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EXPLORING CHINESE INTERNATIONAL DEGREE-SEEKING STUDENTS'
PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THEIR ACCULTURATION
IN THE UNITED STATES

by

TEREZA KOROUSOVÁ

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the University of the Incarnate Word
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

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Tereza Korousová

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my supportive family and friends, my professors and mentors, and all readers who wish to embrace the cross-cultural differences and enhance the inter-cultural understanding and respect within world cultures.

EXPLORING CHINESE INTERNATIONAL DEGREE-SEEKING STUDENTS'
PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THEIR ACCULTURATION
IN THE UNITED STATES

Tereza Korousová, PhD

University of the Incarnate Word, 2019

Studying abroad is attractive for increasing numbers of Chinese students. The United States belongs among the favorite destinations for Chinese students seeking to obtain a university degree. In past years, China was the number one country of origin of all foreign students enrolled in U.S. tertiary education institutions. This study is aimed at exploring Chinese degree-seeking international students' perceptions about their acculturation in the United States. This qualitative study was conducted at a faith-based private university in South Texas. Eight Chinese international students participated in this research in order to share the perceptions and experiences linked to their acculturation in their host destination. The data was collected through personal interviews and follow up interviews. The data analysis, following the six steps of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis recommended by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), revealed findings that enrich the field of acculturation and international higher education literature. Four themes emerged during the data analysis: Cultural Assessment and Learning; Language Acquisition and Learning; Academic and Social Support; and Individual Development. The findings of this study will help interested audiences to better understand and learn about Chinese international students' acculturation process in the United States. Based on the findings, recommendations for practice were set, such as evaluation and development of pre-

arrival orientation for Chinese international students, focus on more multi-cultural approach to advising and teaching, and emphasis on peer programs that would help to increase interactions among Chinese, international and domestic students. Further, it was concluded that more research studies need to be conducted, including studies focusing on finding best practices for pre-arrival orientation, teachers' levels of cultural competence and their skills to effectively teach in multi-cultural classroom, and methods to encourage domestic and international students to interact closer together.

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Chapter 1: Perceptions of Acculturation

Context of the Study

Globalization and internationalization has made the world “flat” (Friedman, 2005) and led to higher interdependency among the world’s countries and their people (Friedman, 2005; Verghese & D’Netto, 2011). Understanding other countries’ cultures and their environments are the key elements for successful international relations, communication, cooperation and business. Globalization trends have given greater importance to global citizenship (Israel, 2012). In the past, global awareness was reserved traditionally for members of high society, politicians and people involved in international trade. Nowadays, global awareness is considered an obligation of all people around the world (TeachUNICEF, 2013). Global citizens are referred to as individuals who understand the world’s interconnectedness, respect and value diversity (TeachUNICEF 2013), are internationally-minded, and are able to work and interact across cultures (Israel, 2012).

Many influential factors, such as economic development, global mobility, international relations and international trade, have increased the importance of professionals’ cultural agility and cross-cultural skills (Israel, 2012). Employers, especially international organizations and businesses, often require their associates to possess the qualities of a global citizen (American Council on Education [ACE], 2012). A crucial role in developing global citizens is played by educational institutions (ACE, 2012; de Wit, 2002). De Wit (2002), Knight (1998) and ACE (2012) have agreed that universities and internationalization in higher education play a key role in developing global citizens.

Due to the effects of globalization, student mobility continues to grow. The pace of globalization has rapidly increased over the past three decades (Friedman, 2005; Verghese &

D'Netto, 2011), and so has the number of students studying abroad (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2014). Student's global mobility—referring to the number of students who participate in international education, including study abroad programs, international internships, exchange programs or enrollment in degree programs in a foreign country—has increased from 1.7 million in 1995 to 4.5 million in 2012, and is projected to reach 8 million in 2025 (IIE, 2014).

At universities and colleges in the United States, the number of international students grew 26 times since the 1950s, from 34,000 in the school years 1953-1954, to 886,052 in 2013-2014 (IIE, 2014). Each year, more foreign students enroll in U.S. institutions to earn their undergraduate or graduate degrees (Overzat, 2011). China and India have been the top countries of origin of international students in the United States (IIE, 2014). Since the school year 2009-2010, China has held the primary position among the countries of origin of international students in the United States. In the school year 2013-2014, universities and colleges across the United States received 274,439 Chinese students, who accounted for 31% of the international college student enrollment. The second largest group of international students was from India, totaling 102,673 and accounting for 11.6% of the total international student enrollment in the United States (IIE, 2014). China significantly outnumbers all other countries of origin of international students in the United States. For Chinese college students, international education is very attractive, and helps the students to achieve their educational goals, which for some may be difficult or even impossible in a competitive field of tertiary education in China (EIC, 2011; Yang, 2015).

In China, the demand for tertiary education is much higher than the number of spaces available at Chinese universities for new college students (EIC, 2011; Yang, 2015). Also, the process of being accepted to a university in China can be very difficult and stressful. Students'

scores from the Chinese national higher education entrance exam, *gaokao*, determine the level of college institution where students can be accepted. Another obstacle in being accepted to a desired institution in China may be the student's region of origin. For instance, it would be very complicated, even for students with high *gaokao* scores who have their permanent address outside of the Beijing Municipality, to be accepted to Tsinghua or Peking University (EIC, 2011; Yang, 2015). Tsinghua and Peking universities are the top ranking universities in Beijing, China, and provide their graduates with highly recognized degrees. They also accept their students based on very strict entrance criteria (Yang, 2015). In order to increase the chances for obtaining quality college education, Chinese students, usually with the support of their families, attain their university education abroad.

The number of Chinese students seeking their college degree in a foreign country has been growing since the Chinese economy opened up in the late 1970s (EIC, 2011). Approximately 700,000 Chinese college students study towards their degrees abroad, mainly in the United States, Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom and Korea (UNESCO, 2015). For several years in a row, China has been the number one country sending international students to the United States (IIE, 2014; UNESCO, 2015). The preferred fields of study among Chinese international students in the United States are business or international business, sciences and engineering (IIE, 2014). By studying in the United States, Chinese students expect to gain education and international training in their field of study (Yang, 2015). They also look forward to obtaining other benefits from studying in the United States, such as prestige and fostering their English language proficiency and intercultural communication skills, which are important for their future careers in China (Yang, 2015), today's largest emerging superpower (World Bank, 2014).

In an attempt to increase their marketability in the highly competitive environment of the Chinese labor market and business sphere, a continuously growing number of Chinese students welcome the opportunity to study abroad (Yang, 2015). However, many studies (Barty, 2006; Koehne, 2006; Overzat, 2011) have highlighted the negative aspects associated with the international experience of Asian students studying in the Western world, such as language barriers, homesickness, depression and other physical and mental health problems, which are derived from the process of their acculturation.

Acculturation is a process that occurs when at least two different cultures come together (Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008). The first major studies exploring acculturation were conducted in the 1930s. Acculturation was predominantly seen as a group phenomenon (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). Concentrating on a group of people in the process of acculturation may identify the impact of this phenomenon on social structure, economic environment, or political organization. However, Berry, Poortinga, Segall, and Dasen (1992) emphasize that it is important to focus on an individual level of acculturation. As opposed to the group lens, studying the internal sources of change helps to understand the changes in behavior, identity, values and attitudes (Berry, 1990; Berry et al., 1992).

The culture of the United States, also referred to as American culture and its members as Americans, has a highly individualistic nature, and is in strong contrast with the collectivist culture of China (Bennett, 2004; Gerzon, 2010; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Hofstede, 1991). Different cultures appreciate various values, habits, and ways of thinking and doing things (Hofstede, 1985; Lewis, 2006). Culture is also responsible for differences among countries in their academic settings (Rybak, 2009). The level of formality is evidently higher in China, while the United State is quite informal. Chinese people put emphasis on respect and obedience

(Miller, 2014; Rybak, 2009), while American students are encouraged to express their own opinions, and on occasions it is even acceptable for them to challenge instructors (Lockette, 2012; Rybak, 2009). In relation to others, collectivist Chinese people tend to have strong family values, and their actions are driven by the intention to contribute to the common good. The Chinese first think of the benefits for the community and the wellbeing of its members. In contrast, Americans usually create large networks of relationships and acquaintances where friendship is more superficial. Generally, members of America society first consider their own interests. Their actions are driven by self-fulfillment, self-development and individual goals. They often strive to compete with, and to prove they are better than, others (Hofstede, 1991; Tsai & Wei-Na, 2006; Zdanuik & Bobocel, 2012). Cultural differences, discussed in depth in Chapter 2, impact Chinese students' performance, and create acculturation issues perceived by Asian students in the United States (Koehne, 2006; Barty, 2006; Lockette, 2012).

Koehne (2006) pointed out that many international Asian students desire to fit in and belong to the new environment in their host country. However, it is not an easy process for them. Koehne's study revealed that Asian students sometimes struggle to blend in, and they often feel isolated and alienated. Perceived negative experiences of international students in their host countries are usually interconnected and aligned with academic issues, health issues, social issues and economic issues (Barty, 2006; Gonzales, 2006; Koehne, 2006). These acculturation issues may also have an impact on Asian students' retention, graduation and withdrawal rate, overall academic achievement, and personal attainment (Gonzales, 2006).

Higher education institutions strive for the academic success of their students, increased retention and graduation rates, and higher recruitment. These indicators and related variables reflect the quality of education and services provided by the school, and influence the rank of the

university among other institutions. Comparisons with other institutions are usually taken into consideration by the Chinese students and their parents while they are selecting the host university abroad. The higher the institution ranks, the more trust and interest it obtains from Asian students and their parents (EIC, 2011).

Research on international students (Barty 2006; Gonzales, 2006; Koehne, 2006; Pandit & Alderman, 2004) has identified issues they often perceive during their acculturation processes in the United States. According to Gonzales (2006), Koehne (2006) and other researchers (Barty, 2006), acculturation issues are predominantly linked to international students' academic and social life, economic and financial constraints, and mental and health problems. All these issues are usually interconnected. For example, due to a low level of English language proficiency, students experience academic issues, as well as social issues, because they are not equipped to communicate effectively with their teachers and peers and are limited in creating new friendships. Perceptions of academic and social issues increase the level of acculturation stress (Barty, 2006; Koehne, 2006). Stress can lead to a number of mental and health problems. Mental and health issues require treatment, and treatment requires money. Unexpected expenses challenge the economic and financial stability of international students.

Students with a significantly different culture of origin, who have no previous experiences with their host country's culture, tend to perceive higher acculturation stress levels (Gonzales, 2006). For Chinese students, as Bennett (2000, 2004) noted, the process of acculturation in a dominant culture such as the culture of the United States can be more difficult than acculturation in countries with similar cultural values. Various cultural models (Hofstede, 1985; Hofstede, 2001; Lewis, 2006) demonstrate differences between world cultures. Comparison of cultures within cultural models, such as Hofstede's Model (Hofstede, 1985;

Hofstede, 2011; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) or Lewis' Model (Lewis, 2006), help reveal cultural differences between countries.

Similarities as well as differences may be identified between both the United States and China. For instance, in recent years, both the United States and China have been recognized as the leading and largest economies in the world. Both countries have been represented by a number of successful businessmen, leaders, athletes and scientists. Yet, these two countries are very different, from a cultural perspective. The highly individualistic U.S. culture prioritizes self-interest over the good of the community and prizes the results. In collectivistic China, quite the opposite attitude is embedded in its society.

In U.S. culture, task prevails over relationship and individuals are expected to take care of themselves (Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). Chinese people, in contrast, are very collectivistic. The interests and goals of an individual are considered after and with respect to the overall interests and goals of the group, community or society (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). In China, the time invested in building mutual relationships, and respect and trust, is very important and never perceived as wasted (Lewis, 2006). The Chinese culture is long-term oriented and strives for the maintenance of harmony. According to Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010), the Chinese try to learn from other cultures, and are more open to adapting their traditions when circumstances change.

Statistical data from the World Bank (2014) and the International Monetary Fund (2014) provides evidence indicating increasing importance in mutual communication between the United States and China. While the United States is still referred to as the world's Economic Super Power, China is perceived as a Rising Economic Super Power (World Bank, 2014). In the

realm of international education, the United States and China are important partners. U.S. universities receive around 30% of all Chinese mobile college students globally (UNESCO, 2015), and Chinese students account for 31% of all international college students in the United States (IIE, 2014). A large number of Chinese students, usually self-funded, significantly contribute to the U.S. economy (IIE, 2014). They also enrich the diversity at U.S. campuses and enable American domestic students and other international students to experience firsthand contact with Chinese culture. Cultural diversity on campuses in the United States promotes healthy cross-cultural communication that brings benefits to both domestic and international students (Gonzales, 2006; Koehne, 2006; Pandit & Alderman, 2004). Yet Chinese international students seeking their degrees in the United States have to deal with acculturation issues, and are challenged with cross-cultural obstacles while adapting to the academic and social lives in their host country (Hawkes, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

In Chinese higher education, since the late 1970s, the trend of studying abroad has increased (EIC, 2011; UNESCO, 2015). In January 2014, almost 700,000 Chinese college students were enrolled in colleges and universities abroad. The majority of them, over 270,000 in the school year 2013-2014, were enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States (IIE, 2014; UNESCO, 2015). Despite the growing number of Chinese international students in the United States, both U.S. education institutions and Chinese international students continue to face acculturation issues (Fan & Ashdown, 2014; Hawkes, 2014). More research focused on Chinese international students and their acculturation issues is needed to promote “Chinese international students’ academic and social success in the United States as well as the improvement of cross-cultural communication” (Fan & Ashdown, 2014, p. 162).

This qualitative study explored Chinese students' perceptions about their acculturation in the United States and contributed to the subject's literature.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of Chinese international degree-seeking students about their acculturation in the United States. The study was conducted at a faith-based private university in South Texas.

Research Question

This qualitative study was led by one research question:

1. How do Chinese international students perceive their acculturation in the United States?

Overview of the Methodology

Social abstractions, such as education and acculturation, are best comprehended through the experiences and perceptions of individuals whose work and lives reflect the elements upon which these abstractions are built (Ferrarotti, 1981; Seidman, 1998). Qualitative research addressing specific social abstractions, including acculturation, could also be used in problem solving and creating positive change (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). The methodology for this study was designed in consideration of the research topic and the purpose of the study.

The basic interpretive qualitative research approach was employed in order to explore the perceptions of Chinese students about their acculturation in the United States. The descriptive and interpretive methods were focused on meaning-based forms of data (Elliott & Timulak, 2005; Merriam, 2002). For data collection, two research instruments were used: personal interviews, and follow-up personal interviews. The data was analyzed using the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) developed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). Multiple

techniques to assess the trustworthiness of this study were executed, including reflexivity, triangulation, participant feedback, and peer review.

In order to support the accuracy of the study, the research was conducted with respect to professional research ethics, and protection of human subjects. All research was executed in accordance with U.S. federal government's policies and institutional rules and regulations and with full awareness of limitations and biases, and every effort was made to report the findings and conclusions of this study in a truthful and honest way to maximize the benefits of this study.

Research Site

The site for the research was a private faith-based university located in South Texas. The institution offers Baccalaureate, Master's and Doctoral programs. The selected tertiary educational institution strongly supports cultural diversity, supporting both inbound and outbound students, and faculty and staff mobility, as part of the internationalization process enhancement. The university partners with over 130 sister universities around the globe, and has an increasing trend in international student enrollment. In 2015, 19% of the student body was represented by international students from over 60 world countries (University of Incarnate Word [UIW], 2015), with China, Mexico, Turkey and Saudi Arabia being among the top countries of origin.

Participants

A purposeful sample consisted of eight Chinese international degree-seeking students from a private faith-based university in South Texas. With the help of the International Student Scholar Services Office, all the Chinese students enrolled in degree-seeking programs were invited to participate in the research.

Theoretical Framework

It is important to explore what is happening to the individuals who gained and created their cultural values in their country of origin, and are attempting to re-establish their lives in a host country with a different culture (Berry, 1997). Chinese degree-seeking students in the United States commit to spending a significant period of their life in a host country in order to receive education and training in their field of study, improve their foreign language proficiency, and gain cross-cultural skills (Fan & Ashdown, 2014; Gonzales, 2006). The process of acculturation plays an important role in international students' academic performance and their social life. Acculturation is usually a very complex and challenging process that may yield acculturation stress (Berry, 2001; Rudmin, 2009). To help Chinese students reduce the level of their acculturation stress and improve their academic performance, it is crucial to first understand the way they perceive their process of acculturation in both their academic and personal lives (Gonzales, 2006).

Framing students' experiences in the acculturation process helps us to understand how they adjust to their new academic and social environment in the United States. Jarren Thomas Gonzales (2006) developed an acculturation model consisting of five categories: Cultural and Social Assessment, Language Acquisition and Proficiency, Social Support, Cultural Learning, and Individual Growth. The study used this model to explore Chinese degree-seeking students' perceptions about their acculturation process in the environment of the South Texas faith-based university.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study lies in the identification of Chinese students' perceptions about, and experiences with, acculturation and adaptation to their host institution and its

environment in the United States. The number of Chinese students in the United States is increasing, as is the number of tertiary institutions hosting international students (IIE, 2014). Texas is one of the top recipients of international students from Asia (IIE, 2014). For instance, the largest group of international students in Houston, Texas in 2012-2013 came from China, representing 15.7% of all international students. Chinese students accounted for 20.4% of all international students at Dallas universities in 2012-2013 (IIE, 2014), making them the second largest group, after India. Contemporary literature focuses on internationalization and acculturation of international students in the United States in general (Berry, 1990, 1992; Bennett, 2000, 2004; de Wit, 2002; Gonzales, 2006; Knight, 1997). However, there was an expressed need to conduct more research that would address the specifics of Chinese students' acculturation in the United States (Fan & Ashdown, 2014).

This study aimed to contribute to literature in the field of international higher education, acculturation and internationalization, and the field itself, by exploring Chinese international students' perceptions about their acculturation in the United States.

Background of the Researcher

I was born and raised in the Czech Republic, and have been exposed to other cultures since early childhood. After graduating with an undergraduate degree in Hospitality Management and Tourism, I was selected to participate for 18 months in a manager development program (MDP) in the United States. Simultaneously, I was enrolled in an MBA program, and earned a degree in International Business in 2009. International experiences, both as a leader and student, allowed me to gain more cultural awareness, cross-cultural skills, and enhanced cultural competence and sensitivity.

I have always been interested in foreign cultures and languages, cross-cultural communication and leadership, business, and education. To gain an even deeper understanding of how culture impacts peoples' lives around the globe, and to be able to share and receive new cross-cultural experiences and help others to live and reach their goals in the globalized world, I enrolled in a doctoral program with a concentration in international education and entrepreneurship.

Since 2009, I have conducted a number of international internships and travels. In the United States I worked as a Graduate Assistant to the President at a private university. In 2014, I conducted two teacher exchanges with universities in Mexico and China, teaching graduate level classes to the domestic students enrolled at the host universities, and participated in an evaluation of a U.S.-Chinese MBA Program.

As an international student, I experienced learning in a culturally diverse classroom environment, and moved through various stages of intercultural sensitivity. As an international educator, I was expected to adjust my teaching style to fit culturally different environments. The international teaching experience gave me an opportunity to practice my cross-culture skills, and further develop them by interacting with the students, faculty, administrators of host institutions, and international student bodies.

Through personal experiences, observations, and interactions with other domestic and international students, I was able to recognize the richness of cultural diversity and the value of information provided firsthand by individuals from various cultural backgrounds. Thanks to living in different cultural environments across three continents, I was able to identify various cultural contrasts between countries, especially contrasts between the U.S. individualistic and Chinese collectivistic natures of culture. Work experiences in the educational field in the United

States and China, and observed cultural differences between the two countries, led me to focus on the phenomenon of how Chinese international students perceive their acculturation in the United States. To explore Chinese international students' experiences, I, as a primary instrument for data collection, obtained data via a personal in-depth interview and a follow up interview with Chinese international degree-seeking students in the United States.

I was aware of specific ethical issues deriving from the nature of the qualitative research. I paid extra attention to keeping all participants well informed about the consent of the study, and ensured that all participants and data collected would remain confidential. I prevented any risks or harms that may have impacted the participants. Also, I put extra effort into avoiding being biased, remaining neutral, and carefully stating findings based on participants' statements.

I began the study with the following assumptions: that all the participants would participate voluntarily and be willing to share their perceptions and experiences in complete honesty. I monitored and attempted to control my biases through reflexivity, and followed the Researchers' Professional Code of Ethics with the aim of increasing the trustworthiness of the study.

Summary

Globalization and internationalization have reshaped the sphere of higher education. International education and global citizenship are gaining in importance, and the number of mobile students has continued to increase. The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the individual perceptions of the international students from China currently seeking their degrees at a U.S. university. Chinese students in the United States currently account for 31% of all international students (IIE, 2014; UNESCO, 2015). The majority of them are self-funded, and altogether they significantly contribute to the U.S. economy (EIC, 2011; IIE, 2014).

The process of acculturation plays an important role in Chinese students' academic performance and their social life in the United States (Gonzales, 2006). Acculturation is usually a very complex and challenging process that may yield acculturation stress (Berry, 2001; Rudmin, 2009). In order to help Chinese students reduce the level of their acculturation stress and increase their academic outcomes, it is crucial to first understand the way they perceive their process of acculturation in both their academic and personal lives (Gonzales, 2006).

Social abstractions, such as education and acculturation, are best comprehended through the experiences and perceptions of individuals whose work and lives reflect the elements upon which these abstractions are built (Ferrarotti, 1981; Seidman, 1998). This qualitative research addressing a specific social abstraction, acculturation, could be used in problem solving and creating positive change (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Globalization and internationalization has made the world “flatter” (Friedman, 2005). In the past, global interactions were reserved mainly for specific groups of people, such as politicians, economists, artists, entrepreneurs, businessmen and members of high society (TeachUNICEF, 2013). Since the 1970s the pace of globalization has increased rapidly (Verghese & D’Netto, 2011) and developments in technology and communication have created an environment for faster globalization and internationalization (Verghese & D’Netto, 2011). Due to globalization, countries and their people are more interconnected. Nowadays, it is a necessity for almost everybody anywhere to be globally aware (TeachUNICEF, 2013). Since the lives of people have become globalized as well, it is important for them to see themselves as part of an evolving global community (Israel, 2011).

Even without leaving their own country, people encounter cross-cultural experiences. The expansion of international business, the global mobility of individuals for various reasons, and faster transfer of information across continents are examples of factors that increase the need for people to be internationally-minded. The demand for global citizens has been growing. As well as businesses and organizations, educational institutions have been adapting to the globalized environment. Schools have been implementing internationalization to address the current trends calling for global citizens (TeachUNICEF, 2013; de Wit, 2002; ACE, 2012).

