The hotel elevator doors opened and Yiwei Huang stepped out, ready for his college orientation.

He held his mother's hand as he approached the registration table.

He pored over the rows of name tags, each belonging to a future classmate, until he spotted his own, printed with both his familiar Chinese name and "Allen" in parentheses — the name he will go by when he enrolls later this month at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

U. of I. is "very beautiful," he said, though he has seen it only through the Internet. Huang, 18, has never been to the campus. He has never been to the United States.

"College life can change a person," he explained, "and I think Illinois is a good place for me."

More than 600 Chinese teenagers have made the same decision, and soon they will arrive on campus as part of the Class of 2018.

They will represent nearly 10 percent of the entering freshman class at the state’s most competitive public university,
up from fewer than 20 freshmen in 2006. And they are so important to the university’s present and future that a U. of I. team flew halfway around the world this summer to conduct three orientation sessions in their country.

While the students and their families are betting their futures on a U. of I. education, the university depends on the full tuition they pay — a minimum of $31,000 a year, in some cases totaling twice that of an Illinois resident, plus housing and other costs.

U. of I. has more international students than any other American public university, and it trails only the University of Southern California, a private institution. All told, including graduate students who qualify for some aid, about 9,400 international students funneled $166 million into the Urbana-Champaign campus budget last year in tuition alone, triple the amount from just five years ago.

When fees and housing are factored in, international students contributed $211 million to the campus budget, accounting for 25 percent of the amount paid by all students. Nearly half that sum came from China, university figures show.

"It brings dollars into the state. That can’t be our primary objective, but it does contribute to the state’s economy," said U. of I. President Robert Easter, who said the Chinese student increase is part of the university's broader interest in China, reflected by the opening of a Shanghai office in December.

"The Chinese students enrich the culture of the campus and the diversity of the student population," said Easter, who spent four days in China in June. "The University of Illinois has to be fully engaged with that nation in terms of preparing our students for futures that will undoubtedly involve interactions with China."

Yet many international students arrive with little knowledge about the campus or Illinois in general, a problem highlighted last fall when a Chinese student arrived at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport and paid a man posing as a cabdriver more than $4,000 to drive him 150 miles to the Urbana-Champaign campus.

That incident and others prompted university officials to realize that while they held several events for freshmen in the U.S., they had been providing little pre-arrival information to foreign students and their parents.

"They weren't feeling quite as supported as they would have liked," said Nicole Tami, the university's first director of international student integration, a position created in August 2013. "If you are coming from one of our suburbs, you can visit the campus multiple times as you’re making decisions, and then there are welcome days and summer orientations.

"International students are coming sight unseen."

So the university for the first time scheduled daylong sessions this summer in three of China's leading cities — Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou — with one purpose in mind: making the students feel welcome. About 570 students and their parents attended.

"It is my great pleasure to officially welcome each of you to the University of Illinois family," said Bryan Endres, interim associate provost for international affairs, as he kicked off the first orientation, held at a Shanghai hotel on a Friday afternoon in June. He spoke to a ballroom filled with about 225 students and family members, sitting in rows beneath crystal chandeliers.

The university officials spoke in English, with their messages translated on big screens in the front of the room. A current U. of I. student and a recent graduate from China spoke in Mandarin.
For five hours, the incoming Illini learned everything they could, from tips about the visa application process (bring proof of your finances) to what clothes to pack for an Illinois winter. Yes, the winters are cold. No, the food isn't that bad — particularly if you shop at the local Asian grocery stores or bring some dried mushrooms from home.

Don't bring too much money — "people will say you are rich" — but do bring medicine and a traditional face-washing bowl, which is hard to find in the U.S.

It was Illini 101, a crash course with an international flair and a dose of reality.

The orientations were "a really smart idea," said Allan Goodman, president of the Institute of International Education, a nonprofit that produces an annual report on the number of international students studying in the U.S. "If your university has an internationalization strategy, you have to do the homework and make sure students arrive well prepared. You not only have to take care of them when they get to campus, but you have to do the pre-departure things that help them get their minds around what the educational experience is like."

**Chinese undergraduates represent the largest group** of foreign students studying in the U.S. That wasn't the case just five years ago — and the increase has been sudden and extreme.

China became the leading sender of international students to the U.S. in 2009-10. That year, nearly 128,000 Chinese students were in the U.S. Three years later, the number had almost doubled, to 235,597. Undergraduates made up the bulk of the surge.

