

# It's a small world After all . . .

Eager,  
anxious,  
a long way  
from home,  
the international

student has a lot to gain and a lot to give in pursuit of his Oklahoma education.

By RATNA RAO SHEKAR

**F**oreign study has played a great role in human civilization — in the spread of knowledge and the development of world understanding. At the University of Oklahoma, we consider our international community a cultural pot of gold and a bridge between countries. Sometimes, Americans tend to be a little provincial, and yet the world is growing smaller every day. Imagine what our students would miss if they had no exposure to other cultures and other ideas. Personally, I have tremendous admiration for our international students. They have come to the University determined to better themselves and their countries. They work morning, noon and night to finance their educations. They are dedicated and dependable, and someday, many of them will become the leaders of the developing world.

—WILLIAM S. BANOWSKY

as was the case this spring with warring factions of Iranian students, some of their American hosts consider that, at best, hospitality is being abused, and at worst, peace and order are being threatened. Many others in the academic community spring with equal fervor to the defense of free speech.

Caught and all-but-forgotten in this controversy is the vast majority of international students whose constant, overriding concern is education. In the classroom, they are serious, hard-working, dedicated; on the campus they are fun-loving, yet shy; charming but often lonely. Theirs is the story that needs to be told.

The author of this article, Ratna Rao Shekar, is both journalist and international student, observer and participant. Holder of a master's degree in English in her native India, she has spent the past nine months doing graduate work in journalism at OU on a Rotary Foundation scholarship. Before coming to the United States, she was assistant editor of an English language weekly newspaper in India and author of articles for English language magazines. —The Editor

*INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS coming to the University of Oklahoma — or any other American university — bring a mixed bag of possessions to their new collegiate homes. Along with their material goods, the international students bring a slice of another culture, an aura of color and excitement, a lilting blend of languages and accents, the fascination of strange traditions and life styles, and an op-*

*portunity for mutual understanding between people.*

*A few also bring with them antagonisms, prejudices and hatred born of the political turmoil of their homelands. These few are the news-makers.*

*Within the safety of the American college campus, they engage in dissent that would never be tolerated at home. When dissent becomes open hostility,*

Most people would agree that a lot of courage is required to be like the student from Pakistan who flew into Oklahoma City this fall with no friends to welcome him, no place to live and very little knowledge of this place called Oklahoma. It was 5 p.m. by the time the airport limousine delivered the young man to the OU Visitors Center, where he startled the departing staff with, "Tell me where do I go from here?"

Few international students arrive in Norman with as little preparation as the Pakistani. But the number of those packing their suitcases, boarding planes and traveling the high seas to study at OU is increasing.

In the '60s and even the '70s, the almond-eyed, short-statured Orientals, the Muslim women with covered heads or the Asians with their strange English accents were considered an oddity on the campus. Today, with more than 1,600 international students at OU, the Chinese, the Saudi Arabian and the Venezuelan still may be the "outsiders," but they are outsiders who cannot be ignored.

Some people love the international students; others may distrust them or pretend they don't exist. But however Oklahomans view them, international students have become a significant part of the OU population.

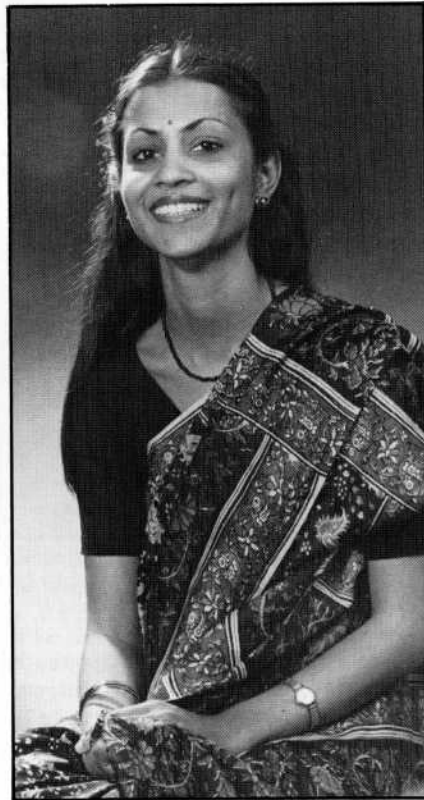
"In the last five years," says Terry Newkumet, director of special student services, "the number of international students coming to OU has doubled." OU enrolled barely 300 international students in the '60s. Their numbers grew during the '70s with the increase coming mostly from Iran. Today they represent 80 different nations from South America, North America, Africa, Asia, Australia and now even Europe.

