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Josefina E. Oramas

St. Thomas University, joramas@stu.edu

Hagai Gringarten

St. Thomas University, hgringarten@stu.edu

Lloyd Mitchell

St. Thomas University, lmitchell@stu.edu

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CHINESE STUDENTS IN U.S. UNIVERSITIES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES, TRANSITION, AND ADAPTATION

Josefina E. Oramas, St. Thomas University

Hagai Gringarten, St. Thomas University

Lloyd Mitchell, St. Thomas University

Despite a recent decline in enrollment (Saul, 2018; Varn, 2018), the number of international students in U.S. universities is still significant. According to The Wall Street Journal, there are 85 percent more international students enrolled today in U.S. schools than 10 years ago, adding more than 35 billion dollars to the nation's economy in 2015 (Belkin & Purnell, 2017). Chinese students represent the largest single group among these students, and globalization has played an important role in impacting Chinese students' perceptions of what it means to study in the U.S. This qualitative study adds to the limited research available regarding Chinese students' cross-cultural transition and academic adaptation to U.S. universities (Kusek, 2015; Yan & Berliner, 2009). Findings add a new perspective regarding the students' perceptions and expectations in China, compared to their true experiences in the U.S. universities. Results show that, despite significant barriers, Chinese students are eventually able to transition and adapt to the new surroundings. Implications of findings can help in the development of effective strategies and programs to facilitate these students' transition and adaptation in U.S. higher education institutions. From a business perspective, better adjustment and transition means increased enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities; thus, added value to both the higher educational system and the nation's economy.

Keywords: Chinese students, cross-cultural adaptation, culture shock, globalization, study abroad, American university, higher education

INTRODUCTION

New immigration policies, cuts in scholarship programs and competition from other countries are impacting the number of international students that enter and remain in the U.S. after graduation (Saul, 2018). Besides rating and ranking, the loss of foreign students (an average of 7 percent nationwide during fall 2017) translates into revenue losses; amounting to more than 10 million dollars in a single school within an academic year (Saul, 2018). Thus, U.S. universities continue to attract large numbers of international students who seek the opportunity to study abroad, pursue academic degrees, receive high quality educations, and conduct research in their fields of study (De Araujo, 2011; Kusek, 2015; Wei, et al., 2007). As noted, these students represent a major revenue source for U.S. universities through tuition, tutoring, and living expenses (Institute of International Education, 2011). Tuition fees from these students are financially vital to U.S. institutions (Dennis, 2017) as they help offset a decline in domestic enrollment and state funding (Belkin & Purnell, 2017). During the 2016-2017 academic year

alone, international students contributed \$37 billion to the U.S. economy while supporting more than 450,000 jobs (Varn, 2018).

Besides tangible revenue, international students add educational value, and cultural and linguistic diversity, contributing to the U.S.'s technical and scientific research, bringing new perspectives into the classrooms, catalyzing academic competition, and helping U.S. students prepare for global careers (Celleja, 2000; De Araujo, 2011; Open Doors, 2016). Emphasis in increasing the number of international students in U.S. schools is understandable. To this end, the U.S. welcomed more than half a million international students after 1999 (Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009), issued more than half a million student visas in 2011 (United States Department of State, 2012), and awarded about four million degrees in higher education in the same year (Chen & Jordan, 2016).

Although international students come from all over the world, China is the largest source (60 percent) of international students (Ohio, n.d.) with a \$35.8 billion contribution to the U.S. economy in a year (Belkin & Purnell, 2017), primarily funded by Chinese students' personal and family funds as well as assistance from their home universities or government (Open Doors, 2016). They are motivated to study abroad in an attempt to seek a better educational experience, follow their true academic interests, and explore the new "American" culture. According to the *China Daily*, 98 percent of Chinese workers want more education, and they want more education in order to "improve their professional skills, make themselves more competitive and enrich their life experience" (Wenting, 2017). Globalization has played an important role in impacting Chinese students' perceptions of what it means to study in the U.S. Chinese students are attracted by the freedom to choose from an array of educational programs, explore the U.S., and meet new people (Chen & Jordan, 2016; Wei, et al., 2007). They also seek the prestige of obtaining a degree from a higher learning U.S. institution (Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009) and the potential to join a highly competitive global market of educated adults upon graduation (Yan, 2015).

In response, U.S. universities are adopting new strategies to provide a welcoming atmosphere and a supportive environment (Kusek, 2015). However, higher education institutions may find this internationalization challenging as they often lack guidelines or knowledge to effectively accommodate international students' needs (Wei, et al., 2007). Institutions also fail to meet the needs of these students due to misunderstandings about their historical and cultural backgrounds (Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009). Meanwhile, as they pursue a higher education in the U.S., international students struggle with culture and language barriers combined with lack of support systems and a lack of awareness of available resources (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Wu, Garza & Guzman, 2015; Yuan, 2011). International students encounter adjustment issues related to academics, social interactions and emotional reactions to the new surroundings (Gebhard, 2012). They must also adjust to the loss of familiar relationships, environment, and educational systems (Wang, Wei, Zhao, Chuang & Li, 2015), and suffer acculturative stress (Smith & Khawaja, 2011) and discrimination (Duru & Poyrazli, 2011; Russell, Rosenthal & Thomson, 2010).