De Wit (2002), Israel (2011) and ACE (2012) agree that a crucial role in global citizen education is played by educational institutions, mainly universities, who embrace internationalization. ACE listed 6 major areas that lead to successful internationalization in higher education and to the development of global citizens. One of them is student mobility. The

institutions supporting internationalization focus on promoting study-abroad opportunities for their local students and recruiting students from foreign countries to allow firsthand cultural exchange among students and foster their acculturation.

In general, acculturation is referred to as a process that leads to a “cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture” (Acculturation, n.d.). In international education, acculturation is often viewed from a perspective focused on internal processes of change that international students experience when they encounter direct contact with the members of their host culture (Padilla & Perez, 2003). Acculturation is part of every international student’s experience. Not only the academic environment, but also the social environment, may be significantly different from the international students’ original culture (Baker & Siryk, 1989).

International students who are well connected to their classmates and teachers participate in extra-curricular activities and feel at home in their host country are more likely to graduate (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). However, many international students perceive issues such as alienation, discrimination, sense of non-belonging, financial constraints, immigration concerns and homesickness (Barty2006; Koehne, 2006).

In the United States, there are over 900,000 international students enrolled in universities and colleges (IIE, 2015). From an academic aspect, international students contribute to the diversity of the student body and allow domestic students to experience firsthand cultural exchange in their home country. In other words, they bring opportunities to domestic students to become more culturally aware and gain traits and skills necessary for a global citizenship without the need to travel abroad (Pandit & Alderman, 2004). From an economic perspective, the international students are an asset, not only for the higher education institution, but for the

region, state and nation as well. In 2013-2014, international students contributed over \$27 billion to the U.S. economy.

In order to retain current students, and recruit future international students, it is important to create an environment that leads to overall positive experiences for international students. Students from cultures that are very different from the culture of the host country are prone to experiencing culture shock and to perceiving barriers to acculturation. To date, the number one country of origin of international students in the United States is China (IIE, 2015). Chinese students, supported by their families, have recognized the benefits of studying in the United States, such as becoming more proficient in the English language, getting familiar with U.S. culture, gaining prestige, and becoming more marketable in the labor market (Yang, 2015).

Both countries, the United States and China, have a lot in common. For instance, they belong to the world's economic superpowers (World Bank, 2014), they are among the largest countries in the world (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015), and they are important trade and business partners to each other. However, there are significant differences between the Chinese collectivistic and high-power distance culture and the very individualistic, low-power distance nature of U.S. culture. The education system, school environment, in-class behavior, teaching styles, and lifestyles of the students also vary considerably between the countries.

It is important for host institutions to create a welcoming environment and comfortable conditions for international students in order to provide them with positive educational experiences (Wadsworth et al., 2008), and to allow domestic students to maximize the benefits derived from the presence of their international peers on campus (Soria & Troisi, 2013). Exploring the experiences and perceptions of Chinese students enrolled at U.S. colleges and universities may help the institutions to better understand the process of their acculturation. By

better comprehending the needs of Chinese students, the institutions can easily dismantle the barriers to acculturation and increase academic satisfaction. From a business perspective, international students may be viewed as customers. Every good business person recognizes the importance of customer satisfaction. Word of mouth is one of the most trusted marketing tools. The more satisfied international (Chinese) students graduate, the more Chinese students will be attracted to study at the particular institution.

In this chapter, globalization and internationalization are defined and looked at from chronologic and geographic perspectives. Since the study was conducted in the United States, the emphasis was put on internationalization in higher education in the United States. Statistical data about international students in the United States will be presented in the following text. The participants for this study were international students of Chinese origin. Part of the literature review focuses on the population of international students of Chinese origin enrolled in a U.S. higher education institution. In addition, facts considering Chinese students' global mobility are presented. To allow the reader to gain a better insight, the Chinese educational system is introduced, and a list of the main reasons for Chinese students' interest in studying in the United States are included, together with a section considering academic and economic benefits for both Chinese students in the United States and their host institutions. Potential barriers and threats stemming from negative experiences of hosted students are also mentioned.

Many of the barriers and issues perceived by international students are interlaced with the process of their acculturation (Barty, 2006; Gonzales, 2006; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Therefore, the concept of acculturation is defined and described. Gonzales' Acculturation Model (Gonzales, 2006) is introduced and explained as a theoretical framework for this study. The main facts about

internationalization and acculturation were brought together, and the benefits of this qualitative study using the Gonzales' Acculturation Model were anticipated.

Globalization and Internationalization in Higher Education

The world is calling for quality global leaders, internationally-minded individuals and global citizens (ACE, 2012; Dalton, Serapio, & Yoshida, 1999; Morrison, 2000; TeachUNICEF, 2013). Globalization, a process of international integration involving the exchange of products and cultural elements including world views and ideas (Albrow & King, 1990; Al-Rohdan & Stoudmann, 2006), has reshaped the world. The process of adjusting products and cultural elements to fit the globalized environment or a specific global market is known as internationalization (Hudzik, 2011).

Economic, socio-cultural and political forces have directed global society toward informed, culturally sensitive collaboration (Coryell et al., 2012) and have driven higher education toward greater internationalization efforts (Altbach & Knight, 2006). Before approaching the topic of acculturation of Chinese international students in the United States, the history, role and effect of globalization and internationalization in higher education is described, and current trends in U.S. and Chinese higher education from the internationalization perspective are introduced.

Globalization in times and spheres. Even though globalization has been tracked back to the 3rd millennium (Frank, 1998), the term globalization became familiar first in the 1990s (O'Rourke & Williamson, 2000). Disputes over the date when globalization emerged in the modern age still remain (O'Rourke & Williamson, 2000). Nevertheless, scholars and researchers in general agree that globalization began to increase rapidly in pace and importance in the 1980s (Morrison, 2000; O'Rourke & Williamson, 2000; Perruci, 2011). Since then, more attention has

been paid to the influence and impacts of globalization on business environments, economics, politics, socio-cultural environments and natural environments.

Globalization has rearranged the world and society in many ways (Morrison, 2000). Perruci (2011) divided the impacts of globalization into two spheres, and refers to them as vertical and horizontal levels. The vertical level reflects the changes in communication and technology development, and the horizontal level is concerned with the human factor. Included in the human level is global citizenship education (ACE, 2012; TeachUNICEF, 2013). This field educates and empowers individuals to comprehend the global interconnectedness and value diversity, and take actions with respect to other countries' cultures and their ethical values (Israel, 2011; TeachUNICEF, 2013).

Economic crises in the first decade of the 21st century, war in Afghanistan, disputes in Egypt, terror attacks in France, all impact the lives of people across the globe. For example, lives of people in the United States are directly and indirectly influenced by the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, development of emerging countries, environmental issues across the world, and other global issues (Guttek, 2006). Accepting the fact that we all are different but we all live in the same world, and we need to interact, raises the need for us to be globally aware. That's why international education and global citizenship education gained in importance.

Global citizenship and international education. In the current era of globalization, there have been significant increases in ethical, racial, cultural, religious and language diversity in nations across the world (Banks, 2004). People today live their globalized lives in a global society, and need to understand their role in an evolving world community (Guttek, 2006; Israel, 2011). In the educational environment, new demands have emerged in connection with globalization. It is not only important for most people to learn how to read, write and count, they

also need to learn how to effectively function in the global society, which has increased the importance of global citizenship education and international education (Israel, 2012; TeachUNICEF, 2013).

Researchers and scholars in the field of international education (ACE, 2012; Altbach & Knight, 2006; de Wit, 2002; Knight, 1999; Pandit & Alderman, 2004) agree that the tertiary education sector is a cornerstone for global citizenship education. ACE (2012) stated:

It is the obligation of colleges and universities to prepare people for a globalized world, including developing the ability to compete economically, to operate effectively in other cultures and settings, to use knowledge to improve their own lives and their communities, and to better comprehend the realities of the contemporary world so that they can better meet their responsibilities as citizens. (p. 3)

Increasing numbers of universities around the world have embraced internationalization and have implemented international education and other components of internationalization in order to satisfy the world's demand for global citizens (IIE, 2014). Internationalization in higher education creates an opportunity for students to develop into global citizens (Israel, 2011). Also, internationalization brings with it a number of non-economic and economic benefits that apply to the institution and beyond (IIE, 2014).

Internationalization in Higher Education

In an era of globalization, internationalization has become a frequent topic in the field of higher education. Universities internationalize their curricula, seek for diversity in the student body, support student and teacher mobility, and promote internationalization at home (ACE, 2012). Literature (Altbach, 2000; de Wit, 2002) refers to internationalization in higher education as an important part of higher education's development, and a key feature of contemporary universities and colleges.

Historical overview of internationalization in higher education. Although there is not much scientific evidence, the roots of internationalization in higher education are believed to be in medieval Europe (Altbach, 2008). In the middle ages, academic pilgrimage was part of the lives of a majority of university students. In the 12th and 13th centuries in Europe, there were only a few universities across the continent, and those who decided to study usually had to travel long distances and move to a foreign country (de Wit, 2002). By the 15th century, tertiary educational institutions were more wide-spread in Europe. However, short-term study abroad experiences, or migration in order to complete studies, remained important factors in higher education (de Wit, 2002; Ridder-Symoens, 1992). By the end of the middle ages, the majority of students attended university in their region, and international student mobility was limited mostly to those who desired to study at a prestigious institution or obtain a degree that was not offered at their nearby universities (de Wit, 2002). Nevertheless, studying abroad gave students the opportunity to find learning, friends and leisure.

Ridder-Symoens (1992) summarized the benefits of international education in the middle ages. He stated that the use of Latin as an official university language, uniform programs of study, and an examination system allowed migrant students to continue their studies at various institutions. Another positive aspect deriving from student mobility was that the itinerant students became the bearers of new experiences, ideas and socio-cultural and political views gained in the host country, which they brought home with them. The outcomes and positive aspects expressed by Ridder-Symoens emphasized that international students in the Middle Ages

had become familiar with new schools of artistic expression, and with living conditions, customs, ways of life, and eating and drinking habits all previously unknown to them. As most itinerant scholars belonged to the élite of their country and later held high office, they were well placed to apply and propagate their newly acquired knowledge. The consequences of academic pilgrimage were,

indeed, out of all proportion to the numerically insignificant number of migrant students. (p. 302-303)

The above-listed aspects are almost identical to, and can be compared to, the benefits of today's international students.

The periods of Reformation and Enlightenment in Europe continued to keep the universalistic spirit of the middle ages alive. Kolasa (1962) described this era as “natural, not organized or regimented, flow of culture, and of free wandering of the creators of that culture across political frontiers” (p. 12). The free flow of culture and academic pilgrimages were inhibited in the second half of the 19th century as universities became nationally oriented and, at some institutions, study abroad was prohibited completely. Latin started to be substituted by local official languages, and academic pilgrimages were superseded by so-called grand tours. In contrast to the pilgrimage, grand tours focused specifically on academic objectives, and the cultural aspects were limited (Hammerstein, 1996).

Yet this era gave rise to three elements of higher education: export of higher educational systems, dissemination of research, and individual mobility of students and scholars. According to de Wit (2002), export of higher education was the most influential aspect in the 18th and 19th centuries. Colonial countries transferred their models of higher education to their colonies, and to newly independent states. For instance, Latin American higher education has reflected the higher education of the Iberian Peninsula. The British Empire implemented its model of higher education in India and other Asian areas, Africa, the Caribbean, and North America. In the early 19th century, most colonized countries gained their independence, but the influence on education brought by the colonial powers prevailed. Even though nations such as Japan or China have never been colonized, during this era they also adopted the Western university system (de Wit, 2002). The development of the university system in the United States was strongly influenced by

Western models as well, predominantly by the Cambridge, Oxford and German models.

Nowadays, the university system in the United States is perceived as one of the dominant models in international education.

Overview of international education in the United States. American higher education has an international background. The system of tertiary education in the United States was based on European models. In contrast to homogeneous university systems in Europe, higher education in the United States has a heterogeneous character. In Europe, international education has been considered an important part of college education since the middle-ages. In the past, it was a must for most students to relocate from their country of origin to be able to obtain their university degree. A no less important rationale behind international education in Europe has been the transfer of cultures, gaining experiences and mutual understanding. Other crucial aspects were developing cross-cultural competence and communication skills that have been appreciated, mainly in business and political spheres.

In North America, universities have been founded since the second half of the 17th century. In the early period of American higher education, European models for colleges and universities were adopted. The first American universities —Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, Princeton, and King's College—were influenced by the British models of Cambridge and Oxford. Harvard University, founded in 1636, followed the Cambridge model. Later, the German model started to be applied to research-based universities such as Johns Hopkins (de Wit, 2002).

Despite the foundation of new universities in the United States, international education remained active. American college students' main destination was the United Kingdom, and the primary fields of their study abroad were law and medicine (de Wit, 2002). Since the 17th century, the American higher education system has transformed and evolved and has become one

of the dominant models in the sector of tertiary education. Simultaneously with the development of U.S. higher education, international education has been evolving as well.

In the early phase of American tertiary education, student and teacher mobility was a common phenomenon. However, after the revolution at the end of the 18th century, the move towards nationalization in the United States raised negative perspectives of international studies and outbound travels of Americans to study abroad (de Wit, 2002). Political and educational leaders, such as Thomas Jefferson, Daniel Webster and Charles W. Eliot, opposed the idea of American students leaving the country and gaining their education abroad (Halpern, 1969). According to Halpern (1969), this hostile attitude towards study abroad derived from the effort to break the American dependence on European education and culture, and from the fear that American students would become denationalized. In 1873, Charles W. Eliot, supporter of national education and American individual citizenship, expressed his opinion on foreign education, stating, “In a strong nation, the education of the young is indigenous and national. It is a sign of immaturity or decrepitude when a nation has to import teachers, or send abroad its scholars” (Halpern, 1969, p. 24). This desire to prove independency led to a decrease in foreign education, which also resulted in national orientation and lower cultural competence. Goodwin and Nacht (1991) suggested that the lack of international elements in American education may be considered responsible for the unpreparedness of the United States to understand the process during World War I and the Peace Conference afterwards. These events made young Americans realize there was a need to better understand other countries, and to be able to interact with them. During the World Wars, there was an increase in interest in the study of international relations.

Since the 20th century, internationalization in U.S. higher education has been re-evaluated and has developed into one of the most important components of modern universities.

In the first half of the 20th century, mainly female students were sent abroad, while male students usually remained in the United States to prepare for or work on their careers (de Wit, 2002). Since the 1960s, the internationalization and curriculum in higher education was stimulated by the federal government, with a focus on foreign policy and national defense. The time period after the Cold War was driven by political motivation, and foreign education was strongly oriented on Soviet and Chinese studies. The International Education Act of 1966 was the government's major stimulation for international education. It was proposed by President Johnson, and passed Congress. However, it was not funded by the new Congress, mainly because the Vietnamese war and tensions within the American community shifted the focus onto national issues during 1966-1985. During this period, international education was limited and the emphasis was put on national defense, diplomacy, security and stimulation of international exchange and cooperation. In the early 1980s, the threat of enormous budget cuts was hanging over the field of foreign education. De Wit (2002), citing Mestenhauser (1998), refers to this period as "defense through the associations" (p. 20). In the 1990s the dark periods were alternated with a "New Euphoria" in international education (de Wit, 2002).

Since the 1990s, globalization increased rapidly in its pace and has reshaped the world. Mutual understanding, cultural competency, cross-cultural skills and agility increased in importance. The changes driven by globalization are responsible for many new trends in internationalization in higher education. According to de Wit (2002), since the 1980s internationalization in the United States has been driven by competitiveness. A new goal for international education has been added (de Wit, 2002) and has overtaken the former rationale driving U.S. international education: mutual understanding, national security, and war avoidance (Mestenhauser, 2000). Through foreign education, American students were supposed to gain

cultural enrichment and competence, and mainly learn how to compete and prosper in the globalized world (Holzner & Greenwood, 1995; Mestenhauser, 2000; de Wit, 2002).

Current trends in the United States. Nowadays, internationalization in higher education is one of the leading trends among American higher education institutions (ACE, 2012; IIE, 2015). Globalization has increased the demand for global citizens, individuals with intercultural skills, cultural competence and agility (ACE, 2012; Gonzales, 2006; Israel, 2011). Universities and colleges play a crucial role in global citizenship education and in preparing individuals for their careers in today's globalized world (ACE, 2012; de Wit, 2002). Elements of internationalization, such as student and faculty mobility, internationalized curricula with a focus on global issues, and collaboration and partnership with abroad institutions (ACE, 2012), have been implemented by growing numbers of American tertiary institutions that enhance global education.

In the United States, recruiting international students belongs among internationalization efforts of the tertiary education sector. From an economic perspective, the presence of international students is very beneficial to institutions, regions, states and the whole nation. The financial contribution of international students in the United States has increased (IIE, 2014). According to the Institute of International Education's report (IIE, 2014), international students contributed over \$27 billion to the U.S. economy.

Fast pace of growth is also evident in the number of international students enrolled at U.S. institutions. Currently, international students account for 4% of the total U.S. higher education population (IIE, 2014). The number of international students in the United States grew from 26,433 in 1949-1950 to 886,052 in 2013-2014. In 2014, the highest number of international students (886,052) obtained an education at U.S. universities and colleges (IIE, 2015).

According to Ruby (2013) this number is expected to continue to grow throughout the next decade. Pandit (2009) says that the aim of expanding international student enrollment in the United States is “closely tied to the positive economic impact of international students, the human capital they represent, and the need to cultivate friends and allies around the world” (p. 651). Further, at the institutional level, international students are powerful cultural catalysts in the process of internationalization (Pandit, 2009) and are a primary source of firsthand contact with another culture for American students (Gonzales, 2006; Pandit, 2009; Pandit & Alderman, 2004).

In recent years, China and India have been the top countries of origin of all international students in the United States, followed by South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Canada and Taiwan (IIE, 2014). Around 31% of the total number of international students in the United States is represented by Chinese students. Approximately 32% of all international students are distributed between three U.S. states: California, New York and Texas.

American-Chinese relations in U.S. tertiary education. With the economic opening in the late 1970s, China started to rank among the top countries of origin sending international students to the United States. Since the school year 2008-2009, China has been the number one country of origin of international students in the United States. In the school year 2013-2014, China accounted for 31% of all international students in the United States (IIE, 2014). According to Institute of International Education data, there were nearly 60,000 Chinese students in the United States in 2000-2001, and China was the second largest sender of international students to the United States. Since then, the number of Chinese students in the United States has continued to grow at a rapid pace (IIE, 2014; UNESCO, 2015).

In 2014, there were 274,439 Chinese students enrolled across the United States (see Table 1). The United States continues to be Chinese international students' number one destination for college enrollment abroad (UNESCO, 2014). Chinese international students enrich the diversity of the student body at the host institutions, and give domestic and other international students the opportunity for firsthand contact with Chinese culture (Pandit & Alderman, 2004; Gonzales, 2006). The majority of Chinese international students are self-funded and, next to cultural benefits, they significantly contribute to U.S. economics and the revenues of host institutions, and have a positive impact on wellbeing at the local, regional and even national level (IIE, 2014).

Chinese students' preference to study in the United States derives from their expectations that in the United States, they will gain language skills and obtain an academic degree and training in their field of study, prestige, and cross-cultural communication skills (EIC, 2011). Yang (2015) also noted that the Chinese college entrance examination, *gaokao*, and the high number of graduates from Chinese universities that are facing employment issues, increases the interest of many Chinese high school students in obtaining their college degree abroad.

Mervis (2014) highlighted that a number of Chinese parents would make any effort to reduce the stress level and pressure that is put on their offspring by the Chinese educational system. One of the attempts to do so is to seek college opportunities for their children abroad. Chinese students, usually supported by their family, often invest a lot of energy and effort to find placement at the U.S. institution (EIC, 2011; Mervis, 2014; Yang, 2015).

Chinese students' retention and academic and personal achievement may be influenced by their acculturation upon arriving to the United States. A number of studies (Barty, 2006;

Koehne, 2006; Overzat, 2011) highlighted some of the consequences of negative experiences and perceptions during the process of acculturation of Asian students studying in the Western world.

Table 1

Chinese Students in the United States

Year	Total International	Chinese Students	Chinese Student % of Total	Rank
1999-2000	514723	54466	10.58	1
2000-2001	547867	59939	10.94	2
2001-2002	582996	63211	10.84	2
2002-2003	586323	64757	11.04	2
2003-2004	572509	61765	10.79	2
2004-2005	564766	62582	11.08	2
2005-2006	582984	67723	11.62	2
2007-2008	623805	81127	13.01	2
2008-2009	671616	98235	14.63	2
2009-2010	690923	127628	18.47	1
2010-2011	723277	157558	21.78	1
2011-2012	764495	194029	25.38	1
2012-2013	819644	235597	28.74	1
2013-2014	886052	274439	30.97	1
2014-2015	974926	304040	31.19	1

Note. Table created based on IIE (2014, 2015) data representing the growth of international students and Chinese students in the United States by school year, the ratio of Chinese students among all international students, and the rank of China among countries of origin of international students.

Acculturation and Chinese International Students

Acculturation is a very complex process that occurs when at least two different cultures come together (Gonzales, 2006; Wadworth et al, 2008). Acculturation has caught researchers' attention since the first half of the 20th century, when acculturation was predominantly seen as a group phenomenon (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). A focus on a group of people in the

process of acculturation may reveal its impact on social structure, economic environment, or political organization (Berry, 1991; Wadsworth et al, 2008). Berry et al. (1992) emphasize that it is important to focus on individual levels of acculturation. In opposition to the group lens, studying the internal sources of change helps to understand changes in behavior, identity, values and attitudes (Berry, 1990). Every person has their own unique way of reacting to, perceiving, adapting to or assimilating with new cultural contexts (Berry, 1990, 1997; Berry et al. 1992; Fan & Ashdown, 2014). Generally, international students become involved in their acculturation process upon arrival at their study abroad destination, unless they have pre-arrival experiences with the host culture (Gonzales, 2006). The host country's distinct cultural concept often causes issues perceived by the international students (Gonzales, 2006; Koehne, 2006). Chinese international students' rigid value system obtained in their home culture causes difficulties with their acculturation in the United States.

The culture of a country consists of values, attitudes, meanings, beliefs, social roles, notions of time, hierarchies, religion and other aspects, including the education system and academic environment (Rybak, 2009) shared by its members (Samovar & Porter, 1994), and can be very different from country to country (Hofstede, 1991; Lewis, 2006). Studies on culture (Bennett, 2004; Gerzon, 2010; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Hofstede, 1991) prove that the highly individualistic nature of U.S. culture is in strong contrast to the collectivistic culture of China.