OU director of admissions Barbara Cousins and her staff report that the enrollment of international students reached the all-time high in the spring of 1981 with 1,720. The fall '81 enrollment was 1,634. The increase in the number of international students coming to OU in the last few years can be attributed in part to the overall economic and political situation in the world.

"What happens in other countries affects us," international student advisor Lemoise A. Savage explains. "New governments and wars influ-

ence enrollment." He adds that students who traditionally would have gone to Europe to continue their educations now are coming to American universities, mainly for economic reasons.

Newkumet agrees that OU offers international students one of the best bargains in terms of cost and academic standing. He also believes that the University's reputation among its former foreign students may attract others. In countries such as the Republic of China (Taiwan), an OU alumni association meets regu-



Ratna Rao Shekar

larly to prepare Chinese students coming to OU by holding slide shows and seminars.

Jane Burman-Holtom, a British doctoral candidate in management, adds that many foreign students come to OU because they know someone here. "Having friends who will help you to settle down is an advantage," she says. She chose OU because her husband had friends in Norman.

Fatima Ahmed, a graduate student from Bangladesh working for a degree in managerial economics, chose OU over a university in Philadelphia because two of her brothers were already Sooners.

However, most of the international students made their college choices because of better educational opportunities. Higher education was available in many of their countries, but it was either of a mediocre quality or lacking in the facilities to educate a large percentage of their populations.

Nyambi Nyambi Akpet, a Nigerian master's candidate in architecture, claims that the quality of higher education in his own country is high, but colleges there cannot accommodate enough students. "That is why Nigerians go to all parts of the world to educate themselves," Nyambi explains. The 103 Nigerians on campus are second in number only to the 492 Iranian students.

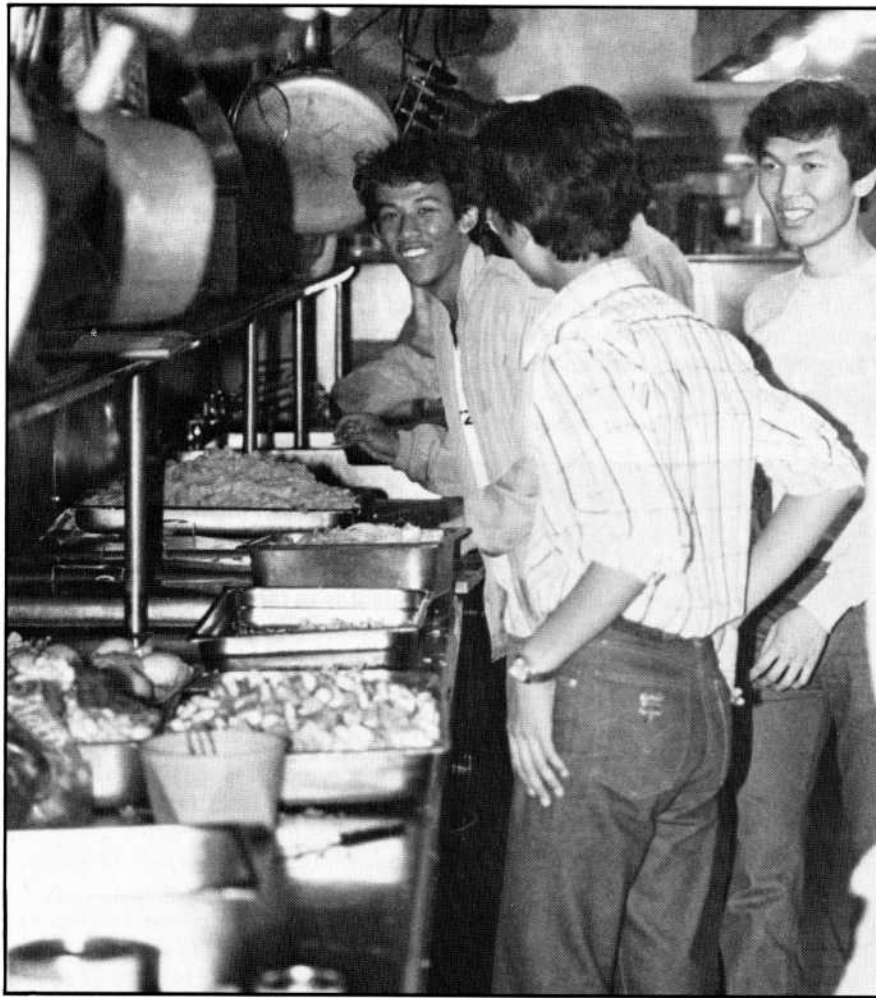
The largest international enrollment is in the College of Engineering, where 21.3 percent of the undergraduates and 49.7 percent of the graduates are international students. More than half the engineering graduate assistants also are international students.