Studies on international students date back to the mid-20th century (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2008), mostly focused on factors affecting their psychological well-being (Wang, 2009). Few studies look at these students' cross-cultural adaptation (Yuan, 2011). Empirical

research on the students' stress levels is lacking as well (Yan & Berliner, 2009). Underlying reasons for the present study are several. Among these reasons are that the growing diversity within student demographics in U.S. universities (Lin & Scherz, 2014); the fact that most research, to date, focuses on international students as a single population; and that Chinese students represent the largest group within this population (Chao, 2016; Zhang & Xu, 2007). Another reason for this research is that, while most studies have focused on general differences between the two cultural environments and academic systems of China and the U.S. (Zhang, 2013), few studies discuss the overall experiences of Chinese students, particularly in the voices of graduate students (Yan & Berliner, 2009). In addition, current research on the experience of Chinese students is limited (Zhang & Xu, 2007), even though they experience greater strains balancing their needs and obstacles (i.e., adjusting) in the new U.S. environment than other international students (Lin & Scherz, 2014; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Yan & Berliner, 2009; Wei, et al., 2007). There is a pressing need to analyze and effectively address Chinese students' struggles in order to successfully embrace them and facilitate their cross-cultural transition. It is also essential to "synthesize and integrate findings in order to illuminate the knowledge base" (De Araujo, 2011, p. 3). This qualitative study fulfills these research gaps by exploring the hopes and expectations of 11 undergraduate students in a regional university in Harbin, China, as well as the experiences of 11 Chinese graduate students enrolled in a private university in southeast Florida, U.S.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The China-U.S. educational exchange signed in 1978 fueled the number of Chinese students in U.S. classrooms from almost zero to more than 20,000 within ten years of the agreement, accounting for 28 percent of all international students (outnumbering those from other countries) by the year 2000 (Yan & Berliner, 2009). Their number reached 328,547 in the 2015-2016 academic year (Open Doors, 2016). Besides their large economic contributions, Chinese students enrich college campuses with their unique ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Lin & Scherz, 2014).

According to Chen and Jordan (2016), Chinese students are eager to escape what they perceive as a "flawed Chinese educational system" in which low standards leave them "ill-prepared for a global economy" (p. 1). Chinese universities are uninspiring and require students to take classes on military theory and Marxist ideals while resisting Western values and limiting access to social websites like Facebook. Admission to the university depends on the *gaokao* entrance exam, but only those with top scores (i.e., *zhuangyuan*) are admitted into the best universities and allowed to choose their educational programs. The pressure of such a competitive education is fierce while the future job possibilities are uncertain as a higher education does not guarantee a better paying job. Educational competitiveness, frustrations, and rejections have Chinese families questioning their institutions and perceiving them as "diploma mills, churning out graduates whose earnings potential is often bleak" (p. 2). Although many parents are reluctant to let their children study in the U.S., they understand the competitive advantage of a 'broader education' (Yan, 2015). When they come to visit, Chinese students fall in love with the green gardens plus the academic freedom to pursue their true academic interests. Once in the U.S., however, these students encounter obstacles that can negatively impact their cross-cultural transition and adaptation (Chen & Jordan, 2016; Lin & Scherz, 2014; Wu et al.,

2015). A review of relevant literature considers three main perspectives regarding difficulties Chinese students encounter in U.S. universities: (a) academic barriers, (b) socio-cultural barriers, and (c) psychological barriers.

A. Academic Barriers

Empirical research confirms that international students face numerous challenges to their academic adjustment. In a study with 18 Chinese international students enrolled in graduate programs at a private university in the southeastern U.S., Yan and Berliner (2009) found three major challenges: language, achievement, and interaction with faculty. Language deficiencies become a source of frustration and a major barrier to academic success. They reduce students' participation in classes, involvement in the host community, and ability or desire to ask for help. Besides issues with listening and speaking in English, high quality academic papers pose an additional challenge, especially for those majoring in humanities and social sciences. Many other research studies corroborate that English language deficiencies are a major obstacle for Chinese students (Huang, 2006; Kuo, 2011, Yuang, 2011).

Using one-on-one, in-depth interviews with three Chinese students in a private university in northeast U.S., Zhang (2013) concluded that "transition to a different learning environment may result in a certain level of discomfort and stress" (p. 109) due to insufficient skills in the English language, difficulties with different academic norms, new teaching and learning paradigms, general classroom structure, teacher-student relationships, and the education system. Level of engagement within the university community was a major concern for students. Other researchers agree that, besides considerable stress from language deficiencies, Chinese students' adaptation to the new academic environment is impacted by academic shock, the relationship between teacher and students, the expectation of critical thinking, and different teaching strategies (Zhang, 2013; Zhang & Xu, 2007). Li (2007) and Shi (2011) concluded that Chinese students encounter difficulties adapting to the different and active U.S. learning paradigm, which emphasizes independent learning and freedom to argue with professors and classmates.

