



## **The force (of U.S. culture) is strong with these kids**

### Chinese students delve deeply into all things American

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McLEAN, Va. — For years, politicians and business types have been warning us that 1 billion Chinese flexing their academic and industrial muscle would bury us, a dark force waiting to crush our fragile economy.

Nobody said one of those kids would be Darth Vader.

"It's sort of an English name, but it's not official," says Chen Kuan, 17, also known as Anakin, the name of the boy who would become Vader in the final Star Wars movie.

It turns out that, during the course of their English studies, Chinese students get English names and in many cases are allowed to pick their own. Kuan chose Anakin, telling a stranger without irony, "I gave it to myself."

When it came time for Liu Xuan to do the same, he didn't think twice: As friends chose Jim, Jack and David, the 17-year-old became Luke, as in Skywalker.

Who knew that the kids who would take over the world are such Star Wars freaks?

"That's the first DVD edition I ever bought," Xuan says.

These teens and 10 others are wrapping up a whirlwind tour of the East Coast, from New Hampshire to Virginia via Boston, New York and Washington, D.C. The equivalent of U.S. high school juniors, they are the first to visit since the start of a cultural exchange in 2004 by the non-profit National Committee on U.S.-China Relations. It has sent three groups of American students to China and plans another this summer.

All are top students from Jiangsu Province near Shanghai, and several have their eyes on studying here. A stop last week at Harvard whetted their appetite for American colleges, though several concede they'd have a hard time getting in.

"I like Harvard, but I can't go to Harvard," says Shao Zhuyan, 16. "I'm not the best student in my school, but I can just try."

All swoon for American culture.

Zhuyan calls himself X-Man. Kuan, aka Anakin, who arrived with dreams of being a psychologist or sociologist, got his hands on the first-season DVDs of *Lost*, the hit TV show whose lead character, Jack Shephard, is a spinal surgeon. Now he wants to be a surgeon.

"I'm not sure," Kuan says. "I'm leaving my options open."

Says Donald Straszheim, vice chairman of Los Angeles-based Roth Capital Partners and a China expert, who is not involved with the student program: "They all fall in love with America."

Arriving at the sprawling Tysons Corner Center for a few hours of shopping before heading to a Kennedy Center dance performance (they spent the morning volunteering at a homeless shelter in Washington, D.C.), the students stare at folding maps of the mall. Then Kuan and half a dozen others head for the Apple Store to buy iPods.

Though Straszheim says it's right to consider the intellectual and industrial might of China's rapidly modernizing economy, he says these kids probably do not represent the greatest threat to U.S. global stature. Keep your eyes on these teenagers' kids, he says. "It's going to take years and years and years."

You can almost see Star Wars' "a long time ago ..." scrolling up the movie screen.

Part of that is because though China turns out millions of smart, motivated high school graduates each year — virtually all only children, the result of restrictions on childbearing — its higher education system "is highly uneven compared to ours," Straszheim says.

Though their best dozen colleges compare favorably with those in the USA, he says, it's hit-or-miss after that. "Business people will tell you they've hired an awful lot of scientists and engineers who simply don't have the skills they thought."

As she stands in line waiting to buy a little purple rubber case for an iPod she's planning on getting, Wu Xi, 16, says she wants to study medicine. Her father is a biology professor, her mother an engineer.

What does she think of Harvard?

"It's very great," she says. "It is very open and every student can have their own creative minds."

She looks down at the package she's holding and notices a "Made in China" label. She traces a circle around it with her fingernail and shows it to X-Man. A bit of a trend-setter, he bought his iPod last week in New York City.

" 'Made in China,' " he reads, laughing. "But it's cheaper here."

Like others, Straszheim says China's emergence will likely make it the USA's strongest economic ally.

"I don't think we should have anything to fear at all. In fact, let's bring the competition on. The more of these kids we have here in our school system, the more they're going to drag us up.

"It's going to be a nice additional competitive element."