Levels of formality are higher in China, and quite informal in the United States (Hofstede, 1991). In the Chinese education environment, emphasis is put on respect and obedience (Rybak, 2009; Miller, 2014), while in the United States, students are encouraged to express their own opinions, and on occasions it is even acceptable for them to challenge instructors (Lockette, 2012; Rybak, 2009). Collectivist Chinese people tend to have strong

family values, and their actions are driven by an intention to produce common good. First, the Chinese think of the benefits for the community, and the wellbeing of its members. In opposition to this, Americans usually create large networks of relationships and acquaintances, where friendship is more superficial. Generally, members of U.S. society first consider their own interests. Their actions are driven by self-fulfillment, self-development and individual goals. They often strive to compete with, and prove they are better than, others (Hofstede, 1991; Zdanuik & Bobocel, 2012; Tsai & Wei-Na, 2006). Cultural differences, discussed in more depth in Chapter 2, can impact Chinese students' performance and create acculturation issues perceived by Asian students in the United States (Barty, 2006; Koehne, 2006; Lockette, 2012).

Koehne (2006) pointed out that many Asian students, upon their arrival at a host country, desire to belong to their new environment. However, it is not an easy process for them. Koehne's study revealed that Asian students sometimes struggle to fit in to their new environment, and they often feel isolated and alienated. Perceived negative experiences of international students in their host countries are usually interconnected and aligned with academic issues, health issues, social issues and economic issues (Barty, 2006; Gonzales, 2006; Koehne, 2006). These acculturation issues may have an impact also on Asian students' retention, graduation and withdrawal rates, overall academic achievement, and personal attainment (Gonzales, 2006).

Higher education institutions strive for the academic success of their students, increased retention rates, graduation rates, recruitment, and so forth. These indicators and related variables reflect the quality of education and services provided by the school, and influence the rank of the university among other institutions. Comparison with other institutions is usually taken into consideration by Chinese students and their parents while they are selecting a host university

abroad. The higher the institution ranks, the more trust and interest it obtains from Asian students and their parents (EIC, 2011).

Research on international students (Barty, 2006; Gonzales, 2006; Koehne, 2006; Pandit & Alderman, 2004) identified issues international students often perceive during their acculturation processes in the United States. According to Gonzales (2006), Koehne (2006) and Barty (2006), acculturation issues are predominantly linked to international students' academic and social life, economic and financial constraints, and mental and health problems. All these issues are usually interconnected. For example, due to existing language barriers, some students experience academic issues as well as social issues because they are not equipped to communicate effectively with their teachers and peers and are limited in creating new friendships. Perceptions of academic and social issues increase the level of acculturation stress (Barty, 2006; Koehne, 2006). Stress can lead to a number of mental and health problems. Mental and health issues require treatment, and treatment requires money. Unexpected expenses challenge the economic and financial stability of the individual. Students with significantly different cultures of origin who have no previous experiences with their host country's culture tend to perceive higher acculturation stress levels (Gonzales, 2006). For Chinese students, as Bennett (2000, 2004) noted, the process of acculturation in a dominant culture such as the culture of the United States can be more difficult than acculturation in countries with similar cultural values. Various cultural models (Hofstede, 1985, 2001; Lewis, 2006) demonstrate differences between world cultures. Comparison of cultures within cultural models, such as Hofstede's Model (Hofstede, 1985, Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) or Lewis' Model (Lewis 2006) help reveal cultural differences between countries.

Geert Hofstede (1985) assigned indexes to world countries based on five dimensions of cultures: Power Distance (PDI), Individualism versus Collectivism (IDV), Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS), Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), and Long Term Orientation versus Short Term Normative Orientation (LTO). A sixth dimension, Indulgence versus Restraint (IND), was recently added to the portfolio (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Similarities as well as differences may be identified across all countries. For instance, in recent years, both the United States and China have been recognized as the leading and largest economies in the world. Both countries have been represented by a number of successful businessmen, leaders, athletes and scientists. Similarities between the United States and China exist. Yet these two countries are very different from a cultural perspective. The highly individualistic U.S. culture prioritizes self-interest over benefits for, and impacts on, community. In collectivistic China, quite the opposite attitude is embedded in its society.

Lewis' Model (Lewis, 2006) organizes world countries in relation to three core categories: Linear-active, Multi-active, and Reactive. The United States is strongly linear-active. According to Lewis (2006), linear-active countries are focused on planning, scheduling and organizing and are monochromic. In other words, actions are pursued one thing at a time. In Lewis' Model (2006), Chinese culture is, after Vietnam, the most reactive of all countries. Societies with reactive cultures are described by Lewis (2006) as courteous compromisers who tend to be good listeners and react very carefully to other parties.

In U.S. profit-oriented monochromic culture, time means money, and making money is important. Time and money is considered wasted while decisions are not being made or actions are not being carried out (Lewis, 2006). Americans like to plan their agenda step by step and prefer to have their tasks accomplished within a fixed schedule (Lewis, 2006). For U.S. society,

task prevails over relationship, and an individual is expected to take care of themselves (Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; House et al., 2004). Chinese people, on the contrary, are very collectivistic. The interests and goals of an individual are considered after, and with respect to, the overall interests and goals of the group, community or society (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). In China, indeed, the time invested in building a mutual relationship, respect and trust is very important, and never perceived as wasted (Lewis, 2006). Chinese culture is long-term oriented and strives for maintaining harmony. The Chinese try to learn from other cultures, and are more open to adapt their traditions when circumstances change (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010).

However, Chinese international students exposed to Western culture, such as the culture of the United States, still perceive acculturation issues in the host country that impact the quality of their daily lives and result in increased stress levels and sometimes, even, resistance to investing time and energy into acculturation (Fan & Ashdown, 2014). Fan and Ashdown (2014), and Gonzales (2006) suggest it is important to conduct research on how individuals, such as Chinese international students, perceive the process of their acculturation in the United States in order to better support their academic and social success and improve overall cross-cultural communication. In order to support research on acculturation and international students, a number of theories and theoretical frameworks were developed (Bennett, 2000; Berry, 1991; Gonzales, 2006). One of them is Gonzales' Acculturation Model (Gonzales, 2006).

Gonzales' acculturation model. Jarren Thomas Gonzales (2006) developed an acculturation model to explore and organize international graduate students' perceptions about their acculturation in the United States. Gonzales agreed with the notion that international students' acculturation experience is based on a recognition of similarities and differences

between the culture of origin and the culture of the host country. These cultural similarities and differences “represent cultural issues that must be addressed in order to successfully adapt to nuances of life in the United States and interact effectively with members of the new culture” (p. 59).

Differences identified by international students in the United States seem to create significant stress in their lives in the host country. Such acculturation stress can prevent or hinder international students from the accomplishment of their personal, academic and professional goals (Gonzales, 2006; Pandit & Alderman, 2004; Tinto, 1998). Individuals in new cultural environments are driven by the need to decrease their cognitive discord and engage in resolving their perceived cultural issues. During the process of acculturation, individuals experience changes in behavior, attitudes and/or beliefs (Bennett, 1993, 2004; Berry, 1997, 2002; Gonzales, 2006).

Gonzales’ (2006) theoretical framework proposed several interconnected elements that characterize the acculturation experience of international students. The core of this framework is based on international students’ identification of the similarities and differences between their lives in the country of their origin and in the United States. Gonzales’ Acculturation Model (Gonzales, 2006) consists of five categories: Cultural and Social Assessment, Language Acquisition and Proficiency, Social Support, Cultural Learning, and Individual Growth.

The first and central category to the model is Cultural and Social Assessment. Four other key categories of this model are: Language Acquisition and Proficiency, Social Support, Cultural Learning, and Individual Growth. The central category, Cultural and Social Assessment, represents the recognition of similarities and differences. The other four key categories represent adaptive techniques international students use to address inconvenience after they recognize

differences in their new cultural context (Gonzales, 2006, p. 60). According to Gonzales (2006), the experiences and perceptions of international students can be best understood when they are aligned in a framework. This model provides qualitative researchers with frameworks in which they can arrange the experiences and perceptions they obtain from international students through questionnaires and personal interviews. The following text explains the individual categories of Gonzales' Acculturation Model in more depth.

Table 2

Categories and Characteristics of Gonzales' Acculturation Model

Category	Defining Characteristics
Cultural and Social Assessment	Recognition of congruent cultural patterns Recognition of incogruent cultural patterns
Language Acquisition and Proficiency	English fluency aids cultural adaptation English fluency would aid cultural adaptation Lack of English fluency leads to frustration
Social Support	Informal sources of social support Formal sources of social support
Cultural Learning	Increased knowledge/appreciation of native culture Increased knowledge/appreciation of new culture Experimental learning through intercultural contact
Individual Growth	Increased self-sufficiency and assertiveness Increased maturity and understanding of self

Note: Gonzales' Acculturation Model (2006, p. 88).

Cultural and social assessment. This first category, which is central to Gonzales' Acculturation Model, represents how international students find their lives different in the new culture concept in comparison to their lives in the country of their origin. According to Gonzales (2006), international students have the propensity to compare their lives in their host country to the lives they were accustomed to in their home country. He refers to this as an "active and

ongoing process of social and cultural assessment” (p. 63). Gonzales further explains that this evaluation impacts the participants’ comprehension of their situation, and influences their daily lives in the host country.

In Cultural and Social Assessment, there are two integral components: expectations and realities. Expectations reflect what the international students were awaiting from their U.S. life experience; on the other hand, realities reflect how the international students perceive their life upon their arrival to the United States. Research conducted by Gonzales (2006) revealed that participants with previous experiences with U.S. culture base their expectations on their empirical knowledge. On the other hand, students with no such previous experiences create their expectations based on assumptions created via media, norms or facts learned in their culture of origin. Nonetheless, even students with a deeper understanding of American culture may later perceive their pre-arrival anticipation as erroneous or obsolete.

Many international students choose to study in the United States because they believe that the conditions, such as the educational environment, including faculty and resources, and job opportunities are superior to the conditions in their home country. These cultural assumptions are challenged, confirmed and adapted during the process of social and cultural assessment. Individuals with more accurate pre-arrival expectations tend to perceive less significant changes in behavior and attitudes than those whose expectations were exaggerated. Inaccurate perceptions about the host country lead to more adaptive changes in order to better manage living in new cultural context.

Language acquisition and proficiency. Language is a critical component of the acculturation process (Gonzales, 2006; Koehne, 2006). Language mastery allows individuals to better comprehend new cultural settings, create relationships and friendships, and accomplish

their educational and professional goals (Gonzales, 2006; Koehne, 2006). The English language skills of international students are observed as critical for them to be able to interact with the new cultural environment in the United States (Johnson & Roen, 1989). English proficiency impacts international students' social relationships with acquaintances and friends, the way they interact with other individuals or strangers, and their interactions in the classroom and in academic settings (Gonzales, 2006; Johnson & Roen, 1989).

International students with less proficiency in the English language tend more towards frustration because of a lack of language skills needed to interact with members of their host environment. Most international students perceive language as the critical instrument that enables them to interact with others, participate effectively in their lives, and achieve their goals. Those with greater levels of English proficiency usually feel more comfortable, have a smoother transition to American culture, and perceive fewer struggles with their daily functioning in the host country. However, even an advanced level of English language does not completely eliminate all confusions and misunderstandings. All international students, regardless their native tongue, are challenged with learning new accents, vocabulary and regional expressions.

Social Support. International degree-seeking students commit to spend a significant time in a foreign country in order to achieve their academic and, in some cases also, personal and professional goals. Usually, due to geography and time differences, they are separated from their family and friends of origin. In moments of frustration, doubt or uncertainty, people are inclined to seek help, advice or comfort in the form of social support. International students obtain their social support from both informal and formal sources. To a certain point, availability of informal social support may be dependent on the individual's English proficiency and ability to interact with other international or native students and create friendships. Universities and colleges in the

United States hosting international students habitually provide social support through their employees or agencies such as international student advisors, counselors and international student associations. These organizations and university staff help the students gain access to services necessary for their life in the United States, including cultural learning, social opportunities, and counseling. Formal networks may help the international students to connect with other individuals, and assist them with developing skills to achieve their goals.

Informal social support channels generally provide the foreign students with feelings of greater social and emotional interconnectedness with the new culture, and a sense of belonging. Informal social support networks can be divided into two sub-groups: those composed of U.S. citizens, and those of fellow international individuals. According to Gonzales (2006), informal networks consisting of U.S. citizens give international students access to culture and function as a guide in the new environment, and those composed of individuals from the same region of origin provide opportunities to recall relevant topics and cultural traditions of their past.

Gonzales (2006) suggested that creating deep friendships in the United States may be complicated for international students. International students often find it easier to befriend other international students, and more difficult to establish a deep friendship with members of the host culture. Also, students with less advanced English skills may encounter more difficulties with developing new relationships and friendships, and therefore may perceive their acculturation process more stressful and less enjoyable (Gonzales, 2006).

The most ideal and important aspect deriving from relationship is the sense of belonging (Gonzales, 2006; Koehne, 2006), which provides the individual with emotional stability. The sense of connectedness to the new culture permits international students to explore more and acquire a greater appreciation for both the new culture and the culture of origin.

Cultural learning. A variety of cross-cultural encounters in international students' lives contribute to their further understanding of the new culture, and makes them more aware and competent in their own culture. Researchers (Bennett, 2000; Gonzales, 2006; Pandit & Alderman, 2004) emphasized the benefits deriving from firsthand cultural encounters. Through direct intercultural encounters, students are able to further the understanding of foreign culture and their own culture (Pandit & Alderman, 2004). Student contact with individuals from foreign cultures helps them gain a deeper understanding of their innate culture and simultaneously re-examine their own society and cultural context (Gonzales, 2006; Pandit & Alderman, 2004).

Throughout their stay in the United States, international students encounter a wide range of cross-cultural situations. Firsthand contact with new cultures contributes to developing more informed insight and a greater awareness about the host culture and their own culture. Members of the dominant U.S. culture often have naïve assumptions and perceptions about other cultures (Bennett, 2004; Gonzales, 2006). By sharing information, international students learn more about their own culture (Gonzales, 2006; Pandit & Alderman, 2004) and often gain a greater sense of appreciation for their culture of origin (Gonzales, 2006).

Individual Growth. Fundamental changes in international students are linked to their life in the host country. For a significant period of their lives, they find themselves far away from their relatives and friends in a culture that can be very different from the culture of their home country, as in the case of Chinese students who decide to obtain their degree in the United States. Exposure to a new cultural environment, society, cultural traditions, and rules and norms provide international students with an opportunity to learn more about themselves. To achieve their academic, personal and professional goals in the United States, international students have to develop skills to succeed. According to Gonzales (2006), international students' individual

growth is indicated mainly by an increase in self-sufficiency, self-reliance, assertiveness, maturity and understanding of self.

Chinese students in the United States usually have to overcome their natural shyness to be able to attain their academic goals, communicate their needs, establish relationships, and gain a greater capacity to impact change in their new cultural settings. Standing up for oneself is embedded in the U.S. culture. By increasing their assertiveness, international students can better accomplish their daily tasks, garner respect from others, and feel more comfortable and empowered in the new cultural context (Gonzales, 2006).

Conclusion

Since the 1970s the pace of globalization has increased rapidly (Verghese & D'Netto, 2011). Higher education institutions have been implementing internationalization to address the current trends calling for global citizens (ACE, 2012; de Wit, 2002; TeachUNICEF, 2013). Universities and colleges in the United States increasingly focus on promoting study abroad opportunities for their local students, and recruiting students from foreign countries to allow firsthand cultural exchange and acculturation among students. Acculturation is part of every international student's experience. Academic and social environments may be significantly different from international students' original culture (Baker & Siryk, 1989). International students who are well connected to their classmates and teachers, participate in extra-curricular activities, and feel at home in their host country are more likely to graduate (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). In contrast, many international students perceive issues such as alienation, discrimination, a sense of non-belonging, financial constraints, immigration concerns, homesickness, and so forth (Barty, 2006; Koehne, 2006).

In the United States, there were over 970,000 international students enrolled in universities and colleges (IIE, 2015). From an academic perspective, international students contribute to the diversity of the student body and allow domestic students to experience firsthand cultural exchange in their home country (Pandit & Alderman, 2004). From an economic perspective, international students are an asset, not only for the higher education institution, but for the region, state, and nation as well. In 2013-2014, international students contributed over \$27 billion to the U.S. economy.

In order to retain and recruit international students, it is important to create an environment that will lead to their overall positive experiences. Students from cultures that are very different from the culture of the host country are prone to experiencing culture shock and to perceiving barriers to acculturation. To date, the number one country of origin of international students in the United States is China (IIE, 2015). Chinese students, supported by their families, have recognized the benefits of studying in the United States, such as becoming more proficient in the English language, getting familiar with U.S. culture, gaining prestige, and becoming more marketable in the labor market (Yang, 2015).

Both countries, the United States and China, have a lot in common. However, there are significant differences between the Chinese collectivistic and high-power distance culture and the very individualistic, low-power distance nature of U.S. culture (Hofstede, 1991). The education system, school environment, in-class behavior, teaching styles, and lifestyles of students also vary considerably between the countries. It is important for the host institution to create a welcoming environment and comfortable conditions for international students in order to provide them with positive educational experiences (Wadsworth et al., 2008) and to allow

domestic students to maximize the benefits deriving from the presence of their international peers on campus (Soria & Troisi, 2013).

Exploring the experiences and perceptions of Chinese students enrolled at U.S. colleges and universities may help the institutions to better understand the process of acculturation. By better comprehending the needs of Chinese students, the institutions can more easily dismantle the barriers to acculturation and increase international students' academic satisfaction. Many of the barriers and issues perceived by international students are interlaced with the process of their acculturation (Barty, 2006; Gonzales, 2006; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Gonzales' Acculturation Model, described in this chapter, was further followed as a theoretical framework for this qualitative study, and served as a tool to organize Chinese international students' perceptions in categories, in order to answer the leading research question.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of Chinese international degree-seeking students about their acculturation in the United States. The study was conducted at a faith-based private tertiary institution in South Texas, and aimed to find answers to one research question:

1. How do Chinese students perceive their acculturation in the United States?

Qualitative research has been prevalently used in disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, health and medical research, and education (Merriam, 2002). Pursuant to the leading research question, qualitative methodology was employed, and a basic interpretative qualitative study was carried out.

Researchers conducting a basic interpretative qualitative study seek to understand how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, or to discover and understand a phenomenon. The process uses an inductive strategy and leads to a descriptive outcome. Data for basic interpretative qualitative studies are usually collected through observation, interviews or the analyses of documents (Merriam, 2002). This interpretative study was executed in order to understand how Chinese international degree-seeking students perceive their acculturation in the United States, and utilized two research instruments: a personal in-depth interview, and a follow-up personal interview, both for data collection and further data analysis. The participants in this study were eight international Chinese students who were at that time enrolled in a degree-seeking program at a private faith-based university in South Texas.

In order to fortify the accuracy of the study, it was conducted in accordance with research ethics and the protection of human subjects. Based on the reality that the qualitative researcher is

simultaneously the researcher and the participant of the qualitative study, special attention was paid to trustworthiness and ethical behavior in the process of conducting this qualitative inquiry. Researchers should always be aware of their limitations and state those in the research, and should conduct their studies carefully to minimize potential bias and subjectivity (Barusch, Gringeri & George, 2011). Evaluation is a necessary part of the qualitative research process (Merriam, 2002). To ensure the accuracy, credibility, validity and transferability of the study, research techniques, such as triangulation and member check, were employed. This chapter overviews the methodology for this study in more detail.

Rationale for the Research Design

The selection and adequacy of a research method depends on the purpose of the study and the questions addressed in the research (Locke, 1989). The basic interpretive qualitative research approach was employed because the aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of Chinese students about acculturation in the United States (Merriam, 2002). The descriptive and interpretative methods were focused on meaning-based rather than statistical forms of data (Elliott & Timulak, 2005) and put emphasis on understanding phenomena in the participants' own right, use of open, exploratory research questions, and efforts to discover something new (Elliott, 1999). The basic interpretative research was employed to support the purpose of this study, seeking to explore how people "create and associate their own subjective and inter-subjective meanings as they interact with the world around them" (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991, p. 5).

Seidman (1998) and Ferrarotti (1981) suggest that social abstractions, such as education and acculturation, are best comprehended through the experiences and perceptions of individuals whose work and lives reflect the elements upon which these abstractions are built. Seidman

stated: “If the researcher’s goal ... is to understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experiences, then interviewing provides a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry” (pp. 4-5). To attain the goal of this study, to explore the perceptions of Chinese international students about acculturation, the qualitative research method was used, where the main source for data collection relied on in-person interviews with Chinese international students, because interviewing in educational qualitative research is considered to be one of the most efficient ways of obtaining data for further qualitative analysis (Gonzales, 2006; Seidman, 1998).

Methodology

In research terminology, methodology is understood as the choices we make about topics or issues to study, methods for data collection and analysis, and planning for the study to be executed (Silverman, 2006). There were several reasons why descriptive and interpretative research designs for conducting this study were employed.

First, for research in the field of higher education and international education, generic qualitative studies that are drawn from concepts, models and theories in educational, developmental and cognitive psychology or sociology are commonly used (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 1998). Historically, quantitative research used to be considered more valuable and relevant. However, new trends in education, such as internationalization, global citizenship education, acculturation, cross-cultural communication and other disciplines increased the need to study subjective meanings and understand how the new phenomena are perceived and what meanings they bring to people (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Gonzales, 2006; Seidman, 1998).

Also, qualitative inquiry allows us to understand how and why the phenomena are perceived from participants' individual standpoints. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) refer to qualitative inquiry as an effort to "study things in their natural environment settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them" (p. 171). The aim of this study was to attempt to understand the acculturation process in natural environment settings, and describe and interpret the meanings this phenomenon brings to international Chinese students at a faith-based private university in the south of the United States.

Since the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of international Chinese students about their acculturation in the United States, theoretical framework for the study were based on Gonzales' (2006) acculturation model. Gonzales and his team of researchers developed this model to explore the perceptions of graduate international students about their acculturation in the United States. Therefore, the Gonzales' Acculturation Model was believed to be an appropriate framework for this study, which aims to explore perceptions about acculturation of international Chinese degree-seeking students in the United States.

Settings

The site for the research was a private faith-based university located in South Texas in the United States. The institution offers Baccalaureate, Master's and Doctoral programs. Both inbound and outbound student mobility are strongly supported as part of the internationalization of the campus. In 2015, 19% of the student body was represented by international students from almost 70 world countries (UIW, 2015), with China, Mexico, Turkey and Saudi Arabia being among the top countries of origin of international students present on campus. Recruiting students from China, and cooperating with other Chinese institutions on various educational

projects, are among the priority internationalization goals. For instance, the university strongly focuses on establishing and maintaining sister school agreements with partner universities in China, and is involved in American-Chinese education-based projects.