"We are attractive to graduate students from oil producing countries," Associate Engineering Dean John Francis explains, "because of the strength of our programs. They send their best to us for training and teaching experience. At the same time, American students are not going on to graduate studies and graduate assistantships as they once did because of the lucrative job offers they are getting from industry."

According to Associate Dean Gene Walker, the concentration of international students within engineering is in petroleum, civil, chemical and electrical — the areas most in demand in developing countries. Although computer science is gaining popularity, the field still is too specialized for many.

Revised admission standards for the College of Engineering, introduced last fall, however, are likely to reduce the number of international students. Hereafter, new admissions to engineering are limited to only 25 percent non-resident. "Non-resident" means not only non-Oklahoman Americans, but also international students.

"We are trying to upgrade the standards for new admissions to engineering," Francis contends, "while ensuring qualified Oklahoma resi-



Cindy Bachman

For the annual *Eve of Nations Banquet*, the students prepare a variety of international dishes, like the Malaysian offering, "Sayur Rampai" (mixed vegetables).

dents are given highest priority."

Whatever the intent, international engineering enrollment is going down. Total undergraduate and graduate enrollment of foreign residents for the spring semester 1982 is down 272 from the previous spring, 1981. The most significant drops were in student engineers from Iran, down 170; Jordan, 51; Lebanon, 20; Libya, 12, and Taiwan, 11.

Nael Aly, an Egyptian graduate assistant in industrial engineering, also insists that the new rules are intended to raise the quality of students being admitted to engineering. He contends that formerly many international students who could not qualify for admission to colleges in their own countries could come to OU only because they had the money.

Failure to gain admission to the College of Engineering after spending a year at OU completing University

College requirements has created serious problems for some international students. Since they must be enrolled full-time to be able to stay in the United States on their student visas, some who could not meet OU's new engineering requirements either have had to transfer to other colleges or change their majors.

"Some of my friends have moved to other colleges where such a requirement does not prevail," says Sadegh Nematzadeh, vice president of the Union of Iranian Students.

One of the concerns of many international students on the campus is their poor knowledge of English and communication skills. Most have at least a basic knowledge of English since the University requires all international students to score a minimum of 550 out of 800 on the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) to be admitted. What es-

capés them are the subtle nuances of the language and the accent.

"Language difficulties," Associate Dean Francis says, "slow down the progress of many international students."

Nevertheless, most international students do well academically. "International students are not better or worse than American students," Newkumet remarks. "Some do exceedingly well and make 4.0s."

Although international students find the educational system here different from that of their own countries, some confess they prefer the American system. They find American education more flexible and job-oriented.

"Here you have to be constantly studying to keep up with the class," Ahmed says. "In Bangladesh, we do not have the semester system, so we pile work for the day of the exam."

Apart from language, the major difficulty for many international students is cultural. "Everything is so different here," says Tung-Ming Lee, a Chinese student working for his master's in political science. "Even the laundry system is so different. In China, we wash our clothes every day and hang them out to dry. No machines for us."

Ahmed, like the others, is reluctant about admitting to any culture shocks when she first came to this country. But she confesses she did find the casual relationships between men and women surprising.

