CHINESE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE STUDYING IN THE U.S.

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This research explored the experiences of Chinese undergraduate students studying in the United States. With the recent soaring number of Chinese undergraduate students at U.S. campuses as well as a lack of previous research on this population, it is important to understand this group of students and their experiences of studying in the U.S. at the current time period. The key research questions were: (a) What are the students' motivations for studying in undergraduate programs in the U.S.? (b) What are their academic, social, and cultural experiences studying in the U.S.? and (c) What are the students' recommendations for the hosting institutions? Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 Chinese undergraduate students at a Midwestern research university. The findings are summarized within themes that emerged from the data, including students' motivations for coming to study in American undergraduate programs, their academic impressions and perceived differences, the challenges and frustrations they encountered, the changes they experienced, as well as their recommendations for the hosting institutions. Future research is also discussed.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Recently there has been an upsurge of Chinese undergraduate students studying in the United States. There were 9,955 Chinese undergraduates admitted in universities and colleges in United States in the academic year of 2006-07, 16,450 in the academic year of 2007-08, and 56,976 in the 2010-11 academic year *(*Bennett, 2012). China is now the leading sender of students to the United States (Institute of International Education, 2012).

My interest in this study started with the observation of this recent phenomenon. With more Chinese undergraduate students studying in the United States, a great deal of money to pay tuition and living expenses is being spent. The students also devote a great amount of time and effort to these educational endeavors. What are the Chinese undergraduate students' motivations for choosing to study in the United States? What are their experiences studying in the United States? What are their perceptions and attitudes in a new academic and social environment? Also, since there are an increased number of Chinese students joining undergraduate programs in the United States, what are the current students' recommendations for the hosting institutions? These questions puzzled me and inspired me to do a research project to explore the answers to them.

Currently, as Yan and Berliner (2011) have argued, "few studies have focused solely upon understanding the unique characteristics of Chinese international students in the United States" (p. 173). Moreover, among these few current research studies, generally they examine Chinese international students as a whole, usually focusing on students at the graduate level. However, undergraduate students are at a different age when they come to the United States. Their demographic profiles, financial and social backgrounds, academic and career goals are not

necessarily the same as other types of international students and scholars. Research on understanding this specific group alone is called for.

Overview of the Study

This dissertation research explored Chinese undergraduate students' motivations and experiences studying in a U.S. higher education environment. Coming from an eastern culture, Chinese undergraduate students come to a very different educational environment in the United States. The design of curriculum, educational philosophies, ways of teaching, interactions with instructors and classmates all influence students' academic experiences in a context that is very different academically, socially, and culturally. At the same time, research on the Chinese undergraduate students' experiences studying in the United States is lacking. This study intends to explore the following research questions:

1. What are the students' motivations for studying in the undergraduate programs in the U.S.?

2. What are their academic, social, and cultural experiences studying in the U.S.?

3. What are the students' recommendations for the hosting universities of Chinese undergraduate students?

I used a qualitative mode of inquiry in order to explore the complex issues and dynamics of students' real life experiences. I conducted document analysis, kept a researcher diary, and conducted interviews with undergraduate students at a large Midwestern research university, so as to understand the experiences of these students' as well as to inform educational practices at western universities hosting Chinese undergraduate students.

Significance of the Study

There is a rapid increase in the number of Chinese students enrolled in U.S. universities and colleges recently, based on a 2012 Open Doors report by the Institute of International Education.
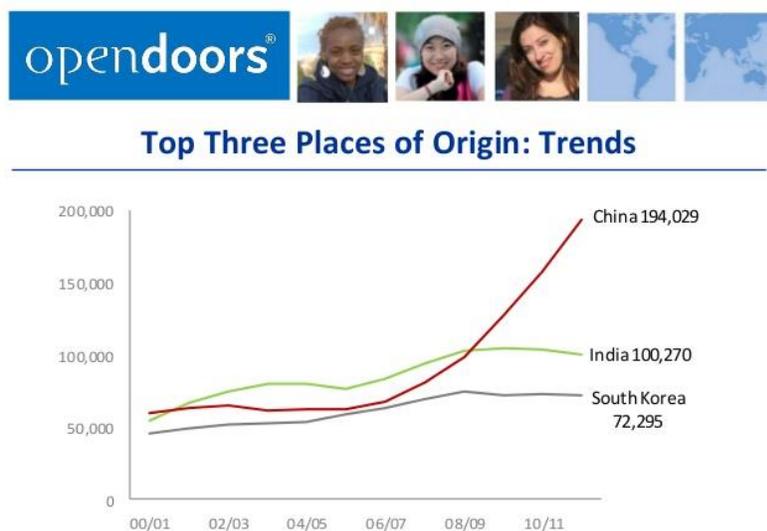
Figure 1. Top three places of origin: Trends, from "*Open Doors,*" Institute of International Education, 2012).

U.S. campuses have seen an increase of Chinese undergraduate students. For example, there are "more than 100,000 international students" studying in California in the academic year of 2011-12, with China being the leading sender (Institute of International Education, 2012). International students are a big source of economic benefits for many western countries. For example, based on *The Economist* (5 August 2010), international students studying in the UK brought an estimated £25 billion revenue in the UK in 2008. Fifteen percent of British university students and 43% of British postgraduate students are international students (United Kingdom Council for International Students, 2010). Also, international education is considered "Australia's third largest export industry" which brought in $17.2 billion in 2008–2009 to

Australia (Australian International Education, 2010). In Australia, international students

comprise 21% of the student population (Australian International Education, 2010). In the U.S.,

it is a similar case, especially recently with an increasing number of international students.

International students "contribute academic value to U.S. colleges and universities as well as

cultural value to local communities" (NAFSA, 2014). For the 2012-2013 academic year, it was

estimated that international students and their families brought $24 billion to the economy. This

number is calculated from $17,702 million contributed to the U.S. economy from the tuition and

fees, $14,715 million from living expenses of the students, minus the U.S. financial support, and

plus the living expenses of the students' dependents (NAFSA, 2014). Also, around

> 313,000 jobs are supported or generated as a result of international student spending on tuition and living expenses while in the United States. This means that for every 7 international students enrolled, 3 U.S. jobs are created or supported by spending occurring in the following sectors: higher education, accommodation, dining, retail, transportation, telecommunications, and health insurance. (NAFSA, 2014)

Based on a 2013 report by National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP), international

students "contribute to and benefit U.S. employers and U.S. universities, which in turn help

increase and strengthen the U.S. economy" (NFAP, 2013). The report found:

- International students account for 70 percent of the full-time master's and Ph.D. students in electrical engineering; 63 percent in computer science; 60 percent in industrial engineering; over 50 percent in economics, chemical engineering, materials engineering, mechanical engineering; in addition to just under 45 percent in mathematics, statistics and physics.

- Foreign graduate students are crucial in assisting in research that attracts top faculty and strengthens the academic programs at U.S. schools, which benefits U.S. students and ensures America retains its preeminence as a teaching center in . . . STEM . . . fields.

- By assisting in important research foreign graduate students foster innovation at U.S. universities that benefits U.S. society and the American economy. In 2010, U.S. universities conducted 51 percent of all basic research performed in the United States, according to the National Science Foundation.

- International students often become contributors to the U.S. economy as professors, researchers and entrepreneurs.

- Legislation pending in Congress would allow foreign graduate students in . . . STEM . . . fields to be sponsored without being subject to the current green card quota [S. 744] or, at minimum, to wait less than they would today [H.R. 2131]. (NFAP, 2013)

Furthermore, based on a 2013 Institute of International Education report, Evan M. Ryan, Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs commented: "International education promotes the relationship building and knowledge exchange between people and communities in the United States and around the world that are necessary to solve global challenges" (IIE, 2013, para 5). The mobilization of students around the globe fosters the communications and knowledge exchange.

Although Chinese international students have become the biggest group of international students in the United States in the recent years, limited studies have been done on Chinese students at the graduate level (Yan & Berliner, 2011). Fewer studies focus on undergraduate students in the United States. I believe that it is important to understand these students' experiences for all parties involved and more studies on this population would be helpful to better address the needs of these students.

People learn from both their past experiences and through interactions with current activities and environments (Dewey, 1938). When Chinese international students enroll in American universities, they situate themselves in a new socio-cultural environment. Compared with students from Europe and other western countries, Chinese students are coming from a very different cultural background (Ward, 1996). Why did they choose to come and study in the U.S.? How do they navigate their experiences when interacting with the new academic, social, cultural environment? What kind of choices do they make while navigating the American norms, social networks, and experiences? How might instructors, staff, and administrators help the students adjust? What are the students' changes after studying in the United States? These are challenging questions for all parties involved.

This study proposes to increase our understanding of the Chinese undergraduate students' living experiences in the United States. The results will help the staff, faculty and university administrators to have a deeper understanding of the needs, expectations, struggles, and experiences of the students and the issues involved, so that all can work together to help improve educational environment and dynamics.

Description of the Chapters of the Dissertation

In chapter two, I review the literature on cultural differences, Chinese international students in higher educational institutions in the United States, as well as provide a description of the sociocultural theoretical framework I used to interpret the findings of this study. This chapter provides a discussion of the current literature on the topic, identifies gaps in literature for this population, and discusses the theoretical frameworks that were used for interpreting the results in this study.

In chapter three, I discuss the methodology and data collection methods used for this dissertation. I used a qualitative mode of inquiry to explore the Chinese undergraduate students' real life experiences studying in the United States. Data collection methods included interviews, document analysis, and researcher's diaries. Twenty students from a large Midwestern research university were interviewed in the spring academic semester in 2013. Ongoing data analyses were conducted to integrate new themes that emerged as the study progressed. Also, member checking and peer debriefing were also used to ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

Chapter four summarizes the analysis of the data based on emergent themes. Findings were summarized within themes; the themes included Chinese undergraduate students' motivations of studying in the U.S., their impressions of their experiences and perceptions of the

academic differences, the challenges they met, the changes they experienced, as well as their recommendations for the hosting institutions.

       Chapter five presents the interpretations of the results using the literature and sociocultural theoretical frameworks as well as future recommendations. The findings are interpreted based on the theoretical frameworks of Dewey and Wenger (1998). The researcher also includes recommendations for the administration at hosting higher education institutions in the United States for incoming Chinese undergraduate students.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

In this section, I will discuss the literature on cultural differences including individualism versus collectivism and power distance, factors influencing Chinese international students studying in universities in the United States, and the theoretical frameworks used in this study.

After Frank Press, President Jimmy Carter's science adviser, visited China in 1978, the People's Republic of China and the United States agreed to exchange students and scholars. The first group was around 50 Chinese students who went to a couple of American universities. Later the number of Chinese students studying in the United States began to surge. Based on a report from the Institute of International Education, "China sent no students to the U.S. from the 1950s until 1974/75. In the 1980s, numbers of Chinese students grew dramatically" (Institute of International Education, 2012). Later, China became the leading country of origin of foreign students from 1988/89 to 1993/94, and from 1998/99 to 2000/01, and again from 2009/10 to now (Institute of International Education, 2012). Below is a graph that demonstrates the recent trends of number of international students studying in the United States (Figure 2) from 2007 to 2012 from a recent Chronicle of Higher Education article.

The Rise of China
Over the past five years most of the growth in international enrollments has come from China, while the numbers from other top-10 sending countries have remained virtually flat. The one exception is Saudi Arabia, where thousands of students have come to the United States on government scholarships.

Source: Institute of International Education
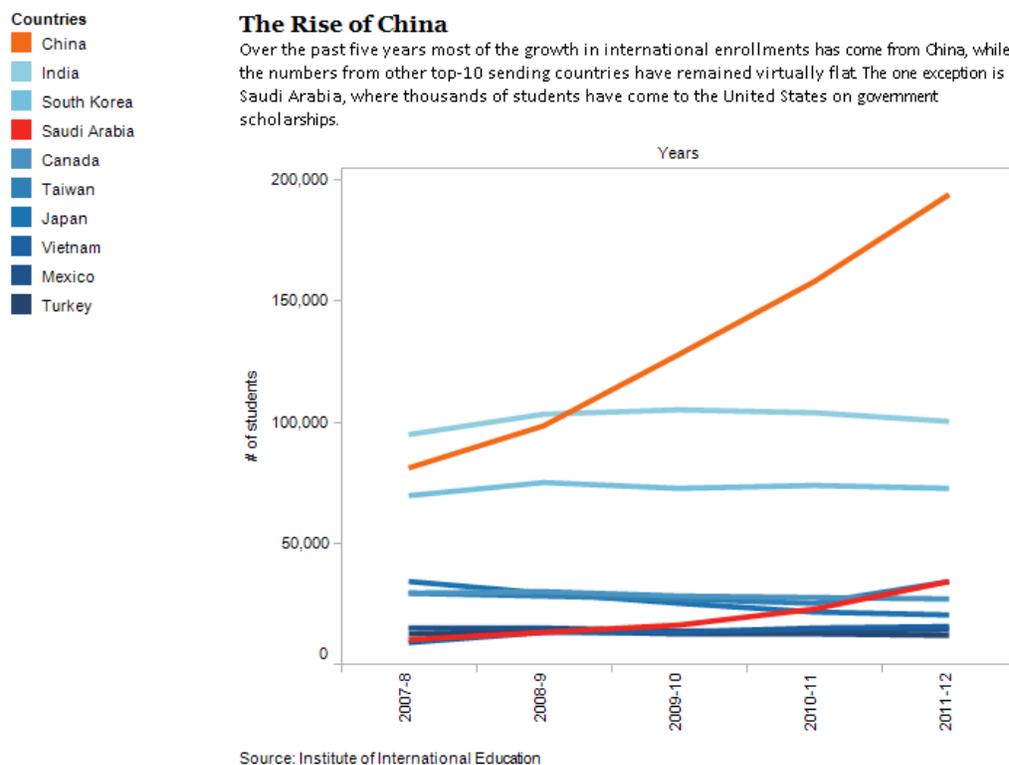
Figure 2. The rise of Chinese students studying in the U.S. (McMurtrie, 2012).

Undergraduate students are an increasing proportion of the Chinese students studying in the United States. As the most recent Open Door report states: "While the majority of Chinese students study at the graduate level, the U.S. continues to experience an upsurge in the number of undergraduate students coming from China" (Institute of International Education, 2012). For example, in the academic year 2000/01, there were 59,939 Chinese students studying in America, among whom 13.8% were undergraduates. During the 2011/2012 academic year, there were 194,029 Chinese students studying in America, among whom 38.4% were undergraduates (Institute of International Education, 2012). As a recent Chronicle of Higher Education article said: "Double-digit growth from China, primarily at the undergraduate level, along with a steady uptick in Saudi Arabian students are largely responsible for the increase in international

enrollments to 764,495 (in 2011-12 academic year), a 5.7-percent rise over the year before"

(McMurtrie, 2012, para. 2).

There are many news reports in recent years on the soaring number of Chinese

undergraduate students, including those of the *Wall Street Journal* (2013), *PBS* (2013), *The*

Minnesota Daily (2014) and various university news sources. The increasing number of Chinese

undergraduate students is a phenomenon that is attracting the attention of many.

According to these news reports, one of the motivations for recruiting Chinese students

(and other international students) is the financial revenue that it brings. For example, *The*

Minnesota Daily described the benefits in terms of revenue generating as below:

> In the 2011-12 academic year, the University [of Minnesota] raked in more than $110 million in tuition and fees from international students, according to NAFSA: Association of International Educators.
>
> International students rarely receive state or federal grants or financial aid, so the average international student pays a larger share of out-of-pocket tuition than the average American student.
>
> Almost 64 percent of international students in the U.S. relied primarily on personal and family funds to pay for college in 2011-12, according to a study from the Institute of International Education, a non-profit training organization.
>
> "There's definitely a financial aspect to the growth in recruiting overseas," said Peggy Blumenthal, senior counselor at the IIE.
>
> Well-funded students from China are "very attractive" to state institutions, Blumenthal said. (Farhang & Aker, 2013, para. 5-9)

Globalization and diversity are two of the other reasons that universities recruit

increasing Chinese undergraduate students.

> Increasing numbers of Chinese choose to study abroad, and nearly half head for US institutions of higher learning. The reasons behind the exponential growth, even at the undergraduate level, are as much financial as "the emphasis on globalization and diversity touted by the universities," explains Hassan Siddiq for Yale Global. (Yale Global Online, 2013, para. 1)

In spite of the increasing number of Chinese undergraduate students studying in America and recent news reports on the phenomenon, research on their overall educational experience is lacking. Most previous research has explored Chinese international students as a whole. This research will focus on the Chinese undergraduate student population.

The following section will review the research on cultural differences and acculturation, especially between the Eastern cultures and the West.

Cultural Differences

One of the most widely used frameworks used to interpret cultural differences is individualism versus collectivism. Hofstede (1980) says "Many of the differences in rules and conventions have been associated more broadly with cross-cultural variations in values, particularly individualism-collectivism and power distance" (p. 423).