The settings for this research were determined by the needs of the study. Considering all the above facts and the strong focus of the university on Chinese recruitment, partnership, exchange and other international programs, and the hosting of significant numbers of degree-seeking Chinese international students at their home campus in South Texas, it was found appropriate to conduct the study at this institution.

Research Participants

In a qualitative paradigm, a well selected sampling decision is crucial for the soundness of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The participants were purposefully selected to allow the researcher to understand the studied problem and phenomenon, and to help answer the research question (Cresswell, 2003). In qualitative research, there is no general rule regarding how many participants need to be selected for the study, sometimes, one is enough (Denzin, 2012). Sometimes, fifteen may be considered the smallest acceptable sample (Bertaux, 1981). To select a sufficient purposeful sample for the study, literature concerned with comparable research purpose was reviewed. The sample size of most similar studies (Gonzales, 2006; Gower 2008; Su, 2012) ranged from five to 12 participants. For this research, a sample of five to 12 participants was selected.

With the help of the university's International Student Scholar Services Office, all Chinese students enrolled in degree-seeking programs were invited to participate in the research via electronic mail that was sent by an International Affairs Department's employee. Interested students were directed to email or call the researcher to schedule their first interview session.

Students' schedule and mobility were considered, a convenient time was coordinated with the interviewees, and a location chosen with respect to their availability and anonymity.

Profiles of the participants. Eight Chinese international students enrolled in a degree-seeking program at a faith-based university in South Texas participated in this study.

Angelique, a 31-year-old female doctoral student from China, was born and raised in a very traditional Chinese/Cantonese community. Since childhood, she had been interested in cultures and traveling. During her high school years she decided she would like to study abroad. Supported by her family, she first arrived in the United States in 2007 to study at the university. Before she arrived to the United States she had no firsthand experiences with American culture. Prior to her arrival in the United States, she sought information about the United States from resources such as the internet, books and TV.

Vivi, a 22-year old female student enrolled in a masters degree program, is from Eastern China and speaks three languages fluently and is learning another one. During her undergraduate years in China, she spent one semester studying abroad in Russia. This experience led her to seek other opportunities for studying abroad. Through her undergraduate institution in China, Vivi learned more about their partner U.S. university, and decided to obtain her master's degree in the United States. Vivi's decision to study in the United States was based on number of benefits deriving from this opportunity. Vivi believed that obtaining a degree from a U.S. university would allow her to obtain a master's degree in a shorter time, to become more proficient with the English language, and make it easier for her to find a good job after returning back to China. She also looked forward to deepening her intercultural skills and gaining new knowledge about different cultures. Even though Vivi had traveled and gained cultural awareness while studying

in Russia, she had no firsthand experiences with American culture. Her knowledge about U.S. culture derived from resources such as TV shows, American movies, the internet and books.

PJ, a 24-year old male graduate student, comes from the city of Zhuhai in the Guangdong province, and in addition to Cantonese, Mandarin and English, he also speaks a number of Chinese traditional dialects. The increasingly competitive environment in South China made him realize that he needed to perfect his English and gain knowledge in the field of international business. Studying in the United States, PJ believed, would give him the opportunity to study English while experiencing life in a “capitalistic country with the world’s leading economy, innovative companies and creative ideas.”

Bibi, a 24-year old female, arrived to the United States over 3 years ago to study towards an undergraduate degree and is currently enrolled in a master’s degree program. According to Bibi’s parents, studying in the United States would get her a better job and other opportunities in China. After successful completion of her undergraduate studies, Bibi started taking classes towards her master’s degree in finance management. Before returning to China, Bibi would like to gain work experiences because she believes knowing the work environment in, and having work experience from, the United States will increase her chance of getting a better job in China.

Jimmy, a 25-year old male, has studied in the United States for 3 years. Jimmy wants to be a professor at a Chinese university one day, and to achieve his goal he works hard. After graduating with his master’s degree, he enrolled in a doctoral program and focused his interests in adult and higher education. Jimmy’s life in the United States is very purposeful. He has always been interested in higher education, and he wished to experience the higher education system in the United States, explore the quality of U.S. education, identify firsthand the differences between U.S. and Chinese education, and experience living in a capitalistic country.

Ned, a 22-year old male master's degree program student, was born and raised in the Zhejiang province. Ned studied in Russia for 6 months and wished to gain more intercultural experiences. Studying in the United States satisfies several of his interests: exploring cultures, traveling, networking with international friends, and preparing for his professional career in international business. Ned believes that studying and working in the United States will give him the opportunity to learn more about American business environments, help him understand the way business is conducted in the United States, and learn more about and understand the U.S. economy.

Sue, 22-year old female student from Eastern China, was encouraged by her parents to study in the United States. She is currently enrolled in a master's degree program. According to Sue and her parents, English is a necessity for young Chinese people who want to find a good job. In China, Sue studied business at her undergraduate institution, and decided to study international business in the United States. Sue finds her life in the United States very different from her life in China. She looks forward to going back to China to her family and friends, but at the same time she realizes that if she invests more time in her stay in the United States, and apply for optional practical training (OPT), her chances of finding a better job in China will increase.

Jia, a 24-year old female, was born and raised in the East of China. Before she arrived to the United States about 2 years ago, she lived with her parents in Beijing. Realizing how important English is in modern China, especially for Chinese businessmen, Jia's parents supported her to study in the United States. According to Jia, there are more and more international people in Beijing and China is more open now, and so English is very important. Before, Jia found the main benefit of studying in the United States was being able to become more proficient in the English language. During her time in the United States, Jia realized that,

even though she is a woman, she would like to be more like her father. She would like to be involved in business. Now, she views studying in the United States as a great opportunity to obtain education, learn about many different cultures, and mainly experience the U.S. economic and business environments.

All eight participants met the following criteria:

- They were full-time students enrolled in a degree seeking program.
- They were first-time students in the United States with no previous direct experience with U.S. culture prior to their arrival in the United States.
- They signed the informed consent form (see Appendix E), which was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

There were five female and three male students involved in the research. Two out of eight participants were enrolled in a doctoral program and the other six students were studying towards their master's degree at the time the study was conducted. All of the participants decided to voluntarily participate in the study and share their experiences about their acculturation in the United States.

Research Instruments

The data for qualitative studies consists mainly of words and text. The general instrument for this research was interviewing. Interviewing is not just getting answers to questions or an evaluation tool (Patton, 1989). The core of interviewing is in an "interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 1998, p. 3). Socio-cultural and educational issues, including acculturation, are considered abstractions that are based on the concrete experience of individuals. In this field, interviewing provides an essential, if not entirely ample, method of inquiry (Schutz, 1967; Seidman, 1998). Seidman

(1998) believes that interviewing provides “a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry” (p. 4-5) in educational research where the goal of the researcher is to understand the meaning people assign to the particular phenomena they are involved in.

In qualitative research, there are a wide variety of practices and techniques for interviewing. Interviews vary from structured survey interviews to unstructured friendly conversations. Following the guideline set by Gonzales (2006), two main research instruments were used: personal in-depth interviews, and follow-up personal interviews. The first in-person one-on-one interviews and personal follow-up interviews were the two research instruments used to explore the perceptions of Chinese international students about their acculturation at the faith-based private university in South Texas.

Personal in-depth interview. The first research instrument was a personal in-depth interview. Interviewing is a recommended research instrument in qualitative research, especially when the researcher’s aim is to understand the meaning participants make of their own experiences (Seidman, 1998). According to Salmons (2015), in-depth interviews are qualitative research techniques that involve a researcher who guides or questions an interviewee to obtain or elicit information, and collects their perspectives, insights, perceptions and experiences on phenomena that cannot be otherwise observed. With the interviewee’s consent, individual in-depth, face-to-face interviews are usually thirty to ninety minutes in length, and are recorded by the researcher, considering the research ethics and protection of human subjects (Graham, 2000; Seidman, 1998; Van den Berg, 2004).

A semi-structured interview was conducted with all participants, and consisted of a set of demographic questions (see Appendix A), and acculturation-focused questions (see Appendix B). Interview questions for the demographic part were inspired by Gonzales (2006). The

structured interview format, with precise wording of the questions, was used. The participants were asked identical questions in the same sequence (see Appendix A). The second part, the acculturation-focused questions, consisted of five open-ended questions (see Appendix B). The aim of the open-ended questions was to obtain data regarding international Chinese students' perceptions and experiences about acculturation in the United States.

After conducting primary interviews with the participants, these were transcribed and the primary source of data was reviewed. In qualitative interviewing, it is common to conduct a follow-up interview with the participants to get a deeper and clearer understanding of their responses (Gonzales, 2006; Salmons, 2015; Seidman, 1998). Follow-up questions are usually built upon the interviewee's responses. The transcripts of the personal interviews conducted with international Chinese students provided me with a platform for creating specific open-ended questions for the follow-up interview for each individual (Gonzales, 2006). All transcripts were stored securely in a digitally locked location accessible to me only, and destroyed after a reasonable period of time upon completion of the study.

Personal follow-up interview. The second instrument for this study was a face-to-face, one-on-one personal follow-up interview. The data and information collected via in-depth interviews allowed me to generate new understandings and new knowledge about the subject under investigation (Salmons, 2015; Seidman, 1998). According to McNamara (1999), interviews as a follow-up instrument may be useful to further explore participants' responses. Rubin & Rubin (2005) suggest that follow-up interviews allow the researcher to gain more depth and understanding of an idea, concept, event or theme.

Follow-up questions were specifically suited to the interviewee (Valenzuela & Shrivastava, 2005) and were built on their responses from the primary personal interview. They

allowed me to gain a clearer and deeper insight into the meaning that phenomena bring to the participants (Gonzales, 2006; Salmons, 2015; Seidman, 1998). Selected theoretical framework were followed and follow-up questions were used, as recommended by Gonzales (2006). The interviews were conducted according to the interview protocol (see Appendix C) adopted from Gonzales. The length of the follow-up interview depended on several factors, such as the topic, the researcher and the participant (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). The length of the follow up interviews in this study averaged between 15 and 35 minutes.

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. All records and transcripts were stored securely in a locked location accessible to me only, and destroyed after a reasonable period of time upon completion of the study.

Protection of Human Subjects

This study was conducted in compliance with the federal government's "Common Rule" for the protection of human subjects, and in accordance with research ethics. Human subject protections were utilized in order to protect the rights of the participants and the integrity of the research. Any and all documents belonging to the proposal for this study were submitted to the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) strictly following the IRB Requirement Guide.

An IRB consent form (see Appendix E) and letter were provided to notify the participants of the:

- purpose of the study,
- reason why they were chosen for the study,
- basic format of how the study was structured and conducted,
- rights and freedoms of participants in the study,
- benefits of the study, and

- additional information or assistance needed for the study.

Every participant was required to read, understand and agree with the informed consent and sign it as proof of the above. For each participant, the informed consent was printed as two originals. One signed copy was kept by the participant, and the second copy was kept confidentially by me. In order to protect the participant's right, and for ethical concerns, in this research, I kept the copy and all documents in a secure and locked location accessible to me only, and destroyed them after a reasonable period of time upon completion of the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly adhered to and respected in this research. The relationship between myself and the participants was critical; therefore it was based on honesty, trust and respect as suggested by the National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural Research (National Institutes of Health, n.d.).

Data Collection

This qualitative study aimed to explore the perceptions of international Chinese students about their acculturation in the United States. As stated above, researchers (Cresswell, 2003; Gonzales, 2006; Salmons, 2015; Seidman, 1998) have been in consent that the best instruments allowing researchers to get a clearer and deeper understanding of a phenomenon, and the meanings it brings to individuals, are interviews. Data in qualitative research using interviews consists mainly of voice and text. To collect data for the purpose of this study, the following steps and procedures were undertaken:

1. Seeking and selecting participants. An International Affairs department employee sent an email invitation to all international Chinese degree-seeking students. Interested students were directed to contact the researcher. Eight qualified participants were selected.

2. Providing participants with research materials. Selected participants obtained a consent form (see Appendix E). Those who voluntarily signed the consent form and agreed to participate in the research were scheduled for a personal interview at a time and location convenient to them.

3. Personal interviews. All participants were individually invited and scheduled at their convenience to conduct a personal in-depth interview. The interviews took place in natural settings. The length of the interview was between thirty and seventy minutes (Graham, 2000; Seidman, 1998; Van den Berg, 2004). The interviews were recorded with a voice recorder, and notes were taken during or after each interview.

Before each interview, participants were provided with an overview of the informed consent for clarification (see Appendix E). All efforts were made to respect research ethics and avoid bias that could have applied personal views or perceptions that may have resulted in influencing the participants and affecting the significance of the study's results.

4. Building follow-up questions: After the responses from the primary personal interview were transcribed and reviewed, follow-up questions for each interviewee were built and individual one-on-one, personal follow-up interviews were conducted with each participant. Protocols for unstructured in-depth interviews with the individual participants were created (see Appendix F), inspired by Gonzales' (2006) follow-up questions (see Appendix C).

5. Follow-up personal interview. All participants were individually scheduled at their convenience to conduct a personal follow-up interview. The interviews took place in natural settings. The length of the interviews was between 15 and 35 minutes (Seidman, 1998; Graham, 2000; Van den Berg, 2004). Using the interview protocol (see Appendix F), these interviews were guided with the aim of further exploring the participants' responses and generating new

knowledge about the subject under investigation (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) and giving access to a clearer and deeper understanding of the phenomena, idea, concept, event or theme (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 1998). The interviews were recorded with a voice recorder, and notes were taken during or after each interview.

Before each interview, the informed consent was gone over for clarification with the participant (see Appendix E). All efforts were made to respect research ethics and avoid bias that could have applied personal views or perceptions that may have resulted in influencing the participants and affecting the significance of the study's results.

6. Transcribing. After conducting personal interviews with the participants, all interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Office Software.

Data gathered that mainly consisted of, but were not limited to, text and voice were further used for an inductive qualitative data analysis.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, various sources of data are considered adequate for data analysis. Qualitative research has been formally used and evolved since early in the 20th century (Joniak, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Qualitative inquiry has gained in importance especially in the past two decades (Joniak, 2003). Nevertheless, qualitative data analysis is still a relatively new and rapidly developing area of research (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). There is no prescribed way for qualitative data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Kawulich, 2004), but there is sufficient literature available (Cresswell, 2005; Kawulich, 2004; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Patton, 1990; Seidman, 1998; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) providing qualitative researchers with tools, models and processes for conducting qualitative data analysis.

In qualitative research, there are many different methods and techniques used for data analysis (Kawulich, 2004; Merriam, 2002; Seidman, 1998), and the process of analysis may be very labor intensive and time demanding (Cresswell, 2005; Seidman, 1998). The data for a qualitative study employing interviewing as a research instrument consists mainly of voice and text (Seidman, 1998). Supportive data, such as a literature review, internal documents, and observations may be used (Cresswell, 2005; Merriam, 2002; Seidman, 1998). During the personal interview, researchers also observe the participant's body language, facial expressions, or their tones of voice while they are talking about their experiences and perceptions (Seidman, 1998).

Data analysis for this study was conducted according to the data collected. The main data collected for this study consisted of text in the form of transcripts of personal interviews. The participants' responses from the follow-up interviews were managed in the same manner as transcripts from the first personal interviews (Meho, 2006; Salmons, 2015). The personal interviews were audio-recorded and further transcribed into text using Microsoft Office Software. To ensure the accuracy of the study, all interviews were transcribed word by word from the digital recordings.

Patton (1989) pointed out that generally, the following three processes are involved in qualitative data analysis: organizing data, reducing data, and identifying patterns and themes. In qualitative terminology, organizing data may also be referred to as segmenting and coding (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Effective data organization is considered to be a crucial step in the overall process of data analysis (Cresswell, 2005; Patton, 1989; Seidman, 1998). Johnson & Christensen (2004) explain segmenting as "dividing data into meaningful analytical units" (p. 502), and coding as "marking segments of data with symbols, descriptive words, or category

names” (p. 502). Smith et al. (2009) identified six steps in the process of interpretative phenomenological analysis, further referred to as IPA, after the data is collected:

1. Reading and re-reading. At the beginning of qualitative data analysis, it is important for researchers to become familiar and get to know the raw, original data. Researchers should immerse themselves in the collected data (Smith et al., 2009; Kawulich, 2004; Seidman, 1998). Smith et al. (2009) suggest simultaneously listening to the audio records while re-reading the transcripts of interviews. The purpose of this stage is “to ensure that the participant becomes the focus of analysis” (p. 82). I listened to the records and read the transcripts multiple times to become familiar with and to immerse myself in the data collected through interviews with the participants.

2. Initial noting. Initial noting may begin simultaneously with reading and re-reading the transcripts. This step of analysis explores the semantic and language use of the participant. Researchers should remain open-minded and note anything interesting within the transcript, with the aim of producing a comprehensive and detailed collection of notes and comments on the data. In this stage, researchers start to uncover how the participant talks about, understands and thinks about a specific issue (Smith et al. 2009). The analysis is likely to reveal and describe the things that matter to the participant and the meanings they bring to them (Seidman, 1998; Smith et al., 2009). In this stage, researchers may comment on similarities and differences, and amplifications and contradictions in the participants’ responses. Judgement and analytical dialog are considered very important in this section of analysis (Mostyn, 1985; Smith et al. 2009). I reviewed the collected data and each time I read the transcripts, I put initial notes and comments into the transcribed text.

3. Developing emergent themes. By adding researchers' notes to transcripts, the amount of data increases. In the previous two phases, the emphasis of the analytic work of the researcher was focusing on the participant and on the transcript; aiming to understand the participant's concerns and meanings; underlining important parts of text; and writing comments and exploratory notes. Seidman (1998) stated that marking and noting what is of interest also helps to reduce the large amount of raw data. Wolcott (1994) argued that reducing the volume of data is an important step that allows researchers to analyze and interpret their interview material. According to Smith et al. (2009), at this stage of the analysis, researchers simultaneously attempt to reduce the load of data and look for emerging themes. In contrast to previous stages, in developing emerging themes, researchers shift to primarily work with the initial notes rather than the transcript itself.

The process of developing emerging themes includes breaking up the narrative flow of the transcript, and the original interview becomes a set of parts for conducting the analysis. Smith et al. (2009) emphasized that "the main task in turning notes into themes involves an attempt to produce a concise and pithy statement of what was important in the various comments attached to a piece of transcript" (p. 92) with respect to the hermeneutic circle, meaning that "the part is interpreted in relation to the whole; the whole is interpreted in relation to the part" (p. 92). The emergent themes are generally expressed as phrases that grasp and emulate an understanding (Smith et al., 2009). After I read the transcripts several times and put notes and comments to the data, I reduced the raw data and was able to identify emerging themes.

4. Searching for connections across emergent themes. The next step included charting or mapping the themes in the way researchers think they fit together. Smith et al. (2009) suggested two basic procedures for reorganizing the themes. The first procedure instructed the analyst to

create a list of all themes in chronological order, then review the list and move themes around, creating clusters of related themes. The second procedure encouraged researchers to print out the list of themes and cut individual themes out. Then, using a board or other available space, researchers manually moved the themes and organized them into segments that represented themes with similar understandings. Other recommended methods included abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, numeration, and function. The methods selected should be guided by the characteristics of the data and the researchers' personalities (Kawulich, 2004; Smith et al., 2009).

In order to reveal the connections across emergent themes, I organized the notes in chronological order. I then printed out the list of themes. To be able to move the themes around, I cut out each individual theme. After moving the themes around, while searching for connections, I organized the themes into segments and created a chart of themes that represented a similar understanding.

5. Moving to the next case/participant. If there is more than one case or participant in the study, step four is repeated for each case or participant. In this phase, researchers need to be careful and treat each participant on an individual basis in order to do justice to their own individuality.

After completing the first four steps of the analysis with the first participant, I repeated the same procedure with the data collected from the remaining participants. During this process, I made sure to carefully treat the data from each individual participant on an individual basis. I created a chart of emergent themes with a similar understanding for each participant and moved to the last step of the data analysis.

6. Looking for patterns across cases or participants. After analyzing themes for each individual, researchers shift the focus on the whole, with the aim of identifying whether there are any connections across the participants and exploring how a theme of one participant helps illuminate a different participant. Smith et al. (2009) suggest moving to a more theoretical level, if possible.

For the purpose of this study, I looked for connections across the emerging themes charts that were created in the previous step. As Smith et al. (2009) suggested, I used Gonzales' Acculturation Model (Gonzales, 2006) as a theoretical framework in order to sort the collected data across all participants in themes. The process of IPA applied to this study resulted in identifying four themes.

The result of analyzing qualitative data utilizing IPA can be represented in different ways. Most common representation of the final stage of data analysis before the write-up is a form of chart or graphic with links reflecting connections within participants. After analyzing the data completely, I proceeded to the final stage - writing.

For the purposes of this study, the best applicable qualitative data analysis tools were chosen according to the data collected, and the selected theoretical framework was found as a tool to help organize participants' experiences and perceptions into themes, and to find potential interconnectedness between participants. The six steps of IPA (see above) were employed to obtain a chart or graphic representation of the collected data with an emphasis on the hermeneutic circle.

Role of the Researcher

The validity and reliability of the study depend on the researcher's substantial knowledge about the field of study, research skills and professional research ethics (LeCompte & Schensul,

1999; Merriam, 2002). It is the obligation of the researcher to treat all human beings with respect to autonomy, beneficence and justice (La Noue & Bush, 2010). My professional background and experience were sufficient to understand the process of acculturation for this study. I was aware of the role I would play as the primary data collecting instrument and data analyst. This qualitative study was conducted in accordance with professional research ethics, and legal and institutional policies and regulations. In order to ensure the validity and credibility of the study, all effort was put into avoiding any personal opinions that may have had an influence on the participants' responses, any bias, and every effort was made to protect the human subjects. The study was introduced to the participants to ensure they understood their role in the research. Special attention was paid to the voluntary nature of participating in the study, and to the protection of the participants' autonomy and privacy. During the interviews, any personal opinions that may have had influenced the participants' responses were avoided. Throughout the study, any bias was avoided, and professional research ethics were strictly adhered to.

