

Immigration from China surges in Iowa

JENS MANUEL KROGSTAD, 5:44 AM, Feb. 13, 2012

AMES, IA. — The epicenter of the Chinese immigration wave in Iowa is found on the campuses of the state's largest universities.

Ziyu Jiang remembers his shock at the sea of Chinese faces in his Finance 301 class at Iowa State University. About 20 of the 30 seats were filled by students like him.

Jiang, 23, arrived on campus four years ago in the midst of a nationwide enrollment boom fueled by China's burgeoning middle class, a product of that country's hard-charging economy. By last fall, the number of undergraduate Chinese students at ISU had rocketed to more than 1,200 — a nearly 2,000 percent increase since 2006. Universities across the country, including the University of Iowa, have reported similar gains.

Those kinds of numbers represent an immigration tidal wave in a state with an estimated 6,600 Chinese-born residents.

“What is happening is this extreme surge in the undergraduate Chinese numbers, and it's happening not just here at Iowa State,” said James Dorsett, director of the ISU International Students & Scholars Office.

Iowans and Chinese say ties have been strengthened over the years by graduate students who stay here to teach and work, Chinese adoptions, and native Iowans who travel across the Pacific to live, work and study. Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping's visit to Iowa this week is the latest in a growing effort to build business and cultural connections.

The most recent student arrivals from China, though, differ from their predecessors in youth, ambition and sheer numbers. They don't come to the U.S. to fulfill the American dream, like previous generations of immigrants. Jiang and many of his classmates share similar aspirations: Learn at what he calls the world's best universities, land a job in the U.S. and gain a few years' experience, then return home to fulfill their Chinese dream.

Jiang, a senior studying logistics and supply chain management, hopes to one day start his own consulting firm in China. First, though, he will earn a master's degree in America.

“But finally, I choose to go back to China,” he said. “Not just (because of) family, but because of the Chinese economy.”

Of those who remain in Iowa, most follow the path taken by Fei Zhou. He enrolled in English classes at ISU two years ago with an eye on expanding his family's food distribution business to the U.S.

Zhou's parents employ 150 people at a factory in Beijing. They arrived two months ago to help grow their company, Iowa Food Manufacture Inc., a soybean production and distribution company. It is one

of the most important of 28 companies founded by Chinese in 2011, according to Immigrant Entrepreneurs Summit, a nonprofit based in Des Moines.

“Thirty years ago, most of the Chinese coming here opened up a restaurant,” said Ying Sa, chairwoman of the Immigrant Entrepreneurs Summit. “But in this century, most are in technology and manufacturing.”

Within three years, the Zhou family hopes to create 50 jobs in Iowa, most in sales and production, and earn nearly \$5 million in annual profits.

“His friends in China are watching him. If they do a good job, more people will come,” said Swallow Yan, executive director of the Chinese Association of Iowa.

Jason and Melissa Nash of Urbandale began developing an emotional connection to China when in 2004 they adopted the first of two children from the country. They are among the more than 70,000 adopted Chinese children in the U.S.

The couple is looking forward to a future trip to China to retrace the steps they took to bring home Malia, 9, and Caleb, 6. When the pilgrimage takes place, they’ll have plenty of places to stay thanks to the families of three high school exchange students they have hosted.

“Over the course of five, six years, it’s like this family keeps growing internationally. It’s really cool,” Jason Nash said.

As more young Chinese arrive in the state, more young Iowans are traveling to China. The country is becoming a home away from home of sorts for Zach Larson, 20, an ISU agronomy senior from West Des Moines.

He has already spent three months in China to study. This year, he will spend eight months there conducting genomics research. As a Chinese language tutor, he sees more students choosing to learn the language because it will give them a leg up in their careers.

“They’re looking for more employees to take part in cultural exchanges. And obviously not having to go through interpreters is an important thing,” he said.

The cross-cultural pollination of young people streaming in and out of China and Iowa is occurring on college campuses across the state — at the strong encouragement of both business and education leaders, who hope to see the trend grow stronger in coming years.

“We absolutely recognize the important place China holds in the world economy and world politics,” said Doug Badger, director of admissions at Grinnell College, which like most colleges has bolstered recruiting in China. “Having a significant number of Chinese students on campus really aids the learning experience for everyone.”

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