Academic and Cultural Experiences of Chinese Students at an American University: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Each year a substantial number of Chinese students come to the Unites States to pursue advanced education. This study examined academic and cultural experiences of ten Chinese students at one university in the Unites States. Specifically, it looked at the challenges faced by Chinese students both at school and outside of school, their social interaction, and their attitudes towards assimilation into American culture. Interviews were conducted with ten Chinese students and two American professors at a large state university. Participant observation was also used to gather supplemental information. Chinese participants identified oral English and class discussion as their major challenges at school. They also reported limited interaction with Americans. Nevertheless, most of them highly praised the American educational system and considered their experiences in the United States rewarding. In addition, Chinese participants expressed mixed perceptions of American culture and different attitudes towards cultural assimilation.

***Keywords*:** Chinese students, academic experience, cultural experience, cross-cultural adaptation, social interaction, American university

Introduction

When I was a child, I dreamed that one day I would study abroad. Fortunately, my dream came true. More than 10 years ago, I moved to the United States to pursue my master's degree in Communication. After years of graduate education I eventually became a college professor. Looking back at my days in the graduate school, I could still recall many moments when I was struggling for certainty, confidence, and competence as well as questing for my identity. My experience was not unique to many Chinese students studying in the United States. Each year a substantial number of Chinese students come to the U.S. to pursue higher education. During the academic year of 2008-2009 there were 98, 235 Chinese students studying in the United States, accounting for14.6% of the international student population in the U.S., which was the second largest group of international students ("Open Doors 2009"). Completing graduate education in one's home country is not an easy task, and pursuing a graduate degree in a different country will certainly add an entirely new set of challenges. Chinese students have to overcome a number of barriers in order to achieve success in a foreign land. Since the mid-20th century numerous studies have been done to examine the experiences of international students in the United States. Previous research mainly explored challenges encountered by international students (e.g., Forstat, 1951; Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007), factors affecting

international student adjustment (e.g., Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Morris, 1960; Perkins, Perkins, Guglielmino, & Reiff, 1977; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Surdam & Collins, 1984; Wang, 2009; Wilkening, 1965; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Zimmermann, 1995), and psychological well-being of international students (e.g., Olivas & Li, 2006; Shin & Abell, 1999; Wei, Ku, Russell, Mallinckrodt & Liao, 2008). Among the small number of studies focusing on Chinese students, most discussed difficulties faced by Chinese students, while very few looked at Chinese students' leisure experience (Li & Stodolska, 2006) and their attitudes toward cultural adaptation. Therefore, this study aimed to explore both positive and negative experiences of Chinese students at an American university in terms of three dimensions: academic experience, social interaction, and cultural adaptation. To be more specific, I first discuss how Chinese students think about the American higher education and the major challenges they encountered at school. Second, I look at how Chinese students spent their free time and the extent of interaction they had with Americans. Third, I explore their perceptions of American culture and attitudes toward cultural adaptation.

Literature Review

This section begins with an introduction of the theoretical framework for this study – theories on uncertainty reduction and cross-cultural adaptation, and then reviews empirical studies on Chinese students in the United States.

Theoretical Framework

When Chinese students moved to the United States for educational advancement, they threw themselves into a completely new milieu. Especially at the early stage most of them were not sure of how to speak and behave appropriately. Under this circumstance, Chinese students had to find ways to reduce their uncertainty in order to make a smooth transition to the new environment. According to Berger and Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory, when an individual experiences uncertainty, he or she is motivated to seek information in order to reduce the ambiguity or "increase predictability about the behavior of both themselves and others in the interaction" (p. 100). In particular, communication can help people accomplish these goals. Based on Berger and Calabrese's (1975) work, Gudykunst (1988) proposed an anxiety/uncertainty management theory. He assumed that during intergroup or intercultural communication there are always in-group and out-group members (strangers). At the initial stage of interaction a stranger will experience both anxiety (feeling insecure) and uncertainty (not knowing how to behave), and he or she is hyper-aware of differences. When the cultural gap becomes wider, the stranger will experience a higher level of anxiety and uncertainty. In particular, moderate levels of anxiety and uncertainty could motivate people to better adjust to the host environment, but excessive anxiety and uncertainty will lead to failure in adjustment or communication (Gudykunst, 2005). Gudykunst (2005) also identified some factors related to uncertainty/anxiety management, including self-concept, motivation to interact, reactions to hosts, social categorization of hosts, situational processes, connections with hosts, ethical interactions and conditions in a host culture (p. 419).

