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Chinese International Students Attending American Universities: How Can We Help You? A Qualitative Study on Chinese International Students' Acculturation Experiences

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Chinese International Students Attending American Universities:
How Can We Help You? A Qualitative Study on Chinese
International Students' Acculturation Experiences

Zhen Li

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Chinese International Students Attending American Universities: How Can We Help You? A Qualitative Study on Chinese International Students' Acculturation Experiences

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Doctor of Philosophy

Given the increasing number of Chinese international students attending American universities, an important study would be to consider problems arising during these students' initial transition period, as they acculturate into the American culture and educational system. Taking this information into account, university counseling centers, campus services, and those who interact with and support these students would be better able to assist in easing the initial and ongoing stress of living in a foreign country and adapting to a new way of life.

Thirteen Chinese international students participated in qualitative interviews conducted in Mandarin Chinese, each participant's native language. Each participant was born and raised in mainland China, had never travelled to the US before studying abroad, had no direct family relative in the US, and had studied at a university in the US for more than two years.

In order to gain a better understanding of Chinese international students' initial transition to live and study in the US, a qualitative research design was utilized. This study used a collaborative hermeneutic approach to obtain a valid and common understanding of the meaning of each transcribed interview. Data analysis followed the hermeneutic circle, which emphasizes that the meaning of the text can be better understood through reading individual parts and comparing meanings of parts and whole. These study used a team to analyze data, thus avoiding the narrow reliance on individual interpretations.

Based on their personal perspectives, participants reported their experiences encountered during their initial transition into the US. More specifically, information shared during individual interviews with Chinese international students indicated specific experiences in regard to their initial and ongoing adjustment to the U.S. environment, including how they made sense of their experiences and how their ways of thinking and behaving changed as a result of being influenced by their experiences interfacing with U.S. culture. Participants also shared their strategies they perceived as helpful in specific situations. Based on an analysis of participants' interviews, themes that arose from the interviews included (a) difficulties and challenges they faced as new immigrants; (b) differences they encountered in respect to their homeland and the new environment, including language/communication, culture, academic study and learning, living in the US, and psychological adjustments; (c) positive growth they acknowledged from facing challenges and adapting to their new environment; and (d) acknowledging the need to accept help and how to more proactively seek and receive help as needed. Implications for more actively assisting and including Chinese international students are discussed.

Keywords: Chinese international student, acculturation, university campus, communication barrier, cultural barrier, help seeking

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As a result of globalization, increasing numbers of international students choose to attend American universities. Opportunities of studying abroad facilitate cultural communication and understanding. The number of international students at colleges and universities in the US increased by 10 percent to a record high of 974, 926 during the 2014/15 academic year. In 2014, international exchanges in all 50 states contributed \$30 billion to the U.S. economy. The number of international students continued to grow each year from 2007 to 2014 (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2015). Given the increasing number of international students, attention should be paid to problems arising during the initial transition period, a process referred to as acculturation.

Acculturation is described as the process an individual or group experiences as modifications occur due to continuous first-hand contact with another culture, resulting in both social-cultural (group-level) and psychological-behavioral (individual-level) changes (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987). As international students transition into the American culture, they face a wide range of challenges (Kaczmarek, Matlock, Merta, Ames, & Ross, 1994; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). An especially difficult challenge international students face is dancing on the edge of two different worlds, while carefully balancing their interactions within each world (Kung, 2007).

Language barriers, cultural differences, financial problems and social exclusion make international students a vulnerable population in a foreign environment (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). On the other hand, some international students perceive the challenges occurring in the acculturation process as positive, a catalyst for personal growth over time. According to Brown (2009), the experience of studying and living in another culture helped some international students gain precious understanding of their own culture and the hosting culture; these insights helped them view life from a different perspective. Therefore, assisting

international students with their initial transition and supporting them in successfully addressing acculturation issues along the way may facilitate a more positive transformation experience.

Acculturative stress is expected to decrease as international students adjust to their new environment. However, Wang et al. (2012) found that among Chinese international students, over 20% remained “consistently distressed” or “culture-shocked” (p. 430), even after three semesters in the US. Russell, Rosenthal, and Thomson (2010) identified 58.8% of international students in the total population of international students studying in a large metropolitan university in Australia as positive and connected, 34.4% as unconnected and stressed, and 6.7% as distressed and risk-taking. These findings imply that for many international students acculturative stress is a long-term challenge. Hence, appropriate interventions are needed to address and improve this situation.

According to the IIE (2015), in 2014/2015 China was the greatest source of U.S. international students, accounting for 31.2% of this population. As noted by some researchers, Asian international students face greater acculturation stressors than their counterparts from European nations. This might be accounted for by relatively lower level of English proficiency, more likelihood of encountering discrimination and racism, and less familiarity with U.S. culture norms (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Moreover, after examining difficulties for international students in adapting to the US, Liu (2009) concluded that problems encountered by Chinese international students are unique and should be addressed independently from other international student communities. Although lack of social support, academic difficulties, language barriers, and homesickness may also be common for other international student groups, Chinese international students may experience those challenges differently as influenced by their cultural traditions (e.g., filial piety), learning habits and perceived differences from peers.

About 28.7% of all international students in the US are from mainland China, which made mainland China the largest source of international students (Chodorow, 2013). This study exclusively focused on international students from mainland China, given the great number and distinctive features of this group.

This study focused on the lived experiences of Chinese international students who currently reside in the US and are enrolled in American universities. More specifically, this study explored Chinese international students' experiences of utilizing specific supports and strategies to cope with difficulties associated with their acculturation process, and how certain experiences have influenced their views and behaviors.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Increasing numbers of international students are attending American universities. During the 2014/15 academic year, the number of international students attending colleges and universities in the US rose to a record high of 974,926 (IIE, 2015). Given the increasing number of international students, universities must consider and attend to challenges these students face during their transition period, which is generally recognized as *acculturation*.

Various models have been proposed to explain how individuals, such as international students, adapt to their new environment. Current models integrate behavior, affect, and cognitive factors in the framework and propose that culture shock is a result of a variety of factors. At a societal level, such factors include different aspects of society of origin and society of settlement (social, political, economic and cultural aspects). At an individual level, such factors include characteristics of the person (personality, language, etc.) and characteristics of the situation (length of contact, cultural distance, social support, etc.).

Acculturation is viewed as the interaction of all these factors. When assisting individuals who are adapting to a new culture, Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) emphasize the importance of addressing both the stressors and the adaptive skills needed to successfully negotiate those stressors.

Acculturative Model

Historical models of acculturation are grouped into three categories: culture learning theory; stress, coping, and adjustment theory; and social identification theories (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008). Zhou et al. (2008) describe these three categories: (a) Culture learning theory regards social interaction as skill-acquiring process. It focuses on behavioral aspects and proposes to develop skill training to facilitate acculturation process. (b) Stress, coping and adjustment theory emphasizes the affects associated with the transition and sojourners' psychological well-being. This theory views culture shock as a result of

stressful events happen in transition period and uses stress management as an intervention.

