

From JiangXi to Infinity and Beyond: An Interview with Luyao Yan

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The first time I met Luyao Yan was quite memorable for me. We were classmates in the History of Higher Education class taught by Dr. Dot Finnegan. Chatting before class, I learned that it was Luyao's very first semester at William & Mary. During Dr. Finnegan's instruction in that first class, I considered how much U.S. cultural knowledge is required in a U.S. history of higher education class: the GI Bill, Reformation and Colonial and Antebellum Colleges (oh, my!)...the course is full of topics that are so culture-laden! I thought, "This course is hard enough for Americans, but how will it be for this new student from China? How can she learn the context along with the content?" Yet, the motivation to learn a different perspective, experience the foreign, and face new challenges was precisely why Luyao Yan chose to attend William & Mary for a graduate degree. Luyao's background, preparation, and outlook provided everything she required to tackle this tough course.

About Luyao

Luyao Yan is a 2nd year Higher Education Administration Master's student from Yiyang, (Province) JiangXi, in Southeast China. After completing an undergraduate degree in English and Japanese languages at Renmin University (People's University), a prestigious university in Beijing, she

decided to pursue higher education administration, but in a comparative education context. Luyao sought a comparative perspective of higher education because "higher education contains political factors and there are differences in the two higher education systems. I seek to learn from the U.S. to solve some problems in the current Chinese higher education system." Despite the discouragement she received from her friends that study abroad would be too difficult, she concluded that the benefits of a comparative perspective outweighed the hurdles. "I just want different things... and challenges. The knowledge here is very good, especially in higher education administration." When asked why she chose the College of William & Mary, Luyao commented that although she received many offers from other universities, the School of Education faculty and campus drew her to William & Mary. "Jim [Barber] sent me an email and he wrote some Chinese in that. I was really impressed! The faculty members are truly very special." The exceptional faculty coupled with her love of historical architecture made the College of William & Mary seem like a perfect fit.



What has surprised you about college life in the U.S.?

Living at a U.S. college for Luyao has proved a comparative exercise in itself. What has surprised her the most here are students' relationships with their families. First, she was struck that many undergraduate students chose William & Mary because of what she sees as "family values." "Being together with family is very important for American students. The students often like to work or study close to their families." Luyao acknowledged that many U.S. students choose to stay close to home partly because of in-state tuition, but she senses a real desire on the students' part to stay connected with their families.

On the other hand, this connection to family conflicts with what Luyao views as a strong financial independence of U.S. youth vis-à-vis their families. In China, generally families pay for their children's education, even through graduate school. In fact, many Chinese parents go to great lengths to personally pay for the best education possible. "Because of the one-child policy, families save their money and spend it on their children. Parents sacrifice their own belongings...such as the selling of a house." Luyao, in fact, does have a friend whose parents sold their house to pay for their child's college education, but she says this is an extreme example. In contrast, Luyao observes that U.S. families are more likely to secure student loans and "would not sacrifice most of their stuff for their children. Student loans are not common in China as they are here." Instead, Chinese families may secure a home loan and use it for education.

Another aspect of U.S. higher education that Luyao finds both "surprising and interesting" is the process of choosing a college major. As a high school student, Luyao chose her major before entering college. At the end of a Chinese high school student's career, he or she sits for the high-stakes national exam, the *gao kao*. The score on the *gao kao* determines college choices. Chinese students "choose top schools instead of top programs. They want the name of that college." For example, Luyao was honored to go to Renmin University and cared little about the ranking of the English Department. The college choice then refines the choice of the major and once a major is chosen during the summer before freshman year, it is locked. "It's hard to change once you're in college; here [in the U.S.]

you have one year experience [before choosing your major] and you know more about what you want."

Value of attending graduate school at William & Mary

Luyao notes that because William & Mary is a smaller school, she has enjoyed many opportunities "for real contact with U.S. students and people, which opens the door to culture. Also, the working experience here is very valuable." Luyao appreciates her various work experiences at the College. She has worked at the Reves Center in Study Abroad, the Center for Student Diversity, and Recreational Life. Each position has offered a unique look at college student life with various challenges and opportunities. For example, in her current post as a graduate intern in the Center for Student Diversity, Luyao believes her perspective as a Chinese student was appreciated because the staff sees value in incorporating viewpoints from diverse cultures. "It's not only about the knowledge or the ways of thinking. If you experience two different kinds of environments, you have more perspectives. You will have the openness to diverse viewpoints. You can adapt to different environments very quickly and with more problem-solving abilities."

Likewise, Luyao sees her work and study experiences at William & Mary will be a great asset to her career. She said many institutes of higher education in China are interested in applying Western style administration. She explains that in the U.S., individual institutions have unique ways of handling their own administration, whereas in China, university governance has employed a national approach. She notes that many Chinese universities are interested in Western approaches to higher education administration. To incorporate lessons learned from the U.S. system for universities in China, Luyao plans to work for a few years in higher education in the U.S. Indeed, her overall work and student experiences at William & Mary have already enriched her global expertise: "No matter where, whether in China or the U.S., something can be applied, like student development theories. Comparative education gives you different perspectives."

Luyao's background, preparation, and outlook brought her to a beautiful campus nestled in Williamsburg, Virginia. Starting her first semester at the College of William and Mary in the

challenging History of Higher Education class did not deter her; instead, it was one more collected perspective to add to an already rich and global repertoire.

About the author

Leslie Bohon is a PhD candidate in the Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership program, focusing on Higher Education Administration.