> Individualism stands for a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: a person is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family only. Collectivism stands for a society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which continue to protect them throughout their lifetime in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. (Holstede, Hosted, Minco & Vincent, 2008, pp. 7-8)

Kagitcibasi (1996) describes Triandis, McCusker, and Hui's (1990) research findings about the attributes and consequences of individualism and collectivism. The attributes of individualism they include were (a) "emotional detachment from the group", (b) "putting personal goals before in-group goals", (c) "behavior regulated by cost-benefit analyses", (d) "willingness to confront", (e) "attributes of collectivism include family integrity", (f) "self definition in in-group terms", (g) "behavior regulated by in-group norms", (h) "hierarchy and harmony within in-group", (i) "in-group seen as homogeneous", and (j) "strong in-group/out-group distinctions" (Kagitcibasi, 1996, p. 15). The consequences of individualism include "socialization for self-reliance and independence, good skills when entering new group, and

loneliness" (Kagitcibasi, 1996, p. 15). Consequences of collectivism include "socialization for

obedience and duty, sacrifice for in-group, focus on common elements with in-group members,

behavior reflects hierarchy, saving face, social support, and interdependence" (Kagitcibasi, 1996,

p. 15).

Masgoret and Ward (2006) further summarized the research findings on individualism

and collectivism:

> Members of individualistic cultures see the individual as the basic unit of social
> organization, in contrast to members of collectivist cultures, who emphasize the
> significance of the larger group. Individualists are idio-centric; they value autonomy,
> uniqueness and "standing out." Collectivists, on the other hand, value "fitting in," finding
> and maintaining one's proper place among others (Triandis, 1989). Theory and research
> have suggested that people from individualistic societies, such as the United States, prefer
> directness, take longer and more unevenly distributed turns in conversation, speak louder,
> and are more willing to express negative emotions in public. Because collectivists,
> particularly people from East Asian societies, value group harmony and face-saving to a
> greater extent, they are less willing to engage in activities that might be seen as disruptive
> to the larger group. Consequently, they often appear more restrained in social interactions.
> (pp. 64-65)

Power distance is also a theme that researchers have identified and discussed in

identifying cultural differences.

> Variations in power distance reflect differences in the social importance of established
>
> hierarchies, the preference for vertical versus horizontal relationships, and the importance
>
> of status. Americans prefer horizontal or equal relationships and tend to be informal in
>
> their interactions, including the widespread use of first names as a form of address.
>
> Societies that are high in power distance, such as those of Mexico and India, are more
>
> likely to employ forms of address that reflect status differences, including the use of titles
>
> (Masgoret & Ward, 2006, p. 65).

To what extent do Chinese and American academic discourses and practices reflect these cultural differences interpreted by collectivism and individualism, and power distance? What are the Chinese undergraduate students' observations of American academic discourse, and do they fit into this framework? This study will use the framework in understanding and interpreting findings on Chinese undergraduate students' experience studying in the U.S.

Chinese Students Studying in Higher Education Institutions in the United States

One of the issues discussed in the literature is academic adjustment difficulties. Factors frequently discussed include language barriers, differences between educational systems in China and the U.S., and communication with faculty members, (Lin, 1998; Perkins, 1977; Sun & Chen, 1997; Wan, 2001; Zhang & Rentz, 1994; Yan, 2008; Yan & Berliner, 2011; Ye, 1992). For example, Yan and Berliner (2011) conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 Chinese students in a Southwestern university in United States, with participants' age from 22 to 38. The results suggest that "academic stress is extremely high for most students" (Yan & Berliner, 2011, p. 943). Their study proposes several factors that contribute to that academic stress: "Culture and education disparities between China and America, together with Chinese students' language deficiencies, ineffective interactions with American faculty members, and their high motivations to achieve" (Yan & Berliner, 2011, p. 939). Similarly, Sun and Chen's (1997) research suggests that Chinese students had difficulties because of "lack of language proficiency; a deficiency in cultural awareness; and academic achievements." They studied eight female and two male Chinese students with an average age of 27.9, who stayed in the United States for between 10 months to 3 years. They suggest that in terms of academic achievement, contributing factors

include "differences in Chinese teaching and learning styles, with which they were accustomed," as well as "lack of experience in handling the American University environment" (p. 15).

Ye (2006) explored the role of social network support for Chinese students in adapting to a new culture. The study identifies three types of social networks that Chinese students used when in cross-cultural transition: (a) "interpersonal social networks in the host country", (b) "long-distance social networks in the home country", and (c) "online ethnic social communities" (Ye, 2006). Based on an online survey with 135 respondents, Ye proposes that "support from interpersonal networks in the host country and from online ethnic social groups was negatively related to social difficulties" (Ye, 2006). Ye also found that newcomers used more online ethnic social community support and that they relied on weak ties in the hosting community more than those students who have been in the host country for a longer period of time.

In addition, Cui, Wu, Ma, and Southwell (2004) suggest, based on their survey of 84 Chinese students at a university in Midwestern United States, that "the degree to which sojourners perceive a need to adjust to their new cultural environment . . . bears a relationship to their perception of media content and the role it can play for them" (p. 92). "An acculturative motive, for example, is correlated with watching US-based TV news programs and using US-based news websites and BBS [online forums]" (p. 81). The authors further suggest: "The higher a Chinese student's acculturation motives, the more frequently that student uses US-based Internet sites" (p. 89).

In addition to these studies, there is a need for additional research on Chinese undergraduate students. First, studies of Chinese students are lacking in general. As Yan and Berliner (2011) argued, "few studies have focused solely upon understanding the unique characteristics of Chinese students in the United States" (p. 173). Second, much of the previous

research focused on Chinese graduate students or a combination of Chinese graduate and undergraduate students or focused on Chinese graduate students alone. Students who came at a younger age may have different experiences. Third, the previous studies were conducted in a different time period and the Chinese economic and social environment has dramatically changed. For example, with economic growth, there are more and more Chinese who can afford to study in America undergraduate programs, which is very different than earlier years. Research on Chinese undergraduate students in the current social-economic environment is needed to better understand this population.

A Social Constructive Approach

This study uses a social constructive paradigm to interpret Chinese undergraduate students' life experiences in the United States. In this research, I try to "explicate how human action is situated in cultural, historical, and institutional settings" (Wertsch 1991, p. 119).

John Dewey. Dewey argues that "all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race" (1897, p. 77). In "Experience and Education," he argues against education that is static and lacking a holistic understanding of students. Rather, he calls for a theory of experience. For Dewey (1938), experience is constructed socially and based on the interplay of two principles: continuity and interaction. The former suggests that a person is influenced by experience, either for better or for worse. Interaction refers to how the present experience is built based on the interplay of one's past experiences and the present circumstances. These two principles are interactive and not separate from each other (Dewey, 1938).

Dewey suggests that the "process of living together educates" (1916, p. 7). People learn through languages and social norms in the social context that they experience. Furthermore, he

contends that **"**the individual who is to be educated is a social individual and that society is an organic union of individuals" (Dewey, 1897). Society, then, is necessary for education to occur. "A being whose activities are associated with others has *a* social environment. What he does and what he can do depend upon the expectations, demands, approvals, and condemnations of others*"* (Dewey, 1916, p. 14). This means that we are embedded in a social context that will influence how we experience things in our lives. The Chinese students studying in the United States are embedded in a new society and will experience things related to this new social context.

Language. Dewey argues in the importance of language in learning.

The importance of language in gaining knowledge is doubtless the chief cause of the common notion that knowledge may be passed directly from one to another. . . . It would probably be admitted with little hesitation that a child gets the idea of, say, a hat by using it as other persons do; by covering the head with it, giving it to others to wear, having it put on by others when going out, etc. But it may be asked how this principle of shared activity applies to getting through speech or reading the idea of, say, a Greek helmet, where no direct use of any kind enters in. What shared activity is there in learning from books about the discovery of America? (Dewey, 1922, p. 17)

Habit. For Dewey (1922), "Habit means special sensitiveness or accessibility to certain classes of stimuli, standing predilections and aversions, rather than bare recurrence of specific acts. (p. 42) He argued:

The word habit may seem twisted somewhat from its customary use when employed as we have been using it. But we need a word to express that kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is projective,

dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some

subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity. (Dewey, 1922,

p. 40)

Chinese undergraduate students bring their past lived experiences in China, their habits,

with them to the United States. Their present living context in the United States exposes them to

a different language, norms and customs. The previous formed habits might not work the same in

the new academic environment. In the "process of living together" with their peers, and while

interacting with classmates, faculty, staff, and administrators in a new environment they would

probably question some of their previous habits, asking questions like, What are my attitudes,

perceptions, and choices? What are my reactions and feelings with the "expectations, demands,

approvals, and condemnations of others" in this new context? What kind of relationships am I

establishing with the environment? What do I learn in this life inquiry process? Dewey's theories

helped provide a dynamic social perspective for exploring the Chinese undergraduate students'

experiences studying in the United States.

> *Purposeful learning and reflective thinking.* Dewey further proposes that it is through

purposeful educational experience that the students learn best. Dewey (1998) suggests that the

formation of purposes is

> a rather complex intellectual operation. It involves (1) observation of surrounding
>
> conditions; (2) knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past, a
>
> knowledge obtained partly by recollection and partly from the information, advice, and
>
> warning of those who have had a wider experience; and (3) judgment which puts together
>
> what is observed and what is recalled to see what they signify. A purpose differs from an
>
> original impulse and desire through its translation into a plan and method of action based

upon foresight of the consequences of acting under given observed conditions in a certain

way. (Dewey, 1998, p. 80)

In addition, Dewey argues that one learns best with experience that involves reflective thinking.

He (1933) suggests that "[A] better way of thinking . . . is called reflective thinking: the kind of

thinking that consists of turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive

thought" (p. 3). It is through reflective thinking that students make sense of the experience.

Dewey further describes sub-processes of reflective thinking.

Reflective thinking, in distinction from other operations to which we apply the name of

thought, involves: (a) a state of perplexity, hesitation, doubt; and (b) an act of search or

investigation directed toward bringing to light further facts which serve to corroborate or

to nullify the suggested belief. (Dewey, 1910, p. 9)

In this study I was interested in investigating how Chinese undergraduate students were learning

from their reflections and problem solving.

We live in complexities and there are problems to solve every day. How would Chinese

undergraduate students encounter and solve the problems they have studying in the U.S. Dewey

promotes inquiry and reflection in problematized educational experience? The new academic

environment poses a learning environment in a way that locates the problematic for the learners

and hopefully provides support for students' inquiry process. Dewey favors students' learning

through experience, which includes diversity and different opinions in thinking, promoting

reflective and higher-order thinking, and fostering students' development in becoming

constructive thinkers.

A community of practice. Lave and Wenger proposed the outlines of a Community of Practice framework in 1991, and Wenger further elaborated this in his book in 1998. This framework primarily focuses on "learning as social participation" (Wenger, 1998).

Wenger (1998) describes a Communities of Practice (CoP) as: "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." Lave and Wenger originally coined the term when studying apprenticeship, but later found it a dynamic concept for working in complex situations defined in a more general way. For example, people can form Communities of Practice if they:

> engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. (Wenger and Trayner, 2014)

The authors argue that it could be applied within a wide range of settings, from knowledge management to various communities with different purposes and sizes, from online learning to face-to-face environments. The three key characteristics of CoP are (a) the domain, which refers to a domain of shared interests, (b) the community, and (c) the practice (Wenger, 1998).
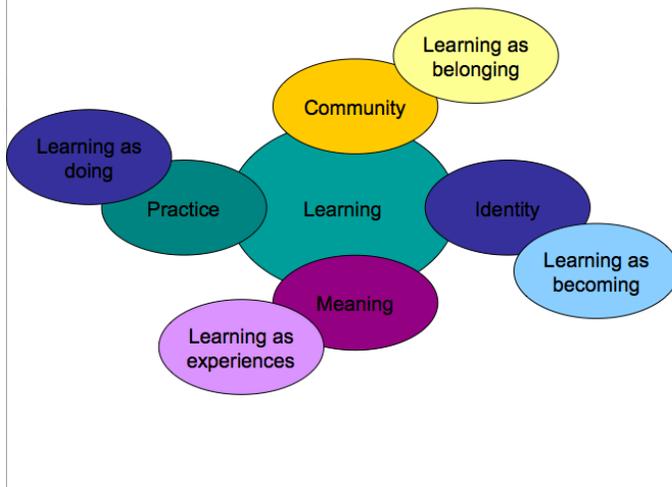
Figure 3. The components of a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998, p. 5).

Wenger (1998) described four underlying assumptions in proposing this framework:

1. We are social beings. Far from being trivially true, this fact is a central aspect of learning.

2. Knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises—such as singing in tune, discovering scientific facts, fixing machines, writing poetry, being convivial, growing up as a boy or a girl, and so forth.

3. Knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises, that is, of active engagement in the world.

4. Meaning—our ability to experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful—is ultimately what learning is to produce. (p. 4)

The idea of a CoP is deeply rooted in social learning theories. It emphasizes the learners' participation in a community. Wenger (1998) argues that "participation here refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (p. 4).

The repertoire of a community of practice includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has

produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its

practice. (p. 83)

The American academic community practices its own "routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts." Chinese undergraduate students studying in the U.S. had previous experiences with Chinese academic communities, whether in elementary school, middle school, high school, or even some college experiences for transferred students. For this research, I wondered: What are their impressions of studying in America's undergraduate programs and their observations of the differences? What kind of challenges and frustrations do they experience when trying to fit into the academic discourses in the U.S.? Furthermore, what kind of changes do they experience after being involved in the academic community in the United States as time goes by? Wenger's Community of Practice theory was used in this study because it provides a lens for understanding and interpreting the Chinese undergraduate students' experiences in American academic discourses and practices.

Wenger (1998) further argues the importance of the concept of identity:

Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of

identity. It is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of

becoming—to become a certain person or conversely, to avoid becoming a certain

person. (p. 215)

How does the experience of Chinese undergraduate students affect the process of forming their identities? How do they negotiate meanings within the "routines, words, tools, ways of doing things dealing with the stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted" while, situated within the setting of a university in the United States? What do they choose to do, or not to do, and thus become a certain person? How

do they avoid becoming a certain person? These are all interesting questions to explore in helping understand the Chinese undergraduate students' experiences studying in America.

Legitimate peripheral participation. Lave and Wenger (1991) introduce a concept that is relevant to this study, "legitimate peripheral participation." Legitimate peripheral participation describes the process of how newcomers become a part of a community of practice and their relationship with the old timers (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Newcomers then gradually gain full participation or leave the community of practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) write:

> It is thus necessary to refine our distinction between talking about and talking within a practice. Talking within (e.g., exchanging information necessary to the progress of ongoing activities) and talking about (e.g., stories, community lore). Inside the shared practice, both forms of talk fulfill specific functions. . . . For newcomers then, the purpose is not to learn from talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation: it is to learn to talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation. (p. 109)

When the Chinese students came to the new campus, they were peripheral participants of the academic community. What do they perceive are the shared practices of the community? What kinds of challenges do they encounter when trying to gain full participation and learning to *"*talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation?*"* In this study, I will be interested in how Chinese students maneuver their peripheral participation and how they learn the "talk" about the society in which they are entering. I am interested in several related questions: As newcomers to a host culture, how do the Chinese undergraduate students generate meaning and navigate their experiences? What are their relationships with the environment? How do they *"*learn to talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation?*"* How do they reconstruct their identity, what are their attitudes and perceptions of the events, artifacts, norms, and environment around them? How do

they reach the stage of full participation or leave? What kind of changes do they have after interaction with the academic community? I will use the concept of peripheral participation to interpret Chinese students' complex real life experiences studying in America.

Participation and reification. Wenger (1998) introduces a concept of duality, which is referred to as "a single conceptual unit that is formed by two inseparable and mutually constitutive elements whose inherent tensions and complementarity give the concept richness and dynamism" (Wenger, 1998, p. 66). One of the dualities that he proposed is *participation* and *reification*. Wenger refers to participation as the "complex process that combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging. It involves our whole person including our bodies, minds, emotions, and social relations" (p. 56). Reification is defined as the "process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into thingness" (p. 58).

When the Chinese undergraduate students come to campus, they are entering "a shared repertoire" (Wenger, 1998). Through past practices, there are already reifications set within the communities of practice, such as the documentations and rules and guidelines that are already established based on past practices. How do they find their way to these reifications? What are things that impress them that are taken for granted by those who are full participants already?

The Community of Practice framework views learning as a social practice. In a shared repertoire, there are "routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts" formed based on past practices (Wenger, 1998, p. 83). It provides a social constructive lens in examining learning practices.