Kommers (2012) emphasized the negative association between social adjustment and academic performance. Lowinger, He, Lin, and Chang (2014) explained that discrimination, homesickness, and self-efficacy were closely related to Chinese students' procrastination. Zhang (2004) found that academic, psychological, and sociocultural adjustments were closely related during a study with 102 Chinese students at universities in Florida, New Mexico, Ohio, and Arizona. Zhang concluded that academic self-efficacy is a strong predictor of general cross-cultural adaptation.

B. Socio-Cultural Barriers

International students struggle with the reality of coming to a new country, finding a place to live, establishing their finances (e.g., bank account, credit cards), transportation issues, and living in a new community with minimal support. Studies (De Araujo, 2011; Ward, et al., 2008) confirm that social support derived from family, friends, and faculty are a critical resource to buffering stress and conducive to mental health. In a study conducted with 900 international students in Australia, Russell, Rosenthal, and Thomson (2010) found that 41 percent of the

students experience significant levels of stress resulting from cultural shock, homesickness, or perceived discrimination. University staff may not be empathic to students' struggles and may perceive them as irresponsible for their academic progress (Beoku-Betters, 2004). In addition, U.S. students perceive international students as threats to their education, economic, physical well-being, values, beliefs, and social status due to prejudices against immigrants (Charles-Toussaint, & Crowson, 2010). Besides lack of support and prejudicial attitudes toward them, decreased communication increases anxiety and decreases social interaction with others while creating a negative stereotype regarding these students' behavior. In contrast, those who better adapt are well-connected to peers and instructors, and join extracurricular events, increase their chances of staying in school, and graduating (Severiens & Wolff, 2008).

Trifonovitch's (1977) four phases or stages of cultural adjustment (*honeymoon*, *hostility*, *humor*, and *home*) can help explain international students' transition period in the U.S. The *honeymoon* stage involves the initial excitement of living and studying in a foreign land and experiencing a new culture. Students experience the *hostility* stage when they encounter misunderstandings, experience culture shock and feelings of anger, frustration, confusion, sadness, and anxiety. In the *humor* stage, students learn to relax, laugh, and socialize with others, making friends and enjoying academic activities. Gradually, they arrive at the *home* stage (i.e., cultural adjustment) in which they settle in the new culture and academic environment, learning norms and standards, integrating elements of their own home culture into the new cultural environment. Smith and Khawaja (2011) corroborate that international students experience a complex transition period from maladjustment to adjustment in which some achieve successful acculturation adjustment and cultural competence while others suffer from acculturative stress.

Using her own English-learning experience as the basis for her research, Liu (2011) explains that culture shock results from social isolation, language challenges, identity confusion, accommodation issues, weather and food differences, role and status change, separation from home, and a different educational system. Besides culture shock, Liu recognized a lack of confidence in English abilities and an introverted cultural personality (compared to Western students) as barriers to improving English proficiency.

A qualitative study in southern U.S. found that international students encounter difficulties in academic, social, and cultural settings. Academic barriers derived from decreased interaction with professors, isolation from classmates, language barriers, and pressure of parents' expectations. Social barriers emphasized communication patterns. Culture shock derives from different values and beliefs systems plus communication and interpersonal patterns that result in uneasiness and misunderstandings. Successful transition and adaptation to the new culture is considered adjustment and conducive to effective performance and overall well-being (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015).

Ee (2013) adds that cultural shock might result in separation from the university campus and the surrounding community. This separation is further impacted by the rejection they receive from the host population. Feeling more comfortable with those from their own culture and background, these students develop their own communities with minimal or no involvement in events inside or outside the campus. In a qualitative study at a public university in Ohio, Kusek

(2015) confirmed that international students feel most comfortable among those from their own cultural backgrounds or other international students.

C. Psychological Barriers

Numerous literary sources document international students' psychological distress as a result of culture shock, loneliness, and stress related to decreased adjustment. Han, Han, Jacobs, and Jean-Baptiste (2013) confirm that about 29 percent of Chinese international students report symptoms of anxiety and about 45 percent of them acknowledge symptoms of depression. During an 11-year review focused on the psychological status of East Asian international students, Li, Wang, and Xiao (2014) found that these students' psychological status was closely related to their English proficiency, length of stay, attitudes toward seeking help, acculturation level, and depression. In another study, Wei et al. (2007) examined the link between acculturative stress and depression among 189 Chinese international students. Sources of academic stress for these students included language difficulties, academic pressures, difficulties in adjusting to new cultural values, feelings of inferiority, lack of support, homesickness, and perceived discrimination. The study confirmed the positive association between acculturative stress and depression among the students. Similar studies (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007) confirm that, outside the campus environment, international students are likely to experience different and even higher levels of discrimination than other students, regardless of the time spent in the U.S.