To Chinese students, studying in the United States "involves more than simply taking classes;" they also need to "adapt or adjust to a socio-cultural system which is different from their own" (Zimmermann, 1995, p. 322). As one of the most distinguished scholars of intercultural communication, Kim (2001) looked at cross-cultural adaptation from an integrative perspective. She argued that cross-cultural adaptation is an interactive process that involves both the newcomers and the host environment as well as the interplay of acculturation (of the new culture) and de-culturation (of the old culture). In particular, Kim and Ruben (1988) presented a stress-adaptation-growth model of intercultural transformation, which demonstrates a cyclic and continual "draw-back-to-leap" (p. 311) pattern. In other words, stress, adaptation, and growth together define the internal dynamics of the newcomer's intercultural communication experience. Kim (2001) also emphasized the importance of communication in connecting strangers with the host society. She argued that successful adaptation will only occur when the strangers' internal communication systems sufficiently overlap with those of the natives.

Empirical Studies on Chinese International Students

Among the limited number of studies on Chinese students in the United States, Sun and Chen (1999) identified three dimensions of difficulties experienced by Mainland Chinese students in the U.S. They were: language ability, cultural awareness, and academic achievements. Specifically, the major obstacles in the academic and social life of Chinese students included lack of English proficiency, cultural differences, and unfamiliarity with the American classroom environment and university facilities.

Yan and Berliner (2009) examined the stressful aspects of Chinese students' academic life in the U.S. They found that most participants experienced a high level of academic stress. The factors contributing to such kind of stress included strong motivation to achieve academic success, ineffective interactions with American professors, lack of English proficiency and educational disparities between China and the U.S.

Since English deficiency is a major obstacle for Chinese students studying in North America, Huang (2006) analyzed the academic listening challenges of Chinese students at an American university. He found that Chinese participants were most confident about their reading ability and grammar, which might explain why they achieved high scores on TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). Their weakest areas were speaking and listening skills. Chinese students were also not very confident about their pronunciation, vocabulary and writing skills.

Li and Stodolska (2006) chose a different research focus by exploring the leisure experience of Chinese graduate students in the United States. Chinese students in general recognized the importance of leisure and enjoyed the feeling of relaxation. However, their leisure behaviors were constrained due to heavy study and work load, limited social network and visa restrictions. As a result, most Chinese students interviewed were not satisfied with their current leisure life in the U.S. and had strong nostalgia for their life in China.

Some researchers explored Chinese students' sojourning experience from a psychological perspective. For instance, Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006) examined the association between psychological attachment (to significant others in the home culture) and acculturation of

Chinese international students. They found that those with a higher level of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were more likely to experience socio-cultural adjustment difficulty and psychological stress than those with attachment security (low attachment anxiety and low attachment avoidance). They also found that students who adopted Western values and life styles seemed to better adjust to the American environment. Additionally, Wei et al. (2007) noted that acculturative stress is positively associated with depression among Chinese students at a Midwestern university. Students with high maladaptive perfectionism (discrepancy between expectations and performance) were more vulnerable to depression. Moreover, length of time in the U.S. together with acculturative stress and maladaptive perfectionism serve as predictors of depression.

Research Questions

Previous research on Chinese international students examined their academic stress, English deficiency, leisure experience, and psychological well-being, with most studies focusing on the negative experiences of Chinese students. In addition, Chinese students' attitudes toward cultural adaptation haven't been widely discussed. This study, however, intended to examine both positive and negative aspects of Chinese students' academic, social and acculturation experiences. Thus, the following three research questions were posed:

RQ1: What kind of academic experiences do Chinese students in the U.S. have?

RQ2: What kind of social interaction do Chinese students in the U.S. have?

RQ3: How do Chinese students think about adapting to American culture?

