie. "But by communicate, I don't mean to speak—I mean to build connections."

Xie is one of fewer than 100 Chinese international students in Wake Forest's freshman class. She's part of a group that faces a unique set of cultural, social, and linguistic hurdles that often go unnoticed. Despite the school's efforts to promote inclusivity, many Chinese students say that genuine integration into the broader campus community remains difficult.

"We all know English, so it's not like we need an English lesson," said Xie. "But what we need is something you can't teach—the rules of connection. How can you teach how to make friends with Americans?"

She's not alone in feeling that way.

Fellow international student Annie Luo believes that the disconnect stems from both cultural differences and unspoken social dynamics.

"People are more comfortable with those who speak the same language or come from the same background," said Luo. "So you're forced to step out of your comfort zone just to get to know different people."

At larger schools, Luo and Xie noted, some of their peers have access to extensive support networks—including entire dorms or classrooms for Chinese international students. However, Xie is still cautious about the limits of those bubbles.

"If you are only speaking in Chinese," said Xie, "why are you going abroad?"

And yet, complete immersion—while ideal in theory—can be draining in practice.

"For anyone who is living and speaking in a second language, it can be exhausting doing it all day long," said sophomore Senya Li. "At the end of the day, it's comforting to speak your mother tongue with someone you're close with."

This emotional fatigue isn't just about tiredness—it's about vulnerability. Navigating a foreign culture means facing a series of small but persistent language shocks that can make everyday interactions feel unfamiliar or isolating.

"Sometimes when I'm scrolling on Fizz, I don't understand what they are talking about," said Luo, referencing the popular anonymous campus app. "Sometimes I have to Google it."

It's not just the slang—it's the fear of being exposed as someone who doesn't belong.

“When I first came here, I didn't know what ‘to be lowkey’ meant,” said Xie. “But I couldn't ask anyone because that would make me feel so stupid.”

Luo echoed that discomfort.

“When I'm in a group discussion with three American students and they're talking super fast, I have to really concentrate or I'll miss something,” she said. “But you don't want to ask them to repeat themselves—that's embarrassing.”

For many Chinese students, the challenges go beyond the social. Wake Forest's recent drop in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings has emerged as a significant concern—especially for students whose future job prospects in Asia depend on the name recognition of their college.

“Chinese people don't know much about Wake Forest except for its ranking,” said Li. “*U.S. News* is one of the major and only sources for employers in Asia. So when a school's ranking drops, it's a deadly blow to students who can't rely on Wake's reputation like students can here in the U.S.”

Xie felt that pressure too. “My father felt a little off about my decision [to come to Wake] because of the ranking drop,” she said. “For them, the only knowledge of the school is the ranking. So a drop is the biggest red flag.”

And yet, despite the challenges, all three students had reasons to stay.

“When I talk to my friends who are in bigger cities, life is so different,” said Luo. “But there are certain things that you like about a school, and you don't know that you're enjoying that benefit until you leave. If you transfer, you may feel like you're losing something. Sometimes I forget how lucky I am at this campus.”

But despite Wake's challenges—and the small size of its Chinese student population—valuable lessons have still bloomed.

“Being here has taught me to be very independent,” Luo said. “Your parents can't help. You have to take care of everything yourself. You have to learn how to cope with the feelings of being by yourself.”

That independence, while difficult, has helped some students find strength in their difference—not despite it.

“Don't get lost,” said Xie. “Sometimes you think you need to blend in to avoid getting lost. But your life is yours, and even in a different country that makes you want to blend in—you have to be yourself.”

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