(c) Social identification theories focus on cognitive component of adaptation and sojourners' identity change as they interact more with host culture.

Recent research focuses primarily on social identification theories, such as the unidimensional model, bidimensional model, and categorical model. The unidimensional model suggests that individuals need to sacrifice native or host culture in order to be oriented to the other culture. Those who are oriented to the host culture inevitably abandon part of their native culture, and vice versa. In contrast, the bidimensional model views orientation to native and host culture as separated processes. In other words, an individual can be highly oriented to both cultures, poorly oriented to both culture, or highly oriented to one culture while poorly oriented to the other (Tsai & Chentsova-Dutton, 2002).

Research suggests that Asian Americans who grow up in Asia follow the unidimensional model of acculturation while those who are raised in America follow bidimensional model (Tsai & Chentsova-Dutton, 2002). Lee, Sobal, and Frongillo's (2003) study on Korean Americans found three forms of acculturation (assimilation, integration and separation) and supported a bidimensional model.

In Berry's (1997) model, four acculturative strategies are presented: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. Assimilation occurs when individuals do not want to maintain their original cultural identity and chooses to primarily seek interaction with the host culture. Conversely, separation refers to maintaining one's original culture while avoiding interacting with the dominant culture. Integration is the most preferred type of acculturation and is associated with less stress (Berry, 2006), those who fall into this category manage to maintain their original cultural identity and interact with host culture at the same time. Ward (2008) suggests that integrated individuals present lower levels of ethno-cultural identity conflict (EIC), which is the conflict between one's identity in his original culture and

the dominant culture. The last type of acculturation is marginalization, which occurs when international students have little interest in either their home culture or the foreign culture.

The national cultures theory (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; as cited in Yu, 2013) also contributes to understanding the acculturation process and cultural differences. Hofstede and his colleagues (2010) pointed out six dimensions of cultural differences: high versus low power distance (expectation for authority's control); individualism versus collectivism; masculinity versus femininity; low versus high uncertainty avoidance; long-term versus short-term orientation; and indulgent versus restraint.

An example of individualism versus collectivism, people from societies that endorse individualism are more likely to use "I" statements, score "extrovert" on personality tests, walk faster, and express happiness. While in societies endorsing collectivism, people avoid the word "I," score introvert on personality tests, walk slower, and show sadness rather than happiness (Hofstede et al., 2010). These types of societal differences help explain the difficulties individuals experience as they adapt to another culture.

Several scholars have proposed different models about the course of transition to another culture. Lysgaard's (1955) U-curve model described the first stage of transition to be characterized by excitement. Following the first stage, the second stage is marked by maladjustment. Ultimately the third stage culminates in completed adjustment.

A similar pattern of adjustment is also found in Adler's (1975) model. His five suggested phases includes contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy, and independence. According to his model, sojourners initially experience confusion and rejection of the host culture, after which they understand more about the host culture and finally achieve culture relativism. Mohamed's model (1997) also indicated that with learning and understanding, stress would turn into competence and maturity. According to Oberg's

(1960) model, transition is divided into four stages, which are the honeymoon stage, crisis stage, recovery stage, and adjustment stage.

According to the W-curve model that was proposed by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1960), after becoming familiar with the host culture, sojourners are likely to experience “culture shock” in their home country upon returning home. Reentering their native culture becomes a challenge in regard to adjusting back to what was once familiar.

Adjustment and Acculturative Stress

When students leave their home country, they also leave behind their family and friends, culture, social norms, customs, and support system (Hahn, 2010). Big changes take place in their lives as they adjust to their new environment. The types of problems international students face are typically categorized as follows: (a) problems common to all college students (e.g., being autonomous); (b) problems associated with being away from home for a long period of time (e.g., culture shock, homesickness), and (c) problems unique to international students (e.g., immigration difficulties, rejection/hate, discrimination) (Leong, 1984, as cited in Kaczmarek, Matlock, Merta, Ames & Ross, 1994; Manley & Nguyen, 2012; Misra & Castillo, 2004; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman 2008). The majority of acculturation studies seem to fall into two categories: acculturation stress and factors that affect acculturation.

International students face unique sources of stress. Some major sources of stress are linguistic, academic, interpersonal, financial, and intrapersonal problems (Jones & Kim, 2013; Lee & Rice, 2007; McClure, 2007; Mori, 2000; Sam & Eide, 1991; Sandhu, 1994; Tan & Yates, 2011; Wright & Schartner, 2013; Zhang & Mi, 2010).

Language barriers can cause difficulties both in international students’ study and their interaction with the host culture. Because of limited English proficiency, they often need extended time for study. Being unfamiliar with terms in certain subjects, they may find it

hard to relate to certain topics in discussion although they may have such knowledge in another language (Zhang & Mi, 2010). Especially during the first few months, they may be unable to express themselves and have limited interaction with people from host country, some even face social exclusion (Jones & Kim, 2013). Yu and Shen (2012) found that social-cultural adaptation and academic adaptation are predicted by linguistic confidence in a second language, which indicates that high level of linguistic anxiety and lack of linguistic competence is associated with difficulty in adjusting to different culture/society, interacting with faculty, and gaining academic development. English fluency is also significantly negatively correlated with depression symptoms (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007).

However, academic difficulty is only partly caused by language barrier. Some students might have a hard time adjusting to the learning environment in US for other reasons. For example, following their cultural traditions, Chinese students are taught to respect the authority, they tend to raise questions more cautiously, and prefer to resolve problems by themselves. However, such behaviors go against the expectation for students in the US and thus create tension in adjusting to the new learning environment. Lack of ability of articulating critical thinking process in class also contributes to Chinese international students' quietness in classrooms. They may be able to think critically, but not participate in critical arguments with classmates (Turner, 2006). For some Asian students, high academic achievement is one of their core cultural values; academic failure is shameful for them and their family (Chang & O'Hara, 2013). Such internalized high motivation to achieve is a common stressor for Chinese students (Tan & Yates, 2011).