Method

The primary goal of this study was to gain a detailed understanding of Chinese students' academic, social and cultural experiences in the United States. Hence, I mainly relied on in-depth interviews to collect data. This method is "well suited to understand the social actor's experience and perspectives" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 173). It gives participants an opportunity to thoroughly explain their behavior and express their viewpoints. It also allows the researcher to clarify certain points and establish rapport with participants. In addition, I used participant observation, which helped me to collect information that may not be obtained through interviews.

Participants

Ten Chinese students and two American professors voluntarily participated in this study. I sought Chinese participants using network sampling. In other words, I contacted people in my social network and asked them to refer participants to me. All the Chinese participants were studying at the University of X at the time of interview. Among them, nine Chinese students were enrolled in graduate programs and one was an undergraduate student (a Finance major). Six of them were studying science or technology (Computer Science, Electronic Engineering, Chemistry and Biology) and four were from the social science disciplines (Communication,

Finance, Diplomacy and Economics). There were seven males and three females. All of them were in their 20s. Their length of stay in the U.S. varied from a few months to three years. Participants were from different regions in China. Almost all of them had either studied or worked in a large city in China, such as Beijing or Shanghai. Detailed information of each participant was listed in the following table (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic Information of Chinese Participants

Name	Gender	Major	Age	Years in the U.S.
Bai	Male	Computer Science	Late 20s	1-2 years
Chen	Male	Economics	Late 20s	1-2 years
Feng	Male	Finance	Early 20s	2-3 years
Li	Female	Communication	Mid 20s	Three months
Qian	Female	Computer Science	Late 20s	Less than a year
Song	Male	Computer Science	Late 20s	Three months
Wang	Female	Chemistry	Late 20s	2-3 years
Wu	Male	Diplomacy	Mid 20s	2-3 years
Yan	Male	Biology	Mid 20s	Three months
Zhou	Male	Electronic Engineering	Mid 20s	1-2 years

Note. Pseudonyms were used in order to protect participants

I also interviewed two American professors in order to get additional insights on Chinese students' academic experience. One of the American professors was from the Department of Computer Science, and the other one was from the Department of Management. I contacted them because they had experience in teaching Chinese students.

Procedures

I interviewed all Chinese participants face to face using a semi-structured protocol. The interview protocol was developed based on literature review, my own thoughts, and feedback from a few Chinese students. The protocol covered a broad range of questions related to academic, social and cultural aspects. For instance, some interview questions were: Why they chose to study in the United States, what they like and dislike about the American education, what problems or barriers they had at school, how they spent their free time, how much interaction they had with Americans, whether they encountered any discrimination, what their attitude toward adaptation is, what adjustment they made, and what their plan after graduation is. During each interview, I also asked additional questions according to each participant's response.

Interviews with all the Chinese participants were conducted in Chinese and translated into English later. Interviews with the two American professors were conducted in English. Most of the interviews took place in the residence of the participants. I interviewed five Chinese participants one-on-one, two in a pair, and three in a group. The length of each interview lasted from 40 minutes to 90 minutes. I interviewed one American professor face-to-face in his office and the other one via email. All interviewees agreed to have their interviews tape-recorded

(except the one conducted via email). I completed all the interviews within two months.

In addition to interviews, I also used participant observation to gather data. I observed Chinese students' social gatherings through participating in some activities on campus, including activities organized by the Chinese Students Association and other organizations. During a two-month period, I participated in a weekly Bible study (for a group of Chinese students), attended one of the largest Chinese get-together parties (celebrating Moon Festival), attended several English classes offered by the Baptist Student Union (BSU) and International Conversational Hour (ICH), and went on a field trip organized by the Office of International Affairs (OIA). I also sat in one graduate class in computer science during a one-month period. Initially I contacted the two professors from the Departments of Computer Science and Management respectively and asked for permission to sit in their classes. The Computer Science professor allowed me to attend his class but the other professor declined my request. In the class I sat in, there were about forty students: Half of them were Indian students, about one quarter were American students, and one quarter were Chinese students. This class met three times a week (fifty minutes for each meeting). Since the professor mainly gave lectures in each class, I only attended four classes.

I conducted this study at the University of X. University of X is a public university located in a conservative mid-size town in the South. The university is a research extensive university and grants Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral degrees in a variety of disciplines. The University hosts more than 20,000 students, including approximately 400 Chinese students.