All data collected for the purpose of this study was kept in a safe and locked location accessible only to the researcher. Participants were treated with respect as to their autonomy, beneficence and justice. Via the informed consent, participants had full knowledge of what was involved in the study. Further, any harm or risk was avoided, participants' privacy, confidentiality and anonymity were respected, and the outcomes of the study were presented in a truthful and honest way (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the qualitative study can be explained as confidence in the methodology and findings of the study, and its applicability, consistency, neutrality and truth value (Krefting, 1991). There are many techniques to assess trustworthiness and help improve

quality and validity in qualitative research (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). One of the potential threats to the validity of the research is researcher bias (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Merriam, 2002; Salmons, 2015; Smith et al., 2009). By employing reflexivity, researchers become more aware of their biases, prejudices and personal views, and are able to monitor and attempt to control those (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). For assessing trustworthiness in qualitative study, several techniques may be combined (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Padgett, 1998). Hunt (2011) further states that the procedures for ensuring quality in qualitative research may vary according to the method or approach used and the philosophical paradigm behind it. Multiple techniques were employed to assess the trustworthiness of this study: reflexivity, triangulation, participant feedback, and peer review.

Reflexivity. Johnson and Christensen (2004) consider reflexivity the key strategy in qualitative research. Reflexivity, the “self-reflection of the researcher on his or her biases and predispositions” (p. 249), allows researchers to consider their biases and attempt to better control them. In this study, biases were considered, and reflexivity was used to monitor and attempt to control them.

Triangulation. Triangulation, the process of corroborating evidence (Cresswell, 2005) refers to the cross-checking of information and conclusions through utilizing multiple procedures or sources (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). In this study, triangulation of data was conducted. The data was collected in two different ways, through in-person interviews and follow-up interviews. Data from each source was compiled and the similarity in the results were evaluated. Triangulation was evident in the process of identifying emerging themes and later findings.

Participant feedback. Participant feedback, also known as member checking, is a common technique for studies involving interviews with participants. Johnson and Christensen

(2004) describe participant feedback as “the feedback and discussion of the researcher’s interpretations and conclusions with the actual participants and other members of the participants’ community for verification and insight” (p. 250). Each participant was asked to provide feedback on the researcher’s interpretation to verify the correctness of interpretations and conclusions.

Peer review. Peer review, in the sense of a validation technique, is a “discussion of the researcher’s interpretations and conclusions with other people” (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 250). For this study, a disinterested peer was asked to challenge the researcher to provide solid proof or evidence for interpretations or conclusions, providing the researcher with helpful challenges and insights. Peer review was employed to help improve the credibility and validity of the study. The perspective of a disinterested peer helped to avoid bias and identify strong evidence that later became essential for presenting the findings and conclusions, and supported the trustworthiness of the study.

Ethical Issues

I was aware of my limitations and biases, and conducted the research in accordance with the U.S. Federal Government policies concerning the professional code of ethics, and all regulations, rules and policies established by the institution I was affiliated with. Also, the informed consent forms were used to ensure all participants understood their involvement in the study. Further, all effort was made to protect privacy, confidentiality and anonymity, and best practices were used to avoid any harms and risks in order to maximize the benefits of this study and help to improve trustworthiness and generalizability.

Conclusion

This qualitative study was guided by one research question with the aim of exploring international Chinese students' perceptions about their acculturation in the United States. The methodology for this study was designed bearing in mind the research topic and the purpose of the study. Qualitative research addressing specific social abstraction, such as acculturation, was also used in problem solving and creating positive change (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

The basic interpretative study was executed in order to understand how Chinese international degree-seeking students perceive their acculturation in the United States, utilizing two research instruments, personal interviews and follow-up personal interviews, for the data collection and further data analysis. The participants of this study were eight international Chinese students, who were at the moment the study was conducted enrolled in a degree-seeking program at a private faith-based university in South Texas.

In order to support the accuracy of the study, the research was conducted with respect to professional research ethics and the protection of human subjects. The researcher was aware of her limitations and biases, and executed the research in accordance with U.S. Federal Government policies concerning the professional code of ethics, and all regulations, rules and policies established by the institution the researcher was affiliated with. Also all effort was made to ensure that all participants understood their involvement in the study, and to protect the privacy, confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Best practices were used to avoid any harms and risks in order to maximize the benefits of this study and help to improve its trustworthiness and generalizability.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

Chinese international students seeking their degrees in the United States are prone to perceive acculturation issues, and are challenged with cross-cultural obstacles while adapting to their academic and social lives in their host country (Hawkes, 2014). Even though the number of Chinese international students in the United States continues to grow (IIE, 2014), both U.S. education institutions and Chinese international students continue to experience challenges related to the acculturation process (Fan & Ashdown, 2014; Hawkes, 2014). Researchers (Barty, 2006; Gonzales, 2006; Koehne, 2006) are in agreement that international students' acculturation issues are linked mainly to their academic and social lives, economic and financial constraints, and mental and physical health problems. Fan and Ashdown (2014) suggest that more research focused on Chinese international students and their acculturation in the United States is needed to support their academic and social success in the United States and to promote the improvement of cross-cultural communication. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore Chinese international students' perceptions about their acculturation in the United States.

Eight Chinese international students who were at the time of the study in the process of seeking their degrees at a private faith-based university in South Texas participated in the study. All participants were interviewed in two sessions. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The first session was a semi-structured personal in-depth interview. All involved participants were interviewed in order to obtain responses to demographic (see Appendix B) and open-ended questions (see Appendix C). The second session for the follow-up interview was scheduled with each participant at the end of the first session. Based on the responses collected during the first interview session, questions were prepared for the participants for the follow-up

interview (Gonzales, 2006). The aim of the follow-up interview was to further investigate participants' responses and generate new knowledge about the subject under investigation (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), and to gain a clearer and deeper understanding of the phenomena (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 1998).

After the data was collected, the recommendations of Smith et al. (2009) were followed and the data analyzed following the six steps of the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA):

1. Reading and re-reading.
2. Initial noting.
3. Developing emergent themes.
4. Searching for connections across emergent themes.
5. Moving to the next participant.
6. Looking for patterns across cases or participants. (pp. 80-101)

In the final stage, after analyzing themes for each individual, focus was shifted on the whole, aiming to identify whether there were any connections across the participants, and to explore how themes of one participant help illuminate a different participant (Smith et al. 2009). Smith et al. (2009) suggest moving to a more theoretical level in the final stage of data analysis. For the purposes of this study, the theoretical framework developed by J. T. Gonzales (2006) was employed. Gonzales' Acculturation Model (Gonzales, 2006) was adopted to help organize participants' experiences and perceptions into themes, and to find potential interconnectedness between participants. Gonzales' Acculturation Model consists of the following five categories: Cultural and Social Assessment, Language Acquisition and Proficiency, Social Support, Cultural Learning, and Individual Growth. After analyzing the data, the findings were written up.

Participants

Eight Chinese international students who participated in the study were full-time students at a private faith-based university in South Texas. This purposeful sample consisted of three male and five female Chinese international students. Six students were enrolled in a master's degree program, and the two remaining students involved in this research were studying toward their doctoral degree.

One of the most common reasons the participating Chinese students came to the United States was to acquire English language proficiency. One of the participants stated that "You need to know English; if you don't know English, especially in my field (international business), you can't do anything." Another common reason was to experience American culture.

All participating students had no direct firsthand experiences with U.S. culture prior to their arrival in the United States with the intention of studying in a degree program. Students' information about American culture before their arrival to the United States was gained mainly through online sources, books, movies and TV shows. Several participants mentioned that they had the opportunity to learn something about U.S. culture in their English language or other classes in China, where they acquired knowledge about some American traditions, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas. Only one student visited the United States for a short period of time, about a year before he entered the graduate program at the university in South Texas.

When reporting the findings, the terms *most*, *majority*, *the participants*, *the Chinese students*, *typically*, *generally or usually* were used when referring to emerging findings that were common for at least a three-fourths majority of the sample (at least 7 students). The terms *some* and *several* referred to responses characteristic for 4-6 participants. The term *a few* was used

when the responses were common for 3 or fewer participants. Specific terms, such as *one* or *all*, were used when appropriate.

Themes

Subsequent to collecting data through in-person interviews with the participants, the six steps of the interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009) were followed. Two interview sessions with each participant provided rich information about Chinese international students' perceptions about and experiences with their acculturation in the United States. After identifying the emergent themes for each participant, patterns across all participants were looked for. Four themes were identified: Cultural Assessment and Learning, Language Acquisition and Learning, Support Network, and Individual Development. The core theme, Cultural Assessment and Learning, captures participants' perceptions about the cultural differences between their home culture and the culture of their host country, and reflects the participants' learning in their new cultural environment. The second theme, Language Acquisition and Learning, encompasses the participants' recognized need to acquire and use efficiently the English language in both, academic and social settings, and shares participants' insights on how they become more proficient. The Support Network theme reflects participants' perceived obstacles in their academic and social lives and outlines participants' efforts to create an informal and formal support network in their new cultural environment. The last theme, Individual Development, embodies the changes in participants themselves as a result of being in a different cultural environment, such as self-sufficiency, maturity and understanding of self after being exposed to and immersed in a new culture.

Theme 1: Cultural assessment and learning. Cultural Assessment and Learning captures participants' perceptions about the cultural differences between their home culture and

the culture of their host country, and reflects participants' learning in their new cultural environment. Compared to Chinese collectivistic culture, U.S. culture is represented by a very individualistic society (Hofstede, 1991). All interviewed students mentioned that one of the reasons why they decided to study in the United States was to explore U.S. culture. For most students, U.S. culture is associated with freedom, capitalism, strong economy, innovation and quality higher education.

According to Gonzales (2006), there are two components involved in the cultural assessment of international students. These are the expectations of the new cultural environment and the realities of the new cultural settings. He further states that international students who have no prior direct contact with the U.S. cultural context seem to maintain preconceived notions of what to expect. The sample for this study consisted of eight Chinese international students, and none of the participants had any experiences with the American education system. Only one participant had visited the United States for a short period of time before he arrived to study at the university. The majority of the participants never visited the United States prior to their arrival to their host institution, and had no direct firsthand experience with American culture. Based on interviewees' responses, all participants relied mainly on information from books, internet and TV shows to create their expectations in their new cultural context in the United States.

Cultural assessment. Cultural Assessment captures the participants' perceptions of the differences between the culture of the country of their origin and the new culture of the host country. Generally, participants responded with a comparison of the differences between Chinese and American culture when being asked about their experiences in their new host country. When

asked, “How would you describe your experience in the United States to this point?” Angelique said:

It is definitely an eye opening experience for me, because I came from a very traditional oriental community, and so the very first time I came here I was in the middle of something I was not quite used to at all. In China I don’t have to think much, actually, because everything is well structured. And you are very well aware of people’s expectations to you. I know what I should do, because that’s what people think I should do, and I never questioned it. Here, the major difference is that I was given the freedom and opportunity to explore.

Angelique further explained that, while she lived in China, she did not have to “think too much” because her actions were driven by the rules set by traditional Chinese society. She said that people in her home country “act like they are expected by the society.” According to Angelique and other interviewed students, the United States provides people with freedom to make decisions, to share their opinion, to express themselves, and to “open their mind and think.” PJ stated:

The United States is freedom, just like, you have an idea and you can do it. In China, sometimes it’s very limited. I think, the way people here (are) thinking is different. I think, when you think innovation idea in my hometown, they (Chinese people) can’t accept it, because it’s (the innovational idea), like, too open-minded. And in the United States people just think it’s normal. They can share their ideas.

The data analysis revealed a pattern among all students with regard to their cultural assessment. They referred to the differences between the Chinese and U.S. cultures in two key categories: academic cultural assessment, and social/daily life cultural assessment. The first category, academic cultural assessment, compiles students’ experiences and observations about differences between the Chinese and U.S. education systems and school environments. The second category, social/daily life cultural assessment, refers to participants’ perceptions about differences between their social and daily life in China and in the United States.

Academic cultural assessment. Chinese international students participating in this study individually observed a number of differences between the Chinese and U.S. education systems and classroom environments, and identified distinct features in teaching styles, class structure and activities. Most notable differences observed by all participants was the Chinese teacher-centric and U.S. student-centric approaches. In China, students experienced larger classroom settings than they experienced at their host institution. Some participants mentioned that in the Chinese classroom settings there are usually around thirty students, whereas in the United States, the number of students in the classroom is usually no higher than 12. Vivian shared her observation and described her classroom experience as follows:

There are many different things in the class. For example, in most of my classes we are about 10, but in China, most classes we are around thirty, three-zero. And the professor here always gives us some practice, like reading a book, and there is more talk in the class. But in China, in the class the professor is only speaking and we are only listening. That's the main difference in the class.

Chinese international students seemed to enjoy the smaller number of peers in their classes, but they also appreciated the more individual approach of the teacher and the class discussions and group projects. All students noted that, in China, the core of the class is the teacher, who lectures, and the only opinion in class is the teacher's opinion. As Bibi, Vivian, Ned and PJ said of their experience from China, if the student in China wants to ask about something regarding the class content they are expected to raise their hand and ask their question upon being allowed to speak by the instructor, or are expected to contact and approach the teacher after the class session. According to most participants, in China, class discussions are not promoted, and group projects are very rare. In U.S. classroom settings, interviewees usually appreciated the effort of the instructors to let students express their opinions and encourage critical thinking and interaction during the class sessions. Even though at first most participants

found it hard to participate in the class discussions, they appreciated the opportunity to share their opinions, ideas and experiences. As Vivian said:

I think the professors here give us more freedom. We can speak, we can talk whenever we want, and we can ask questions. We don't need to raise hand to speak or ask. We can just ask. But in China, you should listen to the teacher, and when you want to ask the teacher, the teacher will tell you: "Come after class. I will answer your question after class."

Several participants expressed their support of school group projects. They found them to be an effective way of applying their newly gained knowledge, but also as an opportunity to collaborate with their classmates, create new networks of acquaintances, and practice the English language. Bibi said:

I like the group projects, I can meet and talk with other students and study and also practice my English with them. In China we don't really have group projects. In China we mostly work and study alone. Here people get in groups and they talk and they present together. I don't know. In China it was not like that ... we did not have group projects.

Several participants also noted that studying in the United States may result in a shorter time invested in obtaining their degree. Vivian explained that in China, summer classes are not an option, but they are commonly available in the United States. Also, the curricula for undergraduate and graduate programs in China are more structured. According to several students, the flexibility in the U.S. system gives international Chinese students a great opportunity to graduate earlier. Thanks to this, Vivian said, she could be able to obtain her master's degree in the United States in approximately 13 or 14 months, while in China she would have to study for the same degree for 2 or 3 years.

Participants' awareness of the differences between Chinese and U.S. education systems, classroom settings, and other aspects of the academic environment signified the students' ongoing process of cultural assessment in the academic environment (Gonzales, 2006). Next to

academic life, there was personal and/or professional life. In order to successfully navigate in daily life and attain a satisfactory social life, social cultural assessment was crucial for international students in the United States (Gonzales, 2006; Hawkes, 2014).

Social/daily life cultural assessment. Since students are exposed not only to academic environments, another key cultural assessment category focused on their social and daily life cultural assessment. This section provides information on how Chinese international students perceive the differences between the social and daily life in China and their life in the United States. All participants expressed that they found their life in the United States very different from their life in China. For instance, Ned stated that there is “So much difference here. Life, culture, economy, many people from different countries ... I find the lifestyle very different.”

Vivian also finds life in the United States very different from the life she lives in China. She compared her life in China with the expectations she had of the new culture and the realities she met in the United States:

I think the most different is the traffic (referring to public transportation). The public traffic is not very good, so I had to buy a car, my own car, my first car. Before I come here, I think I will live American. But, it's really different, because there are many Mexicans here and they speak Spanish, and many Mexicans they cannot speak English. (Vivian laughs). It's weird, I come to America and there are so many Mexican people here, and Mexican food, Chinese restaurants, so for me, America is a combination of cultures. Sometimes I tell my parents “It's not like I'm studying in America I'm studying in Mexico” (Vivian giggles). And I have a friend, and ... I just came here and I met her. And I asked her “Do you know where is the American style buildings and the American style architecture?” And she told me there is none, that you cannot really find an American architecture here. American style, for me, it is a mixture of American architecture you know from TV and Mexican architecture, and you can even find Chinatowns. I find it funny. And I found out that American food, American style, American culture is a combination. That is really the word that came to my mind. Combination.

She also found people in South Texas very nice. Unlike Chinese people, who do not, according to several participants, talk to strangers, people in Texas seem to be very friendly and

may, said PJ, “greet you in the street even though they do not know you.” A few other students made a similar observation and comparison. They argued that people in China do not talk to strangers, while in Texas it seems to be normal. Vivian, PJ and Bibi gave the same example: they were greeted by strangers while walking down the street, and had a small conversation with unknown individuals.

Chinese international students also mentioned various differences they identified between Chinese and American societies. Vivian stated: “Americans party to drink, or go to club, but in China we like to cook and eat and play cards or sing Karaoke, this is a party for us.” PJ made a similar statement:

Here you talk to strangers... and when you have a party they (strangers) will come. I mean, people you don't know. In China ... strangers will not come.... People here are friendly, and for example, you walk down the street and you meet somebody you don't know and he or she will say hi to you. And you talk a little bit, but you don't know them. In China, people are people. They don't talk with strangers. If you don't know them, people on the street they won't talk to you, and I think, if they don't know you they will not come to your party, but here it's normal.

PJ further shared his experience that he was repeatedly invited by his friends or classmates to join a celebration or a party of a person that was not even a friend of his friends, but, for instance, the host was his friends' friend's classmate. He explained that, in China, arriving to a private party or celebration without any kind of invitation by the host would be perceived as very impolite, especially if you never met the host before. Several participants shared stories such as these.

Other observed distinctions between Chinese and U.S. societies included the shopping and dining cultures, health services, ways of spending free time, and overall daily life. From Chinese students' perspectives, the way of doing business in the United States is more aggressive than in China. According to several students, in China doing business is about making the

customer happy in the first place, and making money in the second. In contrast, they had a feeling that, in the United States, the goal of doing business is to close the deal and make the most profit. Vivian, who needed to buy a car, shared her experience. While seeking her new vehicle, she planned to visit several dealerships and find a car that would best fit her needs and budget. In China, as she said, “buying a car is a big deal and you need to make the right decision.” She felt confused while she was trying to buy her used vehicle in the United States:

So, this car, I like it. I like to buy it, but maybe the next day, because I need time to think about buying a car, but the dealer tells me I have to decide right now. So I think I think wrong, but then my parents tell me I did the right thing (take the time to think about it). So, after I think about it, I buy the car on the next day.

Not only buying cars, but also shopping for food is a challenge for some Chinese international students. In China, students typically shop for their groceries at local markets where fresh vegetables, fruits, meat, fish and other items are sold. A few students complained that, in American supermarkets, while there are too many items to choose from, it is hard for them to find products that would satisfy their taste. Sue explained:

In China, you buy tomato and it tastes like tomato; you buy cucumber and it tastes like cucumber; in Walmart, you buy vegetables and it tastes the same, it has no taste, if it doesn't have the shape and color, I cannot tell the difference. There is good vegetables also here, but you have to go to a different store. And also, it's very expensive.

Another student shared her observation:

We like fresh food, but you cannot really find a Chinese-like market here. But sometimes, I can go to Austin, and they do have Chinese markets there. Central Market is ok. They have some Chinese food and fresh vegetables, but it's a little expensive. And I like fish. And I found out it's hard to buy fresh fish or seafood here. And the Walmart? (student sighs) All the fish and meat is frozen. So I asked my friends where can I buy fish. And they said I can go to the supermarket. But I just don't think so.

Next to quality and availability of goods, Chinese students often made comparisons about their cost. Generally, they perceived food and dining in China as affordable, of good quality and very accessible. Whereas, in the United States, they found food much more expensive, and for

them not so easy to access. One student compared his experience in his Chinese school cafeteria with his experience in the cafeteria at his host campus:

In my Chinese campus, you pay for what you eat and the price is very low in the cafeteria. Here you pay one price and you can eat as much as you can, but I don't eat much. And the price is maybe the same as the price in restaurant. And also, in China we eat a lot of rice and healthy. They fry a lot here. So much fried food. But I like the fried chicken.

According to all students, food and dining play an important role in Chinese culture.

Chinese people like to gather around food. Dining is also one of the Chinese students' favorite free time activities. Most participants shared that they like to spend time with their families and friends, and typically a food or dining experience is involved in their meetings. They enjoy social activities, including dining, playing cards or singing Karaoke, and the majority of the students like to travel, watch movies and do sports. They perceived that people they know in the United States are also social, and they like to spend time with their friends. However, the way they socialize differs. Chinese students who participated in the study observed that the meaning of party differs between the two cultures:

Many of my friends here, they do parties. At night. But, I don't like these parties. In China with my friends, we get together. But we cook together, and eat. Those are parties, our parties. Chinese are cooking, cooking and cooking, and eating, eating and eating. Last night, my friend here had a party, and they drink beer and wine. In China, we drink beer and wine, but not like that. Well, I do drink very little. In America people party different. They drink a lot, they are dancing, but in China? No. No. Cooking, eating, play cards.

Participants identified a number of commonalities and differences between the two cultures. The majority of the Chinese students expressed that the way of life in China is very different from the lifestyle in the United States. The data analysis also revealed a pattern across all participants. Their daily life in the United States is not only affected by the culture they are in, but also by the fact that they arrived to the United States with a specific goal or purpose – to study. The selected Chinese international degree-seeking students arrived to the United States

with two main goals: to obtain a degree from an American university, and to acquire a higher level of English language proficiency. Several participants noted their life in the United States is not just different because of all the identified cultural differences, but also because they came here to accomplish their main goal, which is to graduate with an American degree in the United States, improve their English language skills, and also to gain work experience in the United States after their graduation. Learning about American and other international cultures is perceived by all students as part of their American experience, and they look forward to benefitting from it.

Cultural learning. Cultural assessment is essential to cultural learning (Gonzales, 2006; Hawkes, 2014; Pandit & Alderman, 2004). Identifying cultural differences and encountering firsthand cross-cultural situations leads to successful acculturation and cultural learning (Bennett, 2004; Gonzales, 2006). Interviewed students shared that direct contact with different cultures present on campus and the social environment of the United States, mainly South Texas, enriched their cultural experience and contributed to their better understanding of the host culture. All participants also realized that their international experience helped them to better understand and learn more about their culture of origin.

Comparing and understanding cultural differences allows individuals to acculturate, and adjust to their new cultural context (Bennett, 2004; Gonzales, 2006; Pandit & Alderman, 2004). Angelique, who has studied in the United States for over 7 years, finds cultural awareness and learning highly important. Awareness about specific aspects of different cultures is crucial to avoiding cultural misunderstandings. She also identified that there was always room for more learning about cultures:

Once in a while I have this culture shock no matter how long I live in the United States ... It's a learning process. I really like the variety here, the variety of cultures, and the

different people, and how they embrace the differences here. I think my mind has been open to many different aspects, and learning to respect and embrace different thinking, different values, and... I think that for me, it is the best experience I have had living here. There have been so many things and feelings, and you know. One thing I really want to point out is that I feel like, if I'm not interested in sports, especially basketball or American football, then I would never really become popular here. And I am excluded from many conversations. Like my peers, my local peers, that's what they care about. Sometimes I feel it's all they care about, and if I wanted to be good friends with them, to really mingle with them, I really have to do my research.