Despite decreased mental health, however, students do not seek counseling services as they learn to rely on family and friends in difficult times (Ohio, n.d.). Living abroad without family support in an unfamiliar setting that exacerbates the marked differences between the two cultures, students may abuse cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs (Ohio, n.d.; Sa, Seo, Nelson, & Lohrmann, 2013). Mesidor and Sly (2016) affirm that, although these students do not seek mental health counseling, due to their lack of understanding of its benefits, language proficiency, gender, and or culture, institutions can play a significant role in educating and providing the resources to help students adjust. Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) explain that international students need more support during their original transition in order to overcome challenges related to academic progress, social interactions, transportation, health issues, and discrimination. Zhai (2002) adds that student counseling services, together with language support and academic orientation, was essential to students' successful adjustment.

A review of the literature indicates that Chinese students are exposed to an education system with different expectations and requirements from those in U.S. universities. They grow up in a complex culture, very different from the one they encounter in the U.S. Lack of support and acculturative stress add to their struggles during their transition into U.S. universities.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to provide meaningful and in-depth descriptions of Chinese students' expectations and experiences in a U.S. university. Considering that graduate students are more mature than undergraduate students, they may have more experience in facing challenges as well as the adaptation skills necessary to meet those

challenges. It was thus important to learn from graduate students' perspectives. Furthermore, this study investigated the hopes and expectations of undergraduate students in China to gain an increased understanding of the depth of challenges faced in the U.S.

A. Research Questions

The study followed an interview protocol with caution, as suggested by Seidman (2013) and adapted from a study in a northeastern university (Zhang, 2013). Primary research questions were the following (a) What are the major challenges experienced by Chinese students in their first years at the university? (b) How do Chinese students make sense of their cross-cultural experiences in the university? Secondary questions were the following: (c) What are the factors that hinder successful cross-cultural adaptation in the university? (d) What lessons have the Chinese students learned from their experiences as international students in the university? (e) Would Chinese students repeat the experience if given another chance or recommend it to other students?

B. Methodology

Qualitative research allows for a better understanding of topics not adequately studied before (Creswell, 2012). Case study is a standard and appropriate qualitative research method for this research study as it can contribute to a better understanding of individuals and their experiences (Grünbaum, 2007). According to Yin (2004), case studies allow for closer and intensive examinations of each individual case. It is the preferred research approach when (a) the researcher wants to find how or why something happened; (b) the researcher is unable to control the context or participants' behaviors; and (c) it takes place within a real-life setting. Case study was, therefore, the appropriate research method to accomplish the study's purposes.

As a mode of inquiry, interviewing "is a powerful way to gain insight into educational and other important social issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives reflect those issues" (Seidman, 2013, p. 13). Yin (2004) corroborates that interviews allow researchers to elicit details of the experience and facilitate exploration of the content. Recording of researchers' questions and participants' responses allowed for exact interview accounts (Creswell, 2012).

C. Participants

Participants were a total of 22 Chinese students enrolled in various majors. Co-researchers were two professors from the Florida university who were teaching a business course in Harbin, China. Using convenience sampling, co-researchers selected 11 students who (1) were enrolled in an undergraduate program and interested in studying in the U.S., (2) spoke fluent English, and (3) had never resided in the U.S., but could provide their thoughts and expectations about completing studies in the U.S. The main researcher was a mental health professional and adjunct faculty member of the Florida university. Using convenience sampling, the main researcher selected 11 students who (1) were international Chinese students enrolled in a graduate program, (2) spoke fluent English, and (3) had resided in the U.S. for more than a year but were relatively new to the country. Evidence shows that the length of residence in the U.S.

may influence adjustment (Wei et al., 2007; Ye, 2006).

D. Data Collection

Interview sessions took place at regional universities in Harbin, China, and in Miami, Florida, U.S., simultaneously. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and was recorded using a digital recorder. Researchers adopted the semi-structured interview for each participant to reply to the same research questions. Researchers then explored more information based on the responses in order to understand participants' point of view rather than to make generalizations about their thoughts and behaviors (Seidman, 2013).

E. Data Analysis

Researchers created text from the interviews after recording them and transcribing them, thus saving participants' disclosures and returning to them later for accuracy (Creswell, 2012; Seidman, 2013). Researchers then organized excerpts from the transcripts into categories while seeking and connecting threads and patterns. Finally, researchers marked passages they found interesting and labeled them according to subjects (i.e., 'classifying' or 'coding' the data).

F. Findings from Interviews in China

Findings indicate that undergraduate Chinese students in China hold positive perceptions regarding studies abroad, mostly deriving from movies and other media sources. They acknowledge differences between the two cultures and expect numerous challenges, but they are confident in their ability to succeed abroad. Main categories coded in the transcripts were (a) motivation, (b) challenges, and (c) determination.

Motivation. Chinese students are motivated to study in the U.S. by their perception of a flawed Chinese educational system, the benefits of studying in the U.S., and the opportunities to learn from a different culture. A participant observed, "If I only study in this (Chinese) university, (it) is not very good. If I go abroad to the U.S., I can learn more about the finances. I want to do better." Participants exalted the freedom to think and express own thoughts. One participant reflected, "In America, the professors encourage you to speak, to discuss and show you how to do things. In China, you don't share your opinion. America is better. I can improve my language, my knowledge, and understanding of the knowledge." They expect professors in the U.S. to be open and communicative, as expressed by a participant. "I think American professors' contact with the students is more open. In our school, professors always think they are the leaders, and they ask you, 'Just do this.'" Another participant agreed, "I think American professors talk to their students more than in China. They will be concerned about your scores and your life."