When analyzing the data I first engaged in an initial reading of all the interview transcripts and field notes to get an overall sense of the data. Then I scrutinized each individual transcript to identify recurring themes and highlighted relevant passages. Next, I grouped passages related to the same theme into one broad category. Finally, I examined each theme in accordance with each research question.

Results

In this section, major findings of this study are presented in terms of three dimensions: academic experience, socialization, and cultural adaptation. As mentioned previously, I assigned pseudonyms to participants in order to protect their privacy (see Table 1 for detailed information of each participant).

Academic Experience

Perceptions of American Higher Education.

All the Chinese participants except one completed college education in China. Compared to higher education in China, American higher education opens a new window for Chinese students to discover the world. Qian, who just started her first semester in the U.S., was surprised at her first impression, "The atmosphere in the classroom is informal, you can drink, eat, and joke with the teacher. Also, students are very active in the classroom." Zhou, an Engineering student, said he liked the flexibility in American schools – "Students have more choices. They

can choose the subjects they want to study." Bai, a graduate student in Computer Science, was more concerned with the quality of education. He thought that the United States offers better education than China does because

> Compared to China, here [U.S.] emphasizes more the students' ability to apply knowledge and encourages students to work on more hands-on projects. In addition, students have opportunities to study the newest materials. Sometimes the teachers will explain published articles in class. The equipment and facilities here are also more advanced than those in China.

His classmate, Song, agreed with him,

> I think here [U.S.] produces a better educational outcome. It stresses consistent performance throughout the semester. Students' attendance and daily assignments are very important parts of their final grades, but in China even though I didn't attend classes regularly, I could still get a good grade because the final exam determines a student's final grade. Here the final exam only counts a small percentage of a student's final grade and teachers don't accept late work.

Obviously, most Chinese students highly praised the American educational system because they had benefited much from the education they received in the U.S. On the other hand, a few students, who were mainly from the social science disciplines, expressed their disappointment. Wu, a Diplomacy student, said he did not learn anything new except English. As he complained, "American teachers focus too much on theory. It is too abstract for me. Many teachers don't have much work experience in the real world. I don't think the theoretical knowledge will be useful for me." Li, a Communication major, told me,

> All our classes are seminars. I do not like this type of classes. During each class a bunch of people sit there and chat with each other. Some people talked a lot but what they said made no sense. I do not think that I have actually learned something from this kind of classes. I even suspect the teacher did not prepare for the class at all.

Wang, a Chemistry student, held a relatively neutral stance. She thought both Chinese and American educational systems have advantages and disadvantages. In particular, "In terms of undergraduate education, China is better. If you want to work on advanced projects, U.S. is better because it provides sophisticated equipment." She also thought that education in the U.S. focuses on the breadth of knowledge, while education in China emphasizes the depth of knowledge.

Academic Challenges.

Although Chinese interviewees from different disciplines expressed different opinions about American education, they all identified English as their biggest obstacle at school. The

two American professors I interviewed pointed out the same problem. As Professor B urged, "International students [including Chinese students] should immerse themselves into English and resist speaking their native tongue to their friends." Incompetent oral English skills also prevented Chinese students from actively participating in class discussion. When I was observing in a Computer Science class (not a seminar class), I noticed that every time the instructor asked questions, only several Americans or Indian students answered the questions. The instructor of that class, professor A, told me that he often had to force Chinese students to participate in class discussion. He thought that "Chinese students even more than other students have the cultural tendency to be quiet, and not to speak up." When I asked one Chinese student from that class why he did not speak up in class, he said it was because of his English skills. His classmate, Song, expressed a similar opinion, "I often worry if others will laugh at me when I speak, or they may not understand me." Students from other departments encountered a similar dilemma. Wang, for instance, said she had some good ideas, but she did not know how to express her ideas in English.

However, weak oral English is not the only reason for lack of participation in class. As Zhou remarked, "I once asked questions in class a few times, but I had to prepare very well before asking questions. Actually, our [Chinese students'] English is not that bad, but we feel it is bad." Why did Chinese students feel their English is bad even though they prepared for the class well and had some unique ideas? Uncertainty seems to be one reason. Li said she wanted to join the discussion, but many times she just let the chance slip away. As she explained,

> I felt bad when I did not express my opinions in class. I often worried if my questions were meaningful, but I found American students also asked many silly questions. Sometimes I wanted to wait for a while before speaking, but others would mention the same opinion as mine or the teacher would change the topic.