Expectancy Confirmation Theory. Another theory that is relevant is the Expectancy Confirmation Theory. The Expectancy Confirmation Theory (ECT) originated from Oliver's work (1977, 1980) on customer's satisfaction. The four basic constructs for the theory include

expectations, performance, disconfirmation, and satisfaction. The author argues that consumers' satisfactions are determined by comparisons of perceived product's performance with expectations. Positive confirmation leads to satisfaction and negative disconfirmation leads to dissatisfaction (Oliver, 1977, 1980).

Researchers in education settings argue that the students' expectations would help them anticipate/guess on the academic environment, which contributes to students' satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the environment (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995; Howard, 2005). For example, the College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ) was designed to survey incoming students' goals and expectations, specifically for the purpose of the following: the nature and frequency of communications with faculty members; peers' involvement from diverse backgrounds; use of learning resources and opportunities on campus; satisfaction with college; and the nature of college learning environments (CSEQ, 2007). The information generated is believed to help colleges in building first year student assist programs. It is also proposed by education researchers that academic institutions need to help students build realistic expectations in order to better retain students (Howard, 2005).

Overall, this chapter examined past literature on individualism, collectivism and power distance; Chinese students in America; as well as theoretical frameworks that would be used for this study, including those from Dewey, Wenger, and the Expectancy Confirmation Theory.

Chapter Three

Methodology

I used a qualitative mode of inquiry in this study because it was useful in addressing the kinds of research questions I had and to analyzing and interpreting the data I gathered. In this chapter I will discuss the research questions, mode of inquiry, participants, data collection methods, analysis of data, validity and credibility, and situating the researcher.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study sought to understand Chinese undergraduate students' experiences while studying in the United States at the current time. There is little research on Chinese students. Also most of the previous literature is on graduate students and some on combined undergraduates and graduates, but very little on undergraduate students in the United States. This study is an exploration of their experiences studying at a comprehensive research university in the United States.

The research questions include the following:

1. What are the students' motivations for studying abroad at this age?

2. What are their academic, social, and cultural experiences studying in the U.S.?

3. What are the students' recommendations for the hosting institutions of Chinese undergraduate students?

Mode of Inquiry

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) defined qualitative research as:

a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world . . . . qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This

means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make

sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. (p. 3)

The research questions were focused on exploring the experiences of Chinese undergraduate

students in the natural setting while studying in the United States. I collected their reflections

about studying in a comprehensive research university using interviews. I sought an in-depth

understanding of their lived experiences and the complexities and meanings seen from the

students' perspectives. The situated activities for these students were their lives in a foreign

country while they attended the university. In this research, I wanted to describe their

experiences and "practices" in order to make their "world visible." Thus a qualitative mode of

inquiry was appropriate. I tried to get close to the participants and understand their perspectives

and experiences, as well as get a complex and detailed understanding of where the issues and the

context were situated. I let the themes emerge as the study developed.

This study was designed using a social constructivism paradigm. I wanted to make sense

of the meanings the participants had constructed about their lived experiences. Their points of

view of their situations as well as how they constructed and negotiated meaning with the social,

cultural, and historical contexts were the primary focus of the study (Creswell, 2006). "Patterns

of meaning" (Creswell, 2006) emerged from data generated from the interviews with the

participants.

Participants

Participants of this study were students who were born in China and were currently

studying in the undergraduate programs in a comprehensive research university in the United

States. To recruit participants, I first talked with various groups on campus that included Chinese

students to see who might be willing to participate. I explained the details of the study and asked

if they would be willing to participate. Then I followed using a snowball sampling by asking participants who volunteered for the names of other people they knew who they might recommend for this study. I continued the snowball technique until I felt the data began to be repetitive. There were 20 participants for this study, 14 men and 6 women. Their years of study ranged from freshmen to senior. Also, their majors varied from engineering, business, to social sciences. Five of them were transferred students. The participants were interviewed at campus locations of their choice where they felt comfortable. Each interview lasted 1 to 3 hours. During the interviews, participants chose whether they wanted to use Chinese or English in the interview. All of the participants chose to be interviewed in Chinese. The interviews were conducted in the spring academic semester in 2013. All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed in the language of the interview. I did this because I felt I could work with the interview data accurately if I was working in the original language. I later translated the portions into English that I used as quotations.

In the process of translation there are always challenges. I did not do word-for-word translation but rather tried to get the sense of what they were saying as expressed in common English usage. I also did not include expressions or side phrases unrelated to the content of the discussions, e.g., "um" or "you know."

Data Collection Methods

This study used in-depth interviews as the primary data. I also conducted document analysis and wrote research journals that were used as data sources.

Document analysis. I reviewed public documents including national and university policies, websites of the International Student and Scholar Services office of the university. The

purpose of conducting document analysis was to gain an understanding of the environment and context within which the students were studying.

Research diary. I wrote a research diary throughout the research process. As Altrichter and Holly (2005) argue: "In any type of research where a person or a group is trying to make sense of experience, and where the eye of the beholder is a variable in the research, research diaries are called for" (p. 27). The diary included my reflective notes during the research process, with dates and cross-reference, including notes on my thoughts about theoretical frameworks, data collection methods and analysis, and any other concepts and ideas I had throughout the research process. Keeping this diary helped me record the research process, enhance reflections and develop the credibility of the research. This was also used to check my own biases and perspectives.

Interviews. Patton (2002) suggests that the purpose of using interviews as a method in qualitative research is "to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective" (p. 341). Also, he (1990) proposes that the use of interviews assumes that "the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit" (p. 278). Also, he argues that in order to get quality data in qualitative research, researchers need to have "genuine interest in and caring about the perspectives of other people" (Patton, 2002, p. 341), in addition to research skills. By the use of the interview method, I intended to "let the voice of our participants speak and carry the story through dialogue" (Creswell, 2006, p. 55) in order to explore participants' experiences, attitudes, and perceptions about studying a U.S. undergraduate programs. Below is a table demonstrating the match between research questions and primary interview questions (Table 1). Probing questions were used to extend the participants' responses to the interview questions.

Table 1

Research and Interview Questions Matching Chart

Research questions	Interview questions
Demographic questions	1. How many years have you been in the U.S.?
	2. Have you ever been abroad prior to coming to the States? If so, please explain a bit (how long, for what purpose).
1) What are the students' motivations for studying abroad at this age?	3. What are the top three reasons that you choose to study in the U.S.?
2) What are the students' academic, social, and cultural experiences studying in the U.S.?	4. Tell me your overall experiences of studying here.
	5. What are some of the primary challenges you met in studying here?
	6. What are the supports that you perceived as important and helpful for you in studying here?
	7. What are some of the primary challenges you met being abroad?
	8. What are supports that you perceive as important and helpful for you being abroad?
	9. To what extent do you feel that your expectations of studying abroad have been met so far?
3) What are the students' recommendations for the hosting universities?	10. What are your recommendations for the hosting university?
	11. Any other comments that you'd like to share with me?

Patton (2002) suggests three approaches to open-ended interviews: the informal conversational interview, the general interview guide approach, and the standardized open-ended interview. The general interview guide approach was used for this study. I prepared an interview guide to start with so that key questions would be covered. This allowed flexibility and openness for extending of the interview questions in the process of the interview.

I conducted interviews and follow-up interviews with my 20 participants. The interviews lasted from 1 to 3 hours. I also did follow-up interviews with participants for member checking. I brought an interview protocol, digital voice recorder, pen and paper to each interview. The interviews were recorded with permission from the participants. Also, after each interview, I transcribed the recordings and coded the scripts, in order to have an ongoing understanding of the participants' perceptions and capture emergent issues. I then used what I learned from this initial coding to inform further interviews. Thus conducting the interviews, transcribing the interview recordings, coding of the scripts, and updating the interview guide was an ongoing process used to explore the emergent issues based on participants' descriptions.

Ethics. The research aimed to understand the lived experiences of Chinese undergraduate students studying in the United States. Steps were taken to ensure the protection of the study participants: The research was based on informed consent, a university IRB approved in 2012.

When I met with the participants the first time, I explained the study. It was the potential participants' choice whether to volunteer to participate or not. Those who agreed to participate were asked to read and then sign the consent form. No participants pulled out at the first meeting. The participants could withdraw from the study at any time. After data was collected, I used pseudonyms to encrypt/insure confidentiality of the data so that no information could be linked to individual participants.

Analysis of the Data

The analysis of the data was ongoing during this study. During the process, I was primarily using Taylor and Bogdan (1998) and Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) as my guides for analyzing the data. Once each interview was conducted, I first gave participants a pseudonym to keep their participation confidential. Second, I transcribed the audio recording of the

interviews in Chinese, which is the native language of the participants and their choice for the language to use in the interviews. Third, I read and re-read the transcriptions until I had a stable list of coding categories. During this process I integrated emergent issues to earlier themes to inform the conduct of the following interviews, and altered the interview questions as needed based on my ongoing findings. I then coded all the interview scripts until I had a final set of themes. Fourth, I translated portions of the transcripts from Chinese to English for use in the dissertation written in English. Fifth, quotes from more than one student were used to demonstrate the variety in the responses within each theme and sub-theme in order to fully support the description of each category.

Data analyses in Chinese related to issues of translation in a cross-linguistic study. I also pondered whether to translate the data from Chinese to English first before coding or code with the raw data before translating the quotes into English.

I chose to code the transcripts in the interview language, which was Chinese, because it was the participants' native language and the chosen interview language. I believe that translation is a complex cross-cultural which includes not only a word-to-word mechanical process, a transformation in syntax and grammar, but also an art of bridging meanings in two cultures. It could involve an interpretation process of the languages and the cultures involved. If choosing to translate the transcripts to English before the coding process, it makes the work on primary data become a work on secondary data. It would be like coding the data on top of another layer of coding. I believed that coding with the original interview language could help prevent potential loss of meanings in the translation process before the coding categories were determined. Subtle expressions and emotions in the context could be best kept in the original interview language. Moreover, coding is yet another interpretation process. My native language

is Chinese. Thus it is an easier process and could be more accurate for the researcher to interpret the data in its original language format and context. I only translated quotes from transcripts from Chinese into English when I wrote up the findings, in hope of generating findings that represent the participants' experiences the most closely.

Validity and Credibility

Member checking. I used member checking to help ensure the validity and credibility of a study. After the interviews, I returned the typed transcripts to the participants and asked them whether they would like to meet with me for a member checking. I was able to meet with 18 out of 20 participants. I gave them the transcripts and asked them whether they were accurate in terms of what they really meant in the interviews or if they had anything new to add. Eight participants added comments to their original interview transcripts.

Peer debriefing. In this study, I used peer debriefing in my data analysis. As argued by many, "the primary aim [of peer debriefing] is a more complete exploration and explication by the researcher of his or her values and interests and how these might come to bear on the conduct, interpretation, and analysis of the research project" (Given, 2008, p. 604). After the data were collected, I asked a Ph.D. graduate in Education to crosscheck my coding to help enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of my study. Also, I was in a continuous group discussion with my academic advisor and fellow doctoral students who were also at the dissertation stage. They helped me in examining the codes and providing alternative perspectives. This process was helpful in gaining alternative perspectives and identifying underlying themes, comparing points of views, challenging assumptions, and making the coding process "a more complete exploration" (Given, 2008). In addition, I discussed with my advisor questions I had about the translation of

the quotes from the transcripts. We discussed the proper English words to use for accurate and clear communications between the two languages.

Situating the Researcher

The researcher is considered an important instrument in qualitative research. Thus examining and constantly reflecting on the researcher's role is of great importance in qualitative research in general, and my study in particular.

I am a Chinese born graduate student studying in the United States. I received my bachelor degree in China and did not have experience studying in an undergraduate program in the United States. I have, however, studied abroad for my masters and am finishing my doctoral degree. While I have my own experiences and perspectives about studying and living in another culture, I remind myself that I was a different age when I arrived in the U.S., and I am situated in a graduate school. I see my own experience as potentially quite different than what it is like for undergraduate students studying abroad. At the same time, my educational experiences in the graduate program of Education equipped me with various lenses to use in interpreting the results. While my cultural and educational backgrounds and perspectives may influence my interpretations, what the participants describe as their experiences is the primary focus. Thus my intent, as Creswell (2006) describes, was "to make sense (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world" (p. 21) as an interpreter. Patterns of meaning were generated inductively from the data collected. Findings were interpreted with theoretical lens. In this qualitative study, I reminded myself to be open to emergent themes and flexible for changes as the study went on.

As the researcher, I had both an insider and outsider points of views. First, I was born and lived in China until I left for graduate school. I consider myself an insider since I have the "native's points of view" (Malinovski, 1922) of the Chinese culture and educational practices. I

experienced issues and challenges like adapting to language use, academic expectations and social norm changes. At the same time, I have been abroad for years and came here as a graduate student, so I am also an outsider to many of the issues and challenges that my Chinese undergraduate participants had. In this study, the participants' insider points of views were the focus of my research. I have knowledge of Chinese culture and education and will be influenced by my insider views in interpreting the findings, but it is the participants' views that I am seeking for in this study.

Chapter Four

Findings

In the academic semester of spring 2013, I interviewed 20 Chinese undergraduate students; among them 14 were men and 6 were women.

The following section will introduce the results derived from the data within these in-depth interviews. Themes emerged from this data through coding and were then organized to address the research questions: (a) What were the students' motivations for studying abroad? (b) What were their academic, social, and cultural experiences studying in the U.S.? and (c) What were the students' recommendations for the hosting institutions?

In the following section, themes include the students' motivation for coming to study in the United States, their impressions and perceptions of differences, the challenges and frustrations they encountered, the changes that occurred for them, and recommendations they made for the university.

Theme 1. Motivations for Studying in the U.S. for Undergraduate Programs

What are the Chinese students' motivations of studying in the United States for their undergraduate programs?

What are the factors that influence the students' decisions of studying in America for their undergraduate programs?The participants discussed the reasons why they wanted to study in the U.S. for their undergraduate programs. The results are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Motivations for studying in the U.S. undergraduate programs

Categories	Number
1. Good image of American education	14
2. People's influence	12
3. Personal growth	8
4. Good image of the country	6
5. Getting away from parents	1

Good image of American education. The top reason for studying abroad in an undergraduate programs was the good image of American education. Fourteen out of 20 students mentioned that they chose to study abroad because they had a good image of American education. For example, participant 20 said, "Because American education is good, everybody knows about it." Also, participant 2 commented, "I feel it would be a better academic environment in U.S. universities." Similarly, participant 6 said:

> I thought that the undergraduate education in America was very good, comparatively more detailed and one could learn more. For example, people like to read the ranking of universities in the world, and you'll find that there are many American universities at the top of the list. For instance, our university ranked as one of the top 100 schools worldwide, so are Tsinghua University and Peking University. So by coming here, [I] could receive a better education. This is the primary reason. (Participant 6)

Moreover, participant 9 described how he liked the academic environment in the U.S. universities.

At first I was primarily looking at Harvard and Yale, and I found something good, like what they are doing. They are like those traditional American campuses. There are many people on campus who do their own things, like activities, they want to promote their ideas, and there are many demonstrations like this on campus. I felt I should be like this, too. (Participant 9)

Also, participants mentioned that their major was strong at this university. For example, participant 16 said, "one reason is because this major in this university accepted me. I felt it was good. Yes, so I came here to study."

Some mentioned the job prospects of receiving education at a U.S. university. For instance, participant 7 said, "graduating from this university, you'll have better job opportunities."

Some discussed the resources that are available for students. For example, participant 10 is a student in social science; he talked about the resources he could obtain that were very helpful for his study.

First, like my classmates in Berkeley, I felt that he had good institutional background and resources. He had the chances of meeting many insightful people. Sometimes their instructors are, he said that some of his instructors are famous ones, like the former president of Chile. I think that you could get in touch with these people. Also I read many books when I was in China. My biggest impression was that you needed, how to say that, there were so many books and you couldn't read them all, but you needed someone to guide you. So for example, instructors like these, you could then get in touch with the best knowledge and those that you need to know the most. I think this is useful. . . . Also there are many resources that are hard to get, for example, I had a friend at a university [in northwest China] who's in the same major as me. He asked me to look for some

materials for him. He said that those materials that I gave him, ones that I could find from

our library, are materials that even their teachers hadn't read yet. So in terms of doing

research in social science and humanity, if you don't even have access to those materials,

then how would you know whether this project has been done before, or how could you

make scholarly achievements? So the institutional resources are comparatively better

[than in China]. (Participant 10)

In addition, there were students who believed that they would have an exciting life in the U.S.

campus. For instance, participate 4 commented that "I know one could have a full, exciting and

varied life in American universities, based on what I heard from other people."

The good image of American education seemed to be an assumption for many

participants. When the researcher tried to inquire on "why do you think American education is

good," the answer of "you know that" is often heard. Among the participants who were raised on

the good image of American education, 10 were male students and 4 were female students.

People's influence. Among the 20 students that I interviewed, 12 said that their family,

friends, and peers influenced their decisions.

Family and relatives' influence. One reason commonly mentioned by the participants

was family and relatives' influence. For instance, participant 3 commented that "Because my

father studied in America, too. I thought that he did his undergraduate in America, so I wanted to

come here early so that I could adjust to the environment better."