The majority of the participants realized the importance and benefits of cultural learning, and sought contact with students and other individuals of different cultures. They used various sources and techniques to learn about cultures and understand cross-cultural differences. Next to direct contact with members of other cultures, all students sought information on the internet. A few of them mentioned watching news and other programs on TV, reading newspapers or magazines, and observing their environment helped them to understand the cultural context they were exposed to. One of the techniques for cultural learning that Chinese students appreciated the most was direct interaction with members of American and other cultures. Interacting with and observing American peers in the classroom and American society in general brought American culture closer to the international Chinese students. Nevertheless, Chinese students typically found it difficult to make new connections and make friends with their American peers, especially in the first couple of months of their stay in the United States. A majority of participants noted they either already knew some other Chinese students in their host country, or made new international friends shortly upon their arrival to their host destination. These individuals helped them considerably to get oriented more quickly, and feel more comfortable in, and gain greater understanding about, American culture. Thanks to the cultural diversity on campus and in society in South Texas, most international Chinese students commented they had

many opportunities to learn about various cultures and found it very beneficial. A majority of them referred to cultural learning in the United States as an “eye-opening” experience.

Theme 2: Language acquisition and learning. Language is one of many elements of culture (Nahavandi, 2009). Acquiring the language of a country, both verbal and non-verbal, is crucial for successful interaction and communication with its members. The data analysis revealed that English language proficiency was critical to Chinese international students, and had an impact on all areas of their lives in the United States. English language mastery was essential for their success in both their academic and social lives. On the one hand, English language skills were perceived as a tool for understanding the new cultural context, achieving academic and professional goals, and developing new formal and informal relationships. On the other hand, lack of English proficiency, especially at the beginning of the students’ lives in the United States, was evaluated as a complication. Throughout the data analysis it became evident that the interviewees recognized the importance of English language mastery. Chinese students’ concern over English language proficiency was indicated in three interconnected forms.

The first form of concern was expressed by participating students as a desire or perceived need to advance their level of English language skills. International Chinese students consider acquiring English language proficiency as a means to successful academic and social life in the United States. Regardless of how many years Chinese students spent learning English in China, they all pointed out that they had experienced issues due to their language barrier. For instance, Bibi, who came to the United States at the age of 21 to study international business, stated that she did not understand anyone and felt like nobody understood her when she first arrived in South Texas. Vivian also felt that everybody in the classroom spoke very fast when she first started to attend her graduate classes. She noted that she had trouble understanding the “fast”

language and faced this issue by studying more and spending more time preparing herself for classes to fill in the gap in her vocabulary. A majority of the participants indicated they had to invest larger amount of time in their preparation for class, not because the subject or topics in the class were too difficult, but simply because they had to learn new terms, expressions and vocabulary. More difficult than the verbal use of English seemed to be its written form.

According to the participants, in China their English classes focused mainly on obtaining verbal and written skills on the general level. None of the students was familiar with writing papers in English, and none of them was familiar with American style writing formats, such as APA.

Jimmy, who arrived to the United States in 2011 and is currently achieving his doctoral degree, observed a commonality among Asian students:

I found a weakness, a general weakness among Chinese students. All Chinese students have difficulties with speaking up and writing. So, that's the major difficulty we have to overcome. For me, besides writing I don't have any other problems with the English language. You just need to learn how to speak up. And I encourage the Chinese students to do that. I know that for new international students, they probably, I think, they have a lot of problem, so they spend a lot of time learning the language, studying and reading.

Most participants perceived comprehension and communication issues as new international students. From the data analysis, it was apparent that a lack of English language proficiency prevented them from engaging in the class sessions and reinforced their desire to acquire a greater level of English language proficiency. For instance, Vivian attended her first class in her MBA program a week after her arrival to the United States:

For me the most difficult is the language. I took English in China, and I passed the TOEFL exam. So I did not have to take the language course when I arrived.... But, I don't have the vocabulary for class. I was in America for only one week when my first class started. So for me, I don't have many time to prepare or get used to the language. The language here was different than English at school. And, the first class! Everything was so quick! The professor speak so quick. And the first class is online meeting! It was not a face to face education, it was an online class! I was thinking, "Oh, my god!!!"... I cannot see their body language and it's like you listen to the people, just listening to their speaking pace... and, oh, my god! And they just speak like that! Oh, my god! I couldn't

understand a word they're saying. So the first class was the most difficult. First, I had to pay better attention in the classroom, read the book before I go to the class. At least one or 2 hours before I go to class. And I still cannot completely understand the professor.

Even though Bibi attended an intensive English course before coming to the United States, she said:

I come, and the first time... Oh, my god! I come and I don't understand and nobody understand me. Yeah, I don't know what they're saying. That was my first experience. And also, in the class everyone talks. Every one! And also I was shy. And I was quiet. Because of my education in China. The students sit in the class and only the teacher is talking. And it is still a little difficult for me to try to speak up and to join the discussion. So I have to overcome being shy, and I need to learn more English skills. I also have to prepare a lot for the class and study that I know the words and can speak in the class.

Sue, one of two interviewees who attended an intensive English course at the ELS Learning Center in San Antonio before she attended her classes at the university, shared her experience:

I didn't pass the English test when I arrived to the United States, so I had to go to the ELS for one half of a year, and I think it was good for me. I learned only English every day. Also, there were other students from different countries, so I made new friends and meet people. The ELS was good, because I could practice my English with people that were on my level, and we understand each other. I remember, when I arrived, I don't understand the American people, because they talk so fast, and I think they don't understand me. I think it would be more difficult if I didn't go to ELS. Yes. And I still have to prepare for my classes a lot. The vocabulary in the class is different. I read a lot, and also, when we have group projects, I try to talk to other students to practice my English.

Such situations made the participants realize that familiarity and usage of English language is indispensable for achieving their objectives and their welfare in the United States. The data analysis further demonstrated that Chinese international students satisfied the expressed need to learn more English language in various, sometimes creative, ways. None of the students attended any further formal English language classes at school or at any other educational institution. However, all students indicated they were committed to improving their English language skills. They seemed to invest a reasonable amount of time in increasing the level of their English language proficiency in order to achieve better academic outcomes and enhance

their engagement with the new culture and its members. Despite the tendency for Chinese students to create closed groups with other Chinese nationals in the United States, the expressed need to learn more English pushed them to form relations with native speakers or other international students. Among the participants, the most appreciated way to learn English was through interaction with native speakers. Nevertheless, a majority of the students also commented that it was quite difficult for them to get together with native speakers. Several students said that the easiest way interaction and communication with native speakers was possible was in the university settings, such as during their class sessions or during the meetings with their classmates in order to work on a group project. Otherwise, most Chinese international students perceived their American peers showed only very little interest in interacting with them other than at school-related occasions. This phenomenon was typical across all participants. One participant, Vivi, experienced distress due to lack of English proficiency. She put a lot of effort into finding a native speaker in order to improve her language skills, and attempted a number of times to become friends with her American peers:

Here, students, they have some after class jobs, and your classmates don't have time to help, because they go to work. I just tried to find someone to talk to me because understanding fast English in the class for me was difficult. And have somebody talking to you will help improve your English language skills, and class becomes easier, because you can understand better. But, most of them say, "I'm sorry, I have to work" or "I'm sorry, I have to go." I only have chance to speak to them when we have group presentation and we have to meet. At least I can talk a little bit. But for me it is difficult to make a friend, American friend, I can talk to.

Regardless of the attempts to create new friendships with their American peers, all students had a continuous tendency to seek occasions for communication with native speakers or other international students to become more fluent and proficient in the English language. This method of English language acquisition was also closely interconnected with cultural learning. Direct contact with members of American society allowed the students to achieve two goals at

the same time: they have time for English practice and improvement, and simultaneously they enrich their cognition about U.S. culture. One of the students mentioned that she became a volunteer in a non-profit organization in order to have access to the local community and have a chance to accelerate her English learning process, become more familiar with American culture, and gain work experience.

Next to direct interaction with English speakers, other common techniques for English language learning among the interviewees included reading, writing and re-writing, listening to the radio, watching TV, and repeating words or phrases. Jimmy, a doctoral student participating in this study, shared the experience that effectively helped him to improve his English language proficiency:

I knew some English from school, but it's different when you come to the United States. I believe, for me, you take it step by step in learning language. I believe speaking for me is the first step in learning more English. That it gets you in the school. And so, with my friends, we go party. It's ok, you go party and it's a fast way to people, to communicate. And they party, so that helps you at the moment with speaking. You know, it's all knowledge. You get to know the slang, you get to know how Americans express themselves, you learn the way they speak. Find as many opportunities for speaking, that is the first part. And don't go straight into the writing part, because that is last problem you want to come first. And then get to reading. You get more books from Amazon or used books, I know in the bookstore, they sell tons of cheap books or go to library. Or just go to Amazon to download e-books. Finally, the movies. That all helps you learn more and understand. Pick a movie, read a book. Reading, and more and more communication. Like really, talk to people, you know face-to-face communication will help you with writing. For me, with writing, I needed a lot of assistance. So I visit the writing center on campus ... just to ... master the language at all levels. So for me that was the way. So, this worked for me, but I took it step by step. So first speaking, then reading, and then writing.

All things considered, English language acquisition and learning is tightly interconnected with cultural assessment and learning. The data analysis made it obvious that the goals and interests of both themes are interrelated. The cultural assessment expressed the participants' observations of differences and commonalities, and comparisons between their culture of origin

and their new cultural context, and increased students' desire for cultural learning in order to effectively navigate in U.S. culture. English language proficiency was perceived as a necessity for successful academic and social engagement and a means of accelerating the benefits of studying and living in the United States. All Chinese students named a number of ways they enriched their cultural and language knowledge. The participants evaluated their experiences to this point in the United States principally as positive. However, referring to both cultural assessment and language acquisition, all students perceived a number of common issues. This brings us to the next theme, where obstacles with acculturation, perceived issues and sources of assistance and support are discussed.

Theme 3: Support. The data analysis revealed the interconnectedness between cultural assessment and English language acquisition. The cultural assessment enforced the students' desire to achieve a greater level of English language proficiency. English language was perceived as a powerful tool that helped the students to improve their academic and personal life in the United States. Chinese international students noted that better knowledge of English language was a key tool for them to develop new friendships and relations. In their new environment, far away from home and family and friends, the existence of formal and informal sources of support was identified as an important part of their lives in a foreign country.

Most students mentioned that they kept in touch with their families and were in frequent contact with their parents and friends from their country of origin. A majority of Chinese international students communicated with their parents and sought their advice regarding important decisions about their lives in the United States. Even though communication technology is on an advanced level nowadays, sometimes the time difference made it complicated for students to get in touch with their relatives in China. Unfortunately, in some

situations, the original social network from China could not provide an objective insight or help the matter, and international students needed to seek support directly in their host country.

Unexpected occasions that emerged after the participants' arrival to the United States required assistance from those who were familiar with U.S. cultural and social contexts. For instance, a majority of students mentioned that they were used to using public transportation or walking a lot while they lived in China. Upon their arrival to Texas, they found out that the system of public transportation was significantly different from what they were used to, and they realized that having a car and being able to drive would make their life in the United States more convenient. Several of the interviewees never had a desire to obtain a driver's license in China, because they relied on public transportation. After coming to the United States, they perceived having a car and being able to drive as a necessity. In order to satisfy this need, one has to purchase a car and take care of interrelated requirements, such as registering the newly acquired vehicle with the State of Texas office, purchasing car insurance, and obtaining an American driver's license, to be eligible to operate the automobile. One of the students who relied on public transportation in China and never possessed a driver's license in her home country, nor knew how to drive, shared her experience and expressed her need for support in the United States:

I think here, the most different is the traffic. The public transportation is not very good. So I bought a car, my own car. There is a very bad public transportation, so you have to get your own car.... Actually I had to learn how to drive, because I don't have any driver license in China. And for me, my parents they cannot really help me, and I don't have many friends here. Very few American friends. And I had to ask these friends to teach me how to drive. And I know it's hard for them to make their schedule for me. And therefore, it was hard to learn. You need learn to drive in China and then come to America.

Several other students stated they also looked for help when adjusting to their new cultural environment, where everything was different for them, and they felt only someone who

was familiar with the host environment could provide them with advice or information that would help them accomplish their tasks. Generally, Chinese students primarily sought support among their peers, mostly other Chinese nationals or other international students. Most participants already had existing connections with individuals in the United States by the time they arrived in Texas. Several students mentioned that they knew some friends from China, or they were connected to those individuals through their Chinese friends. A few participants mentioned that their supportive network helped them to find an apartment, purchase a car, explain specific processes and cordially help them with their transition to the new culture. Bibi appreciated the support from friends she knew from her home town:

When I come here, I think I'm lucky, because my friends were already here. And they can help me. And they already know things like how to get a driver license, and help me find my apartment. Yeah, I'm lucky! And also before I come here they tell me to get my driver's license in China that I don't have to go to the driving school here, and I can drive when I come, because it is very important to have a car here. And when I come here, my friends told me where I can get paperwork and help me to get my American driver's license. Also, because of my friend I knew from China I found my apartment. They already lived in an apartment, and I got mine next to them.

Developing a network of relationships, also referred to in China as *guanxi*, appeared to be essential among the participants. *Guanxi* is a Chinese social concept, defined in Oxford Dictionaries (Guanxi, n.d.) as: "Chinese concept based on exchange of favours, in which personal relationships are considered more important than laws and written agreements." Since the majority of international Chinese students found it difficult to create new connections with American individuals, they primarily focused on developing purposeful relationships with members of other, mainly Asian, cultures. PJ recalled: "I met some Chinese friends here, and you know, they know more.... All the advice you know, that was very helpful." Jimmy gave greater insight on these purposeful networks:

Oh well. You know. In China, everything is about *guanxi*. That is kind of a Chinese principle of having relationships with others. Like having a relationship on purpose with benefits ... when obstacles happen, we all build *guanxi* on purpose. I know this friend, I know his background, and I need to build the relation with some certain level.... And usually all Asian people build some sort of *guanxi*. Anyway, so, you have to evaluate what kind of obstacle you may have and you have to know your quality, and get to know the quality of others. And you have to know yourself and know what kind of obstacle you can overcome, so you need to be careful of everything that happens, because you are part of the society. So, building *guanxi* is necessary for international students because you don't wanna get in any trouble here. You probably wanna be careful about everything you do, and be aware of different kind of local customs, traditions, probably you wanna peer together with a certain type of people, and create your network that way, you don't get in trouble or you have someone you can ask for help. So this is kinda like my back up plan for overcoming obstacles. Build *guanxi* and be careful of everything I do. Anyway, building *guanxi* is easier here, because all international students here, they have the same purpose. We have so much in common and things to talk about, things we go through. So we get together, we build the *guanxi*. But you cannot really make a real friend here. I'm not saying it's impossible, but it's more about getting together, going to party and benefit from our relationship.

During the process of data collection it became obvious that all Chinese students create their own *guanxi* in the United States. Support from their developed informal network of relations with others, friends and acquaintances, was the primary source of help, advice, information and social contact. Participants were also aware of formal support that was available to them in the form of various offices and centers located mainly on campus. All students were familiar with and used services provided by the International Student Services Office (ISSO) located on the main campus. Most participants relied on this institutional body in order to get support regarding their immigration status. Typically, they searched for advice concerning official paperwork, applications or various deadlines. For instance, PJ, who planned to apply for Optional Practical Training, further referred to as OPT, to gain work experience in his field before returning to China, was preparing to visit the ISSO in order to receive support and information regarding the OPT application process, stating: "The international office will help ... They should tell you what you have to prepare and collect and what you have to do. Anything

you need to get your OPT.” ISSO was also used by some students in order to obtain more information about their academic progress, registration issues, assistance with obtaining permissions to work on campus, and seeking on-campus employment opportunities or assistance with health services. Overall, students noted they felt comfortable with the staff of the ISSO, and were satisfied with their services.

Student services, including writing assistance and academic advising, were naturally enjoyed by the participants. Jimmy appreciated the help he received at the university’s writing center: “For me, with writing, I needed a lot of assistance. So I visited the writing center on campus.” Most participants perceived there were many sources of formal support provided by the university and they appreciated the accessibility and help they received. Altogether, the data analysis showed that, among the participants, the primary source of support was their informal network of friendships and relations, and the university’s services and academic support. Some students indicated during the interviews that they often sought support in themselves. Such self-support was expressed with examples when students had the urge to deal with an obstacle by themselves, and perceived it was their personal matter only. For example, as Angelique remarked:

I think, as far as my academic life, and professionally, I have been receiving a lot of help, which I really appreciate. But then, once in a while, I have this culture shock, no matter how long I live in the United States, and I have a feeling of isolation. And, once in a while ... Now, it’s getting better... For example ... I can still feel ... the ... migrant aggression.... And, for example, when I’m hanging out with some of my colleagues, and some locals, and you know, they tell a lot of joke, and, you know, I speak English, but I don’t understand, and also, there is also, I feel like there is a wall between me and the local people, even friends. And that that is holding us, and we cannot get closer as I would like to be. And, you know, the energy of them, from the cultural (aspect)... the one is people looking at me, and I’m from a different country, and I do not understand, or ... When they talk about some shared childhood memories, you know, we didn’t grow up in the same country. So, sometimes, I have no idea what they are talking about. So, when we come to a certain level of friendship, it is still hard to move from that point and forward with it. So that was my biggest challenge. I haven’t been able to really overcome

this obstacle. I have been working on it. I think for me, it's ok, but it's work. The way that I try to work with it is that ... whenever I see or hear something that the local people are very interested in or they think they are really familiar with, then I really have to do research ... on my own. Whatever movies they talk about, when they were kids, and so on. Something everybody growing up in the United States knows about. That is when I feel the urge to go and at least learn what they are talking about. So it's a learning experience. Learning what they are talking about.

In such situations, Angelique stated that her best source of support is "Google," her own commitment to learning about cultures, and learning how to embrace differences and her own identity. Usually, students relied on self-support in dealing with culture shock, while adjusting themselves to their new cultural context or situations that touched their personal feelings or emotions. Almost all students perceived occasional feelings of loneliness, alienation and shyness. They all dealt with these issues on an individual level and in accordance with their personality. Some committed to more cultural and language learning, and some encouraged themselves or combined various methods of emboldening themselves. As PJ said:

You know, the first, when I come here, the culture is more shock. For example in the class I was afraid. I raise my hand like in China to ask or to answer the question asked. And the professor have the impression that I'm shy.... And that is way different. So, in the United States it is very different. They like to share. They like to share their thinking to the class and to their classmates. So I think. This thing was for me like: "Don't be shy!" and "don't be afraid!" like to ask the questions in front of the class. It's not easy. It takes me like, I think, 4 months. Just try to be not shy, even to be speaking wrong English. But wrong way to speak, I think, that way I can just improve my English. So I just talked to myself: "don't be afraid!" and "be calm" and "share your idea with everybody! Even though the way you speak English that is not wonderful. You can speak!"

Eventually, the pattern across the participants showed that following three types of support—social support, academic support, and self-support—played an important role in students' acculturation process in the United States. The most emphasized form of support was the informal network of friendships and relationships. Next to the support students received, several students also mentioned the support they would appreciate to be more accessible or

improved. Based on the information collected during the interviews, most participants would appreciate more career advising. All Chinese students stressed that they would like to gain work experience in the United States. As mentioned above, they were aware of existing supports provided by ISSO regarding obtaining their OPT. Nevertheless, several students mentioned they would welcome more help with seeking a work place in the United States. Some students mentioned it was common for Chinese students to work while they studied, and most interviewees explained they would want to work while they studied in the United States, mainly to obtain work experience in their field of study. Chinese students were aware they were limited to work no more than 20 hours per week during the school semester with the permission of the ISSO, or they could apply for their OPT and gain their work experience in the United States upon graduation. However, most participants found it difficult or complicated to find on-campus employment opportunities; they were also afraid of not being able to find a position for their OPT. All students considered obtaining work experience in the United States as a benefit to their future professional career. A few students also commented that they would welcome the financial benefits from student employment in order to be more self-sufficient, and mainly to help their parents who have to work hard to provide for their studies abroad. A 24-year old female MBA student first tried to seek student employment on campus. Even though she applied with different departments across the university, she was not successful in finding a position. Then she decided to apply for a Curricular Practical Training, which is a temporary employment authorization for non-immigrant foreign students in the United States while they are enrolled in a college-level degree program in the United States. Her first attempt was not successful. After some time, she was able to find a volunteer position at a non-profit organization. She said:

You can only have a part time job, and it's limited. You usually need to work on campus. It's hard to work out of campus. And all campus job is hard to find or get. I even tried to

find a position at the cafeteria. But they did not hire. And then I wanted to apply for the CPT, but first, I was not lucky. Nobody responded me, nobody tells me how. But now, I have the opportunity to work in this non-profit organization. I am a volunteer here. I do the job here every week. Twice a week. I think for me, there are many opportunities to learn not just language. We meet many other friends from other universities. And I learn many new things. And about the money, that's another issue. We cannot really make or earn money here. I think I will keep my volunteer job. It's my only job I find here. But they don't pay. But I think I can get a lot of experience here and learn more English. So that is why I don't mind having this unpaid job. But truly, I want some money too. To support my life, otherwise, I feel bad for my parents because now they work very hard to support me.

Students often indicated that they considered practical or work experience in their field as part of their learning process and preparation for their professional career. For one of the MBA students, Vivi, it was important to gain work experience in the United States before she returned to China. She expressed that sometimes she found her goal hard to achieve:

I know I can learn all the concepts and theory in class, but I also need experience. I need to learn how to speak, work, and profit. In a job I can learn practical skills and also earn money. So, yes, I want a job. So now, I have to wait for my graduation and then I can find a job for my OPT to get the experience. I need to find a job. Also I can help my parents, I can earn and pay for my home. But it's hard. You know, after my undergraduate, I got my OPT. But in a fast time you need to find a job, because then the OPT is not good anymore. So, sometimes I think. I tried to find a job, but it was hard. You need to connect your major with the job. And in the international student office they cannot let me do the job that I found. They say it was not connected to my major, international business. So I decided to get my MBA and then try OPT again.