Since Chinese students are studying in a foreign country, cultural difference may become a concern. When asked if knowledge of American culture will help their academic performance, a student majoring in Computer Science, Song, said that "our class instruction does not involve any personal or religious issues. It is only about academic issues, so there shouldn't be any [culture-related] problems." However, Feng (a Finance major) disagreed with Song's opinion. He described his experience: "Last semester I took a history class, and during the whole semester I had no clue about what they were talking about." Apparently, different courses demand different levels of cultural knowledge. Knowledge of American history and culture may not directly influence Chinese students' grades, but it certainly will not hurt them. As Professor A stated, "It [understanding American culture] will make them feel like they are more a part of the class, and help them to participate more, engage more, and learn more. "

Social Interaction

Social Activities.

Moving far away from their homeland to a new country, without family and friends being around, Chinese students have to face the challenge of loneliness and establishing a

new friendship network. When coming to a foreign country most people tend to look for their countrymen first for socialization. Many interviewees told me they mainly hung out with other Chinese students, and they were always ready to help each other. In fact, most Chinese students lived with other Chinese, so after school they still spoke Chinese and acted as if they were in China.

Outside of their own ethnic community, some Chinese students also attended some social events organized by the Office of International Affairs (OIA) or Baptist Student Union (BSU). OIA and its affiliated student clubs often organized social activities for international students and American students. It also helped international students to find a local host family. Some interviewees said they had, or planned to have, a host family in town. The host family could help them get to know American customs, but students did not meet with their host families very often. BSU offered English classes and Christianity related events. Through participating in these kinds of events, Chinese students had chances to meet people from other countries and practice their English. Not all Chinese students actively participated in those social activities though. Many Chinese students mainly spent their free time surfing the Internet, playing sports, or hanging out with friends.

Interaction with Americans.

The majority of Chinese students spent most of their time studying and working, and rarely had time for recreation and meeting American friends. Wang, for instance, stated, "I do not want to limit my social circle, but my friends are mainly other Chinese students in my department because they are the only people I see often." She then added, "I feel it is more difficult to communicate with Americans than with other international students. I don't know why." Many interviewees expressed the wish to make friends with Americans, but they found it is difficult to develop meaningful friendships with Americans. Wu, who had both Chinese and American friends, said he felt more at ease when hanging out with other Chinese than with Americans. Feng, whose best friend is an American, spent much time with American friends, but he still thought that except his best friend, his friendships with other Americans were superficial.

Sometimes the uncertainty about each other prevented them from interacting. As Li admitted, "I feel intimidated on some occasions, and I cannot behave as comfortably as I did in China. I can ask Chinese people questions without hesitation, but I always feel hesitant to ask Americans questions or say hello to them." Wu provided a more detailed explanation,

> It is easier to know a Chinese than an American because we share similar backgrounds. When I was with Americans, it seemed that we knew each other well, but I really didn't know much about them. They were polite, but I didn't know what they were really thinking.

It takes time for people from different countries to develop friendships. Intercultural communication is not as easy as we wish. Through observing the activities I attended on campus, I noticed that international students tended to stay within their own ethnic group. It was not uncommon to see a Chinese student and an American standing next to each other and

smiling at each other, but having no conversations. As Wu described, "When they [Americans] were talking about what kind of coffee is good, or whose girlfriend is pretty, I didn't know what to say. Sometimes, when my classmates [Americans] were chatting, I just couldn't join their discussion." Li also reported she did not know what kind of topics Americans are interested in. She thought it was probably because she set this kind of psychological barrier herself – "I assumed that we cannot communicate with each other, so I chose not to communicate with them."