Also, participant 16 said, "Another reason is because my girlfriend is here [in America]."

Moreover, studying abroad seemed to be a family decision for many. For example,

participant 4 said,

When I was 3rd year in high school, there were lots of friends of my parents who sent

their children abroad for undergraduate programs. I took both the national entrance

examination and SAT. After consideration, they decided to send me abroad, because they

noticed that the children [who studied abroad] grew up very quickly. For example, an

originally simple and naïve child came to know lots of things after coming back. They

became good at having conversations and expressing their opinions. Overall, it seems

they became mature adults.

Similarly, participant 12 commented that: "My family sent me here to the country

[second year in high school]. I knew I wouldn't just leave after two years of high school."

Relatives' influence was also raised as a factor that influenced students' decisions. For

example, participant 9 said, "My cousin was in an America's undergraduate program before

me. . . . He said that America may be better than China in terms of education." Among the

students who raised this reason for studying in America, 8 were male students and 4 were female

students.

At the same time, there is one student who did not follow his parents' advice with respect

to where to study. While his parents did not agree that he chose to study in the United States for

undergraduate programs at first, participant 6 insisted. He said, "I did lots of research by myself,

and then persuaded my parents with the results of my research."

Influence. Another factor is their peer or friends' influence. For example, participant 12

said, "My classmates chose to study in America, so I started to think about it." Similarly,

participant 10 said that his friends who studied in American undergraduate programs shared their

experiences with him and influenced his decision to transfer to the university. He said, "Another

reason is because I have several friends who are here [for undergraduate programs], and I feel that they harvested a lot in the two years" (Participant 10).

In addition, participant 5 shared her experience of having information from friends when making the decision of studying abroad:

When I was in high school, I organized study groups for learning English. I knew many foreign teachers, like inviting them for lectures in the school, so I'm familiar with many of them. Also I was quite confident with my English at the time. I also participated in some activities that were English related. So I felt that I shall be ok coming here.

She further explained:

Also my parents had a friend, so I feel that many of these rely on networking. My father's friend was also from our province and they were close. He worked as a professor in American universities. So before I made decision, he happened to be visiting our home. So I discussed with the professor. Also, there was another friend who also went abroad as an undergraduate. Now she has already settled abroad. I met with her during summer time. Her husband is a Canadian. They had two babies and they were having tours in my hometown. Because there are many places of interests here, I accompanied them, and I also communicated with them. That lady is also a person who excels in her studies. She is good academically and works hard when going abroad. He [My father] introduced me to these people to learn from their experience. . . . Later my father felt that there were kids in our relatives' families who studied abroad when they were very young, and it was not as dangerous as people thought. Maybe it could help broaden horizons. My father felt it was nice, so he let me communicate with people [who have experience of studying abroad]. Sometimes it was just touring or having fun together, not intentionally asking for

experience, but rather that people get together and chat, like sharing some thoughts. I was a bit young at that time, like first year or second year in high school. They felt that I was young at the time, so they wanted to help guide me. (Participant 5)

Personal growth. Eight students mentioned that they chose to come to the United States for personal growth, broadening horizons, becoming more mature and independent, expecting the unknown, and improving English skills.

Three students said that they wanted to study abroad in order to broaden their horizons. For example, participant 13 commented: "[The reason why I came here is because] first, I'd like to see more things, to put it straightforward, something like broaden your horizon." Similarly, participant 16 said, "The third reason is also to widen my horizon abroad, since I've been staying at home for long. So I decided to go abroad after consideration."

Also, participants mentioned that they were hoping to get more mature and independent by studying abroad. For example, participant 2 said the decision of coming to the U.S. was made because it was seen as an opportunity of growing more mature:

When I was 3rd year in high school, there were lots of friends of my parents who sent their children abroad. I took both the National entrance examination and SAT. After considerations, they decided to send me abroad, because they noticed that the children grew up very quickly. For example, an originally simple and naïve child became to know lots of things after coming back. They became good at having conversations and expressing their opinions. Overall, it seems they became an adult.

Moreover, participant 8 said that he was looking forward to the unknown by studying in the U.S. In addition, participant 6 mentioned that he wanted to study in the U.S. in order to improve his English skills. He said, "[Another reason was that] learning English is very

important. My parents felt that by coming here for an undergraduate degree, I could learn English well. It could be helpful for my future" (Participant 6).

Good image of the country. One other reason of choosing to study in America was the good image of the country, as mentioned by the participants. Six participants mentioned about this. For instance, participant 10 said, "America is the most advanced country in the world now. I'm hoping to grasp different kinds of technology, so I'd like to learn here." Participant 5 raised, "there would be more opportunities in the American society."

Participant 9 mentioned that he liked the living environment in the U.S. Also, participant 6 said that the top reason for him to study in the United States was that the U.S. values spoke to him as well as the resources he could found here,

Deeply speaking, my values are closer to what's valued here. Also, the more I study here, the less I want to come back, considering the ways of handling things in China, I don't like it, well, it's not that I don't like it, but at least I don't want to do that. It's fine if other people do in that way. So my plan is to stay here. . . . When I came to study in America (in high school), I also participated in some activities, and bought many books. I had two luggage bags at that time; one of them was full of books, because you couldn't get these books in China. So I brought them back. I feel that the educational resources and this kind of culture, or system, is the primary reason that made me come here . . . I think it's primarily because of the system. Because I feel that in terms of culture, how to say, the culture in America is comparatively short, probably it's more because of the system. The most important reason is because I like the system, in terms of culture, if I don't like some, then I don't go. So it's not crucial. The most important is the feeling of freedom. (Participant 14)

Getting away from parents. There is one participant who mentioned, "Another reason [to study here] is to get away from my parents' management." While this participant took his parents' suggestions in terms of studying in the United States, he was excited about the fact that he would be away from home.

In general, the participants described that they came to America to study because of the good images they have about America education, family or friends' influence, pursuit for personal growth, and good image of the country, and getting away from parents.

Theme 2. Academic Differences/Impressions

The students raised nine things that impressed them: pragmatic approach, hard working environment, teacher-student relationships, TA' support, classroom discussions, Mathematics and fundamental science disciplines, choices availability, presentation styles, and diversity.

Pragmatic approach. First, participants mentioned the pragmatic approach promoted in the academic programs. For example, participant 12 was a transferred engineering student. He shared his experience about his courses:

> When I was studying at home, there was not as much homework on coding [in my assignments]. For example, if one type of knowledge was taught in my original school, maybe after learning, it was all about it. If you understand, it's done. If you don't understand, never mind. Or lots of the assignments are written ones, like what you have at the end of each chapter of the textbooks. But here, it would be very practical. They will let you know the problem, prepare stuff, and let you come up with the function, like use the formula just learned to generate a function and realize something . . . how to relate to real situations. . . . I felt it was more reasonable, but it takes hard work to do well.

Also, participant 14 shared his observations at the Engineering school:

Especially those in the Engineering school, many of them [American counterparts] have foundations….Some of them, when they were in high school, if they were interested in something, their experience of electrics and coding are better than us. Right, they are experienced right at the beginning…. Hands on ability and coding ability. Many of the things the professor taught have already been learned when they were in high school…. They would learn what they were interested. We probably haven't realized this yet, maybe high school study focuses more on science like mathematics, physics, and chemistry, but not that much on coding.

Similarly, another participant in the Business major described how in her program she was really stressed about how her education was linked to job opportunities.

When I participated in the Finance Club last time, they had a meeting each week. . . they invited people to talk about various kinds of working opportunities. I feel that they are very realistic here, they ask students to start to look for jobs since freshmen year, everything is centered on jobs. Yeah, I feel my classmates, like I am a sophomore now, I'd like to look for an internship. But I feel that my friends studying in China don't have this kind of sense. (Participant 9)

She commented further:

Moreover, they are very pragmatic here. Like we have a statistics course in econ, we need to do homework with excel. I feel it's very pragmatic, because one probably doesn't need to do a complex t distribution with a calculator after working. You need to use excel, because you need to be exact to 6 or 7 digits after the decimal . . . then you must copy and paste the results . . . the focus is primarily on concepts, how to say that, primarily on understanding. . . . I feel that what they think here is that what's taught are preparing for

jobs later. . . . They teach you in a practical angle. In China, they will not prepare you that well in order to prepare you for merging into the society.

She also mentioned, "I participated in a case competition with PWC. Then we did a case to help a company handle a newly bought company." She commented that it was helpful to see how to relate what she learned to the real life scenarios.

In addition, another participant in social sciences stated:

I feel that this university, and the States overall, provides the students with many opportunities, unlike [when I was in] China. I feel that education and jobs are separated domestically to a certain extent. But here the universities will help establish a platform, e.g., in helping you find internships, etc……. I feel that the platforms are better. For example, like in our major, [the department] provided me with many choices and help me locate the internship. (Participant 10).

In general, the participants expressed liking of the pragmatic approach used here. They said the approach was relevant and motivated/inspired them to learn.

Working hard. Another impression that the students have is that many students work very hard on campus. For example, participant 6 described:

I felt that many American and Chinese students work hard here. At 2 or 3 am in our building, not only our group are there, but also other groups, no matter it's for doing assignments or projects. Our major in this university ranks quite top, around No. 4 or 5. I also talked with my parents on this. I seemed to understand one point: The ranking is top, but it's not necessarily a completely objective thing, it's actually because everyone has their own motivation. He is motivated himself. He has a desire to advance himself in study, so won't feel that he has been studying late. No one feels tired. No one would

leave if the task hasn't been completed. I am deeply touched by it. Everyone is studying very hard, for themselves. (Participant 6)

Similarly, participant 16 shared his observations: "Another thing is about study. I feel that there are Americans who work very hard. I felt that Chinese students studied very hard. But actually Americans study very hard, too. I also see many Americans who study overnight." Participant 16 further commented:

I feel that the environment for study is nice here. Because I have some classmates who attend universities domestically. If they don't consider doing masters abroad, they don't necessarily care about their GPA and feel that just they could just get by. But here, you need to study diligently, especially like in our major, if you just review [course content] right before tests, it would be hard. Also there are quizzes, mid-term, and things like these here. There are only mid-term and final exam in domestic [Chinese] universities. So here [the schedule] tightens your time, one phase after another. Assignments are also due every week and you must turn them in. This semester I have five courses. One requires paper and the other four are exams. (Participant 16)

Similarly, participant 6 said that there are many tests and quizzes throughout the semesters.

I feel [university] teachers here are more responsible, well maybe not. Maybe it's more based on policies because there are so many tests, you need to pass every test so that you could get a comparatively good [grade] . . . so you need to learn constantly and read constantly. Assignments are graded based on accuracy rate. While in [the university I study in China], you receive grades as long as you turn in assignments, then you only have a final test at the end of the semester. So you could just read at the end of the semester. You just attend classes, and don't need to review too much. But here, you need

to read some every time you do homework, or else you may get it wrong or don't know how to answer the questions. I feel that learning here is more solid. But actually the content covered in China is comparable with here, so it depends. (Participant 6)

Furthermore, participant 6 also expressed his preference for this busy academic schedule.

I like it here better, because I did learn more solidly here. Honestly I forgot much of what I learnt when studying [in my university] in China. Here I learn with a good foundation. There are so many quizzes, so many things to be completed, it is impossible not to learn. . . . When I was in high school, lots of knowledge was learned with a solid foundation and I did many questions. But in my university [in China], there were not many questions to practice. I just read, listened to the teacher's lectures, completed the assignments, and then did a final. Actually there are many questions to practice in the university here, a number of assignments, quizzes, and tests. (Participant 6)

Teacher/student relationships. Five students raised that they noticed one difference in the American classrooms and Chinese classrooms: the teacher-student relationship. They felt it was more equal and casual. For example, participant 10 said, "My teacher has us call him by his first name." Also, another participant commented on the teacher-student relationship:

Also, the relationship between the teacher and the students is different, including what I feel after going to college, that [you] feel equal with the teachers. Yes, it's a bit different when I was in China where it's more serious and more on respecting the teacher and his teachings. [Here] you could joke with teachers, and so on, and you feel like friends with teachers. (Participant 19)

Similarly, participant 10 mentioned:

I feel that the teachers are, well, the [academic] culture is different. Like in China, our culture is that you need to respect the teachers. If the teacher taught you anything, you generally ask questions after the class. But here …… it is a bit different. You could interrupt him/her at any time and the instructor wouldn't get upset. But it doesn't seem to be proper in domestic classrooms......There are more hierarchies domestically. I feel that teacher is teacher and student is student. Usually they don't get too close. It is what I feel. (Participant 10)

Participant 10 also described his observations in terms of teacher-student relationship in classrooms:

Also like what I mentioned to you in terms of teachers. Last time when I had a class, a small one, there was a female student sitting there, doing nothing but playing with her cellphone by herself. There was no textbook in front of her either. Then the teacher said, , I feel the teacher is a very nice one and he was probably out of good intention when he asked a question and asked her thoughts on that. She said she had no thoughts. Then the teacher raised another thing, she answered the same thing and continued to play her cell phone. Then the teacher said, since it's a small class and a bit over the line, right? So he felt if you really didn't want to stay in class, you could leave. Then the girl got mad and said bluntly: I broke up with my boyfriend, blablabla, I shouldn't have to be here. Then the teacher was speechless. It was unimaginable in China. But this teacher, I think that most teachers are like this. The only teacher that was a bit overly [harsh], well, he was criticized badly on that Rate a Professor [website]. My feeling on taking his class is that, he asked a student a question in class, the student couldn't answer it, then he said something like the student didn't do the reading, something like that. He was just saying.

Then maybe the Americans have strong self-esteem, the female student rushed out directly and left the room. Then the teacher was on the unwavering side and said: Either she finds me during office hours, or never come again. Then I feel this is different than in China. Maybe domestic teachers stress more on authority and here more on equality. It is a bit different. (Participant 10)

This is different from the teacher-student relationship in China. Usually in China, teachers are seen as sources of knowledge and someone that the students should respect. They are seen more as an authority on the knowledge of the course. The participants described how there was a more equal relationship in the U.S. between students and teachers.

TA support. Students also mentioned support they received from the TAs. For example, the text below is from a conversation that I had with one student.

A: Moreover, I learned ways of writing a good argument, influenced by those TAs. They are very nice to me, too.

Q: What do you mean by that?

A: I mean that they are willing to use their time [for us]. They must be very busy, as students here. Yet they have time to meet us. En, if I [say] I have a question and want to see you before turning in the paper, then the TA would arrange a time to meet with me. After reading my paper, the TA will also give some sincere suggestions, like where that is not good enough. . . . He said that if you do it like this, you wouldn't get an A, you'd be given at best a B. Then I was provoked. Then he/she taught me how to write a good argument. . . .After learning these things, I felt that I improved my logical thinking and critical thinking. (Participant 19)

Also, participant 2 described how TA helped her with one of her challenging course task.

The support I used was the TA office hours at the college that intended for writing. They would help me with grammar, presentation skills, and writing. I felt that there was someone they're helping me. I was very good at the "content" part of the paper, but not good at the "communication" part, so the writing support at the college was very helpful. At first, I felt that I might have C for this course and felt impulsive to improve. So I went to the TA office hours. Each week before the session started, I would have been sat in the classroom. It was great that it was very helpful. I could have 8.5 out of 10 later. Although it was not the full points, but I improved a lot. My motivation was to get high GPA. My GPA was very good in the first two years. Starting in the third year, I felt it became a bit difficult to get A or even A minus sometimes. But GPA is important in terms of finding jobs as well as other types of pressures, including application for graduate school. For example, in order to apply for grad school, the major GPA needs to be above 3.0. Although my final grades are B or above B. But sometimes in the middle of the semester, if I have some low grades, and I felt lots of pressure.

Discussion. Participants said that there were usually more discussions in the classrooms they were in, compared to classrooms in China. Participant 2 said, "Also, during class time, there are all kinds of questions raised in class. But domestically, it was usually very quiet during class. You could only hear the voice from the teacher," she said, laughing

Similarly, participant 19 expressed her appreciativeness for the teacher's approach to asking "why" types of questions.

Moreover, yes, I feel it is nice that the teachers here inspire students more on thinking. They don't have a required fixed route for you to follow, but rather inspire you constantly,

let you think about the next steps. Leading one question to another, why should it be this way? Especially in the rhetoric class on writing, I found that writing is actually such a particular thing. That is, I felt it's [the class] was already finishing, but the teacher would ask "Why this?" and "Why that? . . . it leads to so many things to think about. . . . Unlike when I was studying in China, once one reaches a certain point, you'll stop, or something like that. There are no restrictions. (Participant 19)

Choices. Five students mentioned that they have many choices in terms of study, both in terms of course selections and the use of time. For example, participant 10 is a transfer student. He said, "You have lots of spaces in terms of course selections here. Yet most courses are set already domestically [in China]." The participants are indicating a comparatively more fixed academic route in China, but it is also changing gradually in some universities nowadays. Also, as participant 11 said "there is lots of free time here, if you'd like. There are no parents around. After class, time is all yours" (Participant 11).