In terms of social interaction, international students expressed a desire to interact more with Americans. They also reported difficulties in cross-cultural communication. In general, loneliness is a main theme for international students (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008). Some described feeling invisible, isolated and having no sense of

belonging (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011). Some students reported experiencing anxiety toward contacting supervisors and dissatisfaction with supervisor-supervisee relationships in regard to closeness, joint-research, and guidance (McClure, 2007). Cultural differences, perceived social-cultural isolation from host country, language barrier, and lack of time caused by academic pressure make interacting with the host culture a stressful process (Wright & Schartner, 2013). Specifically, discrimination against international students was experienced by some international students in various social situations. They encountered discrimination in on-campus interactions with faculty and administration, in seeking funding or job opportunities, and in off-campus interactions such as housing and shopping (Lee & Rice, 2007). For Asian international students, who are likely to view themselves as interdependent and form their self-image based on their relationships with others, relationship problems can cause much tension (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

International students are likely to pay higher tuition as non-residents at state universities. However, regardless of the fact that most of them come from developing countries (IIE, 2015), they often receive lower financial support and spend more on travelling, transportation, housing, etc. (Hahn, 2010; Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010). Under the immigration regulations that limit international students' working hours and working places, it is even more difficult for international students to improve their financial situation, especially when facing an unexpected financial crisis (Mori, 2000).

Intrapersonal problems refer to psychological problems arising during the complex process of integrating different values, beliefs and traditions into international students' worldview, and during the decision-making process in regard to deciding on important aspects about their career and life (e.g., to stay in the US or go back home; family crisis) (Mori, 2000). Common psychological problems are loneliness/homesickness (Wu, 2011), tiredness, sadness, worrying (Sam & Eide, 1991), depression (Yi, Lin, & Kishimoto, 2003),

and profound sense of loss, inferiority, and uncertainty (Sandhu, 1994). Pederson (1991) noticed the somatization of psychological symptoms in adjusting to the new environment. These problems include social withdrawal, inability to sleep well, sexual problems, sadness and depression, academic problems, loss of personal integrity and self-esteem, difficulties with communicating and making friends, financial concerns, and difficulties learning the cultural maze (Sjogren & Shearer, 1973, as cited in Marion, 1986).

Other concerns for international students include having adequate and safe housing; nutritious food; adequate transportation; protection from harsh weather; adequate health care; and sufficient accommodations for religious needs (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010). In a qualitative study that explored developmental factors that contribute to Asian female students' suicidal attempts, experiences that put those students at risk for suicidal behaviors are classified as unsatisfying family relationships, social isolation, immersion in academic study, and situational stressors (e.g., break up with a boyfriend). The challenge of transitioning to a new environment can exacerbate existing conflicts (Chung, 2004) thus generating an even more stressful situation to face.

Another focus for acculturation studies is exploring different factors that influence stress and coping processes (Berry, 1997; Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Yan & Berliner, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). For example, Heggins and Jackson (2003) found that adjustment, communication, learning, participation, external pressures from family, and traditional values are some key factors that influence Asian international students' experience in college. One of the biggest themes in acculturation is to adjust one's perception of one's cultural identity. For example, many Korean immigrants who immigrated to American at an early age expressed that, while growing up, they experienced conflict with their cultural identity (Son, 2013). Berry's (1997) model divided those factors into two groups—the group-level factors, which include society of origin, society of settlement, and group-level acculturation; and

individual-level factors, which include factors exist prior to acculturation and factors arising during acculturation. Following that model, Yan and Berliner's (2011) study found the individual-level factors to be age, gender, major, expectation, knowledge, and skills. Stress, social support, English language proficiency, region/country of origin, length of residence in the US, acculturation, social interaction with Americans, self-efficacy, gender, and personality are frequently reported as predictors for international students' psychosocial adjustment to life in the US (Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

Help-Seeking Behavior and Underutilizing Counseling Services

Although the psychological and physical problems among international students are prominent, they often lack resources to address their needs (Pederson, 1991). It is widely acknowledged that international students could benefit from counseling help during the adjustment process. However, there is a large gap between international students' needs for help and their actual help-seeking behavior, especially in seeking help from mental health professionals. The under-utilization of counseling services by international students has been found in various studies (e.g., Russell, Thomson, & Rosenthal, 2008). For example, Asian international students perceive less needs to seek professional help from counseling than U.S. students (Yoon & Jepsen, 2008). A high drop-out rate after intake sessions is identified as another problem (Nilsson, Berkel, Flores, & Lucas, 2004; Russell, Thomson, & Rosenthal, 2008). In regard to preferences in counseling, research indicated that Chinese students prefer directive counseling approach to nondirective approach (Exum & Lau, 1988). Kim, Li, and Liang (2002) provided evidence that Asian clients favor counseling sessions during which the counselor recognized their cultural values and emphasized immediate problem-solving. Chong and Liu (2002) concluded Chinese students expect "directive, goal-oriented, time-limited and pragmatic counseling" (p. 53).

The lack of bilingual therapists and culturally sensitive therapists is another possible factor for international students' underutilization of counseling services (Sue & Zane, 1987). Wang and Kim (2010) found that Asian Americans are more satisfied with therapy when therapists showed multicultural competence during counseling session. Clients are also less likely to drop out after the first session when their therapist provides culturally sensitive counseling (Wade & Bernstein, 1991).

Interestingly, international students from East Asia were found to become more open to counseling after being in the US (Chen & Lewis, 2011). Zhang and Dixon (2003) also found that students with higher acculturation level are more positive toward help-seeking behavior. These findings indicate that culture plays a big role in whether or not international students seek professional psychological help. Although traditional Asian cultural values do not support seeking counseling, as Asian international students gain more knowledge about American culture, they are expected to be more open to the idea of seeking counseling.

Indeed, culture affects how people view counseling. The conflicts between traditional cultural values and counseling values add the difficulty in seeking help from counselors while encountering psychological problems. Cultural stigma towards seeking professional help, such as viewing using counseling services as weak or shameful, is a barrier that prevents individuals who share such points of view from seeking counseling. Chinese culture emphasizes harmony in relationship and in society. As a result, complaints about interpersonal difficulties to a counselor may bring them shameful feelings (Chong & Liu, 2002).

In Asian culture, the need to save face causes minimization of psychological problems and the attempt to keep such problems from strangers, such as a therapist. As a representative of their culture in front of another culture, they are likely to prefer solving problems independently to maintain a positive profile for their country or culture. Fear of

burdening others is another Asian tradition that might explain Asian international students' underutilization of counseling services (Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Park-Saltzman, Wada, & Mogami, 2012).

Counseling as a profession is underdeveloped in China, although the situation of psychological problems among Chinese is serious. Lack of proper training and research, inadequate number of professional counselors, problems with adopting Western theories, and limited knowledge about counseling in society all contribute to the fact that counseling services are unpopular in China (Hou & Zhang, 2007). Even in elementary and secondary schools in Beijing—a major city that has access to more mental health related resources—the ratio of mental health educators to students is only 1/1,167. Most mental health professionals in schools do not work full-time as school mental health educators. They also reported having received insufficient training and supervision in providing mental health services (Caldarella, Chan, Christensen, Lin, & Liu, 2013). As suggested by Chang (2008), lack of experience with counseling services is correlated with less possibility of seek counseling in the future. Chinese international students who came from such background with little exposure to counseling services may fail to view counseling as a resource when facing stress.