The increase is attributed to China's burgeoning middle class — a demographic layer of families consisting of two working parents with only one child and a fervent desire to invest in that child's future.

Some Chinese students come from affluent families, but many live modestly. Their parents have chosen to raid their savings to pay more than $50,000 a year for tuition, fees, housing and living expenses. In a country without a standard retirement system, parents have traditionally relied on their children to care for them in old age, and a U.S. education is considered an investment in the family's future.

For their part, students said they chose to study abroad because of the comparative freedom at U.S. universities. In China, students are slotted into particular majors and career paths based on test scores. In the U.S., students instead are encouraged to take classes in various subjects before committing to a major.

"College life in the United States is more free," said Huang, who is interested in math and chemistry. "I didn't have to decide my major before I attend university, and actually until now I am still not clear about what I am most interested in. I still want to take some courses in my freshman year to see which field I am most fond of."

Jiaqi "Jackie" Chen, 17, picked U. of I. over Purdue, the University of Iowa and the University of Oregon. She, too, hasn't decided on a major but hopes to study computer science.

"(U. of I.) ranks higher than other universities in China, so with regard to my future ... I will choose the U.S.," said Chen, who will enroll in the university's Division of General Studies.

She attended the Shanghai orientation dressed in camouflage shorts, a Polo shirt and Nike sneakers. Her left thumbnail was painted to resemble the U.S. flag. "I'm excited and looking forward to my journey to America," Chen said.

Studying abroad also provides an alternative to China's high-stakes admissions process — a grueling two-day exam that is the single factor for determining who wins a spot at one of the nation's 2,400 universities, compared with about
4,000 in the U.S. A reported 9.8 million Chinese students took the exam this June. (By contrast, 1.6 million students took the SAT worldwide last year.)

Testing fatigue led Jiaying "Lois" Song, 17, to Urbana-Champaign. "I am bored of taking exams in China, and many teachers only emphasize grades. It had no meaning. I would like to choose America to find a more challenging life," said Song, who traveled three hours from her home to the orientation in Shanghai.

Song said she applied to 10 American colleges and universities and was accepted by half. Bucknell University in Pennsylvania, her first choice, turned her down, but she was accepted at Ohio State University and Indiana University.

One of her reasons for choosing U. of I. was consistent with the response provided by most students. "In my family, many members like high rankings," she said.

**While American students closely study rankings of colleges**, international students seem to emphasize them even more. U. of I. ranks No. 41 on the popular U.S. News & World Report system. And on the Academic Ranking of World Universities scale, compiled by the prestigious Shanghai Jiaotong University, U. of I. ranks No. 25, besting private institutions such as Northwestern, Brown and Duke.

That helps explain why the U. of I., a school in the middle of the country, surrounded by cornfields, enjoys a stellar reputation in China, in some respects outpacing its status in the U.S.

It doesn't hurt that the university's top programs mirror Chinese students' interests: engineering, business, science and math.

U. of I. also has a long history of enrolling graduate and doctoral students from China, which gave the university a head start in name recognition when undergraduates began pouring across the Pacific.

Even the university's name generates goodwill in China. Chinese students refer to the institution as UIUC — which, when translated into Chinese characters, means "There is love and there is happiness."

Stacey Kostell, director of U. of I.'s undergraduate admissions, said the university does "very, very little" recruiting in China. Admissions representatives visited four Chinese high schools this past year, two each in Beijing and Shanghai, compared with 472 visits to Illinois schools, she said.

The university doesn’t advertise. It doesn’t purchase the names of high-achieving students from the College Board. There are no admissions materials in Chinese. And, unlike some other universities, including Roosevelt University in Chicago, U. of I. doesn’t pay commission to third-party companies to recruit students.

"The application increase has happened naturally," Kostell said.

Word of mouth helps. As one student, Qin "Celia" Xu, said at the Shanghai post-orientation reception, while sipping a glass of wine: U. of I. is "friendly to Chinese students." Six students from her high school, Suzhou High School in Jiangsu province, north of Shanghai, will start at U. of I. this fall, she said.

U. of I. received 5,919 applications from China for this fall's freshman class. Five years ago, there were 1,436 applications. In 2006, there were only 105.