Participants perceived the U.S. academic instruction as superior, as one participant noted. "In Chinese universities, what you learn is just on the surface. We cannot learn something real." Another participant added, "I think American education maybe more creative and more free than Chinese education. Chinese education not great. Teacher will do the plan for the student, but American teachers will not. Students will learn something they are really interested in."

Participants expressed their hope to enhance skills. “Maybe (I will learn) the different way to think about things in the American or Chinese way. If I learn in America, maybe I can do more if I face a problem.” They also recognized the competitive advantage of obtaining a degree from abroad. “Maybe a Chinese company will do some research on your degree. If you only have the Chinese degree, they may say ‘No’ (not offer you the job).” A participant shared the three main reasons for wanting to study in the U.S. “Something I am interested in, is the culture of America. It is very wonderful to know this different culture. The second is the language, and finally, is the friends. I want to know more about the American people.” One more participant spoke about the opportunity for broader and meaningful experiences. “I will experience a different life. I can broaden my horizons. If you only stay in this place (China), you only see this small world.”

Challenges. Students in China recognize challenges emerging from the different academic settings, language difficulties, rejection and discrimination. Global media sources influence their beliefs and perceptions. A participant voiced his concerns. “From the movies, we know American students are very happy (but) I think they actually have much pressure. They are really very stressed. They have many papers. They are busy and have no time to play.” Others agreed, “In (an) American university, the course (load) is really heavy. (Students) have a lot of work to do. It is different in China’s universities. You do really hard work to get in the university (but) you will have a lot more time.” Another participant emphasized language barriers. “First of all, (Chinese students) have to know how to communicate with American people because the cultures of the two countries are different.” Others agreed, “I think English is the key point to make friends because you have to use the same language. Then you can make friends and you can chat.” A participant added, “If you have good understanding of English, you will have a better ability to make others understand you more and you will understand others more.”

Students in China expect to encounter rejection. A participant reflected, “Maybe I will not really get into their groups. Maybe they will think I am different from them.” They believe their quiet nature may inhibit acculturation. “I think most of Chinese personality is not very open and they are always just studying in their classroom or in the halls. They (do) not like (to) party, so this may be the bigger difference.” They identify discrimination among the reasons for their isolation: “I just heard that there is some kind of discrimination about the Asian people and that leads to, when we go abroad, we just make friends with Chinese people.”

Determination. Despite perceived barriers and expected struggles, participants showed determination to adjust and adapt in the U.S. When asked about possible obstacles, a participant quickly answered, “I think it is not very difficult for me.” Another one admitted, “I think it will be difficult, but I will try my best to understand all the course (classes) and to learn the knowledge.” They expressed their determination and confidence to succeed. “Speaking English is the basic one. You should have an open mind to communicate with others, but I think every Chinese student will do that.” Another participant expressed, “Although we may bear many difficulties, once they know we are Chinese people, we can solve this problem very well.” Regarding their ability to connect with U.S. students, a participant expressed, “Maybe at first, I will feel afraid to talk to others, but I should not do that because, if you talk to others, you will have the opportunity to get to know them and make friends.” Another participant observed, “I think it will be very smoothly (to) connect with Americans. I always see the customs from the movies or TV series that are American made. I think I will make friends.” They anticipate to join

the host culture. “I’ll take part in their parties first and introduce myself to them, and know their habits and do some help for them.” Another participant suggested, “Make friends and join the party to let (Americans) know we are about the social works, social knowledge.”

G. Findings from Interviews in the U. S.

Two main categories emerged from interviews in Florida: challenges to adjustment and contributors to adjustment. Challenges to adjustment included (a) academic barriers, (b) socio-cultural barriers, and (c) psychosocial barriers. Contributors to adjustment included (a) motivation, (b) determination and perseverance, and (c) positive experience.

Challenges to adjustment. Chinese students face numerous barriers while completing their studies in a U.S. university. They struggle with academic, socio-cultural, and psychological barriers. A discussion of each challenge follows.

Academic barriers. Participants recognized issues with different working processes and discourses as well as language barriers negatively impacting their academic performance, relationships with professors, and overall emotional well-being. A participant remembered her struggles to register for classes. “I needed to find the dean of the department, then go to the registrar’s office. Payment was in another office. That makes students confused. In China, is easier to register.” Another participant recalled, “I didn’t know about taking notes when the professors are talking. In China, we just write what the teacher wrote on the board and recite (answers) in the exam. Here, I get lost.” Most participants identified language as an obstacle. A participant shared, “For me, my English is not so good. No problems in the class, but when writing papers is a problem.” Others acknowledged frustration with oral presentations. “In China, every class has a quiz, but here, (we have) presentations and writing.”