Coping Strategies

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) recognized the functions of coping strategies as a way to manage the change in person-environment relationship (problem-focused coping) and regulate stress emotions (emotion-focused coping). Another way to classify coping strategies, in the *Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations* (CISS), Endler and Parker (1990) included three categories: task-oriented, emotion-oriented, and avoidance-oriented coping.

However, not all strategies are considered adaptive and helpful. For example, some therapists may encourage emotional expression, however, venting emotions as a way of

coping is strongly related to depressive symptoms (Sapranaviciute, Padaiga, & Pauzienė, 2013).

Individuals from collectivist cultures—cultures that view the self as interdependent and inseparable from important relationships (e.g., family, workplace, school; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997)—tend to use relational coping while dealing with stress (Cross, 1995; Essandoh, 1995; Mori, 2000). Relational coping is characterized by the tendency of seeking help from family members and close friendship networks (Cross, 1995; Essandoh, 1995; Mori, 2000).

For international students, family and friends are the primary source of help (Zhai, 2004). However, separation typically includes long distances from their family and friends, which negates the possibility of direct and immediate assistance. Additionally, different time zones make communication with friends and family in the students' homelands difficult. International students may not want to worry those individuals in their home country who care but are unable to directly offer assistance. For these reasons, international students may avoid talking to their family and friends about difficulties (Wilson, 1996).

Forbearance is another coping style that international students from collective culture might use. In order not to burden others, they may tend to minimize or conceal their problems (Constantine, Kindaichi, Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2005; Yue, 2001). These coping strategies are largely influenced by the values of self-control, maintaining harmony, and self-cultivation, which derive from Confucian, Taoism and Buddhism (Yue, 2001; as cited in Moore & Constantine, 2005). As a result, international students are pressured to solve the problem on their own, which makes their situation even harder.

The specifically reported strategies given by international students include preparing themselves for oversea study (e.g., becoming familiar with the university, educational system, courses, the city, culture, language, learning to live independently), using internet

and electronic devices for information and communication, joining social organization and activities, attending orientations and events, learning study skills, building relationship with advisors and instructors and seeking assistance from them, seeking help from senior students, developing realistic expectation about employment, sharing their problems with students from their own country (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011), interacting with local peers, preparing carefully for each class (Tsai, 2009), seeking help from family, counselor, getting support from church (Yan, 2008), and learning to “let go” (Tseng & Newton, 2002). Sun’s (2010) study demonstrated that “third places,” which are places that distinct from home and work/school, provided international students with environments to socialize, relax, and experience culture. Frequently reported “third places” were cafés/ coffee shops; friends’ houses; bars; gym; movie theaters; parks and outdoor areas; and restaurants.

As for external supports from universities or communities, host family and campus friend programs, cross-cultural group work designed to facilitate multicultural relationships and workshops designed to share information about taxes, study skills, campus talk may be helpful for international students in the adjustment process (Hayes & Lin, 1994). Such help can make international students’ transition to the US easier.

Limitations of the Research

Despite the myriad attempts at addressing problems associated with international students’ transition to the US and giving suggestions to improve their situation, the real situation they are facing may be more complicated. As concluded by Berry (2006), researchers often presume certain views without considering “cultural-rooted individual preferences and differences” (p. 296). For example, although counseling may help reduce international students’ stress levels, the actual obstacles of seeking counseling may be greater than acknowledged. Underutilization of counseling is not simply associated with stigma, but also involves value conflicts, issues of trusting a western counselor, etc. Without taking

international students' specific situations into consideration and listening to their voices of experience, recommendations and suggested strategies will most likely be a mismatch to their actual needs and preferences.

Although the topic of the international students' acculturation has drawn much attention, most studies are quantitative in nature. Qualitative studies that explore international students' experiences are needed to facilitate a better understanding of their unique experiences (de Araujo, 2011). Among the existing studies, the major focus has been on difficulties and struggles, yet very few studies have explored international students' growth and their ideas on what has been helpful in real life experiences (Moore & Popadiuk, 2011).

Furthermore, as pointed out by Liu (2009), Chinese international students' acculturation experiences are distinct from other international student communities and should be explored separately. Given the language barrier that may prevent Chinese international students from fully expressing themselves, all the interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese in this study. Focusing exclusively on Chinese international students and using their native language in interviews allows researchers to more effectively study acculturation.

Considering the limitations of previous research studies, this study focused on Chinese international students' experiences of coping during their initial transition to a U.S. university. This study also investigated strategies Chinese international students have utilized to adapt to the American environment and the perceived effectiveness of those strategies.

According to Saleehey (1992), individuals who have struggled have also found ways to resolve their conflicts and have grown from these challenging experiences. Most individuals who have undergone the acculturative process ultimately achieve their goals of adapting and fitting into their new environment (Berry, 2006). Taking this strength perspective, the researcher attempted to take a closer look at the transformation process of

coping with stressors. The study aimed to explore the difficulties Chinese international students face and how they make sense of their experiences. Such information will help others better understand Chinese international students' acculturation experience and will provide readers with different strategies that work in specific contexts.

Research Questions

Based on their personal perspectives, what experiences did Chinese international students encounter during their initial transition into the US? More specifically, the following information will be sought during individual interviews with Chinese international students:

1. What specific experiences are reported by Chinese international students in regard to their initial and ongoing adjustment to the U.S. environment? (a) How did they make sense of those experiences? (b) How did their ways of thinking and behaving change as a result of being influenced by their experiences of interacting with U.S. culture?
2. As reported by Chinese international students, what types of strategies are available and have proven helpful in specific situations?

Chapter 3: Method

In order to gain a better understanding of the unique coping experience Chinese international students have in their initial transition to live and study in the US, a qualitative research designed was used. Qualitative methods are used to investigate topics that have not been adequately studied in the past and may bring new or unexpected knowledge to enable a better understanding (Creswell, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Despite the lack of qualitative research in acculturation studies, such methods should be considered because these methods expose researchers to new facts and regularities, as well as help them understand the acculturation process (Chirkov, 2009).

This study used a collaborative hermeneutic approach, as described in McKenzie et al.'s (2013) study. Hermeneutical interpretation aims to obtain a valid and common understanding of the meaning of the text. This approach adopts a relational ontology, which suggests that meanings are construed by the interaction between interviewers and interviewees. In this sense, there is not objective meaning. Meanings are negotiated rather than discovered (Kvale, 2009).

Data analysis followed the hermeneutic circle, which emphasizes that the meaning of the text can be better understood through reading individual parts and comparing meanings of parts and whole. One of the criticisms for qualitative research is the lack of validity in data analysis. Collaborative hermeneutics uses a team to analyze data, thus avoiding the narrow reliance on individual interpretations (McKenzie et al., 2013).