"Divorce rate is so high here," she exclaims. In her own country as in other traditional societies, marriage is for keeps.

The total dependence of the society on the automobile surprises Burman-Holtom. Nor can she refrain from raising an eyebrow whenever she sees an American eating with only a fork. But she views the openness and frankness of Americans positively and finds their willingness to ask questions disarming.

Taraneh Sadeghi, an Iranian studying geology, cannot understand why her American friend should have taken offense when a young Iranian man complimented her by saying, "You look as if you are dressed for a wedding."

"In Iran, it is a compliment," Sadeghi says, "but for my American



friend, it was an insult."

The Nigerian Nyambi cannot comprehend how a society can discriminate on the basis of color. "Nigerians coming to America are shocked by the color prejudice prevalent here," he says.

Equal, if not more difficult, are the adjustment problems of the families of international students in a strange culture. Some of the wives know very little English and have many misconceptions about the danger of women going out alone in America. As a result, they do not venture into the streets.

"For some of the wives of international students," says Dorothy McGovern of Friendship International, an organization for international wives, "life in America is confined by the four walls of an apartment."

Millie Audas, assistant director for international student programs, recalls that she once had the wife of an international student come to her in tears because she was unable to explain her gynecological problems to the doctors at the student health center.

Often in an emergency, such as a sick child, they do not know whom to go to. "Some of the wives do not know how to use the telephone book," McGovern says. "They take more than 15 minutes to locate a name."

McGovern believes that some of the women are reluctant to modernize because, when they go home to their own countries, they will be unable to take jobs or even to drive cars.

But there are also international wives like Laila El-Ibiary, who not only drive cars and are westernized in their dress, but also pick up a degree or two. El-Ibiary, an Egyptian, has her Ph.D in physics from OU.

Children of international students make adjustments to their new environments the fastest. At Madison Elementary School, located near campus housing areas and having the largest international enrollment, children of all races mingle without inhibitions.

"Children adjust so well here," says Jasper Mercer, the Madison principal, "that many find it difficult to go back home."

Many of the international students prefer to live near the campus. Ac-

ording to Mary Ann Gunter, assignments manager for University housing, at least 85 percent of all University student apartments are occupied by international students.

She often has requests from students wanting to live near someone from their own country. "Most of the time, we try to oblige," she says, even when an international student comes in with a request for housing with the front door facing east.

But once in a while even the housing staff is overwhelmed, as they were when a Middle Easterner burst into the office needing an apartment immediately, because he had just arrived with his family and had nowhere to live — and his family included not a wife, but wives.

Sooner or later, most international students are able to make the transition to American culture. "International students cannot behave like the Americans," the Egyptian Aly says, "but they learn to compromise and survive."

Aly is the current chairman of the International Advisory Council, composed of the presidents of the 26 international student associations. The associations help international students make the transition to campus life by meeting regularly, organizing cultural meets, film shows and religious get-togethers for their members.

"We not only pick up new students when they arrive here," says Lee, the president of the Chinese students' organization, "but help them to find houses, buy groceries and find new friends."

Religion is a matter of individual concern, with some attending a student-organized mosque and others the Norman churches. National festivals are celebrated among countrymen, although other OU students and faculty members are invited.

Generally international students tend to associate with others from their country. "Most international students," Burman-Holtom remarks, "search out others of their country. But this way they miss out on interacting with other students."

The international students contend, however, that if they cling together, it is because they feel alienated from their American classmates.

"If you go to an engineering class," observes Oussama Nehme, the presi-

dent of the Organization of Arab Students, "you will find all the international students sitting on one side of the classroom and the Americans on the other."

During the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979, some American students and townspeople became hostile toward all foreigners, irrespective of their country, Aly recalls. Two of Nehme's friends were mistaken for Iranians and beaten. Iqbaluddin Ahmed, a Bangladesh student, often was mistaken for an Iranian, especially at night. Cars full of Americans would drive past him with shouts of "Iranian, go home!"

Clashes between opposing political groups of Iranian students this spring, one resulting in injury to 14 persons, including two University security officers, and damage to University property, have added to the growing distance between some Americans and international students.