After her failed attempt to find a job for her first OPT, she realized she needed to obtain more information in advance to be more successful after her MBA graduation. During the follow-up interview, she provided more insight into her story. For her first OPT, she was almost hired as an assistant in a fashion industry firm with international operations. In her opinion, this position could have helped her to gain work experience in an organization that was involved in international business. However, this position was not found to be in accordance with the specific requirements for OPT and the job description did not clearly meet the requirement to be a match with the studied field. Bibi also obtained general instruction from the ISSO regarding the

OPT application process, and successfully obtained her temporary employment authorization. However she misunderstood the OPT requirements for job selection, and before she was able to find a different position for her OPT, her temporary work authorization expired. Her expected graduation with an MBA degree was scheduled one or two semesters after the interview, and the participant was already taking steps not to miss her opportunity again:

My major is finance. But I would like to do OPT in hotel management. So I have to ask what I can do for my OPT. Maybe I will have to change my major, or go to another school for hotel management, but I don't know yet.

It was evident from the data analysis that Chinese international students would appreciate more assistance with finding a student employment placement and have access to more information about various forms and processes of non-immigrant student employment in the United States, both during their studies and upon graduation. Next to career services, some students suggested that they would appreciate more cultural awareness at the university, and more opportunities for interaction with American society. All students were able to identify cultural differences between the two countries, and it was perceived that they were progressively acculturating in the United States. Most interviewees stated that they sometimes had the impression that their peers looked at them as if they were “too different,” “less smart” or just “weird.” Several students suggested that they would appreciate it if there was more cultural sensitivity in the classroom. Also, they considered their instructors as part of their academic support, but on occasions Chinese students felt these support providers should do more to raise cultural awareness at the university.

Jimmy, a 25-year old doctoral student, said, “I think even the instructors at the university should know more about diversity and cultural differences among international students.” The participant further explained that he believed that the instructors or professors had the power to

help increase cultural awareness among students and promote their interaction with each other and with respect to other cultures. According to a few other students, lack of cultural awareness was responsible for cultural misunderstandings and communication barriers between international and domestic students. Angelique, a doctoral student, described her perceptions and feelings about other students' impressions of her: "They were looking at me like ... I'm from a different country and do not understand."

Cultural differences were on several occasions underestimated by the advisors when providing information to international Chinese students. A Chinese female from a very traditional Chinese family experienced culture shock when she got sick and wanted to visit a doctor:

One time I got sick, and I wanted to go see the doctor, so I went to the international office because I don't know the doctor here. Oh, and there is a different thing here. In my hometown, when you don't feel good or you have a headache or you are sick, you go see the doctor. Here, you only go to see a nurse. One time, when I was not feeling good, and ask about the doctor, and they sent me to see the nurse. That is a difference. In China you go see the doctor. And also a nurse can be a man here. And also I am a girl and in China when you are a girl the nurse is a woman, because, you know. And here when I go see the nurse I feel so confused. And I say: "Thank you, but I am shy, and we are not used to a man nurse." It was a surprise. So I ask the manager if there is a female nurse, and he said "oh, I'm sorry," but he is the only one here. So, I was not comfortable.

The student had a smile on her face when she told her story. She said this experience was uncomfortable for her, but funny at the same time. Since then, she has had the urge to share it with all her Chinese female friends to avoid their surprise if they ever meet a male nurse in the United States. She also said that "maybe some Chinese advisor can help." During the follow-up interview, she explained she would appreciate if there was access to an advisor, counselor or a designated peer on campus who is from China or somebody who is aware of and familiar with Asian culture, and could help Chinese students to resolve their specific cultural issues.

Social and academic support was perceived as an essential source of help with regard to personal and academic success, and so was self-support. Various sources of support, both formal and informal, helped students overcome different obstacles they perceived during the process of acculturation in the United States. Each obstacle overcome and issue resolved was perceived by the students as a valuable experience, and often reflected their perceptions about their individual growth.

Theme 4: Individual Growth. As a result of being separated from their original social connections and support, and being exposed to new cultural environments, Chinese international students registered a change that occurred in themselves. Individual growth occurred in the participants as a perceived increased level of maturity, responsibility, self-sufficiency, self-reliance, assertiveness, understanding of others, and understanding of self.

Typically, Chinese students were supported by their parents when they lived in China. Several students did not have to worry about many things, because most decisions and arrangements were made by their parents. Some of them conceded that they were taken care of and even pampered by their parents. Departure to the United States started a new chapter in their lives. Exposure to new cultural environments away from their supportive family and friends was linked by the students to their perceived individual growth. PJ, a 24-year old MBA student, said:

My parents in China, you know. You wake up, and they will put breakfast for you. And here, everything here is you do it by yourself. And you just wake up and make breakfast for you. I wake up I cook breakfast for myself. So, it's a lot different. Actually ... It's more difficult. But right now I'm a little used to it. Another thing is, my parents give me like a budget for my life here, and they pay the school. But it's difficult because now I have to compare prices. And also here in America some things are like six times more than in China. So you have to like not spend too much. And it's good to have my girlfriend also. We can share some things and we don't have to spend so much money, and, you know, the culture difference here (authors note: referring to availability of goods and free time activities)... But it's hard sometimes you cannot spend so much, and to have money you have to work hard.

PJ's comment reflected his perceived greater level of responsibility, self-sufficiency, and maturity. In the new cultural context, without the direct support and care of their parents, Chinese students had to develop new skills and personality traits in order to successfully navigate their lives in the United States. The data analysis disclosed that long-term commitment to study in a foreign country gave rise to the students' urge to rely on themselves, to take care of themselves, to learn and to achieve. For example, Bibi confessed that in China she used to rely on the support of her parents. However, living in the United States made her realize she needed to be more self-reliant. She noted that her experience in the United States helped her to improve herself:

In my hometown, I can always go and ask my parents. And they will always help me. But here, I am alone. I can just think nobody can help me and I have to do it. Like for example I have to plan. And I plan what I have to do. And, for example, if I have an accident here, I will call the police and the insurance. But when I was in China, I will first call my parents. In China I always ask my parents. I think I came here and I like improved myself. I have to do everything by myself. And when I come back to my hometown, my parents they say: "oh, now you are grown up!" they say I'm not just a child anymore.

Chinese international students indicated how new cultural situations evoked feelings of confusion or insecurity. These perceptions occurred mainly on occasions when the expected behaviors or social processes were in strong contrast with their original culture. For instance, in the class environment, most students who were used to teacher-centric lectures felt that the U.S. liberal student-centered education system was in contradiction with their learned behavior. There was no need to raise their hands when they wanted to speak. On the contrary, they were encouraged to speak up and share their opinions. A majority of students designated their natural shyness as a hindrance in their American academic development, and were progressively eliminating this barrier. As a result, typically the students developed greater assertiveness that allowed them to encompass their original cultural values while adjusting their behavior to U.S.

culture. This phenomenon was caught in students' comments like: "I push myself to understand more about American culture, to communicate more with local people." As PJ commented:

You know, the first, when I come here, the culture is more shock. For example in the class I was afraid. I raise my hand like in China to ask or to answer the question asked. And the professor have the impression that I'm shy. And yes. And that is way different. So. In the U.S. it is very different. They like to like to share. They like to share their thinking to the class and to their classmates. So I think. This thing was for me like: "Don't be shy!" and "don't be afraid!" like to ask the questions in front of the class. It's not easy. It takes me like, I think, 4 months. Just try to be not shy, even to be like speaking wrong English. But wrong way to speak, I think, that way I can just improve my English. So I just talked to myself: "don't be afraid!" and "be calm" and "share your idea with everybody! Even though the way you speak English that is not wonderful. You can speak!"

This statement exposes not only how the student supported himself, it also clearly shows how the student progressively built his skill of assertiveness. He first identified the contrast between Chinese and U.S. cultures, then he realized his behavior required him to learn new behaviors to foster his academic development, and then he applied self-supportive techniques to process the necessary changes in his classroom behavior.

During the follow-up interview, PJ was asked if he would share more information about his perceptions about classroom behavior in the United States in comparison with classroom behavior in China. From his response, it was evident that he preserved his innate culture and personality traits, and simultaneously during his process of acculturation he was able to adjust his behavior with respect to the U.S. cultural context:

You know, I'm shy, but I talk to myself "don't be afraid" and "be calm" and "you can speak." When I first come here, I raise my hand to speak. And now, you know, it's better. I can speak in the class and share my opinion with other classmates. I think,... I like it. And also, I think, now I'm not afraid to share my opinion.

Assertiveness also helped Chinese students to raise their confidence in the United States, and improved their experience with their daily life in the host country. The process of developing assertiveness and acquiring higher levels of acculturation in the United States was perceived by

all participants. This continuous process varied from participant to participant according to their individual personality traits and skills and required various amount of time. Accessibility to informal social support networks helped some students to accelerate their assertiveness development. Generally, international Chinese students felt better, more confident and found their academic and social lives more successful with time. As one participant said, “The more time I have spent in the United States, the longer time in the United States, the better I feel about me.”

Through their international experience, participants were not only able to develop their skills and acquire traits to better and more effectively navigate their lives in the host country, but they also gained a better understanding of others and themselves as well. Angelique, a doctoral student who was raised in a traditional Chinese society, started to realize that, with her arrival to the United States, her own personality and identity continued to develop:

My identity started to form, and then I realized that, you know, there are, actually, so much about myself, and there is so much about culture and the stories I have when I was living in China. That becomes a valuable knowledge for me. I realized the value of my own stories, the value of my culture. So, I started to embrace my identity as a Chinese..... In China, I don't have to think much, actually. Because everything is well structured. And you are very well aware of people's expectations to you. And back then. I just feel like, you know. I know what I should do, because that is what people think I should do, and I never questioned it, and that happened to a lot of my peers too. So, having come out of the country, but still living in China. I can still see the difference in me back then and the me now, and I can see if I hadn't come to the United States, I would be the same. And the difference, the major difference is that here, I was given the freedom and the opportunity to explore a different path. So, the good thing is, I have many many options and the opportunity to really find myself. And living through the uncertainty, that is where I find the meaning of that.

Generally, Chinese students described their experience in the United States as an eye- and mind-opening experience. They realized how they changed since their arrival to the United States. They were able to learn more about their abilities and capabilities. They acquired higher levels of assertiveness, self-sufficiency, self-reliance and cultural agility. They developed skills

to better understand and communicate with members of other cultures, and effectively function in the culturally diverse environment of their host country. Also, all participants noted that exposure to foreign culture gave them an opportunity to see themselves through a different lens and gave them room for individual growth.

Summary

The qualitative data collected through personal in-depth and personal follow-up interviews were subject to interpretative phenomenological analysis conducted in six steps, following the recommendations of Smith et al. (2009). After the individual cases were analyzed, patterns across all participants were looked for and data analysis revealed four themes:

1. Cultural Assessment and Learning,
2. Language Acquisition and Learning,
3. Support Networks, and
4. Individual Growth.

Cultural Assessment and Learning was a core theme that emerged across participants. This category captured participants' perceptions about the cultural differences between their culture of origin and the culture of the United States. It also encompassed the students' experiences about their cultural learning in the environment of a foreign country. In other words, this theme captured how different the international Chinese students found the culture of the United States in comparison to their culture of origin, and how participants learned to navigate their lives in a foreign culture.

The second theme, Language Acquisition and Learning, comprised the participants' recognized need to acquire and use the English language in both academic and social settings, and indicated the participants' insights on how they became more proficient. Efficient usage and

familiarity with English language was identified as a crucial means to academic attainment, to the development of social and support networks, and to a better understanding of the cultural context.

The third theme, Support Networks, encompassed participants' perceived obstacles in their academic and social lives and outlined participants' efforts to create informal and formal support networks in their new cultural environment. This category further embodied the three main sources of support identified by the participants, including informal social support networks, formal support networks and self-support. The theme reflected international Chinese students' insights on how the support networks helped them in achieving their academic and personal goals and meeting their objectives.

The last theme, Individual Development, embodied the changes in participants themselves as a result of being in a different cultural environment, such as self-sufficiency, self-reliance, assertiveness, maturity, and understanding of others and self, after being exposed to and immersed in a new cultural context.

Findings that emerged during the data analysis revealed phenomena across the participants linked to their acculturation process in the United States. Acculturation in selected Chinese international students was compared to an eye- and mind-opening process through which the interviewees were able to learn more about the new culture and acquire higher levels of language proficiency, social skills and cross-cultural communication skills. The impact of acculturation was not limited to the academic and social lives of the participants. It also led to further development and transformation of their personalities and identities. Both positive and negative experiences with living in a foreign country were appreciated and evaluated as valuable

learning experienced by all. The data analysis also identified common remarks that may be taken into consideration for recommendations, and implication for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

Introduction

This study was conducted in order to explore Chinese international students' perceptions about their acculturation in the United States. Four themes were identified that emerged during the phenomenological interpretative analysis: Cultural Assessment and Learning, Language Acquisition and Learning, Support Networks, and Individual Growth. These provide a deeper insight and understanding of how international Chinese students perceived their acculturation while studying in a degree-seeking program at a university in South Texas. Cultural Assessment and Learning was identified as the core theme, and all themes were mutually interconnected (see Figure 1. below).

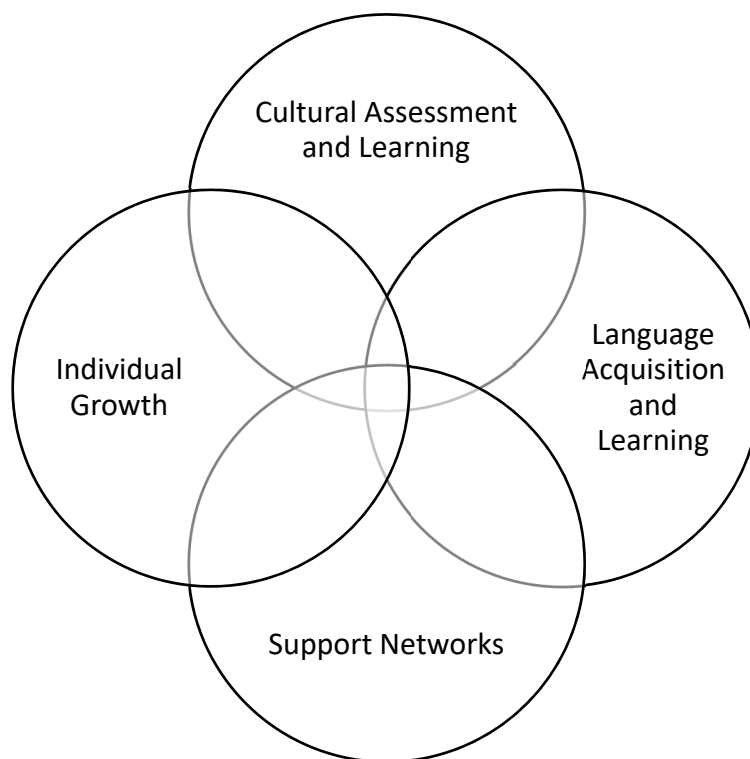


Figure 1. Emerged themes.

The core theme, Cultural Assessment and Learning, encompassed participants' perceptions about the cultural differences between their culture of origin and the culture of the host country. It also captured students' experiences about their cultural learning in the cultural context of the United States. In other words, this theme focused on how different the international Chinese students found the culture of the United States in comparison to Chinese culture; and secondly, how participants learned to navigate their lives in a foreign culture.

The second theme, Language Acquisition and Learning, included the participants' recognized need to acquire and use the English language in both academic and social settings, and comprised the participants' insights into how they acquired greater English language proficiency. Efficient usage and familiarity with English language was perceived by Chinese international students as a crucial means of academic attainment, development of social and support networks, and better understanding of their new cultural environment.

The third theme, Support Networks, considered the participants' perceived obstacles in their academic and social lives and indicated participants' effort to create informal and formal support networks in the cultural context of their host country. This category further embodied participants recognized need to develop support networks. The study revealed that Chinese international students mainly seek support within their informal social support networks, formal support networks, and their own self-support. The theme reflects participants' insights into how the support networks helped them in achieving their academic and personal goals and meeting their objectives.

The last theme, Individual Development, embodied participants' perceptions about how they have changed as a result of being exposed to and immersed in the cultural context of the United States. Individual growth was generally expressed by Chinese international students as

increased levels of self-sufficiency, self-reliance, assertiveness, maturity, and understanding of others and themselves. All participants perceived their individual growth as a positive aspect and implication of their international experience in the United States. Most participants discovered new abilities and capabilities. They deduced that their international experience gave them an opportunity to learn more about themselves and encouraged them to embrace differences.

Discussion of the Findings

Findings that emerged during the data analysis revealed phenomena across the participants linked to their acculturation process in the United States. Acculturation in selected Chinese international students was compared to an eye- and mind-opening process through which the interviewees were able to learn more about the new culture, and acquire a higher level of language proficiency, social skills, and cross-cultural communication skills. The impact of acculturation was not limited to the academic and social lives of the participants. It also led to further development and transformation of their personalities and identities. Both positive and negative experiences with living in a foreign country were appreciated and evaluated as a valuable learning experience by all involved. The data analysis also identified common remarks that may be taken into consideration for recommendations, and implication for future research.

The aim of this study was to explore Chinese international students' perceptions about their acculturation in the United States in order to gain new insights and understanding of the process of acculturation in Chinese international degree-seeking students. The findings of this qualitative research were organized into four categories. Table 3 recapitulates the four emergent themes and features the characteristics and attributes of each category.

Table 3

Themes

Theme	Characteristics	Attributes
Cultural Assessment and Learning	How do Chinese international students perceive differences between the Chinese and American culture? How do Chinese international students approach and perceive cultural learning?	Identifying differences and commonalities between cultures Expressed need to learn about and understand the new cultural context
Language Acquisition and Learning	How do Chinese international students perceive the importance of English language proficiency? How do Chinese international students acquire greater levels of English language proficiency?	Language as a means of communication and cultural learning
Support Networks	How do Chinese international students perceive the role of support in their lives in the United States? How do Chinese international students develop their support networks?	Expressed need to develop formal and informal support networks Academic, social and self-support
Individual Growth	How do Chinese international students perceive the change in themselves resulting from their international experience?	Self-sufficiency, self-reliance, maturity Understanding of others and self Embracing cultural differences Personal individual development

This study supports findings from previously published literature and extends the capacity of acculturation literature to understand and bring more insight into Chinese international students' perceptions about their acculturation in the United States. Existing literature on acculturation has focused on changes that occur when an individual is continuously

exposed to another cultural environment and is in direct contact with its all aspects (Berry, 1991; Bennett, 2004; Gonzales, 2006; Pandit & Alderman, 2004). Findings from this study revealed that participating Chinese students acquired new skills, traits and behaviors in order to navigate their lives more effectively in the new cultural context of the United States.

Students assessed their new cultural environment and were continuously involved in cultural learning. Participants acquired a higher level of English language proficiency, and developed new support networks. Exposure to a new cultural environment also resulted in the participants' individual growth, which was expressed as higher levels of self-sufficiency, self-reliance, maturity, assertiveness, and a better understanding of others and themselves. Besides the assessment and acquired orientation in the culture of their host country, Chinese students also developed a better sense of and understanding of their original culture. Commitment to study in a foreign country enriched the Chinese students' lives with numerous experiences that led to the development of their intercultural skills, traits and behaviors. These finding are consistent with previous acculturation literature and theory focused on how individuals, such as international students, perceived their acculturation process (Barty, 2006; Bennett, 2004; Gonzales, 2006; Hawkes, 2014; Padilla & Perez, 2003; Pandit & Alderman, 2004).

The findings from this research were also in congruence with Gonzales' (2006) explanation of the acculturation process of international students. Themes that emerged from the data analysis are supportive of Gonzales' emphasis on the role of expediency in adjusting to a new cultural environment. The participants identified cultural differences and similarities between their culture of origin and their new cultural context. They also made comparisons between their pre-arrival expectations with realities that were experienced by them upon entry to the United States. Gonzales considered these elements, the expectations and realities, as essential

to cultural assessment in new cultural context. He also suggested that students with more accurate expectations from their new cultural environment tend to perceive a smoother transfer to the new culture than those whose expectations are based on assumptions and biases governed by their country of origin.

Chinese students who participated in this study had no prior direct experience with American culture. Their assumptions of what to expect from their student life in the United States was created based on information accessible to them in their host country, mainly media, internet, books or television. During the data collection process it was apparent that newly arriving students would appreciate having more empirical knowledge of what to expect. For example, several students mentioned they could not rely on public transportation in the United States as they could in China. All students evaluated that living in South Texas without a car was complicated. A few students never drove a car before they arrived to the United States. They expressed that they would learn to drive a car before coming to the United States, if they knew how important it was in their new cultural environment. Summarizing the obstacles commonly perceived by Chinese international students, the following recommendations for practice were suggested: Pre-Arrival Orientation, Multi-Cultural Approaches to Teaching and Advising, and Peer Programs.

According to Gonzales (2006), international students who are more aware of what to expect from new cultural settings in their host country acculturate with more comfort and ease. Pre-arrival orientation may serve as a means of transferring knowledge and awareness about American culture and school environments to Chinese students who plan to seek their degree at an American university. Literature (Altbach, 2000; de Wit, 2002; Pandit & Alderman, 2004) considered internationalization in higher education as an important part of higher education's

development, and a key feature of contemporary universities and colleges. Cultural diversity of the student body, represented by international students, faculty and staff, is one of its core components (ACE, 2012). Pandit and Alderman (2004) suggested that a multicultural approach to teaching would help increase cultural awareness, especially in the classroom environment. They further stated that increased cultural awareness promotes interaction and cooperation between domestic and international students, and features a number of other benefits. Peer programs established to bring domestic, Chinese and other international students together could help to promote a rather informal environment for mutual learning, support and socializing.

Recommendations for Practice

Pre-arrival orientation. Cultural Assessment and Learning comprised participants' perceptions about cultural differences between their culture of origin and the culture of the United States. This section also explained how Chinese students approach cultural learning in their host country. The first step in cultural learning was cultural assessment. Cultural assessment lies in an individual's ability to identify differences and/or similarities between the host culture and the culture of origin (Bennett, 2000; Gonzales, 2006). Gonzales (2006) also emphasized that there are two inseparable components involved in cultural assessment. These are expectations from the new culture, and realities of the new culture. Comparison of expectations with realities is therefore a component of the process of cultural assessment.

Gonzales (2006) suggested that international students with prior experience with American culture acquired through living in the United States or through attending an American educational institution in a foreign country create expectations based on their empirical knowledge from the past. In other words, international students with prior direct contact with American culture have an idea what to expect from their lives in the United States. On the

contrary, students with no previous contact with American culture set their expectations based on the collection of available information and preconceptions. They have assumptions about what to expect based on the media or standards governed by their country of origin (Gonzales, 2006). Gonzales further explained that more accurate expectations and perceptions about the host country lead, in most cases, to a smoother acculturation process. In contrast, students with less accurate expectations need to attain more significant adaptive changes in order to effectively function in their new cultural environment.