The increase has made admissions more competitive for international students. In 2006, 61 percent of applicants were admitted; for this fall's class, 38 percent of applicants — or 2,255 — were accepted. That compares with an admission rate of about 70 percent for Illinois residents.
Kostell expects 600 to 625 Chinese students in this fall's freshman class of about 6,900.

Meanwhile, the number of students from Illinois is down, to 5,358 freshmen last fall, but that is more a function of students passing on Illinois than the university rejecting them. U. of I. has admitted a consistent number of in-state applicants over the past five years, but a higher percentage of them are enrolling elsewhere.

The international student increase has rankled some state lawmakers and Illinois families whose children have been rejected by the university. In response to criticism, university officials previously have backtracked on public statements about wanting to increase the number of out-of-state students and have acknowledged the issue is a touchy subject.

But disapproval seems to have quieted in recent years with the decline in state funding to U. of I. and other public institutions, and the recognition that full-tuition-paying international students help the bottom line.

International students go through the same admissions process as domestic applicants, including taking the SAT and writing two essays. To help them navigate the process, international students often pay consultants thousands of dollars to help them choose schools and assist with essays.

Kostell acknowledged the possibility of fraud, which has been reported elsewhere, but said the same possibility exists for domestic students who hire consultants.

International applicants must have a minimum score of 550 on the verbal portion of the SAT to be considered for admission.

On average, Chinese students do well at U. of I. About 97 percent of freshmen from China return for sophomore year, compared with 94 percent for Illinois residents. About 85 percent of students from China graduate in four years or less, compared with 70 percent of those from Illinois.

"Right now, there isn't a red flag that says the students aren't doing well here," Kostell said.

While many Chinese students said they had hired agents to help with the college admissions process and the applications, Huang said his family didn't hire any paid consultants. He learned English through a daily class at school and by reciting words on his own, he said.

Huang prepared for the SAT by working with a tutor for about four hours a week, for several months. He took the SAT three times, each one requiring a two-hour flight and overnight stay in Hong Kong, since the exam is not offered in mainland China. His best score was 2110 out of 2400, he said, including a perfect 800 on the math section.

He applied to about 10 colleges and, in addition to U. of I., got offers from Penn State University and Fordham University and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in New York. He was turned down by Colby College in Maine, Middlebury College in Vermont and Colgate University in New York, his first choice.

Huang is earnest and eager, and his U. of I. essays showcased his academic accomplishments. But they also revealed the language challenges, particularly in writing, that confront international students who learn English in a classroom.

"Accounting and chemical major of UIUC are very outstanding and desirable," he wrote. "I firmly believe that I can fulfill my talent when studying in UIUC."

At their modest two-bedroom apartment in Shanghai's modern Pudong district, Huang's parents spoke with pride about his accomplishments and admission to U. of I.
Clothes swung from the balcony of their walk-up apartment, one of hundreds in a sprawling complex. There were few decorations on the walls, but a sign above the door had a Buddhist prayer for good luck and safety.

Huang's mother, Lianhong Han, 40, said she thinks a U.S. education fits her son's personality. "Yiwei is more suited to an open environment," she said in Mandarin. "He likes his freedom, not to be controlled."

It is a new idea for her generation, as is the idea of studying in the U.S., unheard of when she and her husband were teenagers. They worked for many years before they could go to college. Huang's father, Yufei Huang, 43, is a building engineer; his mother is a landscape architect.

Neither speaks much English. Nor have they been to the U.S.

The Shanghai skyline was covered by haze as students began arriving at the U. of I. orientation at a downtown hotel along Nanjing Road, a pedestrian-only shopping district considered one of the world's oldest and busiest.

Some brought their parents. Others arrived with high school classmates or students they had met in online discussion forums they created for themselves.

In addition to their name tags, they picked up Illini luggage tags, lanyards and lapel pins that they immediately attached to their shirts.

They came with a common purpose: to learn more about the place they call UIUC. Dinghong Wang, 18, who traveled about 100 miles by train from his home in Hangzhou, acknowledged that much of what he knew about the campus is from Wikipedia.

Wang said he wanted to meet more students, learn about the physics department and, perhaps most important, get some advice about where to eat.

"I have heard that the food is not so good, so I am kind of worried because I really like eating," he said.

Wang got the answers he wanted about food (there are Asian groceries and restaurants on campus and nearby), as well as crash courses on many other subjects. The U. of I. team included officials from student affairs, housing, international studies, new student programs and fundraising.