Apparently, making American friends does not seem to be an easy job for many Chinese students. On the other hand, friendship is not developed based on one party's desire, but based on mutual interests. All the Chinese interviewees complained that American people showed little interest in China and Chinese people. Wu said that although his American friends were nice to him, he still felt they had some negative stereotypes toward China. For instance, "When we went out together, I could tell from their words that they still discriminate against China. Maybe it is because China is a communist country." In addition, Chinese participants thought most Americans are nice but know little about China. Song recalled one incident,

> When I first met my DGS [Dean of Graduate Studies], he noticed that I was wearing a quartz watch, so he asked me, "Is it made in China?" I said "yes." He was very surprised and asked, "Can China make such a delicate watch?" I replied, "Yes, we can make everything."

Li said that she expected misunderstandings when communicating with Americans because "it at least shows that they are interested in China, but the problem is that some Americans may not be aware of the existence of China. They may only know Japan in the East."

Feng, however, said he did not expect Americans to have much interest in China because "these two countries are too far away from each other and the U.S. is more developed than China." He also pointed out, "If your English is bad, Americans will not be interested in talking with you."

Cultural Adaptation

Perceptions of American Culture.

During the interviews Chinese participants revealed different perceptions about American culture. Bai and his wife Qian both said that they still did not have a clear idea about American culture. They thought most Americans they met were nice, but they did not like what they saw on TV. Chen thought American society can tolerate heterogeneous opinions and groups, but on the other hand, excessive tolerance can lead to some negative consequences, such as violence and pornography. He then made an interesting comment about the American youth, "They are party animals, good at chasing girls, and seldom worry about the future." Both Feng and Zhou mentioned that the American society values freedom and privacy, whereas there are too many restrictions in China. Zhou also said that he felt more contented while living in the U.S. Contrary to Feng and Zhou's appreciation of American culture, Song expressed his resentment of American culture. In

his eyes, Americans are arrogant, shallow, pretentious and materialistic. He said this made him miss China more. Most interviewees however, identified many positive traits of Americans, such as being upbeat, optimistic, outgoing, and confident. They also found that Americans do things for fun, while Chinese people are more serious. In addition, several participants were surprised that some Americans are even more conservative than Chinese people.

All interviewees pointed out that Chinese people have closer relationships than American people do. As Li explained,

> In China, if two persons are best friends, they are very loyal to and can do anything for each other, but we can't find such kind of friendship here [U.S.]. Americans are too individualistic and they overly respect their own and others' privacy. To some extent, excessive respect also means indifference.

An issue of frequent concern among the minority groups is discrimination. Some interviewees told me that they once encountered a few incidents that might be considered discrimination, but these instances were not serious and did not hurt them. As Chen stated, "If you are confident about yourself, others' attitudes will not influence you too much." Feng argued that "discrimination exists mainly due to different economical statuses. If you do well at work, no matter if you are White, Yellow, or Black, nobody will look down upon you." Li thought we should not be so concerned about discrimination because "it exists everywhere, not just in the U.S." Zhou pointed out that the United States "is tolerant enough to host so many people from all over the world." Overall, all interviewees did not consider discrimination a big problem at school because most professors were open-minded and fair.

Attitudes toward Adaptation.

Intercultural communication scholars often assume that if a person wants to survive in a foreign country, he or she will try to adapt to the host culture. Is this assumption applicable to Chinese students? When I asked them if they had ever tried to adapt to American culture, Chinese participants gave me three kinds of answers. The first kind of response is "no." Bai said he and his wife Qian never thought about this issue and right now they still wanted to keep their own culture. So did Song, as he stated, "As long as I am here, I will follow their way at work, but their way will never be my way, and it will never change. I do not want to adapt to American culture." His roommate, Zhou, agreed with him,

> Look at those old Chinese people who have been living here for a long time, their friends are still Chinese. Actually, when you are living here [U.S.], you can overlook the existence of Americans as long as you obey the laws. You can just live your life in your own way and socialize with your own friends.

I was a bit confused by his attitude because during the interview he mentioned a few times that he liked American culture and he felt more satisfied while living in the U.S. I doubt that he did not want to adapt to American culture.

The second type of answer to the question of adaptation is "depending upon the situations." As Wang explained, "If I plan to work here, I will try to adapt to the local culture. Otherwise, I will fall behind. If I go back to China after graduation, then I will not worry about adaptation." Chen echoed Wang's opinion, "We are living on their [American] land, we have to adapt to their values and norms, but it takes time. Right now, I am still living my life according to Chinese values."

