Chinese students flock to area schools
Enrollment jump reflects national trend, growing local ties

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Ruihan Hu didn’t buy the Marina District or the Docks, but she’s as much the face of a growing tie between Toledo and China as are the businessmen who made those high-profile deals.

The 17-year-old from Guangzhou plans to study film at the University of Toledo once she finishes UT’s intensive English program at its American Language Institute.

Guangzhou is a long way away from Toledo, but she’s got a friend at UT, and the campus is beautiful.

“And the University of Toledo has great geographical location,” Ms. Hu said.

While Toledo’s connection to China tends to be framed around economic concerns, bonds are growing elsewhere, especially in the region’s schools.

Enrollment of Chinese students at local universities, prep schools, and parochial high schools is on the rise, part of a national trend that has students from mainland China becoming the leading nationality for international enrollment in American higher education institutions.

Part of the increase is program-specific, with schools recruiting international students into specific degrees. But much of it stems from China’s rapid economic growth and the emergence of a middle class that has the financial means to choose where they send their children to school.

“They are coming here with more money and more choices,” said Peter Thomas, the University of Toledo’s director of international student services.

Some of those financial means are significant. Mr. Thomas said he saw a student attending the university’s English language immersion program driving a Maserati, an Italian sports car.

The number of international students at UT has more than doubled between 2003 and 2012, from 621 students to 1,385.
The increase was even sharper among Chinese students; only 141 Chinese students enrolled at UT in 2003, but 558 enrolled this fall.

That trend mirrors a nationwide one, and Toledo is less in the vanguard than riding a wave of Chinese student immigration into American schools.

More Chinese students were at American universities and colleges last year than any other country, and Chinese enrollment grew 23 percent from the prior year, according to the Institute of International Education.

Enrollment of Chinese students at Bowling Green State University has also grown, from 149 in 2010 to 233 this fall. While that growth has been universitywide, it's also in part because of programs that have intentional exchange programs between Chinese institutions, said Sue Houston, vice provost for undergraduate education, citing programs in BGSU's college of business.

Bowling Green wants to boost its international enrollment, and it sees continual growth opportunities in China.

“We are definitely looking at the regions of the world that are growing,” said Albert Colom, BGSU's vice president for enrollment management.

International students also tend to pay full tuition to universities, providing an economic incentive to recruit them.

The region's large research universities also have experienced an influx of Chinese students. Chinese enrollment at Ohio State University has ballooned in the past decade.

This fall, 3,438 undergraduate and graduate students from China enrolled at OSU, by far the largest group among international students and more than four times as many who enrolled in 2002.

Of the 5,937 international students at the University of Michigan this year, 2,104 were undergraduate or graduate students from China.

Chinese students are also enrolling in increasing numbers at local high schools, many with the belief that a degree from those schools will improve their chances for admission at American universities. Of Maumee Valley Country Day School's 30 international students, two-thirds are Chinese, said Gary Boehm, head of school.

Though the school long has had international students, the influx of students from China is a recent phenomena, especially in the past three years.

Unlike traditional high-school exchange students, the students from China plan to earn their diploma in America. That's because leaving and then returning to China during high school can adversely impact students' chances to get into top-tier Chinese universities, Mr. Boehm said.

The independent school is not the only school in Toledo adding to its Chinese ranks. St. Francis de Sales High School announced in the spring plans to enroll about a half-dozen Chinese students in the fall, with the expectation of adding a class each year.

The students the school is targeting are also diploma-seeking students, not those who plan to spend a year in
America.

The program is part of a push by the Toledo Diocese to add international students.

“What we learned is if they are going to come here, they have to graduate from here,” Mr. Boehm said, “and they see this as an opportunity for placement in an American university.”

Maumee Valley plans to build an on-campus residence hall to board international and regional high school students, and many of those students will be from China.

It’s hard to tell if those students will end up going to regional universities at similar rates as domestic students, or if they’ll fan out across the country. There doesn’t appear to be any direct regional or demographic link between the types of Chinese students who end up coming to the Toledo area for college.

The University of Toledo does draw many students from Qinhuangdao, Toledo’s sister city, but just as many students come from other areas in China, said Michael Klug of UT’s American Language Institute. International students who aren’t proficient in English must go through the institute before taking for-credit classes, and they can take up to five terms of intensive language courses to prepare them for the university.

Mr. Klug says there’s significant word-of-mouth about Toledo in China, part of the reason students would choose to enroll at a university in a city they may have never heard of before when looking for a school. Others who don’t have friends or classmates who went to college in Ohio had to learn about UT the way most young people learn about things these days: the Internet.

Yuan Fang, a 22-year-old from Shanghai, said he chose Toledo after reading good things about the university’s pharmacy program online. He started looking for American schools with his parents, he said, because they believed a degree from a U.S. school was an advantage in China.

“My parents think the universities in America are better than Chinese universities as a pathway,” he said.

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