Mathematics and fundamental science disciplines. 4 participants mentioned that their education in China helped them in mathematics and other fundamental science courses like physics. For example, participant 12 said,

Tests were very simple. (Participant 13)

For me, the courses last semester were not very hard. It felt similar to what I learned in China. The content was the same. In terms of teaching fundamental knowledge, I feel that it's more solid in China. For example, like math and physics, the courses that I took last semester, I felt it was [not hard]. For math taught here, I'm not sure whether it's because the section I attended was simple or else, but I only got points deducted once for all of my assignments. The rest are full points. . . . I felt that the instruction was solid, but the tests were very simple. (Participant 13)

At the same time, participant 16 said that it was only a stereotype that the Chinese are better in mathematics compared to their American counterparts.

> Also, what impressed me this semester was when I took the honor course on mathematics. Last semester I took the math course with a big number of classmates. In was a comparatively big class, many of the American students were not that good in math, and then many of them failed the calculus tests. . . . Then this semester it was the honor course but there were only thirty people. Those American students are very good at math, many of whom had experiences with Olympics games. I felt wow, Americans could be very good in math when they are good. (Participant 16)

Presentation skills. Three participants discussed on their lack of presentations skills and tried to learn. For instance, participant 9 commented how she strived to learn presentation skills that she was originally lacking:

> You will learn how they relate to the reality, and then how would they did presentations. I felt it was difficult for me to do a presentation here. It was, first, related to language, and then my American classmates are familiar with the way of presentations here since they were young. . . . Then in terms of the way they do presentations, everyone has their own style. (Participant 9)

Diversity. Classroom diversity is another thing participants felt was impressive, both in terms of teacher and student diversity. For example, participant 6 said:

> Another impression was on diversity. In my first semester here, I selected five courses. The five teachers were all from different countries. Well, I'm not sure whether 'from' is the right word to use, they were originally from, or maybe the word 'from' could be used

here, like Armenia, England, South Korea, and one from America. . . . But my impression

was that it was indeed international here. (Participant 6)

Theme 3. Challenges and Frustrations

Participants also shared the challenges they met when studying in the undergraduate

programs here, such as language, feeling disorientated, busy schedules, being required to raise

hands in class, group work, interacting social with schoolmates, expectations different from

reality, financial pressure, and limitations for international students.

Language. One frequently mentioned challenge was language. For most of the

participants, language was a big challenge they faced in the U.S.

Twelve out of 20 students raised language as one of their primary challenges in academic

success. For instance, participant 7 described his experience of reading humanity materials for

classes:

For me I felt that the content of study was not a challenge. But reading is. Because I'm

good at engineering courses. You actually don't need to read a lot, you'll only need to

understand formulas as well as their applications, etc. But you still need to take general

education courses and then you felt very painful because you need to read long

paragraphs after paragraphs. Maybe your American counterparts only need 1 or 2 hours,

but it will probably take me 2 to 3 hours. Then even after reading, you still might not

remember the material. Maybe it's also because I'm not good at social science anyway.

(Participant 7)

Similarly, Participant 6 commented on his challenges with reading:

In terms of study, I feel reading is a challenge. When I was taking some humanities

courses, there were lots of reading requirements. When I just arrived, I felt that my oral

English was ok, but in terms of reading, especially reading in a large quantity, I felt it's pretty difficult. For instance, when I was reading literature and humanity books, I could read only a dozen pages each day. But the professor gave lots of reading assignments. More importantly, many times you found that you still didn't understand after reading only once. Then you felt frustrated.—You've spent a long time reading, then you found you didn't understand it. Then you spent long time reading again. I felt it was a challenge.

Participant 1 gave with the example of listening in class. He has been studying in the United States since middle school.

[It is] language. Math is definitely not a challenge. It is the language. It depends. Sometimes the teachers speak very fast, and language could be a challenge sometimes, even now. There are times, how to say that, we have many Russian professors. You sit there and he speaks with a Russian accent. . . . I feel that language is the biggest barrier when studying in America.

Furthermore, participant 12 described his challenge of understanding course content in class due to language barriers:

Also when I first attended the classes, there are people from different places and with different accents. . . . Like for one course, the professor was from Poland and there were lots of "r" when he spoke. I was a bit crashed at that time, since he wrote swiftly like doing a drawing. It felt like you had to use all your senses to get the information so you won't get lost. One could not understand what he said, nor could one read what he wrote. (Participant 12)

Participant 5 said that writing skills were a challenge for her. "I couldn't write as fast as the Americans [in English], or I didn't write as well. I feel that in terms of language, especially those concerning the major, [writing] is very important and one should pay attention to it."

In addition, participant 10 shared his experience of participating in discussions in a class during his first semester on campus:

> There was a course called Global Studies in my first semester here. Honestly, I felt that the course was quite different at the moment. I meant there were many discussions. I felt that my English was rather poor [at that time], so I was almost speechless during the discussions. Also, the speed was so fast when people started to discuss that you didn't fully understand. They couldn't fully understand what I was talking about, either. So it was a bit awkward. Later I often chatted with my instructors about this and it's getting a bit better. Yes, this is what impressed me the most during the first semester. (Participant 10)

Many students also raised language as an issue that hinders communications in students' social lives. For example, participant 9 described the importance of language in getting in business clubs.

> There are many interviews, if you want to participate in any clubs, then you need to participate in interviews first. Then a practical problem is language. Then you need to prepare. Because as an international student, you definitely need to prepare. You couldn't just speak fluently as you open your mouth. You must prepare what you want to say. (Participant 9)

Moreover, participant 2 shared her experience when trying to be friends with her roommate:

When I first arrived as a freshman, I wanted to interact with Americans very much. For example, my roommate was an American in the dorm. I chose an apartment that was with more American students purposefully. However, after moving in, I found that my English was not good at all. There were difficulties communicating with my roommate. At first, she was willing to listen to my broken English. However, she was bored later and was not willing to listen patiently. I felt under big pressure during that time and was not very happy. In addition, there are so many Chinese around me. Of course it would be very convenient communicating with Chinese. So within less than half a year, I was back in the Chinese community. I feel that if I went to a school with less Chinese, I would probably have hung in there and persisted. Then I would probably know more about American society. Actually, I didn't feel that I should merge myself in American society until when I was a junior. I was more extraverted then and had become much better in English. I began to have more interactions with Americans. So I felt the freshman and sophomore years were wasted a bit [related to language development]. Although I worked very hard in my studies (in these two years), I felt that I didn't interact with Americans much. (Participant 2)

In addition, language was an issue for participants' daily lives. For example, participant 2 sketched her experience of trying to solve a problem with her laptop with the customer service people in her second year.

My HP computer had some problems, so I decided to call the customer support. I couldn't express myself well because of my poor English then. Nor could I understand the customer support agent. I called her for two hours, but still was not able to communicate. I remember I asked "What?" "What?" at that time in order to ask the

customer support agent to repeat. I'm not sure whether she understood the problem. That was when I was a sophomore. But the customer service person I talked to then was very nice. . . . I felt very exhausted after the call, lying on the couch and tired. But now I am much better. I now know how to use English to communicate and solve problems in a phone call. If I had an American friend then, I would have asked her to call for me. But I didn't have one then, so I needed to solve that by myself.

Disoriented. There are a number of students who mentioned that they felt disoriented during the beginning days after arrival. Four students recalled that it took them a long time to find classrooms in this big campus on their first day. One shared her first experience of trying to take the bus and getting lost trying to find her apartment. Some mentioned their unfamiliarity with the academic systems. For example, participant 16 expressed that he was not familiar with the process of course selection or what TA sessions were for when he first arrived in the U.S. Also, participant 5 mentioned that she was getting adjusted now [as a senior year student], but she was confused at first "about the internet system of homework and things like that. But now surely I use that very proficiently. Everybody is like that."

Raising hands or not. Some students mentioned their hesitations in adapting to the classroom culture. One commonly mentioned adaptation was whether to raise their hands in class or not. For instance, participant 2 described her hesitation in the 4 years of studying the U.S.:

I didn't dare to raise my hand until I was a senior student. In one of my courses at the senior year, my participation grade was 30 percent. So I felt I had to raise my hand so as not to receive a low grade. Then after raising my hand once, I felt that it was okay. Even if I got stuck, the professor wouldn't laugh, the classmates wouldn't laugh either. Some of the classmates were not listening to class anyway. The instructor would listen to your

answers with patience anyway. Also for most of the times, no matter whether you said it

right or wrong, the instructor would say that it was a good answer. But if it was not

correct, the instructor would just continue to ask other students. I felt shy at the beginning,

because there was not a habit formed of raising hands actively when I was in China. I

remember that I raised my hand until the third year in elementary school. But after that,

very few students raised their hands. Usually it was the teacher talking, and usually not

asking whether we have questions. (Participant 2)

In contrast, participant 19 mentioned her preference of raising hands in her classes:

I could raise my hand for questions at any time, although I still don't dare to ask

questions in big classes. But I try my best to use opportunities to talk with instructors in

small classes. As long as it's small class instruction, I usually get along very closely with

the teacher. But if it's big class instruction, I lack the courage to ask questions. However,

I found that teachers are always patient in explaining.

Busy schedule. American campus life seems to be busy for the majority of the

participants. For example, Participant 19 described her schedule in terms of the campus life:

By studying here, I feel that I needed to do well in, to learn the so-called time

management. Because it's such a big university, there are so many things that one could

do. People around you have different things happening every day. Then someone says

that he participated in this, and another one says that she participated in that. Then you

feel, oh god, it seems I haven't done much yet. So I feel that having a group of people

like this around me, it encourages me to attend different activities, and then enhance my

experiences. Also, there are faculty and students who excel in the university, then you

think, how can I catch up, there are people ahead of you who you could learn from, that

you want to pursue after them, and feel like inspired. Then the more things I do, and the

more I need to learn good time management, to control my time, then improve efficiency.

I feel that there is comparatively less of this in China. It seems that once one is in a

university, you can lay back and be good with it. And you would still get a degree being

like that. The university has become like that. In high school, it was like reading books

without thinking, pure memorizing, preparing for the entrance exam, etc. It feels different

here. I am really learning in the university here.

Similarly, participant 3 described his time management challenge at the beginning of the

university life:

Also there is the issue of time management. At first, there were no people supervising me.

Also I put courses at a later time of the day. So how to say, sometimes I log online, read

stuff, or read books, and time just flies. . . . I didn't have classes until 1pm on Monday.

So sometimes I just slept over if there were no classes, and didn't study. (Participant 3)

In addition, participant 5 commented in a similar way: "I feel that the course schedule here is

relatively tight, with many deadlines. But it is okay, I just spend more time on those, then it's

fine."

Group projects. Two participants mentioned teamwork as being a challenge at the

beginning. For example, participant 6 said:

How you collaborate with your team members [could be a challenge]. Sometimes you did

more, and he did less, or vice versa. Then how did you coordinate the relationships, how

to find teammates, and what to do when the teammate didn't know how to do his parts.

Also, participant 11 described his experience when he was not treated fairly in group work:

There are of course challenges sometime. When you have group meetings, there could be

people who might not get along with you. For example, students who don't participant in

group meetings, or something like that. You just couldn't get along, and it left you feeling

very weird. For example, there was a course last semester and the discussion session was

online. There were 7 people in my group. Every time there were only 5 people showing

up. The other 2 almost never appeared. Then at the end, maybe the peer evaluation grade

could be given a bit lower for them. But I felt, the full points for peer evaluation was 50

at that time, with the average score of 47. I got 44. I didn't understand why at that time.

We had 5 papers to write. So we did an arrangement. We had 7 people, with 5 papers to

write. I turned in 1 by myself, which actually received full points. Then for group

discussions, I participated seriously each time. Then my group members gave me such a

low grade . . . I didn't know why. [Participant 11]

The same participant described his counter experience later as time went by, when I
was doing member checking with him.

I took two engineering courses this semester. One was 221 and the other was 421. I took

421 with the junior students and 221 with the sophomores. Then we had a group member

in 421 group, who was very, very competent. He did almost all of the investigations by

himself and did a table for that. I am responsible for drawing, which is a bit less

demanding. He is responsible for the more demanding part. There are two other students,

who also contributed a lot. But primarily this guy, he is very capable. For the 221 grading,

it was taken when I was sophomore, we had 4 people in the group, and it was primarily

me and another student, we two were responsible for around 95% of the work, I was

responsible for maybe 75% in this 95%. So I feel that people in the second year and third

year are completely different. Where is the difference? Like he never showed up in

meeting, didn't respond to emails, but waited until several days later and replied that it

was not convenient for him to read emails, could you send me text messages? Everyone

is using emails, but you had to send him text message separately. This type of person is

like a baby, he is a bit immature. This is a different feeling compared with last year. Last

year I didn't take this type of engineering course, nor did I have this type of project. Now

I have this kind of feeling after completing this one. [Participant 11]

Socializing with schoolmates. When studying on campus, some participants mentioned

they had some challenges when socializing with American schoolmates. For example, participant

12 said:

Participant: I felt that one big problem was that I couldn't merge into the life of

Americans. I hang out with Chinese every day. But I didn't know how to

merge into their lives.

Me: Did you try?

Participant: Not too much. I am very busy now. Doing assignments has left me little

time to take care of things like this. So it is just like this now.

Me: What about in class, like when you're doing group work?

Participant: Group discussion is only discussion. Then it's over.

Also, participant 12 expressed how he was lonely in an environment that was missing the

familiar social norms and customs.

I miss home when it is the Lunar New Year. I felt that after coming here, there were no

longer any festivals, either Chinese ones or those abroad. You feel that when people are

celebrating festivals abroad, it has nothing to do with you. Chinese festivals are not

celebrated here at all and there are no vacations for them.

At the same time, there are also participants who described how they tried to build more social

connections by using the resources around. For example, participant 14 shared his experience of

participating a school-organized volunteering opportunity, which he felt help him engage more

in the local community.

I felt one activity that I participated was very interesting….This activity was organized by

a living hall in the university. They recruit students from various dorms. The students

went through interviews and participated in trainings like understanding the culture of

New Orleans. What we were helping was to build a house for a local person with

disability. Their houses were a bit old. Then we helped him remodel that. The foundation

had already been laid earlier by others, including the overall frameworks. But it still

needs some work like painting, or help pave the backyard, which needs many people.

Also he needs a fence, like a big one. So you need to dig the earth out, then cement….

There were several female students who got burned, like really hurt, looks read, and

really painful once touched. I was burned a bit, too. So we put on sunscreen later. My

work was primarily the yard, digging the earth out. It was not easy, because there were

bricks. . . . It was quite interesting actually, but also a bit tiring, working 6 to 7 hours per

day.

He also shared:

During work time, the volunteers were helping each other. Almost everybody was willing

to contribute and there were no one who was lazy. It was generally a nice environment.

The colleagues had team members who were open, like playing music and dancing with

the song. There seemed to be a popular song at that time, which they even recorded one. In one morning, everyone was working, then suddenly just stopped and dancing rigorously there. It was quite interesting.

He also mentioned that he was impressed with the diversity of the team, including students with international backgrounds including China, Indonesia, and Philippines. He was also really happy sharing this experience and seemed to see this volunteering experience as a valuable part of his studying and getting to know the people in the U.S.

Expectations vs. real situations. Students were frustrated when the actual situations did not match their expectations of studying in the U.S.. For example, participant 12 shared his reflections:

My expectation was that I'd play with Americans all the time. But I found that I was playing with Chinese. Before I came, my mother said numerous times that it would be very hard being abroad and I'd be very tired. She has giving me lots of psychological warnings, but it still exceeds my expectation. The main part is, I feel that studying is all right, the main part is that you need to do everything yourself. You feel that your schedule is very full, like you need to do this at this time, and that at later time, it's completely occupied. But there is no situation like this at home. So I couldn't completely handle this yet.

Similarly, participant 6 described how his expectations did not match the reality after coming to the U.S.:

There are some differences [between my expectations and realities]. I didn't expect studying to be with this big proportion. I thought I could understand more about American culture, perspectives from the society. But actually I don't have enough

understanding about the culture and community's perspectives. I'm not sure whether you watch news reports every day? I watch myself, but I feel I don't watch enough . . . . There are not many chances to understand about American culture. From the university's perspective, I don't know what the university could do, since this type of social situation actually is personal, too. For example, sometimes there is an activity that I'd like to go, but there is an exam tomorrow and I couldn't skip reading for that. Or for instance, there are many activities in the dorm, but there are thing due and exams the next day, you couldn't just not turn them in. Actually it's a self-choice. For example, if you don't see studying as that important, you could participant in activities, actually this is fine, too. But if you see studying as important, and want to get an A for each course, then you may naturally sacrifice time for playing and social activities. [Participant 6]

Financial concerns. While the financial pressure was not high for most of my participants, 2 students raised it as one of the reasons that made them feel stressed while studying in the U.S. Participant 12 listed it as his primary stressor:

The financial pressure is very high for me. My father didn't agree that I study abroad, primarily because it was too expensive. Later my mother agreed, so I came here. I feel that my father still doesn't agree. I selected many credits this semester, because I didn't want to graduate late, like taking one more semester or a year. It's better to graduate early. Then maybe later I could apply for graduate school and maybe find a school that grants me funding.