Language barriers contribute to their isolation, as a participant explained. “Sometimes, I am scared that some people are going to laugh. I am scared because I speak the wrong word and I will see people’s face... look confused.” Another participant reflected, “I think it’s good to study here, but the first problem is (that) I don’t know how to talk with my friends, classmates, or professors. I don’t know how to explain my idea.” When asked why some Chinese students adapt well to the U.S. university while others do not, one participant observed, “Maybe they don’t know how to use American way to express themselves and may do some mistakes.” Others recognized different communication patterns. “The Americans have body language. They speak with their hands and shoulders. Chinese, more quiet. Not many movements. Americans think we don’t want to talk. We want to make friends, but we don’t know how.”

Socio-cultural barriers. Participants recognized cultural differences as a barrier. A participant explained, “I feel culture sometimes is hard because everyone has their own culture and sometimes they give you a hug or a kiss and, I don’t know what to do. But you have to get used to it because we are from different cultures and have different habits.” A participant offered an example. “In China, we don’t dress up, unless we are going to do business. Here, when (we) don’t dress up and everyone dresses up, we are going to feel bad. But that’s not our fault. That’s our culture.” Participants recognized passivity as a barrier. “I understand why professors don’t

understand. (We are) very passive. Students may have difficulties, but they don't speak out until (they have a) real problem, so professors can't see the difficulties the students have."

Participants complained about food. "Eating is a real problem; the biggest problem for us. First, is the taste that we like to eat: the rice and vegetables. Sometimes, we try to get food outside, but very few options in the cafeteria." Others agreed. "I don't eat (on campus) because I don't like it. It's very American: cheese pizza, hamburger, chicken. I don't like that." Another participant compared, "American food, too much fat. In China, you eat dumplings. Chinese food, no coffee. In the United States, coffee all the time." Food issues keep students away from campus. "It's cheaper to be outside, and we can make Chinese food."

Participants also recognized transportation as another hurdle. "The most big problem was transportation because we didn't have a car, and we didn't know where we can go. Later, I had a Chinese student take me to places I needed to go to." Lack of transportation inhibit them from experiencing 'the real American life,' as a participant observed. "Chinese students don't want to live in school. They want to live the real American life. They want to rent apartment, but is not easy to get places, and then they need a cheaper car." Besides transportation, respondents also expressed frustration regarding visa issues and Optional Practical Training (OPT). A participant voiced his frustrations. "Say, you can do your own business, and probably succeed in the U.S., but, because of that one-year challenge, students can't do anything. That's the issue for Chinese people. You study hard and then have to go back after a year."

Psychological barriers. Participants acknowledged feelings of loneliness and rejection as well as discrimination. However, none of the participants reported seeking counseling services. A participant sadly recalled, "It was fun for the first three months. But later, I feel super alone; living far away from family and all friends." Loneliness is aggravated by feelings of rejection, as a participant sadly noted. "Some professors are not too nice to me. Because not everybody likes me." They find support in their own. "I made friends with Chinese people only. It was better because they were my age and in the same program, then we play basketball and go to the gym." They rely on other Chinese students before joining other groups. "I play soccer and go out with my friends from the team. At first, when I got here, I wasn't on the team yet. Chinese students helped me a lot. I have other nationalities for friends now." They reported discrimination too. A participant explained, "I don't know how to say the word, but maybe people don't like Asian people... discrimination? Some people laugh, like some students and staff in stores." Others agreed, "Some people see you are Asian people, they don't like you. Discrimination. They talk words that I don't understand. Maybe is a joke, but in my mind, it is not right. In China, they like foreigners. They don't make jokes. Maybe is not a joke, but it feels bad."

Evidence shows that Chinese students studying in the U.S. face numerous challenges in their attempt to adapt to the host culture and academic setting. These challenges can negatively impact their academic performance, psychological status, and overall experience. Nonetheless, they are gradually able to adapt and adjust.

Contributors to Adjustment. Findings from the interviews conducted in Florida show that Chinese students remain motivated to complete a higher education in the U.S. They are also determined and perseverant. Furthermore, they report a positive, enjoyable experience.

Motivation. Participants praised the education system in the U.S. A participant reflected, “You have self-motivation to go study or do whatever you like here. In China, the professors are going to push you. ‘You have to do this.’ Here, you finish your paper. The professor doesn’t tell you the exact answer.” Another one expressed, “It is fun to be here. Professors to me are excellent. Everyone else do their work.” Others agreed. “The professors are very nice. You can have a great environment to study. Studying is not only about the school you are in, but about yourself. Here you can have the skills for learning on your own.”

Determination and perseverance. Participants demonstrated determination and perseverance to adjust and adapt. One participant proudly expressed, “People don’t think we know, but we have a lot of skills.” Another one observed, “Right now, I concentrate on what I want or need for my life. If you want to gain the respect of other people, you need to gain the skills.” Another participant made recommendations. “I can say, yes, is very tough because of language... because of everything. Some people are wrong to you, but (that) just (makes) a stronger you. They can’t really help you. You have to help yourself.” Smiling, another participant recalled: “I was the only Chinese in the group. So when I spoke to them, they laughed at me, but they will ask me to repeat after them. That’s a good way to learn.”