Jack Stout, OU vice president for student affairs, insists that such incidents should not be used as a yardstick to judge all international students, but he admits that situations like these create negative feelings about the international students.

After the Iranian incident, University officials acted swiftly to clamp down on potentially dangerous student gatherings, resulting in a hot "free speech" debate on the campus and in the student newspaper. Many international students privately voiced concern about their position in the University community.

"Obviously," Stout says, "the Iranian problem is part of larger political and religious issues of which we have little understanding." He contends that during the Vietnam era in the '60s and early '70s, people could identify with the demonstrations at the University, whether they sympathized or not, because the issues were nearer home. But he feels that few Americans can identify with the Iranian situation.

But if some prefer to ignore the international students, there are others who go out of their way to offer sympathetic help and understanding.

"Some of us here are prejudiced about people of a different race," remarks Sara Ragland, a Fort Worth, Texas, sophomore majoring in mod-

ern languages. "We tend to stereotype them."

Audas feels that some local people who have not had the opportunity to travel are afraid of people from different countries because of their lack of knowledge of other cultures. "They do not know what it is to come thousands of miles from your country and leave behind family and friends," she says, "and to step down from the plane and become instantly a minority of one. The most positive thing that happens to foreign students is to have warmth and friendliness extended to them when they first arrive. And that happens often when foreign students first arrive in Oklahoma."

To promote interaction between U.S. and international students on the campus, Audas and others have organized the Faculty Support Group and are involved in a new World Community project. Volunteer community groups also offer support to international students and their families, such as the Norman Hospitality Program, the International Alumni Association and Friendship International (First Baptist Church).

"Some of us here think America is the world," remarks Kris Libbee, psychology intern at the OU counseling center, who is closely involved in bringing about the World Community project at OU. "We are culturally isolated. We need to bring the American students in contact with the international students."

However, Paula Englander-Golden, assistant professor of human relations, who is a member of the Faculty Support Group, believes the problem may not be a question of prejudice at all. "People are basically shy," she says. "Most of them do not have a common ground to meet."

Programs like the Faculty Support Group, which meets once a month, Friendship International, which meets every Thursday, and the Norman Hospitality Program, in which international students meet with their host families as often as they can, are designed to provide a forum, a "neutral ground" for Americans and international students.

Audas, Newkumet and Savage, as OU officials working directly with international students, feel that one of the biggest benefits to the University in having international students is



The Norman Transcript

*Clashes between opposing Iranian political factions, such as the one this spring which resulted in personal injury and property damage, is a continual problem for OU administrators and for the vast majority of international students who feel threatened by public reaction to the activists. Disciplinary action to prevent further violence stirred up a lively campus "free speech" debate.*

the cultural education they are providing for others on campus. Stout adds that having so many international students on campus helps students to relate to each other on an individual basis rather than as governments.

"A university is not a university without international students," Admissions Director Cousins insists.

But international students also mean a lot of work, both for the Office of Admissions and the International Office. Admissions has two to three shelves of books on how to interpret the grade sheets and degrees awarded in different countries. The international office has just as much paperwork to do in keeping the international students "in status." Status maintenance includes work permits, transfer forms, visa extensions and expirations and other immigration papers for international students.

Once in a while, international students find themselves in trouble, either with civil or University authorities or in their classes. Stout feels that some of the international students use their "foreignness" as a crutch to get themselves out of dif-

ficult situations. He would like to see them make a greater effort to become part of the mainstream of University life. But he also believes that the University can make a greater effort to bring them into that mainstream.

What happens to international students once they graduate? Some go home to their countries to make significant contributions to their own societies. Among these are alumni like Han-Min Hsia, an OU Ph.D who became the vice-minister of education in the Republic of China. Others remain, take jobs and settle down in America.

"The student visa is one of the biggest contributors to immigration to the United States," Savage remarks.

No one is sure how long the international students will continue to pour into OU . . .

Or if American students will ever stop staring at the sari-clad Mahasweta Chaudhury, the Indian doctoral candidate in philosophy . . .

But with 1,600 international students, OU may well continue to sing, for some time to come, Disney's refrain:

*"It's a small world after all . . ."*