Participants

Thirteen Chinese international students participated in qualitative interviews. These individuals were fluent in Mandarin Chinese, born and raised in mainland China, had never travelled to the US before studying abroad, had no direct relative in the US, and had studied at a university in the US for more than two years. Participants were recruited through various

organizations (e.g., international student office, Chinese Student and Scholar Association). Such organizations forwarded the information of the study to qualified people and interested students contacted the researcher to schedule an interview.

In order to obtain a wide range of experiences, some demographic variables were taken into account (e.g., undergraduate students/graduate students, marital status, religious beliefs). After conducting initial interviews with interested participants, researchers reviewed demographic information of interviewees, and a select group of participants were purposefully identified for their unique experience to create an information rich study.

Procedures

Prior to a semi-structured interview, participants were asked to review and sign a consent form. Each interview lasted for 45 to 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted one-on-one through Skype with each individual. This interview method was chosen over face-to-face interviews. This decision was made to ensure that participants had similar interviewing experiences, regardless of their locations. Skype interviews also avoided the awkwardness that participants might feel about disclosing personal experiences directly—as was expected in face-to-face interviews. This type of interviewing was determined to be more culturally appropriate. At the conclusion of the interview, each participant was given a \$20 gift card for their participation.

Interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed for analyses. In order to allow Chinese international students to fully express their experiences, all interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. This is their conversational language. Interviews were conducted by the principal investigator, who is a native Mandarin speaker.

Being an international student and having conducted the interviews herself, it is predicted that her analysis might be influenced by her subjective experience. Taking that into consideration, investigators who have different cultural experiences were included to reach a

better understanding of the text itself. A team that consists of three members analyzed interview data using the hermeneutic circle. The principal investigator is a native Mandarin speaker and an international student from mainland China. One team member is an undergraduate international student from Singapore. She was exposed to Mandarin language since elementary school and speaks Mandarin fluently. The third member of the team is an undergraduate American student who has lived in Taiwan for two years and speaks fluent Mandarin. The principal investigator has taken graduate level course in qualitative research, and the other investigators were trained in qualitative data analysis before they analyzed the data. All the investigators read original transcripts or listened to the interviews in Mandarin. An outside fourth person (who is fluent in Mandarin) served as an auditor. After team members reached a conclusion, selected quotes were translated from Mandarin to English.

Data Analysis

Hermeneutics is concerned with the meaning of a text, therefore in order to be sensitive to nuanced meanings and contexts (Radnitzky, 1970; cited in Kvale, 2009), researchers were asked to read three selected articles on this topic before analyzing the transcripts. Hermeneutic analysts believe that presuppositions from researchers influence their judgment in analyzing transcripts. Therefore, researchers were asked to write down their initial reaction to the topic and what they expected to find in the transcripts. In that way presuppositions of the researchers can be recorded and compared to analysis results when needed.

The actual analysis of interview data followed four steps: (1) Members read transcripts individually to gain a general understanding of the texts and identify themes. While reading/listening to each interview, each researcher compared the content of that interview to other interviews, and evaluated the similarities and differences of participants' reported experiences. Each researcher tried to make sense of seemingly contradictory

statements by re-reading the transcripts. Through this internal process, researchers summarized common themes they found among transcripts. (2) The research team met to compare and discuss themes. When disagreement occurred, members read the relevant parts of transcripts again and searched for disconfirming statements. They compared parts and whole constantly to enrich their understanding. (3) As the team analyzed additional transcripts, the themes that received less support were discarded. This process was repeated until the team felt confident about their analysis and associated results. (4) After themes were identified, members selected quotes that demonstrated each theme and succinctly categorized themes.

Trustworthiness of this study was established through “member check” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and the use of an auditor. After investigators identified themes, interviewees were contacted to compare the results to their experiences and add comments for additional clarification. Such comments were considered as the research team finalized the results. The purpose of using member check was to make sure the researchers’ interpretations of the interviews were accurate and complete. Ultimately, an auditor, that was not part of the data analysis team, checked the work of the team. He examined the process of inquiry and determined whether the interpretation of data was coherent. The list of themes were finalized after receiving feedback from the auditor.

The following nine open-ended questions were developed by consulting the current literature. These questions served as guiding questions, to be adapted for a variety of situations and for the unique experiences of interviewees.

1. How did you make up your mind to study abroad? What expectations or goals did you have before you came?
2. What were your impressions and experiences interacting with this new culture and environment when you first came here?

3. What difficulties have you faced in the past or are you currently facing (cultural adaptation; financial difficulties; language barriers; academic or school related; social experiences, such as dating and marriage; etc.)? What expectations have you developed in the process of dealing with those difficulties? Who do you turn to for help?
4. What coping strategies have you tried in the past (dealing with acculturative stress, academic stress, etc.)? How were they helpful/not helpful?
5. How are you dealing with the above difficulties now?
6. What were some of the most memorable moments in your transition experiences? How did those moments influence you?
7. In what ways have you learned from your acculturation experiences? How did those experiences influence you?
8. What advice would you give to other Chinese international students?
9. What advice would you give to those who want to assist Chinese international students?

Investigator Assumptions

The principal investigator is a female doctoral student in the counseling psychology program at Brigham Young University (BYU). She grew up in mainland China and has never been abroad before beginning her study at BYU. She has experienced “culture shock” in her transition and has made an effort to adapt. She is aware of her assumptions and that they will inevitably affect the study. It is assumed that Chinese international students choose to come to the US to study for a purpose and have searched for different ways of coping in their acculturation process. It is assumed that their experiences have similarities and can be of help for other Chinese international students.

Chapter 4: Results

The following sections are based on the themes presented by the participants. These themes included (a) difficulties, (b) differences, (c) growth, and (d) help. Table 1 summarizes the themes that are discussed in the results section.

Table 1

Acculturation Themes Based on Chinese International Students' Responses

Difficulties	Differences	Growth	Help
Language	How people think and behave	Changes in ways of thinking	Local churches
Social interactions	Reverse culture shock	Maturation and independence	University resources and student associations
Learning	Perception of US		Help and support from others
Living in the US			Proactive participation and self-assertive inquiry
Learning and living independently			Sense of purpose and direction
Psychological adjustment			Service to others

Understanding and Facing Difficulties

Chinese international students shared difficulties in their transition to the US in many areas, related to language, culture, study, living in the US, and psychological adjustments. They reported more stress at the beginning of their stay.

Difficulties with language. Language difficulties caused academic difficulty, mainly in comprehending the teacher and getting involved in conversations. In academic programs that required high proficiency in English, students reported difficulty in meeting the criteria. For participant LS, who graduated from a Chinese university with a bachelor's degree in

English, passing her program's English competency requirement still remains a problem.