"You will hear a lot of voices today from administration, students and faculty. You may not remember every detail, but what I hope you hear overall is that there are people across campus who want to help you and want your experience at Illinois to be a great one," said Renee Romano, vice chancellor for student affairs.

Students learned that the help will begin as soon as they arrive at the airport, with plans for university officials to greet them there and, for the first time, have official shuttles to whisk them to campus for $25.

The advice ranged from academic — the definition of a 100-level class and how many credits to take each semester — to the intricacies of the visa application process, including that students must bring to their visa interview proof of how they'll pay for college.

Tami, the director of international integration, cautioned students at the Beijing orientation that there are "distinct differences" between classroom culture in the U.S. and China.

Students are expected to contribute to class discussions, rather than sit through the lectures. The students, not the instructors, will move from class to class. Class schedules differ by student. There are U.S.-specific rules for citing material.
"It can be confusing," Tami admitted.

The incoming freshmen also heard from two of their predecessors, Jiahui "Joyce" Yu, who graduated in May; and Tianwei "David" Sun, a U. of I. senior and president of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association.

"Packing is the biggest issue," Yu said in Mandarin. "It is important to know what to bring to the United States. The winter is really cold," with the temperature sometimes dipping below zero degrees.

There was nervous laughter from the crowd. "But in the United States, the good thing is that inside the room, the temperature is very high," she added.

The orientations highlighted many of the cultural differences awaiting the students. The advice included bringing only one set of sheets because "you can dry your sheets on the first floor of your apartment (or dorm), right after you wash them." It will be a new concept for many students; clothes dryers are rare in China, and most families hang their clothes from their apartment balconies to dry.

Yu also had some advice for the female students: Don't bring an umbrella to use as a shield from the sun, and, if you do, expect to draw attention. In the United States, women "like to tan themselves," she said.

Students and parents had so many questions that the sessions stretched beyond the scheduled hour at both the Shanghai and Beijing orientations: Are motorbikes allowed on campus? What age do you have to be for a driver’s license — and how do you get one? What’s the process to get a job or an internship?

But most of the questions focused on academics. Over two orientations, there were few questions about extracurricular activities or social life.

Many instead focused on how to get ahead: What is the maximum number of credits students can take in a semester? Is it possible to get dual degrees? How will scores on the English Placement Test, used to assess the oral and written English abilities of international students, affect course selection?

"Be careful when you choose your classes," Tami cautioned. "Taking too many courses at one time can compromise your overall success."

**Huang listened from a seat in the back of the ballroom,** dressed in the dark suit he wore earlier that morning for his graduation from one of China’s top high schools.

He began the day around 7:30 a.m. on the school’s athletic field, as he and hundreds of other students lined up in straight rows for their "morning exercises" — 10 minutes of synchronized calisthenics required by the government.

In his classroom, a Chinese flag hung on the otherwise bare walls. A television in the corner of the classroom streamed state-controlled news.

At his graduation ceremony, in the school's auditorium, the school president addressed his class: "No matter whether you go to first-class domestic universities or overseas universities ... I sincerely wish every one of you will realize your dream."

Of the 414 graduates, 32 will leave China for college. Four will enroll at the U. of I., more than any other foreign institution.

Huang's dream, he wrote in a graduation day message to a friend, is to be an actuary. And so, straight from the graduation ceremony, he went to the U. of I. orientation.
By the end of the day, he was shouting "I-L-L" with his half of the ballroom, while the other half responded with "I-N-I."

He was starting to feel like an Illini.

He knows there will be challenges, from making friends with American classmates to understanding mathematics taught entirely in English.

But as he went to a post-orientation reception, he put those fears aside. His main goal was similar to that of his U.S. peers — making friends.

He sipped wine at the reception. He exchanged social networking IDs with his peers. He flirted with a girl he had met in an SAT prep class. And he took a picture with President Easter, who was there to greet alumni and incoming students.

"We are starting on a new trip," Huang said as the reception drew to a close around 8 p.m. He and his mother were among the last to leave.

Huang slung his backpack over his shoulder, and they took the elevators down to busy Nanjing Road to catch the subway home.

On Aug. 18, he will board a plane for the U.S. Half a world away, at O'Hare International Airport, a U. of I. team will be waiting to greet him.

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