Positive experience. Participants reported a positive and enjoyable experience with the opportunity for growth. An excited participant stated, “In America, everybody cares about their lives. They wear makeup and dress nice every day and they say ‘good morning,’ and share their lives’ experiences so I follow in their steps.” Another participant observed, “In America, people treat others very patiently and politely. In China, they don’t have much patience or time.” Others acknowledged becoming self-reliant. “The way I think and do things is much better now. My parents told me to do this, and I will go there and do that. Now, I have to do it myself and read the instructions; how to pay bills and apply for stuff like a driver’s license.” Another participant stated, “I have learned how to use a library and how to write academic papers.” Their study-abroad experience became a dream come true. “When I was growing up, I saw it in the movies and the music. Getting in that culture, it’s like, Wow! I am here, like in the movies! I love the music and art culture. The energy. People here are always active and not shy.” They made recommendations to other students in China. “It is a very unique experience and not everyone has the opportunity to see a different world. I would tell them to travel or study in America, maybe for a year or two.” Another participant suggested, “Chinese students need to share. We need to make a relationship with others. If you need some help, if you need someone, you need to reach out.” A participant warned, “If my friend told me he wants to study abroad, I will say, ‘It’s challenging, but there are many opportunities. But if you only want to spend your parents’ money, I’ll say, ‘Stop. Enjoy your life in China.’”

Summarizing, the perspective of Chinese international students on their ability to adjust and adapt in U.S. universities is remarkable. It involves a strong motivation to succeed. More than that, it involves a high level of determination and perseverance, confident on their ability to ‘flow and adapt,’ as one last participant expressed during the interview:

In an interview like this, Bruce Lee says: ‘The water can flow or can crash. If you put the water in a teacup, it becomes a teacup. If you put the water in a bottle, it becomes the bottle.’ The philosophy: You are just to flow and adapt. You feel better.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

The current study adds to the limited qualitative research available regarding Chinese graduate students’ cross-cultural transition and academic adaptation to U.S. universities (Kusek, 2015; Yan & Berliner, 2009). Findings add a new perspective regarding the students’ perceptions and expectations in China, compared to their true experiences in the U.S. universities. Furthermore, results were consistent with those from previous studies, especially the need to understand these students’ challenges in the U.S. (Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009).

In agreement with Chao (2016), findings corroborate that the main reasons that Chinese students decide to come to study to the U.S. include gaining control of their future, seeing the world, broadening their life experiences, and improving their financial and professional potential. Cultural and non-academic details are important reasons for leaving their country. China’s global economic power entices students “to develop a global view and depart from the traditional Chinese system of college education” (p. 28).

Findings also show that language deficits hindered Chinese students’ academic performance as well as their social interactions with classmates and the local community (Chen & Jordan, 2016; Zhang, 2013). Language difficulties also encourage newly arrived Chinese students to form close friendships with other Chinese students, thus impeding their cross-cultural adaptation in the U.S. (Yan & Berliner, 2009; Yuan, 2011).

Students are either unaware of the services the university provides, do not understand their benefits, or fail to ask for help, avoiding visits to counseling centers and exacerbating their isolation and vulnerability (Li, 2016; Onabule & Boes, 2013). In contrast, connecting and establishing good relationships with their families, friends, and community help reduce their feelings of homesickness and loneliness (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Participants also recognized the value of relaxing and having leisure time, but were restricted by study workloads, decreased social networks, and issues with the visa, hence corroborating Li and Stodolska’s (2006) findings. However, results do not confirm the association between acculturative stress and depression as suggested by Wei et al. (2007) as participants did not share increased levels of psychological distress, probably to avoid losing face, feeling embarrassed, showing personal failure, or general cultural stigmas.

In addition, findings of our study support Lin and Scherz’s (2014) observations with Asian international graduate students in a university in northwest U.S. Barriers to adjustment included the following: (a) linguistic challenges that affect their understanding of lectures, decrease their participation in classroom discussions, and inhibit them from expressing feelings of frustration; (b) cultural challenges emerging from limited social relationships and decreased communication with instructors; and (c) instructional and academic challenges that include instructional delivery and unmet academic expectations.

Furthermore, findings agree with those from Li's (2016) interviews with 13 Chinese international students regarding their experiences and helpful strategies. Li's study revealed that Chinese students' use a didactic, teacher-centered learning style with emphasis on memorization, which hinders their participation in the U.S. classrooms. Culture and past learning experiences contribute to their passive learning and become academic challenges in the U.S. As in the present study, Li also found that these students are reluctant to seek help due to their desire to be independent and a cultural background that emphasizes withdrawal and self-coping. In agreement with Li's research, findings of this study also show that Chinese students' limited knowledge of the U.S. culture can result in culture shock and unrealistic expectations while exposure to the U.S. culture can facilitate their transition into new norms and practices.