For participant 16, his financial situation seemed to be a limitation: "In terms of other challenges, I just didn't have much money. I'm not from a very wealthy family, so I couldn't spend

extravagantly." He said that his family was taking care of the tuition and basic expenditure but he did not have much left over.

Limitations. Another challenge was the limits that international students faced in America. Seven participants expressed this. For example, Participant 9 raised concerns about applying for internships as an international sophomore student:

There is a limitation for international students. Lots of internships don't allow international students to apply, because they require US citizens. For example, some professors would send us emails saying that there was this opportunity or that. Then I checked for those, and found I'm not a qualified candidate. There are very few opportunities for internationals students. . . . So I feel that the limitation [on the career website] is actually limiting job prospects of international students.

She further elaborated on her experience when applying for internships online:

When you apply for jobs [with the college's job application website], there was an "Apply" button. If my materials are there and I'm [identified as] an international student, then I could not click the "Apply" button. So I feel it is a big limitation. Also, another limitation is your years of study. For example, you may not apply for one position until you're in your junior year. I am a sophomore so I couldn't apply for that.

She described her frustrations on this issue:

Many of my American classmates found internships when they were sophomores. Probably Big Four don't offer internships for sophomores. But they could look for other companies, either smaller companies, or insurance company. But as an international student, it's very hard to get an internship. One possible reason is because they don't sponsor visas. Another reason I'm not very sure. But it's a prevalent phenomenon that

there are almost no international students who get internships in sophomore year [in my

department]. (Participant 9)

This student said that lacking internship opportunities as an international student while her

American sophomore peers found positions made her worried about her progress.

Similarly, 5 other students mentioned their concerns about finding internships or jobs

because of visa limitations. Two of them described their efforts of finding alternatives like doing

internships in Hong Kong or mainland China. But they in general were concerned about job

prospects, if they decided to work in the U.S. after graduation. For example, participant 14

commented:

Many companies stated directly that they would not sponsor H1B for undergraduates….

For instance, like BP, we went to their campus recruitment where they stated directly that

they would only offer the positions to Master or Ph.D. students. Also, they prefer Ph.D.

students. So if you are not with special skills that they need, well, it's probably hard to

have those kinds of skills anyway. Right, they said directly in the campus recruitment.

There are some companies that recruit [international] undergraduate students. But those

are very competitive, especially good companies. There are students who graduate from

universities like Berkeley, Stanford, or MIT. It would be hard to compete with them. Our

university has a good number of Chinese students. Right, it was actually Chinese

competing with Chinese, since you are not in the same pool with Americans.

In summary, participants had challenges and frustrations when studying at the University,

including language, feeling disorientated, busy schedules, raising hands in class, group work,

social life with schoolmates, expectations different from reality, financial pressures, and

internship limitations for international students. Some of these may be overcome as they spend

more time studying in the US, like what I found in the "Change" theme section that follows. But some students remained frustrated throughout their US study experiences.

Theme 4. Change

While they had frustrations and challenges, students also shared the positive changes as a result of their cross-cultural experiences, including (a) improvement in language skills, (b) becoming more open-minded, (c) personal growth in terms of independence and critical thinking (d) value change, (e) academic habit changes, (f) lifestyle change, as well as sticking to their original values with little change.

Language. 4 participants out of 17 said that although they encountered lots of challenges in their use of English, their language skills improved over time. For instance, participant 2 described her experience with writing in one of her courses.

I remember that I took a course in the second year, which required me to turn in a 3-page memo each week. I thought it was impossible. But at the end of the semester, I felt that writing a 3-page memo could be very quick. I could use an afternoon, sitting there, reading the case, and then spend 2 to 3 hours to write it. So I felt although it was intensive, I improved very quickly. The support I used was the TA office hours at the college designated for writing. They would help me with grammar, presentation skills, and writing. I felt that there was someone there to help me. I was very good at the "content" part of the paper, but not good at the "communication" part, so the writing support at the college was very helpful. At first, I felt that I might have C for this course and felt impulsive to improve. So I went to the TA office hours. Each week before the session started. . . . I got 8.5 out of 10 later. Although this was not the full points, I improved a lot. (Participant 2)

Language improvement seemed to happen over the years of studying in the U.S., related to their studies and with their daily lives.

Open-minded. I did not regularly ask the participants whether they had become more open minded while studying in the United States. But 7 out of 17 participants mentioned that they became more open-minded after being abroad. For example, participant 2 commented:

> I am more open to new things now. When I first came, I was very close-minded, like feeling that this wasn't good and that wasn't good either. . . . But now at least I am willing to accept new things, or maybe have a try. For example, maybe people say that something is not good, I wouldn't say immediately that it's definitely not good, but would like to try first. (Participant 2)

Similarly, participant 3 commented:

> There don't seem to be many big changes with me, but I feel I may have changed gradually. I think I no longer see things as right and wrong as before. Now I would also choose mid-solutions. I see [things] clearer. I would look at bigger aspects when considering things. I don't know why. After several years, I seem to be more open-minded. I don't seem to have examples. These are just my thoughts. (Participant 3)

Some mentioned their development of perspective taking. For instance, participant 6 mentioned changes in his perceptions: "At first, people don't know each other, so there could be some stereotypes, etc. Like such and such was not so nice. Later you'll feel that actually they are probably very similar to us and very fun, too." Moreover, participant 9 described her experience where American ways of thinking had broadened her horizon by describing what she learned about sticking to principles in her program.

Also I feel that Americans stick to principles very much. Yes is a yes, and no is a no. For example, I once participated a leadership program that discussed ethical principles and he [the leader] talked about a case. Your roommate applied for a scholarship, you are on the committee in reviewing the applications. But you found that one thing on your roommate's resume doesn't match the reality. What do you do? My first reaction is, because he also mentioned that your roommate had financial difficulties recently, her father had things happen and was really in need of this. Then he asked us whether we'd report this to others, considering others had started to consider your roommate seriously. . . . I felt that I might not do it, since she was my roommate, she was my best friend, and on top of the fact there was a tragedy in her life recently. So I said I might not do it. But the Americans said they would [report her]. . . . The reason was explained that if you were partial on one side, then you gave opportunities to your roommate, which originally belonged to others, which means hurting others' benefits. I felt, oh, it seemed to be like this. So I think maybe people's thoughts are different. I felt surprised. . . . Our teachers mentioned in my East Asian culture courses that for Chinese, social relationships are most important and we don't respond on an absolute fairness foundation, maybe Chinese are more inclined to be based on connections to people and human feelings. . . . But in America it seems most of them would think that if this is not right, then it is not right. . . . I feel that participating in many of these [discussions] helped me learn, at least it widened my horizon. (Participant 9)

It is interesting that this participant is in another culture and trying to make sense of it. Although she may be overgeneralizing the two cultures, she seems to be working hard to see the similarities and differences between the two cultures.

In addition, two students talked about mutual understandings of both cultures. In the next quote, we see open-mindedness expressed as mutuality.

Some of my American friends are curious about what is China like. We will discuss on things like politics. They feel that China will be a threat because China is getting stronger and stronger, with a fast developing economy. They think that one day, maybe 10 or 20 years later, China will soon surpass America. Yes, they have these kind of thoughts. I feel it's kind of a China threat statement. Maybe the western media still has propaganda on this. So what will I tell them, I'd say I feel it won't be that fast. China is indeed developing, everyone could see that. Then I'd explain to them what kind of problems China faces in developing, including benefits, social security, and things like these. I feel that they don't know about many things about China. . . . It is developing mutual understanding. People voice their opinions. There are indeed different thoughts. The influence on me is . . . I could get in touch with different voices, people, and how people from different cultural background think. Like getting in touch with the ABC [American Born Chinese] group. I think they are a comparatively underprivileged group. Because they are, first they are Chinese; I meant they have Chinese faces. But they are real Americans. Their culture is American culture. Yet Americans don't necessarily accept that. Chinese may also have some distance with them. For ABCs, they don't understand China, since they have grown up in America. . . . I feel this is very interesting, since I didn't know about this previously. Things like this, new ideas one could get only after communication. . . . There are not many people willing to discuss things like this [around me in China].

. . . . I think growing understanding between each other is already very good. Maybe my personality is the type that willing to listen to others on things that I haven't heard about before. I'm very curious. So communicating with these many people let me feel that everyone's perspective of understanding and viewing problems is different, then my attitude is more open, that is to say, more tolerant, which is very helpful for myself.

[Participant 13]

This long description shows this student's willingness to be open to other people and as a consequence he gained new insights from both Anglo and Chinese Americans.

Change in values. Two students described changes in their values. Both of them seemed to like philosophy greatly. Participant 14 described his change in values with the example of his perception of love:

Also, the core change is on thoughts, that is to say, on values. For example, on the value of love. I didn't have any education about love before and didn't understand it well either. Or my previous thoughts were, well, to just see it as fate. Having long-distance relationship with my girlfriend for so long, I didn't know what it would be like later, I didn't think about how it would turn out. . . . The more important thing is whether love exists and whether this essence of love will still be there years later, like the values of exchange and communication of minds and hearts. . . . The change of my thoughts came after coming here, when I came to understand what love is, why I need love, and why I'm with my girlfriend. These changes are also because of my own thinking, and also the environment here, and talking with professors here.

This participant attributed his thinking about love to the use of persuasive arguments that he had learned in his class. He also further explained how changes in his understandings of core values influenced his attitudes in making decisions.

> In China, I think the environment would not influence me in this way. At least for me, I could seldom find people who would be persuasive in explaining their thoughts. There are many people who are good at making things sound good, but there are not many who give effective arguments. Although emotionally a person may feel that he/she is right, it seems he/she didn't explore further why it is right. Here philosophy would understand more about the essence; to analyze, it is a better way. So love is only one aspect; values including honesty and being upright, why people should be honest and upright, and why we need understand the true meaning, why we need these qualities, and these qualities are not absolute, where they should be applied, and what are their foundations. These questions may let me understand more about values and let me make different choices in different situations. . . . This influence on me in terms of the change in values is long lasting. (Participant 14)

Similarly, Participant 17 was interested in philosophy and described how the learning from his philosophy courses here changed his attitudes when making decisions.

> There are comparatively big changes in my thoughts. I feel that taking philosophy courses helped. Like the philosophy course I took, like Plato and Aristotle, etc., they are good at discussing about life, justice, happiness. I feel that they are not necessarily right. I didn't feel that any philosopher is totally right, but I feel they promote thinking; for example, one thing Aristotle mentioned the highest good. . . . So what is the highest good? Aristotle says that happiness is the highest good. We pursue money maybe partially

because of money, but another reason is because money could bring us other things; those things are happiness. Money is only a process, happiness is the result of our pursuit. I thought it was reasonable when I heard this. After hearing these ideas, I was thinking about how I should see myself and what I should do. For example, friendship, familial affection, these are things that bring you happiness directly. . . . If you choose a job that you don't like, although it may bring you lots of money, the sense of happiness and satisfaction will be very different than those that friendship bring. These will affect my life and I have been thinking about these. . . . Now when I go through many things, face choices, or have things happen, I often ask myself: So what? Something happened, so what? What do I get if this happens? How will it change or help my life? (Participant 17)

Personal growth. Five out of seventeen participants said that they grew personally, including becoming more independent and developing more critical thinking.

Independence. Four participants commented that they became more independent. Participant 5 described her change toward more independence:

I feel it's independence. I became independent after coming here. I was not independent at all at home. Before coming here, I didn't know how to take a bus. I didn't learn anything about the school. Also, my dorm was chosen by my mom. She wanted me to live in a girls' dorm. So I didn't proactively study [taking] buses. Because I didn't realize that the school is so far away from Chicago. It's not like in China. If you're in China, and if you're in Shanghai, even if you don't know, you could still just find it. . . . At first I didn't expect that I'd move out of the dorm. At first I felt the dorm really fit me well. Because I could eat there, things like that. Later my schoolmates said that it's troublesome to handle water and electricity, as well as cooking. But I felt it's okay later. I

lived at the apartment for two years, one year longer than the usual length. Also, personally I prefer being an individual . . . to staying in a group. For example, my cell phone plan is an individual plan. . . . So I'm more independent. (Participant 5)

I feel that I have clearer thinking after going abroad. When I was in China. . . . My father was comparatively more strict with me. For example, he drove me to and from school every day. Sometimes if I hang out with friends, he'd specify a time of my returning home. One deep impression/memory I had was when I got together with friends for a birthday party in China. My friend invited many friends from various backgrounds, some already working. Usually a birthday party would easily last till 12am, so I told my father that maybe I could return at 11 p.m. My father said ok. I thought I was already one hour ahead and doing a great job, but my father called me at 10pm and told me that he was downstairs. . . . He felt it wouldn't be a safe time for a girl. (Participant 5)

Similarly, Participant 4 described her change in trying to become more independent financially after coming here. It seems that she adopted the individual responsibility that students here feel for their economic well-being. She saw students working in part-time jobs and so she decided to do likewise.

I forgot to mention one important thing. I feel that I should not spend parents' money after 18 years old. It is taken for granted that parents will pay for children in China. But here [I noticed] students were comparatively independent and did part-time jobs. So I started to do part-time jobs in order to earn pocket money. I was surprised when hearing from a local friend once that he needed to buy musical instrument and wanted to borrow money from parents. They are really independent. So I feel that I should no long spend my parents' money. (Participant 4)

While in China students expected their parent to give them money. After watching American students, this participant decided to adopt a more independent student role characteristic of the students in the U.S. Participant 11 described his change in becoming more independent.

> There are improvements both academically and in life. For example, now I could arrange my own travel plan. I return home safely after the trip. The trip lasted for a week, I felt good about it. It's the same thing academically. I will, for example, do exercises, I think on my own.. . . For example, I'd look on Google for electronic books, which saved lots of money. . . . Glad that I found them.

As students learned to do things on their own, they developed a sense of independence that they had not had while in China.

Critical thinking. Two participants said that they improved in critical thinking. Participant 11 said that one of his changes was the improvement of critical thinking:

> P: When I read the news, previously I'd be like, for example, Yansong Bai said bla bla. But now I would think not to believe what's spread on the Internet too much. It needs to be researched and checked, I'll search by myself.
>
> Me: Do you think it was influenced by your life here?
>
> P: I took Rhetoric 105 last year, which was on thinking and writing. It allowed me to analyze anything I saw, like what kind of meaning and relationship does something have. I can't tell you anything specific, but I feel it was [because of] this course.

Critical thinking is something that is not typically emphasized in Chinese education and these 2 students described critical thinking as something new that they were learning.

Academic habit changes. Three students talked about their academic habit changes, 2 on adjustment to frequent and strict due dates and 1 on teamwork.

Due dates. Two participants described changes in adhering to deadlines. They described their adjustment of strict deadlines. For example, participant 12 said:

The requirement on time is very strict. If you miss the deadline, it wouldn't do. I procrastinated and didn't have a sense of time, and learned a hard lesson. Then I missed some deadlines and was not allowed to submit again. At home, if you discuss, maybe it would work out. But here, you couldn't expect negotiations on this. (Participant 12)

Furthermore, participant 10 offered his understandings of deadlines as a representation of contract-based social norm. He used this concept to interpret the personal problems he encountered in practical situations, for example, renting a car, opening a bank account, and his car insurance.

Academically, I no longer procrastinate, since they [assignments] are due often. Because the culture here is more contract-based. It is like if you said anything, then you must complete something, and you have no excuse. . . . Actually I dislike this kind of commercialization in America. There are many hidden fees. Compulsory consumption is annoying. For example, when you rent a car, it may say 100 dollars. Yet you don't know where the dealer would earn a dozen dollars more. When you open an account, he told you that you could use it like this and that, but you found it was not like that. . . . Later you went to buy automobile insurance. I bought it through phone arrangement. Then I found they used a package with the worst selection. That is to say, they adjust it to a high price, but bad service. Our teachers said that around 25 percent of the spending of American insurance companies is on operating costs. That is to say, the reason why they have such a high operating cost is because they are finding ways to do the insurance package for you. The degree of privatization is high. The companies that make money are

made by the companies themselves, and those that don't make money are taken care of

by the government. Then the government is criticized. So finally the companies make

money, and the taxpayers pay for all of the projects that don't make money. That is to say,

overall companies take a leading position in this country, which is too much. But there

are many theories in politics. Some feel that the government shouldn't manage anything,

because the government only needs to make the information transparent. Later many may

feel that the government may participate in management or something like it. I think that

the government should take part in some, rather than like here because the ultimate

purpose of companies is to make profit. It doesn't have the sense of being responsible for

the public. Government might have a little sense of it. (Participant 10)

While this student does not mention a particular class, he seems to be using his knowledge of

business and economics to evaluate what he sees as he participates in U.S. culture.