The third type, Wu and Li, looked at this issue from a different angle. They thought Chinese students should minimize the differences and stress the commonalities. As Li said, "We do not need to stress the differences between these two cultures. No matter where you are from, human beings always share some commonalities."

Regardless of whether they want to adapt to American culture or not, all the Chinese interviewees agreed that assimilation is something beyond one's willingness and successful adaptation to a different culture is almost impossible. As Li articulated, "Culture is ingrained in one's mind. Especially for adults, it is hard to change their native cultural values even though they want to change, so we do not need to force ourselves to assimilate into American culture."

Chen said as long as he is living here, he would like to adapt to the mainstream culture, but it would be hard and he was not sure if he could achieve this goal. Feng, however, expressed a relatively radical viewpoint, "I think people are lying when they said they never thought about assimilating into American culture. The truth is they are scared, and they are not capable of adaptation." Interestingly, he also did not think successful adaptation is possible. As he stated,

> I think as a person who has black eyes and yellow skin, no matter whether you are an ABC [American born Chinese] or an immigrant, you will always feel awkward in this country. You cannot feel like a White American. It is hard to completely adapt to a different culture especially for adults. The most important thing is try to adjust yourself to the new environment as much as you can, which also requires much effort.

Discussion

Arguably, the United States offers first-class graduate education in the world because of its internationally acclaimed scholars, advanced teaching and research facilities, and diverse academic environments. All the Chinese interviewees considered these advantages the top reasons why they chose to study in the U.S. They acknowledged the positive educational benefits they received in the U.S. Meanwhile, they had to put in considerable effort in order to succeed in an American university, as cross-cultural learning will never be a relaxed journey. In general, most Chinese students worked very hard and performed well at school. As Professor A evaluated, "The Chinese students I have worked with are very conscientious, good students, work very hard, have very good work ethics, and want to do well."

Regardless of their positive academic performance, English is still a barrier for most Chinese students. This problem has been well documented in previous literature. English education in China mainly relies on written tests to evaluate students' performance with less emphasis on speaking and listening skills. Hence, many Chinese students didn't feel confident

to speak English in class. In addition, their low involvement in class discussion could also be related to the educational culture in China. As Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006) stated, "Students from Taiwan or China are usually taught to be compliant, remain quiet in class, and withhold expressing their thoughts or asking questions until invited to do so by their teachers" (p. 422). In China, arguing with the teacher is often considered challenging the credibility and authority of the teacher. On the contrary, in an American classroom, students are expected to speak up, and being quiet is usually considered incompetent and inattentive.

In addition, most Chinese interviewees reported that they did not have much interaction with Americans. This may be due to their insufficient English and cultural differences, which consequently increases their uncertainty and anxiety when interacting with Americans. To some extent, the uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) can help us understand Chinese interviewees' limited interaction with Americans and low involvement in classroom discussion. On the other hand, this theory assumes that people will actively seek information to reduce the amount of uncertainty and anxiety they had. Yet this assumption does not seem to work for all Chinese students. In other words, the theory cannot explain why some Chinese students didn't make an active attempt to reduce their uncertainty about the host environment. Perhaps as Gudykunst (1988) pointed out, excessive anxiety and uncertainty will cause uneasiness in communication or failure in adjustment. Thus, some Chinese students may lose their motivation to engage in uncertainty reduction because it requires too much effort and it may bring them out of their comfort zone.

Another challenge faced by Chinese students is the dilemma between conforming to American values and preserving their native values. As Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006) put, Chinese students "experience an internal tug of war – a conflict between consciousness of Chinese culture identity and the strong aspiration toward American political and economic systems" (p. 430). Interestingly, in spite of the differences in their attitudes and experiences, all Chinese interviewees thought it is impossible to completely adapt to a different culture. Kim (1991) considered the capability to adapt to a new culture "the heart of ICC [intercultural communication competence]" (p. 268). Did Chinese participants lack intercultural communication competence? In fact, cross cultural adaptation is not just a matter of open-mindedness or competence. Instead, it is a painful battle between long-term cultural indoctrination and unfamiliar values. Considering this, how can we define successful adaptation? Should it be necessarily a process of acculturation (of the host culture) and deculturation (of the native culture) as suggested by Kim (2001)? For instance, how do we explain the case that a Chinese person speaks and acts like an American but psychologically still sticks to his or her native culture? Obviously, these questions haven't been thoroughly addressed in the existing literature.