The sample for this study consisted of eight Chinese international students enrolled in degree-seeking programs at a university in South Texas. All participants had no direct contact with U.S. culture prior to their arrival to the United States. The findings revealed that interviewees' knowledge about the United States and its cultural context relied mainly on information from accessible internet sources, books, TV shows, movies, and through English classes. In addition, students stated that they were well informed about their student visa application process, immigration, and other requirements they had to resolve prior to their arrival to the United States.

The students were encouraged to contact the ISSO with their questions and concerns before their arrival, and they all attended orientation for international students upon their arrival to their host institution. Through the orientation sessions and workshops, students were introduced to their new cultural environment and became familiar with immigration requirements, deadlines, and other necessary information that were crucial for their successful functioning in the United States and maintaining their non-immigrant foreign student status. However, students generally indicated a set of information they would appreciate possessing

before their arrival. They stated that they first realized this fact upon coming to the United States and facing the new cultural realities.

The participants typically assumed they would be able to rely on public transportation in the United States, as they did when they lived in China. The information that was available to them prior to their arrival to the United States made them assume that there was an existent public transportation system in their host destinations similar to the public transportation system in their hometown or equivalently large Chinese city. One of the resources few students relied on was the public bus transportation, recommended as a quick and easy way to move around the city. Some students stated the public transportation was acceptable to move between the university and downtown destinations; however, they found it insufficient for commuting to their apartments or shopping centers. All students noted that they deemed a car as a necessity for their life in South Texas. Based on their personal experiences, most students would recommend new students learn to drive and obtain their driver's license prior to their arrival in the United States.

Another message from the participants to prospective students would be to not underestimate the need for English language proficiency. Some participants completed their English language requirements after their arrival to the United States. These students were required to take the English language exam within 3 days of arrival, and perceived higher stress levels due to jet lag and other factors deriving from being in a new environment. A few of them did not pass the exam and decided to attend the English language school to maintain their student non-immigrant visa status. The participants would recommend that prospective international students obtain their proof of English proficiency in their home country in order to avoid stress and potential unexpected expenses, as well as a potential postponement of their university enrollment.

These recommendations are limited to the source of information and data collected from the participants of this study, based on their individual perceptions. Further research is needed to evaluate existing pre-arrival orientation materials and adjust them to international students' general needs.

Multi-cultural approach to teaching and advising. The site selected for this research promotes internationalization and diversity of cultures. At the time the study was conducted, 19% of the student body was represented by international students. China ranked among the top 10 countries of origin (UIW, 2015). Even though the institution is involved in the process of internationalization and aims to spread cross-cultural awareness across campus, several Chinese students indicated they perceived a sort of cultural barrier between them and their classmates and school officials.

Multi-cultural approach to teaching. Chinese international students participating in this study perceived feelings of alienation at times from their peers, and experienced cultural prejudices or even discrimination. Some students stated that the way their classmates looked at them made them feel that their peers considered them weird or not too smart, because their behavior in the classroom was different and they were afraid to speak up. Several Chinese students complained about a lack of interaction with U.S. domestic students.

Koehne (2006) suggested that Asian students often perceive alienation from their U.S. peers in the classroom due to existing cultural differences. It takes a certain amount of time for international students to adapt their behavior to the cultural settings of their host country (Gonzales, 2006), especially when the differences between cultures are in strong contrast, such as Chinese collectivistic culture and U.S. individualistic culture (Hofstede, 2001). According to Bennett (2004), members of dominant cultures, such as the culture of the United States, often

tend to consider their culture superior to other cultures. He further explained that it could be more difficult for the members of dominant cultures to develop cultural sensitivity. In other words, members of dominant cultures are more prone to perceive the behavior of individuals from other cultures as weird, especially those who have no cross-cultural experience. They tend to consider their innate culture as the only right one. In contrast, students from different cultural backgrounds, who often find themselves as a minority in classroom settings, can perceive issues becoming accustomed to the new education system (Gonzales, 2006; McKeachie, 1999).

McKeachie (1999) argued that acculturation issues make it more difficult for international students to engage and interact with their peers. In such situations, the educator can help.

Existing literature (ACE, 2012; Gonzales, 2006; Koehne, 2006; Millis, 2010; Pandit & Alderman, 2004) argues that the role of faculty is very important in the process of internationalization, acculturation, and developing cultural awareness in the field of higher education. It is the educator who can facilitate diverse cultural classroom settings and help to enhance the learning outcomes, develop respect for each other, and increase cultural awareness (Millis, 2010). The instructor has the ability to engage students in so-called cooperative learning, represented by classroom activities such as group discussions, pair-working, or team-projects (Thistlethwaite, 2012). Diller and Moule (2005) argued that culturally competent teaching is essential to enable all students reach their full academic potential.

Since Chinese international students tend to be shy and afraid to speak up (Gonzales, 2006; Koehne, 2006), a teacher using effective teaching methods in multicultural classroom settings could help to eliminate the cultural barrier in the classroom by enriching the course with education about cultural diversity (Amstutz, 1999; Brown & Kysilka, 2002; Gurung & Prieto, 2009; Pandit & Alderman, 2004). Amstutz (1999) recommends storytelling as an effective

teaching strategy in multicultural settings. This strategy enhances a positive classroom environment and fosters exchange of information about diverse cultural backgrounds among students. Another successful teaching technique for multicultural environments is involvement in experiential activities. According to Gurung and Prieto (2009), such activities can eliminate cultural bias and challenge inaccurate beliefs or attitudes, while individuals are restructuring their cognitive schemas.

Overall, in culturally diverse classroom settings, the educator plays an important role. The instructor can contribute not only to students' successful academic achievement, but also to the promotion of cultural competence, understanding, and mutual respect. By creating a positive atmosphere in the classroom, Chinese international students may be protected from feeling alienated or misunderstood, and could more actively participate in classroom activities.

Therefore, it is recommended that institutions of higher education with significant cultural diversity encourage their faculty to implement effective teaching methods, and adjust their teaching methods to fit diverse students' learning styles and needs, which sometimes requires, according to Amstutz (1999), in a blend of various teaching strategies.

Multicultural approach to advising. Generally, the Chinese international students indicated that they sought support primarily within their informal network or relied on information they obtained from the internet and other sources. However, in situations concerning their academic progress, immigration and other legal matters, or health services, they preferred to consult with institutional officials and seek advice in relevant campus offices. In general, participants were satisfied with university services. They indicated that they were comfortable visiting the ISSO to obtain specific information about immigration matters and their non-immigrant foreign student status.

All Chinese international students involved in this study shared their wish to obtain work experience while they were in the United States. The majority of the participants argued they would like to enjoy the opportunity of on-campus employment or other work possibilities off-campus to develop practical skills, apply their formal knowledge to practical situations, and to gain work experience. Participating students obtained detailed information from the ISSO office and were well aware of requirements and conditions for non-immigrant foreign student employment in the United States. What they perceived to be lacking was the amount of employment opportunities on campus, especially positions that would allow them to obtain experience in their field of study. In addition, some of them stated that finding part-time employment off-campus was rather difficult, and was mostly in the form of unpaid volunteering. One student volunteered in a non-profit organization and appreciated all the practical and language skills, knowledge and experiences gained. However, most participants would want to take the opportunity and not only gain experience, but earn some money as well. The majority of the participants were funded by their families, and mentioned that even a small income would be appreciated by them in order to help their parents by being able to provide for themselves. A few students stated that paid student employment would give them an opportunity to save money to travel and explore U.S. culture.

The majority of the Chinese international students mentioned that they would like to take the opportunity to apply for OPT upon their graduation. Most of them were familiar with or knew where to get specific information about the OPT application process. However, several students expressed their concerns about finding a relevant employment opportunity. One student already obtained her temporary work endorsement after she graduated with her undergraduate degree. Unfortunately, she failed to find a relevant job position before the deadline and her

permit expired. She said she would like to apply for the OPT again after she graduates with her graduate degree. At the time of the interview, she assumed that finding a temporary work position in the United States with no work experience would be a difficult process for her. Several other participants shared similar perceptions. The findings of this study captured that Chinese international students were not worried about the application process, because they knew where to go for support. In fact, the data analysis revealed that the interviewees would appreciate more career advising and information about temporary work opportunities in the United States.

Chinese international students also believed that work experience from student employment during their studies would be an advantage for them when they applied for their OPT. According to Hart Research Associates (2013), temporary employers give hiring preference to university graduates with skills such as critical thinking, intercultural skills, and the ability to contribute to innovation. They further concluded that

employers strongly endorse educational practices that involve students in active, engaging work—practices including collaborative problem-solving, internships, research, senior projects, and community engagements. Employers consistently rank outcomes and practices that involve the application of skills over the acquisition of discrete bodies of knowledge. They also strongly endorse practices that require students to demonstrate both acquisition of knowledge and its application. (p. 2)

Student advisers in career planning for international students need to take into consideration specific requirements under which international students are allowed to work in the United States. Some Chinese students mentioned that it was brought to their attention that some American employers are hesitant to hire international individuals, because they are not familiar with the immigration processes. School officials are generally well respected. They may help international students to find their placements by approaching potential employers. A connection to local organizations or an established network of off-campus student employment could enrich

the portfolio of student employment opportunities for international students, and would render Chinese international students the opportunities to satisfy their expressed desire to acquire work experience.

The ambassador program, the international alumni connection network or other university student organizations could also help to answer Chinese international students' questions or requests. Participation in extracurricular activities may give Chinese international students an opportunity to start developing their work experience (Montelongo, 2002). Also, they could gain access to a source of information and the opportunity to develop relations with their peers, and further build their *guanxi*.

Peer programs. The findings of this study indicated that Chinese international students would appreciate having more access to the local community, especially U.S. domestic students, in order to learn more about American culture and have the opportunity to interact in person with native English speakers. Pandit and Alderman (2004) suggested that the lack of interaction between international and domestic students reduced the opportunity to exchange firsthand information about their cultures. They emphasized that international and domestic students should be encouraged to collaborate.

One of the many ways of bringing college and university students together is through student organizations and associations. Literature (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1995; Montelongo, 2002) indicated that student organizations and participation in extracurricular activities enrich students' formal education and provide them with occasions to apply their formal knowledge to real practice, and develop the skills necessary for a successful professional career. Benefits from involvement in student associations, clubs or organizations include an increased level of intellectual development, communication skills, teamwork, leadership skills, responsibility and

independence (Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1994; Magolda, 1992; Montelongo, 2002; Smith & Griffin, 1993).

Encouraging Chinese international students to join student organizations may help them satisfy their need to find peers with whom they can practice and improve their English proficiency. Through direct interaction with American students they will also gain more access to firsthand information about U.S. culture. On the other hand, Chinese international students' participation in such student organizations will give American domestic students and other international students the opportunity to learn more about Chinese collectivistic culture. Mutual cultural exchange between students may lead to an overall increase of cross-cultural awareness on campus (Pandit & Alderman, 2004).

It is common for universities and colleges to issue campus news, magazines or journals. This media informs the campus community about various events, special topics, and other themes. Some student organizations issue their own periodicals too. Writing articles or stories for campus press would allow the students to share their experience, opinions or stories with the community. Encouraging Chinese students to contribute their stories or articles to the university news, journal or magazine may support their writing practice. The findings of this research showed that Chinese international students perceived their English writing as the most complicated part of learning the English language.

Chinese international students should be encouraged to share their stories and perceptions in a written form. For instance, Chinese students may be encouraged to submit articles or stories on special topics. Their articles and stories would provide readers with a new point of view, a Chinese perspective. It was obvious from the findings that Chinese students appreciated help and support with their English proficiency. One of the internationalization goals among higher

education institutions is to raise cultural awareness among members of the campus community and of society (ACE, 2012; de Wit, 2002). Therefore, American domestic students should be encouraged to help their Chinese peers with their writing activities. Not only could they benefit from this experience by developing professional skills such as communication skills, mentoring/teaching skills, and teamwork in diverse environments, they could also learn about and better understand Chinese culture by reading Chinese students' articles and stories.

Bringing Chinese, other international and U.S. domestic students together and supporting their direct cooperation and communication in student organizations and extracurricular activities is rich in advantages for all students, faculty, staff and the campus community, but may also be beneficial on a regional, national, and even international level.

Recommendations for Future Research

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore Chinese international students' perceptions about their acculturation in the United States. Findings from this study provided information that led to a better understanding of the process of acculturation among Chinese international students. The research question that led the study, "How do Chinese international degree-seeking students perceive their acculturation in the United States?" was answered by participants' shared stories, experiences and perceptions that were organized into four categories. Nevertheless, other questions are still to be answered.

One of the recommendations for practice focused on pre-arrival orientation. This section also indicated a recommendation for future research. Participants of this study identified room for improvement in pre-arrival orientation materials. What are the best practices or methods for pre-arrival orientation in order to minimize culture shock and contribute to Chinese international students' smooth transition to their new culture? Would these apply to all international students?

Evaluation of existing pre-arrival orientation materials and consideration of international students' feedback could lead to the establishment of best methods for providing pre-arrival orientation to international students.

Further, the study revealed that, despite internationalization efforts, Chinese international students perceived feelings of alienation from their American peers, and lacked interaction with their American classmates. They also argued it was difficult for them to develop friendships with Americans. According to research on teaching in multicultural environments (Amstutz, 1999; Brown & Kysilka, 2002; Gurung & Prieto, 2009; Pandit & Alderman, 2004), educators play an important role in setting the atmosphere in the classroom and contributes to increased cultural competence, understanding and respect among students from culturally diverse backgrounds. The first prerequisite for a successful teacher in multicultural settings is their own cultural competence and sensitivity (Diller & Moule, 2005). Lonquist, Banks, and Huber (2009) argued that most faculty do not possess a great enough level of cultural competence to effectively educate students in culturally diverse classroom settings. However, how do we define enough cultural competence in educators? Can we measure the level of cultural competence in faculty?

Since current findings addressed a lack of interaction among Chinese international and American domestic students, the questions that emerged were: "Why is there a lack of interaction between the two groups of students?" or "What are the best practices for encouraging international and domestic students to interact closer together?" Research concerning any of the above questions should be conducted in order to reveal new phenomena and facts and contribute to the field of acculturation, internationalization and global citizenship.

Summary

This qualitative study aimed to explore Chinese international degree-seeking students' perceptions about their acculturation in the United States. The data collected through personal in-depth interviews and follow-up interviews with eight participants revealed four themes that may help to better understand and learn about Chinese international students' perceptions and experiences linked to their acculturation in the United States. The answers to the research question that led this study, "How do Chinese international degree seeking students perceive their acculturation in the United States?" were organized into four categories: Cultural Assessment and Learning, Language Acquisition and Learning, Academic and Social Support, and Individual Development. The fundamental theme, Cultural Assessment and Learning, comprised participants' perceptions about the cultural differences between their home culture and the culture of their host country, and reflected the participants' learning in their new cultural environment. The second theme, Language Acquisition and Learning, captured participants' recognized need to acquire and use the English language in both academic and social settings, and shared participants' insights on how they became more proficient. The Academic and Social Support theme reflected participants' perceived obstacles in their academic and social lives and their effort to create informal and formal support networks in their new cultural environment. The last theme, Individual Development, embodied the changes in participants themselves as a result of being in a different cultural environment, such as self-sufficiency, maturity, and understanding of self after being exposed to and immersed in a new culture.

The research question was answered, and new questions arose. What are the best practices/methods for pre-arrival orientation in order to minimize culture shock and contribute to Chinese international students' smooth transition to their new culture? Would these apply to all

international students? How do we define enough cultural competence in educators? Can we measure the level of cultural competence in faculty? Why is there a lack of interaction between the two groups of students? What are best practices for encouraging international and domestic students to interact closer together? In order to answer these questions, further research studies need to be conducted.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Personal Interview Protocol Part I: Demographic Questions

1. How old are you?
2. Are you married?
3. Do you have children? If yes, how many?
4. Where do you come from?
5. What is your native language?
6. What other languages do you speak?
7. What degree are you seeking in the United States?
8. How long have you currently been in the United States?
9. Have you been to the United States prior to your full-time studies?
10. Have you had any firsthand experiences with the U.S. culture before coming to study to the U.S.?
11. Do you live on campus or off campus?

Appendix B

Personal Interview Protocol Part II: Open-Ended Questions

1. Why did you decide to study in the United States?
2. How would you describe your experience in the United States to this point?
3. How different is your life in the U.S. compared to your life in China?
4. How do you overcome obstacles in your life in the U.S.?
5. How does your experience in the United States impact the way you feel about yourself?
6. Are there any significant experiences regarding your time in the United States that you would like to share?

Appendix C

Follow-Up Interview Sample Questions

1. You mentioned that “.....”. Could you talk a little more about that?
2. You indicated “.....” Could you discuss this a bit more?
3. You stated “.....” Could you explain what do you mean about that?
4. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix D

Invitation Email

Subject: Invitation to participate in the research project: Understanding Acculturation in the United States

Dear International Student,

My name is Tereza Korousova, and I am a Doctoral Candidate at the University of the Incarnate Word, currently in the process of dissertation writing. The topic of my dissertation is “Exploring the Perceptions of the Chinese International Students about Their Acculturation in the United States.”

I will be conducting interviews as part of the research study to increase the understanding of how acculturation is perceived and experienced by the Chinese international students in the United States. As a Chinese international degree seeking student you are in an ideal position to give me valuable firsthand information from your own perspective.

The interviewing consists of two parts, an in-depth personal interview, and personal follow-up interview. The first personal interview should not take more than 90 minutes. The personal follow-up interview takes around 30 minutes. Both interviews will be scheduled with you at a time and place convenient for you. Interviews will be anonymous, and informal. I am simply trying to capture your thoughts and perceptions on being an international student here in the United States.

Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code or nick name to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings. Your participation will be a valuable addition to international

education research and findings could lead to greater understanding of acculturation of international students in the United States.

If you are willing to participate please respond to this email, and suggest a day and time that suits you and I'll do my best to be available. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask.

Thank you!

Respectfully Yours,

Tereza Korousova

PhD. Candidate at the University of the Incarnate Word

4301 Broadway, CPO # 303
San Antonio, TX 78209

Email: korousov@student.uiwtx.edu

Office: 210-829-3900

Cell: 210-502-1158

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

Project Title

Exploring the Perceptions of Chinese International Degree Seeking Students about Their Acculturation in the United States.

Principal Researcher

Tereza Korousova
University of the Incarnate Word
Education Department: Dreeben School of Education

General Information

Dear Participant:

You are invited to participate in a research study regarding Chinese international students' perceptions about their acculturation in the United States. As a Chinese international degree seeking student you are in an ideal position to contribute to the study with valuable firsthand information from your own perspective. I would like to ask you to read this form and if you have any questions, please feel free to ask before agreeing to join the study. The study is being conducted by Tereza Korousova at the University of the Incarnate Word, Dreeben School of Education.

To Participants

You are being asked to participate in this study because your firsthand information from your own perspective are of a great value to the research topic of this study. The purpose of this study to explore the perceptions of eight Chinese international degree seeking students about their acculturation in the United States. The study hopes to contribute to the field of international education and acculturation, and to improve overall cross-cultural communication.

During the process of study in findings, results, or any points of publishing, your data or personal information will not be traceable nor will be recognizable. All of your data will be aggregated with other data and combined and gathered into one complete data collection of the study. The data will be stored securely in a digitally or physically locked location, accessible to the researcher only, and destroyed after a reasonable period of time upon completion of the study.

Background Information

The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of Chinese international degree seeking students about their acculturation in the United States. The aim of the study is to learn how Chinese international students perceive the process of their acculturation upon arrival to their host education institution in the United States, and how they assign meanings to this phenomenon from their own individual perspective.

Procedures

It is anticipated that the opportunity to express your fine experiences will provide valuable information to the field of international higher education, acculturation, and internationalization.

The perceptions from your individual perspective of view can contribute to development of new methods, strategies and policies in the realm of international higher education, and cross-cultural communication.

If you agree to participate in this study, I would politely ask you to allow the researcher to conduct two personal interview sessions, the first session of the length between 45 to 90 minutes, and the follow-up interview session in the length between 30 to 60 minutes, both interviews will be digitally recorded.

Risks and Benefits of Participating in the Study

There is no greater than minimal risks involved for the participation by being interviewed: 1) there is a low risk of there is a low risk of a participant being identified by their stories, and 2) there is the low risk that through telling their stories, the participants may experience emotional distress. Before this study is completed, there are no benefits for your participation of being interviewed. After the study is completed, there might be some beneficial findings of effective acculturation in the United States.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report that might be published, any information that will make it possible to identify a participant or subject will not be included. Research records will be stored securely in a locked location and accessible only to the researcher. The records will be destroyed after a reasonable period of time upon completion of the study. Only Tereza Korousova, the researcher, and her dissertation chair will have the authority to review the records and data collected for the purposes of this study. The digitally recorded interviews will be anonymous. To support the anonymity and confidentiality, nick names will be used with no indication of any hinted information for others to identify the participants in completion of dissertation process. The nick name chosen by the participant will remain the same for the participant during the time the study is conducted. For the purpose of communication with the researcher the participants will be encouraged to use an email address, for example nickname.participant@email.com, to further support the confidentiality and anonymity of the study, and to allow the researcher to carefully link the data from all interview sessions to each participant.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

You have freedom to choose whether or not to participate in the study or to discontinue participation at any time. There is no guarantee that this study is beneficial to you in the participation for this study, however, it is hoped that the opportunity to explicit and express your perceptions about acculturation in the United States will later prove beneficial to the field of international higher education, internationalization, cross-cultural communication.

In order to participate in the interview sessions, you are giving entitled approval that your data can be used in the research and applied results of this study.

Contact Information

Tereza Korousova is the researcher for this study. If you have questions about this study and/or your involvement, please feel free to contact Tereza Korousova at (210)502-1158 or via email at korousov@student.uiwtx.edu.

You will keep one copy of this form for your own record. When you sign your name, please keep in mind that your signature indicates that you have agreed to participate in this research study and you have completely understood the information given above in the consent form.

Please be aware that the attachment of your signature to this form confirms your consent of taking part in this study as well as signifies that you have read and fully comprehended the information above provided and explained clearly to you.

Participant's Signature

Researchers Signature

Participant's Printed Name

TEREZA KOROUSOVA
Researcher's Printed Name

Date

Date

Tereza Korousova
4301 Broadway, CPO# 303
San Antonio, TX 78209
Email: korousov@student.uiwtx.edu
Cell: (210)502-1158

If you have follow-up questions in the future or any problems that you wish to report related to this study, please do not hesitate to contact the Chair of my Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Osman Özturgut
Dean of Research and Graduate Studies
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