Team work. Participant 11 asserted that he improved in the area of teamwork competence.

My team work [ability] has been improved. I didn't have experience with teamwork

before. So, although I was scored low by them [teammates], I feel good about myself. I

could contribute greatly when in groups, like contributing nuclear magnetic resonance

spectrum for the whole semester.

Lifestyle changes. Two participants commented on their life style changes. Participant 4

described her changes in personal clothing selections.

If there were any changes, it might be on clothes. Previously I liked colorful ones when I

was in China. But after coming here, in order to not be different from others, I started to

feel that the styles here are nice, too, simple and one doesn't need to think too much

about matching. (Participant 4)

Also, participant 17 mentioned lifestyle changes of doing exercise.

> Starting from last semester, I went to gym with schoolmates. People here are crazy about fitness. I'm not sure whether you've been to the lowest level of the gym. After entering, I was totally shocked. Their arms were thicker than their legs, their muscles were very strong. I went to exercise with schoolmates often this semester. Exercising is meaningful. I feel that fitness is comparatively lacking in China. Also they have some protein powder. There are not serious protein powders sold domestically in China. (Participant 17)

Social norms. Two participants commented on their observations about social norm changes. For instance, Participant 10 described:

> I have a big change myself. I didn't have a clear concept of weekend. Maybe university life wasn't this busy, or maybe there were many friends. Also I felt that hanging out and having some drinks during Monday Tuesday or Wednesday was quite normal [in China]. But now this concept is very clear. From Monday to Friday, it's all about study. Then it suddenly reaches the weekend, even if there are things to do during weekend, I wouldn't do it, since there are many places that don't open on weekends here in America. But many places in China are open during the weekends. Then you naturally, including the environment and your own feelings, you feel relaxed and having some leisure time and feel one should rest during weekends and then work from Monday through Friday. . . . I felt relaxed every day when I was in China; also you have work every day, and it's very convenient to have some food at 11 pm or 12am, unlike here. It's a very big difference in terms of life. (Participant 10)

Given his experience, he could shop or have entertainment services 24/7 in China, but he found store hours to be very different in America. Participant 12 expressed how he was lonely in an environment that was missing familiar social norms.

No change. Two participants commented that they did not change much while in the U.S. One said, "I feel I didn't change in the most part, because I'm the kind of person that sticks to my own principles. I feel that I shouldn't just follow the trends, so I don't feel I need to change my principles because of the culture here." She further explained with an example:

Do not do excessive drinking. A little bit is fine, but don't be like those people who [drink too much and then] pass out. But the popular culture here is, I'm not sure, the local students are like, you could fit in their party if you drink. But I feel that I'd rather not go to those parties if I need to be like this. . . . Before I went to college, I have a rough impression, I thought [drinking] is only for a small amount of people, but I didn't realize the majority were like this. Yes, I feel that if you don't want to drink his wine then just don't go. Or else you'll change yourself for them. I don't like drinking excessively myself after all. (Participant 4)

In summary, participants described their changes in terms of improvement in language skills; becoming more open-minded; personal growth in terms of independence, and critical thinking; value change; academic habit changes; lifestyle change, as well as sticking to their original values with little change.

Theme 5. Recommendations

Participants were asked if they had recommendations for the university related to future incoming students based on their experiences. Their recommendations included more help in selecting their major and choosing courses, an introduction to academic differences and

expectations of American colleges, more opportunities to work along with American students in studying, more information and networking opportunities for transfer students, more web services, and keeping the dorms open during holidays.

Major selections and course selections. Five students mentioned that they hoped the university would provide more information on choosing a major and selecting courses, especially during earlier years. In addition, four of them called for more advising help on course selections.

> In terms of course selection, because I came right after high school in China where I didn't need to select courses. . . . I didn't adjust well when I first came. I didn't know how to make reasonable and beneficial choices [on this]. Last semester, I first selected several courses and they turned out not working for me, then I dropped several, then I re-adjusted several times until I had the final list. If it was planned well, then it would be less a panic situation. (Participant 2)

Similarly, participant 12 mentioned: "My department only has three advisors, so every advisor has a lot of students. You couldn't talk with him/her for long, maybe around 15 minutes and that's all. It's just talking with the advisor before class selections."

Difference in academic systems and expectations of U.S. colleges. Two participants raised the issue that academic differences made it hard to transit smoothly during the first semester and recommended university providing more assistance on this. For example, participant 14 mentioned:

> Another aspect is on the academic system. For example, in America, we didn't know that there would be quizzes, midterms, and things like these. For example, how to take notes in class, or how to bla bla, yeah, difference in study, because here, well, maybe not here, since college and high school are different to start with. In college, they won't lead you to

study like in high school in China. Many times [in the U.S.?] the studying depends on

yourself. After his lecture, like his 45 minutes' lecture, you need to spend lots of time

after class [studying]. [Participant 14]

He further commented:

I don't know whether they have TA sessions in universities in China. Did they

distinguish TA sessions and lecture sessions in China? So we need to differentiate TA

sessions and lecture sessions. Because they were targeted to different things. Also, how to

integrate into discussions, there are differences, too.

Also, he said,

I don't know about other countries. Like Korea, they have many international students

here, too. But I don't know how different their high school systems are compared to here.

But I feel that if the Chinese student population reached a certain, a high number, there

could be, maybe one person at ISSS responsible for helping to introduce differences

between Chinese and American academic work. It would be very helpful. Especially for

students from Mainland China, it is a big population, if there is a person specialized in

this, it could be very helpful. Because if it was too broad, it might not be focused enough

to be helpful, it would just be general information. (Participant 6)

More opportunities for working and studying at the same time. Three students

mentioned that there were limitations to looking for jobs for international students. When they

wanted to find internships associated with majors that they study, they faced fewer opportunities

than their American peers. For example, a student in Engineering mentioned that he wanted to

land an internship but could not partially because of visa limitations.

Transfer students. Three students offered recommendations that more assistance be provided based on transferred students' special circumstances. For example, participant 10 described:

I felt that transferred students were comparatively in an awkward position. Transfer students are not like those who are freshmen. It felt like it is like my second marriage, it's a bit awkward. First, most of the transfer students were in the Department of Economics. Chinese students like to learn about business, but the Business School doesn't recruit transfer students, so all of them are in the Department of Economics. Also, transfer students were someone in between. They were not like freshmen, nor are they like graduate students. Once you come, for example, everyone is studying this and that, and there is a big circle of friends. But I felt the transferred students were in a very small circle. Like some of the information, for example, for one transfer, he might be already at his second or third year, and some of the information is no longer the best fit for them. Some of the information is serving new students. When they introduced the school to you, they usually focused on the ones who just came, like freshmen. Or they introduce some information to the students in the third year or fourth year about finding jobs. Then transferred students are in the middle and a somewhat awkward position. I felt the services from campus for them was comparatively less helpful. (Participant 10)

He further explained: "Yes, there were [orientations] that everybody could participate…… There were [orientations] for graduate students and undergraduate students. But there were not any for transferred undergraduate students…… I felt that the transferred students were in an awkward position. First, there were a comparatively small

number of us. Second, we were sparse. Third, there were no opportunities for us to get

together. So it is a bit awkward situation for us. (Participant 10)

Information sharing for this group of students could be beneficial in helping them orient

themselves into the new campus life. Also, potential social activities or connection resources

may be helpful for peer information sharing among the group.

Web services. Some participants also commented on the web services that they used at

the University. One student mentioned the need for a coherent course management system.

Participant 14 commented:

One troublesome issue is that the assignments of different courses are at different places.

They use different webpages, so it was confusing. Some use Compass, some use Learn,

some use Wiki (Engineering), and some use others. It looks like every department has

their own websites. . . . The assignments were put at different locations, so you needed to

turn in assignments at different places. Also the announcements were on different pages,

and you couldn't find all the course contents on one website. (Participant 14)

In addition, another student suggested using the Internet to help organize workshops for

international students. He mentioned:

I went to their OPT workshop. But I wasn't able to attend until going to their office

multiple times, because they didn't accept reservations. Then every time before you enter,

like you arrive early, then they give you a number, but they didn't give the number based

on when you came, but rather randomly. So sometimes there were people who arrived

early but didn't get the number. There were also people who were busy every day with

classes. If the session starts at 11 a.m. and he arrived at 10 a.m. every day, but the

numbers were already out. So actually it would be better to put the quota available online

for students to reserve, and then students could come based on their own schedule. Participant (7)

Dorms closing on vacations are not convenient. Four participants mentioned the big inconvenience for international students when the dorms close during spring and fall breaks. For instance, participant 5 said:

> One thing I don't like is that dorms close even during spring breaks. At that time, I had no home to go back to. I felt very lonely. There was no place to eat since the cafeteria was closed, too, and no meal plan. I felt very sorry for myself. Then during times like this, I'd have trips out with others. I had no choice. At that time, I felt this wasn't good. . . . There are assignments that you need to do. After moving out [of the dorms to an apartment] there was more flexibility in terms of arranging my own time. (Participant 5)

Similarly, the other participants mentioned that it was inconvenient for her to move in and out frequently in one year, which was one of the reasons why she choose to live off campus.

In general, students proposed recommendations on more help in selecting their majors and choosing courses, an introduction to academic differences and expectations of American colleges, more opportunities to work along with American students in studying, more information and networking opportunities for transfer students, more web services, and keeping the dorms open during holidays.

In summary, this chapter discussed the findings including the participants' motivations of studying in America, their impressions and perceived academic differences, the challenges and frustrations, the changes they experienced, and their recommendations for the hosting institution.

Chapter Five

Discussion

This study was conducted within the larger context of a soaring number of Chinese undergraduate students studying in U.S. higher education institutions in recent years. For this study, 20 undergraduate students in a Mid-western university were interviewed to study their motivations for coming to the U.S. to study, the benefits and burdens of their experiences, and their recommendations to the university for ways to better serve Chinese students. The theoretical frameworks used for this study were expectation confirmation theory and social-cultural theories, including those from Dewey (1897, 1916, 1922, 1938) and Wenger (1998). In this section, I will analyze the results in the context of these theoretical frameworks, discuss limitations of the study, and suggest recommendations for further research.

Research on Chinese Students Studying in the U.S.

Based on previous research, one of the commonly given reasons for Chinese students studying in the United States is the positive image of American education in China (Brzezinski, 1994; Chen, 1988; Wang, 1992; Zhao, 2005; Yun, 2009). The findings with the Chinese undergraduate students in this study supported this. A positive image of American education was the number one factor mentioned by the students in this study in terms of their decisions to come to the United States to study. Family, friends and peers' influence were also listed as top reasons; this concurs with research studies by Cao (1997) and Li (1993). At the same time, participants offered other reasons for coming to the U.S. to study, including intentions for personal growth and getting away from parents.

The participants discussed challenges that they faced, such as:

1. language barriers

2. feeling disorientated

3. demands of busy schedules

4. being required to raise their hands in class

5. challenges of group work

6. difficulties of interacting and socializing with American schoolmates

7. differences between their expectations and the reality of life after arriving

8. financial pressures [for one student]

9. limitations for international students on working and internship opportunities

These findings support previous research on the challenges of language deficiency and students' lack of familiarity with the American educational systems. For example, Yan and Berliner (2011) examined academic adjustment difficulties by interviewing 18 participants of 22-38 years old and proposed several factors that contributed to students' academic stress: "Culture and education disparities between China and America, together with Chinese students' language deficiencies, ineffective interactions with American faculty members, and their high motivations to achieve" (p. 939). My participants discussed financial pressures in a different way. Among the 20 interviewees in my study, all but one of them said that finances were not a concern for them because their family took care of that. Only one student said financial pressure was a major concern for him and he needed to graduate as soon as possible because of this. Another student felt financial concerns were somewhat of a limitation for his life in the U.S., but not a major stressor. But it could be a potential problem if their parents' situations changed in ways that would jeopardize their financial situation in the middle of their study. This finding also suggests that these students came from rather affluent families.

This study focused on Chinese undergraduate students and thus contributes to the limited

literature on Chinese undergraduate students; the current published research is focused primarily on graduate students. This study also provided Chinese undergraduate students' perspectives on the changes they experienced during their studies in the U.S. and their recommendations to the hosting institution.

Expectation Confirmation Theory

The students chose to study in undergraduate programs in America primarily because they had a good image of American education. They mentioned that they were influenced by what other people said about the United States, the good image of the country presented in the media, their expectation of better educational opportunities, and one student mentioned the benefit of getting away from his parents. There are four main constructs of the Expectancy and Confirmation Theory: expectations, performance, disconfirmation, and satisfaction (Oliver, 1977, 1980). According to this theory, comparisons of perceived performance and expectations will cause a positive or negative confirmation, which can lead to satisfactions/dissatisfactions (Oliver, 1977, 1980). Before coming to the U.S., these Chinese undergraduate students had "preconceived ideas" (Oliver, 1980) of studying in the undergraduate programs. According to this theory, if the information is insufficient or not correct when making the decision, students may find the existing reality does not match with their expectations. Confusion and dissatisfaction may arise from this mismatch. As discussed in chapter four, some participants recalled that they were expecting to have lots of American friends while studying abroad, but in reality they were actually hanging out more with Chinese friends. Some thought that they might have relaxed and free lives, but there were lots of assignments that kept them busy. Some thought they were here to learn and learning would be their only task, but actually they needed to handle all things in living in the U.S. (living and travel arrangements, food preparation, social

activities) in addition to the course work. Some of them thought that study would be easy in the U.S. But on arrival, it seemed that they were not sure what to expect, how "success" was defined in the particular programs, how to navigate the academic system, and how to socialize with their American counterparts. Many of my participants seemed to come without thorough preparation about what to expect when living in this new environment, which led to disorientation in many aspects of their campus lives. Some adjusted well after their early days on campus, but some struggled for a longer period.

The Expectation Confirmation Theory was useful in thinking about my participants' initial expectations and the realities they faced after they arrived at the university. Next I turn to using two sociocultural theories.

Sociocultural Theories

For the interpretation of my findings, I draw on two sociocultural theories. The first is situated within a social learning theory and I use the concept of a Community of Practice. This is helpful in framing my participants' experiences as they adjusted to the new academic programs as incoming students to a new Community of Practice. Second I use Dewey's theoretical ideas about experience and education to interpret my participants' learning experiences within a new university setting.

Community of practice. A Community of Practice (CoP) is defined by Wenger (1998) as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." The three key characteristics of CoP are (a) shared interest and meaning, (b) the community, and (c) practice (Wenger, 1998). The concept of a CoP is deeply rooted in social learning theories. It emphasizes the learners' participation in a community. Wenger (1998) argues that "participation here refers not just to local events of

engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (p. 4). When Chinese students come to the United States to study they are entering a new community of practice that encourages, even requires, that they be active participants in a new social community.

Wenger (1998) describes ways in which a community develops its practices within a social context, which he labels the community's repertoire.

> The repertoire of a community of practice includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice. (p. 83)

The students in this study had to learn the repertoire of the community they were joining, in this case, a foreign university's education system. They faced challenges in learning this repertoire, for example, how teachers and students related to each other, how to work with the TAs and how to get their support, how to participate in classroom discussions, and how to make presentations.

Students were also challenged by speaking English sufficiently well to communicate in order to participate in this community. Many of the students started to learn English as their first foreign language when they were young in China. But in the new schooling system, the first challenge they met was still language. Students described how their speaking, listening, reading, and writing in English influenced their assignment completion, getting along with roommates and friends, and solving problems when they needed to contact people on the phone. Those who were more fluent in English seemed to have a smoother process of adapting to the new repertoire.

But language was only the first step in fully participating in the schooling discourse in their U.S. undergraduate programs. As some of the participants reported, they were not sure about how to do presentations or interviews in ways that were defined as "successful." For example, one of the participants who was a freshman in the Business College described her experience of interviewing for two positions for two different business clubs and she failed. She reflected on the process and thought it was because, first, she was not fluent in English, and second, she did not know how to present herself effectively. Also, another participant mentioned although she felt the courses were very easy for her, presentations and socializing with peers were areas that she wanted to improve. When she was preparing for interviews for internships, she realized that she did not have experience with writing a resume. So she tried to learn "how to" participate in the interview process in the U.S. During the process, she was trying to learn the norms and ways of doing things in this community of practice. She tried to fully participate in the academic and social discourse in the business school.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of "legitimate peripheral participation" was useful in interpreting my results. Legitimate peripheral participation describes the process of how newcomers become part of a community of practice and their relationships with the old timers (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Typically newcomers gradually gain full participation or they leave the community. It took most participants time before they felt like they were full participants at the university; some never felt fully integrated.