Since the majority of the interviewees had only stayed a short period of time in the U.S. by the time of interview and they spent most of their time at school, cultural adaptation didn't sound urgent to them. In fact, some interviewees even said they chose not to adapt to American culture. Some of them did not think that culture has anything to do with their study and they mainly spent their free time with other Chinese students. This made me wonder if adaptation is important for foreign students especially when it is not related to their grades and when they are closely tied to their ethnic community. On the other hand, I also want to know if this lack of motivation to adapt will hinder a person's professional development in a foreign country.

In other words, can a person live a life according to his or her native cultural norms, but still achieve success in a non-native society, especially in a society that embraces freedom and diversity, such as the United States?

Scholars have often used the terms *acculturation, adaptation, assimilation, adjustment* and *integration* interchangeably. If adaptation includes both acculturation and de-culturation (Kim, 2001), then we cannot conclude that adaptation and acculturation refer to the same thing. In addition, I found that Chinese interviewees used the term *adaptation* to describe different things in different contexts. Some of them said that they did not want to adapt to American culture, but on the other hand, they would follow the rules of the host community. Is not the latter a form of adaptation? My understanding is that at the surface level, every Chinese student needs to make some adjustments, such as speaking English and conforming to American educational standards; but at a deeper level where some fundamental beliefs and values exist, Chinese students differ from each other on whether they need to adapt or not.

Many researchers like to use the word *mutual* to describe the process of cross-cultural adaptation. Interacting with Americans can help Chinese students to better adapt to American culture. However, adaptation is never a mutual process when the host and newcomers have imbalanced status (Ellingsworth, 1988). Chinese students traveled a long way from their homeland to the U.S., and they didn't have any pre-established social network in this country. They are studying in a country that is considered the only superpower in the world, and many of its citizens do not have much enthusiasm to learn about the rest of the world. Considering this, it is unrealistic for Chinese students – academic sojourners, to expect equal effort from the host society. Thus, Chinese students have to follow the norms and rules of American society if they want to survive in this country (Yuan, 2010). Similarly, Ellingsworth (1988) pointed out that the less advantaged side will always bear the burden of adaptation. As one Chinese student stated, "If you want Americans to look up to you, you have to do much better than them."

Finally, Chinese participants shared some similar perceptions because they all had to deal with certain challenges at school and in personal life. However, their levels of satisfaction and attitudes toward cultural assimilation varied depending on their majors, personalities, and previous experiences. Relatively speaking, students majoring in science and technology felt more satisfied than those from the social science disciplines because science uses a universal language, but social science majors demand a higher level of English skills and knowledge of American culture. Therefore, the latter group tended to report more pressure and frustrations about class discussion.

Overall, all Chinese participants agreed that studying abroad is worthwhile considering the benefits of improving English skills, gaining new perspectives and knowledge of the outside world, fostering academic and personal growth, and having more opportunities for future development. It should be noted that there are always differences between expectations and reality. Therefore, Chinese students should be well prepared before pursuing higher education in another country.

Limitations and Recommendations

All participants of this study were from one state university in Southern United States.

As Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006) pointed out, campus difference could be a significant contextual factor due to different socio-political climates and attitudes toward foreigners in different regions. Thus, a study composed of participants from many different universities would enhance the validity of the research findings on Chinese international students.

In addition, although this study produced meaningful findings about Chinese students' academic, social and cultural experiences in the U.S., the small scope of this study reduces the generalizability of the findings. Future research could utilize large scale surveys in order to obtain a broad understanding of similarities and differences among Chinese students sojourning in the United States.

Finally, most participants were graduate students majoring in science and technology. They did not seem to recognize the importance of cultural knowledge in learning and they could still earn high grades even though they did not speak fluent English. Comparatively, Chinese students enrolled in social science or undergraduate programs often had more concerns about oral English skills and knowledge of American culture. Therefore, researchers should further explore the impact of academic major and status on Chinese students' experiences in the United States.

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