This test is more stringent than the university's language competency requirement.

Daily conversation is all right, but because we are going to study for an OPI [Oral Proficiency Interview], which is a test for English skills, [my English proficiency level is not high enough]....For the test, you are interviewed in person and being asked a series of questions. It starts with basic ones and then they ask you some abstract questions. I took the test for many times but could not pass it! (LS)

Participants also reported that English usage was different from their expectation.

They reported that "real English" uses more slang and is often spoken with a faster speed.

The Americans I met in China speak Chinese-influenced English. They spoke really slow and chose words and expressions that are familiar to Chinese. However, here it is all in a native way. When they are communicating as a small group, they adopt a different style from how I communicated with my foreign colleagues. I am totally confused....It is also too fast! (VLY)

I think my English is good as a Chinese. I was an English teacher in China, but I found out that my spoken English is not very American. I use Chinglish (Chinese English) and formal sentences instead of slangs. To give you a simple example, I used to teach elementary school students. They were told as they first learn English "when others ask you 'how are you,' you should answer 'fine' or 'very well,'" but here people say "good"....However, in multiple choices tests "good" is treated as a wrong answer! I just felt...THIS is real English, what I learned in China is not real English! (RLQ)

Difficulties with social interactions. Cultural factors primarily caused difficulties in activities related to social interactions. Chinese international students reported difficulties in getting involved in conversations with Americans. They expressed that they did not have

topics to talk about with Americans and the conversation was often superficial. Their interaction is limited to greeting each other and discussing homework.

When I go to social networking events, I do not know what to talk about with Americans. After a while, I just do not know what to say and feel embarrassed. One reason may be my poor English. Another reason is cultural differences....I don't know how to talk with foreigners, but I can talk freely with Chinese classmates, whether I know them from China or I met with them here....I am not sure [why this is the case]...I don't have many topics to expand my social network....It was unnatural for me, it feels like we just ask and answer questions, rather than having a conversation. On the other hand, I am perhaps not very confident, after I speak English for a while I just think, 'What should I say...' and I don't know...In this aspect I still don't feel a sense of belonging. (YR)

One thing that stressed me out was...Because I could not understand [the language], it was embarrassing....Sometimes when I participated in activities, or hung out with roommates, I felt like I was wasting time, it was not as fun as being with Chinese friends. With them [Americans] I was not quite myself. And it felt boring or it's a waste of time. Sometimes I felt really annoyed and did not want to hang out with them [Americans]. (KK)

Some participants attributed the difficulties to different interests and cultural contexts.

One interest that Chinese international students specifically brought up in the interview is football.

Right now for me, the biggest difficulty in interactions is, I don't have enough understanding of their [American's] cultural roots, such as the jokes they tell, or football....The things that you really need to learn and experience as you grow up to understand....I still don't understand those. (YJX)

Similarly, several participants mentioned the challenge of understanding jokes.

Participant IB shared his confusion that he could not laugh at American jokes, even if he understands “every single word” of it. He described that “what they experience and what we experience are two parallel worlds” that are completely different.

I feel that classes require tons of effort, they talk very fast, even when the professor and students are chatting, I don't understand their jokes. Even if the story uses simple words and I understand every single word, I still could not laugh with them, since I don't get it.

I think it is mainly because we didn't grow up in the same environment. Even if there are few details we don't understand, we cannot understand what they are talking about. Sports, TV show, readings, etc. What they experience and what we experience are two parallel worlds....It is very different. I cannot share my opinions on their topics. This was my biggest confusion when I first came—how to fit in their lives and how to fit in their circle....(IB)

Difficulties with learning. Chinese international students found it hard to adjust to a Western learning style. They reported not knowing the emphasis and requirements of the course material. Many mentioned the difficulty of finishing reading class-related materials, while not knowing that they are expected to skim some materials instead of reading in depth.

When I first came I thought one difficulty was that I often couldn't finish my readings....Now that it is my second year [in this program], with more adaptation and communication with classmates, I found out I don't need to read everything. For some readings, you can just skim. I was taking things too seriously at first....(RLQ)

Participant YR reported a hard lesson she learned from not taking the syllabus serious. Out of ignorance, she misused quotation marks in her paper and received a violation report from her school because of this. In the interview, she shared that this incidence caused

her a lot of psychological distress and feelings of shame. For her, plagiarism was not viewed as an important issue and did not hold the same weight of seriousness—It was not comparable to copyright infringement in U.S. law.

Back then I was not familiar with the function of syllabus and other class materials. I did not read them carefully, and the teacher did not give clear instructions for a paper....It turned out that I got punished by misusing quotation marks....International students are vulnerable, I don't know who I can turn to in that situation....I remember the teacher said, 'You just need to revise it and never do it again.' But each of us [who misused quotation marks in that assignment] received a violation report from my school after that. We were all stunned, thinking 'How can it be that serious?' We did not realize how serious it was. (YR)

Several participants mentioned that the interactive classroom environment was hard to adjust to. They expressed that they tended to spend time considering what was being said before they responded, and had a hard time deciding when to speak up.

In our small graduate classes, there were 5 or 6 people. American classmates often thought of many ideas, they interacted with the teacher a lot. But for me...I don't know whether it is because of language barrier, or the fact that I am not used to this learning style...I feel that it was hard to decide when to speak...I mean, to insert my words into the discussion....I also feel that I did not know what to say, so it took me a long time to think....I don't know why they could share everything on their mind....I always thought, could it be wrong? Will it be inappropriate to say that? I think the teacher was encouraging students to speak up....No matter what you say, he would give you a positive response, he did not seem to care what students said [he was accepting of the comments], but I created a barrier for myself by thinking about when I should speak up. (WUZ)

Difficulties living in the US. Living in the US presented many challenges to the Chinese international students in this study. Some of these challenges included adjusting to the weather, the types of food that were commonly eaten, difficulties with transportation, the routines and responsibilities involved in daily living, and securing a job. For example, some of the challenges experienced in daily living included facing the unfamiliar, yet necessary experiences, such as finding housing, opening a bank account, opening a cellphone account, selling a housing contract, becoming familiar with directions and transportation to school and home, etc. One participant shared an example of being deceived when she was selling her housing contract. Because of her lack of experience, a buyer wanted money in advance and was taking advantage of her naivety. Luckily, her landlord warned her not to respond to this offer.

Transportation was not expected to be a problem for many participants prior to their journey abroad, since in many places in China “the transportation is very convenient, even if you don’t have a car and you only own a bike, or a bus card, it is still convenient” (GZ). Another participant also complained about the transportation in US. She mentioned that not having a car made it hard to go to groceries stores and limited her activities (e.g., watching movies, eating out).