Lave and Wenger (1991) extend what it means to participate in a community of practice by contrasting "talking about" and "talking within" a community:

Talking within (e.g., exchanging information necessary to the progress of ongoing activities) and talking about (e.g., stories, community lore). Inside the shared practice,

both forms of talk fulfill specific functions. . . . For newcomers then, the purpose is not to

learn from talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation: it is to learn to talk

as a key to legitimate peripheral participation. (p. 109)

An example of this is the two students who used what they learned about western philosophies in approaching life and making decisions. For example, one student discussed what he learned in the philosophy courses on how Aristotle was thinking about the "highest good." He then applied it to how he viewed things and made decisions in his life as an Asian person. Another student shared his changed perceptions of "love," using the philosophical perspectives he acquired in a philosophy course. He described how it influenced his point of view about his relationship with his girlfriend. He also expressed how the concepts he learned from western philosophy guided him in terms of making life decisions. For these two students, it was not only about learning philosophy, i.e., learning from others to participate in western philosophy's discourse community but also about actually using what they learned in the community in their decision making processes and life practices. They actually "talked within" the western philosophy's discourse community instead of just "talking about" it.

Participants tried to become full participants in the communities of practices here. An example of a participant trying to move from peripheral to full participation in the community of practice was a student who described his efforts in participating in various campus clubs at the beginning of the semester. He was trying to be proactive by getting in touch with peers in the clubs with similar interests, into order to form a beginning circle of friends. He eventually felt fully integrated with both American and Chinese friends, but this had taken him several years of being in the U.S. He had completed high school in America, which he thought helped him in preparing for college life. Even for a student with prior experience in the U.S., it took him time

to move from the periphery to fuller social participation in the university's community of practice.

Moving from the periphery was evident in a participant's description of how she learned skills in writing memos by the end of one course. She was intimidated at the beginning, because she did not know how to write memos of the required length and what was considered a "good" memo for her course. What she did was to be the first to arrive at the TA office hours in order to secure a spot, asking questions constantly until she learned the preferred approach to writing memos. She commented that she felt that writing memos was very easy by the end of the course. Throughout the process, she adapted to using the English words to express herself, organized her writing in a way that were expected and valued in American schooling systems, and became part of the practice of the community. This was another example of moving from the periphery to a more central participatory place in this particular community of practice.

Similarly, there was another student who shared her experience of navigating the new environment. She described how she got lost when she first arrived and spent hours finding her way home. She did not know what items to buy for the dorms but relied on help from a relative's friend during her first days. She did not know how to cook and was in the dorm for 2 years for that reason. But through the years of studying and living in the U.S., she changed gradually. She explored her own ways of finding career opportunities when the department did not have enough resources. Eventually, she could easily handle apartment renting or planning trips to other cities all by herself. She had developed more skills and seemed to be confident in negotiating meaning within the community. She had comparatively strong English abilities before coming to the United States, because of her own interest in the language and efforts in China to learn English by organizing English clubs, communicating with American teachers, etc. In our interview, she

recalled the days in college when she was chatting with her dorm mates, happily sitting at the door of the room during the first week of school. She realized after arriving in the U.S. that her language skills needed improvement for more complex conversations. Now she was in the fourth year of her program and in the process of confidently stepping into further university participation. This is a detailed description of moving from the peripheral to more involved participation in university practices.

It was clear from the data that most students clearly felt positioned on the periphery when they first arrived. Students were confused about where to go and what to do next. One student described his confusion of finding classrooms during the first day or understanding the purpose of TA office hours; for example, not participating the in office hours although he had questions, not being able to catch up with his assignments, and struggling to manage his time effectively. He decided to switch his major after one year of studying and was in the process of looking for answers in doing the undergraduate program in the U.S. He felt it took time to learn how things worked and to figure out what he wanted to do in his studies.

Experience and education. For Dewey, experience is crucial for learning. He suggests that the "process of living together educates" (1916, p. 7). People learn through languages and social norms in the social context that they experience. Dewey argued that education should be unstructured, flexible, and student-centered. In his book, *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) argues against education that is static and lacking a holistic understanding of students. Rather, he calls for the necessity of progressive education and a theory of experience. For Dewey (1938), experience is constructed socially and based on the interplay of two principles— continuity and interaction. The Chinese undergraduate students' *continuity* of learning was evident in how their previous experience of living and studying in China came with them as they

entered a new university in the United States. Then they *interacted* with the new environment, including many aspects—the schooling system and the expectations and communications of the faculty members, peers, and others—as they adjusted to living and studying in the U.S. Through these interactions, students encountered problems and situations that ignited their motivations to solve and reflect on addressing them. Interactions with the new environment provided an opportunity for the students' to solve problems through inquiry. Dewey argued that inquiry is an attitude toward life; it is the process of solving problems. Reflection is the thinking about what's going on during that inquiry.

Chinese undergraduate students brought their past Chinese living experiences with them when landing in the United States. Their living contexts in the United States had different language, norms, and customs. In the "process of living together" with their peers, and while interacting with classmates, faculty, staff, and administrators in a new environment, they perceived many differences and had to make choices and solve problems. In this interactive process, their experiences were educative if they engaged in inquiry that led to learning. The new contexts provided a rich context for an inquiry process for students, the students faced these problems and tried to deal with them in productive ways, in ways that solve problems through inquiry and result in learning. Dewey's theories helped provide a dynamic social perspective for interpreting the Chinese undergraduate students' experiences studying in the United States.

Participants shared what they learned and changed while in a U.S. institution. For example, several participants mentioned that they developed time management skills because college life was very busy and they had to arrange everything well to navigate campus life to make it more meaningful for them. Another example would be things that the students felt that they developed, like one student mentioned that he improved in critical thinking after taking a

writing course. After that course experience, no matter what he heard, he would think and evaluate by himself before believing the information. Also, another student described that she started to work and earn money for herself because one of her American friends was doing that and she felt it was good to try to support herself.

Sometimes students discontinued the learning process. An example of this is a student's attempts to get along with American peers. When she first came to the United States, her intention was to get to know many American friends. So she deliberately chose a dorm with an American roommate. But she said that she was not successful in interacting with her roommate because her English was poor at that time, and she did not understand the TV series that her roommate invited her to watch. So she retreated from her attempts "to be" an American in the students' community and returned to the Chinese students' community. Later, she tried again but this inquiry process was discontinued after an unsuccessful trial. So it is no longer part of her learning process. Later she decided to resume it, so a new inquiry process was on its way.

Dewey argues that people learn from reflective thinking and that this is an important part of the inquiry process. He maintained

> Reflective thinking, in distinction from other operations to which we apply the name of thought, involves: (a) a state of perplexity, hesitation, doubt; and (b) an act of search or investigation directed toward bringing to light further facts which serve to corroborate or to nullify the suggested belief. (Dewey, 1910, p. 9)

For example, one participant shared her surprise after hearing from one of her friends that he needed to borrow money from parents in order to get a musical instrument. Like the previous student, this experience made her question her own dependence on her family's financial support. She decided to start doing a part-time job.

Students may also change their *habits* after their experiences of studying in a new place. Dewey claims that habits are not necessarily a bad thing but rather what you carry over from past experiences. They are activities and ways of acting that are done without deliberate thought. Yet many times learning happens when habits are interrupted and when things do not work for us in the usual way. When the students came, they immediately experienced a new environment. They had to change some of their "habits" in order to fit into the academic practices or adhere to the new norms. If they set about it in an inquiry mode, it turned into learning experiences; for example thinking about questions like "what should I do? why should I do it?" and this opened new possibilities. Some completed the stages of changing habits and picked up new ones; some stuck with the old ones, proactively or based on negative reactions.

One example of changing habits was about raising hands in class. Participants mentioned that in Chinese schools they were not required to raise hands to ask questions or for discussions in class. But when they came to the U.S. academic setting, discussions and raising hands to answer or ask questions happened often in many classrooms. The professors expected students to raise their hands and many of the instructors included participation as part of the grading scales in the syllabus. The Chinese students were required to adapt to the new set of practices. For example, the student who did not raise her hand voluntarily until her senior year described her experience of having the "habit" of not raising hands in class but just listening when she was in the school environment in China. Finally she tried raising her hand in a fourth year, and then she became comfortable with this practice. This was an example of changing a habit because she was situated in a community that had different norms and practices. This new set of expectations challenged her previous habits of school behavior and led to a change and learning for her.

Overall, Chinese undergraduates' experiences in the academic university were learning

experiences. By being reflective thinkers, the students benefitted from the environments that presented challenges and frustrations. These challenges required them to adopt an inquiry approach to learning new things, new practices within this university community of practice.

Limitations of the Study

Participants of this study were attending the same research university in Midwestern U.S. The students in the undergraduate programs in other four-year universities may have different backgrounds, expectations, experiences, and recommendations. Also, while the snowball sampling method was helpful for the researcher in getting access to the undergraduate students, it may have limited the range of students the researcher reached, e.g., many of the students knew each other so my sample may have had more similarities than a more random sample would have. Moreover, the data were collected during one semester, Spring 2013. Students' perceptions may have changed overtime, although the students who were in the U.S. longer reflected on their previous experiences. Although students described changes they had experienced so far, longitudinal studies would have been useful to investigate how students changed over longer periods of time.

Recommendations and Future Research

The participants offered recommendations for institutions hosting Chinese undergraduate students. Based on their suggestions, I propose the following recommendations based on the students' comments and research findings.

Orientations. Discuss and provide assistance with the skills expected for success in the undergraduate programs, including how to make presentations, do interviews, participate discussions and argumentations. This kind of orientation would be particularly helpful for first-year Chinese students to help them understand the expectations and transiting to the new

academic community more quickly and smoothly. Some of the challenges for my participants were culturally specific. It may be that orientations for particular cultural groups would be more helpful than generic orientations. Since there may be different expectations for how to be successful in different programs, these participants thought it would be helpful to have more department/program specific orientations. The students also suggested that there were cultural differences that no one helped them to understand, i.e., how norms in classrooms are different from teaching in China, the expectation that students should talk in class and ask questions, and strategies for how to do this. It would also probably be helpful to do a student needs analysis or evaluation to assist the planning of orientation programs.

Toward a cosmopolitan curriculum. One suggestion that was raised by this research is to provide a more cosmopolitan curriculum. The word "cosmopolitan" is derived from the Greek word kosmopolitês, which means "citizens of the world" *(*Kleingeld & Brown*, 2013).* In terms of a cosmopolitan view related to education, Hansen (2009) argues that *"*The recent turn to cosmopolitanism as a topic of research comes at a moment in the world when individual and cultural differences are meeting, daily, in almost every setting imaginable" (p. 2). My participants were part of a trend worldwide of students going abroad to study. Students from many countries participate in study abroad programs for a month to a year; students also travel outside their country to attend a university for several years in order to get a degree. My participants were daily meeting people different from them in many ways—language, culture, norms, values, and traditions. They also came in contact with students and faculty from many other countries. This exposure requires a response. Hansen (2009) further proposes,

> Cosmopolitanism represents a creative response on the part of people to the realities of
>
> globalization and cultural change. In this response, people learn how to develop what I

call reflective openness to the world combined with reflective loyalty to the local. . . .

cosmopolitanism means learning to inhabit the "crossroads" where individual and

cultural differences meet. It means learning to learn from other people, a process much

richer and more enduring than merely "tolerating" them, as important as that aim can be.

(2009, p. 1)

Students on a large campus are situated in the midst of globalization and cultural change. My

study documents how these Chinese students responded to this intercultural context. Some of

them reached out to others different from themselves; many found this difficult and retreated to

being mostly with other Chinese students. Appiah (2006) argues from a cosmopolitan

perspective:

We should learn about people in other places, take an interest in their histories, their

civilizations, their arguments, their errors, their achievements, not because that will bring

us into agreement, but because it will help us get used to one another. If that is the aim,

then the fact that we have all these opportunities for disagreement about values need not

put us off. Understanding one another may be hard; it can certainly be interesting. (p. 78)

There was very little in my data to suggest that my participants were getting used to one another.

They often found American students different and curious, sometimes difficult to understand and

at times they wondered whether they were being treated differently as Chinese students than

would have been the case if they were Americans. There was little in the data to suggest that they

had opportunities to resolve disagreements about values, except to talk with other Chinese

students. There were some examples where students learned something in a course and then tried

to apply it to their lives; for example the student who was rethinking his understanding of "love"

after taking a philosophy class. This was clearly cross-cultural learning but it was not

deliberately interactive nor were there comparisons made between Asian and Western concepts of love.

The lack of examples that would suggest cosmopolitan thinking or learning in their courses may suggest a lack of the use of cosmopolitan curriculum in their studies. The researcher recommends embedding a more cosmopolitan perspective into the curriculum design in university campuses that host international students. If the goal of cosmopolitanism is to "learning to learn from other people, a process much richer and more enduring than merely 'tolerating' them," as Hansen suggests, then a more deliberately designed cosmopolitan curriculum would be needed. Such a curriculum would promote reciprocal learning and would consider the large number of international students a valued asset in the potential learning for U.S. students studying on the same campus. International students would be seen as more than just recipients of the norms and learning content of the foreign culture in which they are studying. This approach would enrich local students' learning experience as well as help international students adjust to the hosting environment, since channels for dialogues and reflections would be promoted.

Researchers throughout the world have recently been discussing cosmopolitanism theories (Brown, 2009; Halldenius, 2010; Hansen, 2010; Kleingeld, 2011, Louden, 2012; Pinar, 2009; Roth & Chris, 2012). Ryan (2011) argues for a cosmopolitan approach for British universities where international students occupy a big percentage of the student population. She believes that cosmopolitan curriculum should be embedded in pedagogical approaches to promote mutual learning, which would be beneficial in the context of the internationalization of higher education in the U.K. (Ryan, 2011).

Singh (2009) argues that one of the challenges to integrating a cosmopolitan curricular approach is that western instructors of Chinese students have stereotypic "western imaging of mainland Chinese people." In order to develop more authentic understandings, he promotes reciprocal learning and suggests an "examination of China's diverse heritage of intercultural disputation." He further explains: "This means bringing this intellectual capital to the production and flow of research-based knowledge as much as the dialogic education of transnational educational researchers" (p. 187). This research suggests that both Chinese and American students would learn more if universities utilized a dialogic cosmopolitan approach where Chinese students could participate as active participants in a more reciprocal curriculum.

In summary, cosmopolitan curriculum promotes dialogues and reciprocal learning that could be beneficial for all students, especially given the internationalization of higher institutions in western countries. Chinese undergraduate students bring their knowledge and experience to the campuses. It would be helpful to create situations for reciprocal learning where international students could engage in dialogues about their home curriculum and schooling. The participants in this study did not mention anything that suggests they participated in curriculum with a cosmopolitan design. Only one student mentioned a course on Eastern culture that she selected that helped her to understand and interpret cultural differences. The absence of the students' responses related to a cosmopolitan approach raises the question of whether it is practiced in any of the classes attended by the participants in this study and/or whether there is awareness of this approach among instructors. I recommend the consideration of this approach to curriculum design and pedagogy, which could be valuable in promoting reflection and dialogue for local faculty and students as well as international students and could ultimately benefit the learning of the larger campus.

Social interaction

It would be helpful to provide more social opportunities for international students with American students. The participants in my study were looking forward to communicating with their American peers but this did not happen often or regularly. More programmatic help with this would be good. One possible example could be a "cultural ambassador" program to help international students settle-in during the first several weeks/months. Having a "cultural ambassador" would help to create a bridge for international students with the local culture and community, providing a support for initial contact with the community of practice and introduce the words, routines, and rituals commonly used in the community. This may help provide support for new participants to feel safe and comfortable asking questions as well as fostering conversations and mutual understanding among community of practice participants and new participants.

Transfer students who are also international students have particular needs because they are coming into programs where other students, even the Chinese students, are likely to be more knowledgeable about the norms and procedures because they have been on the campus longer. Two of the transfer students in this study felt it was difficult to learn what they needed to know in order to participate fully in the educational programs and social contexts.

Institutions should also consider providing merit-based scholarships to international students. This may help attracts those young talents who are brilliant academically but not financially well off. There are also many ways in which dorms could be structured to better meet the needs of international students, especially when they first arrive to the institution.

Further research

My research suggests further topics that could be further explored. For example, in terms

of the students' motivations of studying in the United States, the following questions could be explored:

1. Why did they have a good image of the educational systems and the country? Where did they get this information?

2. How are the motivations to enter undergraduate programs different from their American peers?

3. Are there differences in their overall academic impressions and challenges between female and male students, students from different majors, and students with different years of experience in the U.S.?

4. What were the reasons for Chinese undergraduate students who withdrew from the programs?

5. What are the reasons for the choices and experiences of students who did not study hard and end up with low GPAs?

Future research on program evaluation would be useful to see ways in which programs are meeting the needs of international students in general, and Chinese students in particular. As new programs are created to make campus more receptive to international students, these should be studied to see if they are achieving the desired goals of a more integrated and cosmopolitan-oriented campus.

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