Results of the present study were also consistent with Zhang and Xu's (2007) research findings with 11 Chinese international graduate students at a North American university. Despite the challenges and struggles, Chinese students persevere in their studies because of their strong work ethic and ability to transition from a passive teacher-center education system to an active student-centered education system. Chinese students are able to reach cultural adjustment as they gradually settle in the new academic environment, adapt to new learning standards, and integrate elements of their own home culture into the new Western lifestyle and cultural environment (Trifonovitch, 1977; Wang & Malinckrodt, 2006).

Additionally, findings help explain factors leading to Chinese students' success in U.S. universities. Ohio (n.d.) identifies these factors as motivation, language skills, and cultural accommodation. Results show that, despite difficulties and struggles, Chinese students maintain an adequate level of motivation and passion for their studies. This motivation is fueled by 'globalization persuasion' or 'the worldly effect' on these students' interests (Ohio, n.d.).

In summation, findings of the study show that Chinese students encounter difficult and challenging experiences as well as exciting and meaningful ones. They emphasize personal growth, gain a competitive advantage, and broaden their global perspectives (Yuan, 2011). They gradually mature, and become independent and proactive (Li, 2016), successfully adjusting their worldview with mainstream U.S. culture (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). They acknowledge "invaluable personal gain and cultural learning experience (with) a strong motivation to adapt and develop not only as students but also as individuals" (Zhang, 2013, p. 137).

A. Recommended Framework

The Chinese students' perspectives and insights in this study offer valuable recommendations to institutes of higher learning in the U.S. Providing clear explanations of college courses and course instructions (e.g., detailed syllabus) as well as relevant research opportunities and practical field experiences can increase students' knowledge, language skills, and understanding (Lin & Scherz, 2014). Empowering these students with required knowledge and information can help reduce their anxiety and facilitate their adjustment in the university (Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

Embracing students, understanding their expectations, being sensitive to their needs, and appreciating their diversity can facilitate success in the new contexts (Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009;

Zhang, 2013). University staff must provide equal opportunity for all while enhancing cultural awareness (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Orientation programs, seminars and workshops can have other Chinese students publicize counseling services and other resources to stabilize stressful experiences (Onabule & Boes, 2013; Wei, et al., 2007).

Before coming to the U.S., Chinese students should acquire a good proficiency in the English language; gain knowledge of Western culture, customs and values; and learn about theories in their respective fields of study (Yan & Berliner, 2009). Once they arrive to the U.S., they must be flexible with their approach to new learning and cultural environment (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Students also must set clear goals for learning English and actively interact with those who speak English while developing speaking, listening comprehension, reading, and writing skills (Liu, 2011; Kuo, 2011; Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009; Young, 2011).

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

New immigration policies, reduced scholarship funds, and increased competition from other countries are impacting enrollment numbers while visa restrictions are reducing career opportunities after graduation for foreign students (Saul, 2018; Varn, 2018). Still, U.S. universities continue to rank high worldwide (Varn, 2018) with a breaking record of over one million international students enrolled in U.S. institutions in 2016 (Dennis, 2017). There is optimism that U.S. universities will continue to attract students from around the world (Chao, 2016; Saul, 2018). Cross-cultural adjustment can be a significant challenge for these students. However, learning to overcome challenges can help develop the skills needed to solve problems, deal with difficulties, and grow from the international experience, thereby contributing to their successful adjustment and adaption in the U.S. university.

From a business perspective, institutions must be aware of how to help international students in their cross-cultural transition, given their significant economic impact for both U.S. universities and the nation's economy. During a study in 2016, the National Foundation for American Policy found that many founders of *billion dollar startups* were international students in the U.S. at one time (Anderson, 2017). The risk of losing revenue deriving from these entrepreneurship opportunities for international students is another powerful reason to increase such awareness.

The study subjects were 22 Chinese students in both China and the U.S., which was a relatively small size group. Subjects' age ranged from 16 to 27 years of age. They came from stable to affluent economic backgrounds. Student subjects from China were enrolled in diverse undergraduate programs, most of them majoring in communication, business, and computer science. Subjects from the Florida university were enrolled in graduate programs mostly in business administration. Their stay in the U.S. ranged from a few months to four years. Such diversity can help explain their different perspectives and experiences while they study abroad.

Generalizations of this study's findings to international students from non-Chinese backgrounds, or students studying in countries other than the U.S., should be applied cautiously. Moreover, the study only focuses on the perspective of Chinese students. Additional research including a larger number of students, administrators, and faculty members can result in a more

thorough understanding of Chinese students' expectations and actual perceptions (Chao, 2016) as well as their cross-cultural transition and adaptation in U.S. universities (Lin & Scherz, 2014; Zhang, 2013). Deeper understanding of these students' acculturative stress also can help in the development of culturally sensitive services and programs to support and facilitate their cross-cultural adjustment (Nasirudeen, Josephine, Adeline, Seng, & Ling, 2014). Although the experiences shared by the Chinese participants in this study are not exactly the same at all universities, there is hope that international students feel welcomed, engaged, and supported as they transition into the U.S. learning environment with the motivation, determination, and perseverance revealed within these pages.

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