The difference is that, here is spacious and not as many people, the public transportation is very inconvenient. I haven’t had a profound understanding until I came here. I did not have a car, at first I did not have many friends, so life was boring. Going out was inconvenient. (YR)

Difficulties working and living independently. Chinese international students reported difficulty in living independently and balancing life. Specifically, many participants reported that they rarely cook for themselves in China, but have to cook in the US to save

money. Furthermore, because U.S. college life is very different than in China, participants reported difficulty in initially balancing their life in the US.

When we were in college in China, there was not much work to do. Coming from China and not having prior work experience, to work and go to school [in the US] at the same time, and to balance homework, work, and sleep...[is a challenge]. (LS)

...[A challenge was] to arrange my schedule....Maybe I know what I am going to do for the next hour, but [not for the whole day]For example, on Saturday I don't know what I should do. I don't have an idea. Sometimes I just sleep in, wake up and eat something random, and watch drama, just like that. I just feel bored and don't want to go out. (GZ)

Chinese international students reported stress related to finding employment as they approached their graduation dates. They noticed discrimination against them in finding a job. Participant YR shared that in interviews she often failed to express herself fully and had difficulty convincing others of her potential value to the company.

Language remains a barrier. I heard people say 'In seeking employment, Chinese international students only have weak points and have no strengths.' Relatively speaking, you don't have any advantage over Americans. No matter in terms of language skills or network, they are more competitive than you. (YR)

Another participant expressed similar understanding in her experience. As an international student, finding a sponsor is necessary to work legally in the US. Because of the need of being sponsored, many companies close their doors to international students.

The primary concern with finding a job is not having a green card. It's hard that you don't have this authority and need the company to sponsor you. Most companies don't want to do that, unless you have special skills that they cannot find in candidates from their own country. In general, if a company can find a native who

has work authority, even if he is less qualified than you, they won't hire a foreigner who needs to be sponsored. (YJX)

Difficulties adjusting psychologically. Chinese international students reported facing challenges in their psychological adjustment. They reported feeling lonely and bored. One barrier in their adjustment seems to be their need of being independent and not wanting to ask for help from others, especially those they are not familiar with. Participant KK mentioned that the high stress in China forced people to “get over it” by themselves, or else “everyone needs to see a counselor” [Comment was stated with sarcasm.] (KK, p. 9). Possibly, because of this mindset, Chinese students value independence.

I think when you have stress you need to fix it by yourself. Others may provide you some help, but no one can solve it for you. They may comfort you but you have to deal with it on your own. Many Chinese face a lot of stress....They don't attempt to relieve the stress. They need to 'tolerate it'...(KK)

I believe many people are willing to help, but in the past I found it hard to ask for help. At the beginning...Sometimes you must...If you want to buy milk or rice, you need to ask others to take you. I think in this aspect I need to overcome some psychological barriers. (GZ)

Those who can help me are Americans. At first, I haven't met as many Chinese...Since I was not familiar with them, I didn't want to burden them...I need to solve the problems by myself after all....I don't like to seek help from people I don't know well. I also don't want to worry my parents. So in this sense...strangers were excluded, I did not have close friends, family were also not good [to seek help from] ... (BU)

Chinese international students expressed feeling lonely. They long for a circle of friends, for them to “open hearts to chat” (YR), to have a “reciprocal friendship that allows them to talk about their inner frustrations” (IB). They also miss having friends with whom they can “go shopping, eat out, sing karaoke, and watch a movie”. Some reported experiencing the US as “less fun and less lively” (GZ), in comparison to where they came from in China.

In China, we share similar cultural background and I had many friends. Here people are busy with their own stuff, and... We rarely had any opportunity to open our hearts and chat with each other. It is a very lonely feeling. (YR)

I think what is missing is that...Fundamentally, there is not a real circle of friends. For me, if I am single, I think I definitely need more friends, mostly Chinese friends... Normally in China we like to go shopping, eat out, watch movies, sing karaoke, and do activities with friends. But here, there is no good KTV [karaoke bar]. There is no delicious restaurant. It is just boring. For entertainment...I don't have people who share my interests and I enjoy hanging out with...If you want to hang out with Americans, it is hard to fit in their circle. If you really want to, you may not enjoy what they like for fun...This is just cultural difference, the way you grow up prevented you from adapting, let alone here you don't have the required facilities here. (RLQ)

Understanding Differences

Initially, Chinese international students seem to lack an understanding of the U.S. culture. They had unrealistic expectation of the US and found it to be much different from what they had imagined.

Differences in how people think and behave. Chinese international students noticed differences in how people think and behave in the US. Chinese international students shared that Americans are more direct and express uniqueness, while Chinese are more indirect and

value commonness. Participant WUZ expressed that she was impressed that instead of having a generally accepted life path, American students have different plans for their future and are not afraid of choosing their own path.

One thing I really appreciate is...when I was talking to American students....One American student told me, 'After I graduate [from a bachelor's degree] I don't want to be in school, I want to....' His [referring to the American student that the participant was talking to] church has a boat, and they can travel around the world and preach along the way. He said he wants to do that for two years. I said, 'Good, what about after this?' He said, 'I will work for a non-profit organization and earn some money, because I took a loan for school.' I was thinking, that's so different from us. That's because...every Chinese student I talked to wanted to go to grad school, get a job, or earn money....I feel like...Not that it's bad...But they [Chinese students] are very homogeneous—they want similar things. American students, they never thought about life in a linear way, they might take a break and make a change in life, and then go back to school, or do other things. Also I feel like they [people in American society] encourage students to be themselves. In contrast, Chinese students might...Like myself, when I was making some previous choices, I was thinking more about my parents or what others want me to do. I feel like the Chinese....Well, for me, I would rather walk on a path that the majority walked on, which is safe....(WUZ)

Some participants expressed that Chinese like to guess how others are thinking and tend to misunderstand the underlying meanings. Participant BU and LS expressed acceptance of and appreciation for directness.

I think Americans give me the impression that each one of them wants to stand up and express his perspectives and thoughts. They enjoy doing that, but Chinese are more

reserved. For a lot of things, they just keep their thoughts to themselves. I don't think it is a problem to be adapted to....In this aspect, I actually prefer to speak up. (BU)

This is the way I communicate with Americans, I am not sure whether others do the same....If I don't like something, I tell them....Then they get it. But with Chinese, if I do the same thing, they often feel that when I say I don't like something, in actuality I do like it. They often distort and misunderstand my intended meaning. (LS)

Another participant IB also commented on the difference between being direct and indirect. He expressed that it was hard to accept this straightforwardness in the beginning. Similarly, he recognized the value of being direct and learned to appreciate this difference. He shared his experience in the following statements.

Americans don't behave like that. When given a gift or being treated to a meal, the first reaction of a Chinese is to say 'no,' to try to decline the offer [to show politeness]. However, I have never seen Americans doing that. Their attitudes are 'You are so good;' 'I like it a lot;' 'Give it to me.' In a positive way, they are straightforward and innocent. In a negative way...We cannot accept this culture as Chinese; subconsciously we believe we cannot accept it. We feel hard to adapt to it. We feel uncomfortable....This is the biggest difference, but...at the same time, this is something we should learn, I should learn. Because I was brought up in China, being influenced by Chinese culture, this seems to be hard to accept in a short period of time.

Participant KK shared an experience at a Christmas dinner, during which he first noticed this difference. He contrasted it with his experience with the Chinese and said, "When Chinese invite others to eat, there is a lot of food, and it is hard to finish. But when they [Americans] do it, I feel it is not enough food and I am often not full." Also, another participant BU offered an explanation for the common practice in China, "When others ask

you to eat or when others give you something, a Chinese person often ‘pushes it away’ (declines), but the host will still continue to offer the food or gift. Americans don’t do that. In America, if you don’t want to eat more, that’s fine. That’s it.” Initially, some participants experienced this as “the host not being generous” (IB).

I remember the first night I was in the US, it was Christmas Eve. I was really hungry and their homemade Christmas dinner was really delicious. I ate for a while and told them I was full. I was just trying to be polite, but they just put the food away. I was very hungry during the evening. I was thinking ‘how can they not let me eat more, I did not get enough’. Those kinds of situations happened a lot, so my sister told me, ‘No need to be polite, you can eat as much as you want. The more you eat, the happier they are. If you say that you are full, they will not ask you to eat more.’I will not forget this experience. Especially that I was hungry for the whole night, thinking, ‘how come Americans are like that....’ When they invite people to eat....When Chinese invite others to eat, there is a lot of food, and it is hard to finish. But when they [Americans] do it, I feel it is not enough food and I am often not full.

(KK)

Another difference noticed by Chinese international students is paying bills. As in China, it is normal for one to pay for the guests. In the US, the common practice is for people to pay individually.

When I first came and ate out with roommates...In China, it must be...A group of people order a lot of dishes and share them. If they are very familiar with each other, it is likely that one person gets the bill. Here when we went out, everyone just orders and eats his own food, and pays for himself....It’s fine once I got used to it. However, when we came back to Beijing, we needed to pay extra attention to not pay separately if eating out with friends....[Because] it feels bad [to pay separately in China]. (KK)

Chinese international students noticed American ways of greeting and dating are different from the Chinese ways.

I remember when I first came here, I was not quite used to answering basic questions like, 'How are you?' That's because in China we don't ask such questions. I think in China people appear somewhat indifferent. But here Americans are very friendly. Sometimes you just don't know how to respond....(GZ)

Back then my classmate told me, you should date, you can date many people at the same time. But I was thinking, how come that I can date many people at the same time? I often think...In a Chinese perspective, you are almost boyfriend and girlfriend when you start dating. Here it seems fun to date more than one person, it's not against moral norms. After dating, if you confirm that this is my boyfriend or girlfriend, then you become exclusive. At first I was like, 'Oh wow, people can date more than one person!' (WUZ)

Chinese international students also noticed differences in making friends. In terms of developing friendships, participant GZ described Americans as “fast and easy to become friends with but hard to get familiar with them beyond superficial friendship.” Participants acknowledged that Americans are very “friendly and outgoing.”

[Americans] are very nice, I am wondering whether that's because they don't have as many people as in China....I was impressed by strangers that I ran into on the street. The second day I came here, I was walking to school, a policeman greeted me with excitement....I was shocked. (FM)

Although they [Americans] are very friendly with strangers, I still feel a sense of disconnection...I think they have their own way of interacting with people. With Americans, it is fast and easy to become friends but it's hard to get familiar with them

beyond superficial friendship. They are very polite....Maybe one needs to understand their culture in order to form a friendship with them....In contrast, I get to know Chinese much faster. (GZ)

Participant IB also shared his theory about how this difference manifests itself. He pointed out that the openness and hospitality make it easier to get to know Americans at first, but it is easier to go deeper with Chinese friends. He reasoned that this is because Chinese “long for relationships that allow for mutual dependence” while Americans are more “independent individuals.” Furthermore, he stated that, “we don’t have common topics to talk about, we don’t have similar ways of behaving and thinking, because of the lack of commonality, it is hard to bring us together.”

Participant YJX described having difficulty in finding women who can understand her, when she first came to the US to accompany her spouse, before she started graduate school herself in the US. As a career woman in a family-oriented faith organization, she further described unique “challenges” she faced.

I worked for a Korean company, it is fast-paced, and I was very busy. When I came here, life became too slow that I could not adapt. I didn’t know what I was doing. I had no goal or direction. I felt like I was wasting time and I felt empty. I could not find any friends to chat with. I got to know some Americans in the community, but they could not understand me. As women, most of them are stay at home moms; what they care about and what I want are very different. I felt that finding people who could relate to me was a big challenge. (YJX)

She further illustrated:

As Chinese, it seems like you should always have your direction, your career, and your pursuit. But as Americans, they found it empty or unnecessary. Their pursuit is

family....Maybe that's because most people around me are Mormons. For them, finding joy in family is the most important thing. (YJX)

Reverse culture shock. Chinese international students experienced reverse culture shock after staying in the US. It seems that they are more aware of their surroundings than before they lived abroad.

I went back to China for 3 weeks this April....I realized that Chinese do things much differently from Americans, such as, waiting in line....I went to the hospital because my grandparents were sick; I was annoyed when people didn't wait in line. Also, when you were talking, they just got close to you and wanted to hear what you were talking about! (LS)

Going back to work in China [after 7 years of speaking English]....[I found that] speaking Chinese was not as fast as speaking English for me....I need to think about words to say when using Chinese....I feel like I kind of got used to the life here [in the US]. (KK)

One way that participant KK found it hard to adapt to China was the different working environment. He joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the US. Aligned with their church teachings, he did not drink or smoke. However, during his internship he was exposed to the Chinese working environment in which people often invite clients out to drink or smoke with them.

A lot of things are church-related....I worked at an accounting firm, and I often interacted with clients. They [workers] often ate with clients. Sometimes we interns ate with the boss and had to drink and smoke with them [clients]....It is awkward if you cannot do this...Maybe it is related to the church....I feel like it is hard to adapt....This is one reason that I want to stay here [the US]. In China, it is problematic if you don't drink or smoke in a business-related job. (KK)

Perceptions of US. Chinese international students expected America to be “high-end, magnificent, and classy” (translated from “Gaodashang” in Chinese; Retrieved from [<http://www.myreading.cn/?post=400>]) and experienced it as a country of freedom.

...[America should be] like a heaven....People are well-off, life is very fun....I don't know where I get this impression that America is as illuminating as New York....There are skyscrapers everywhere....very commercial and lively....bars....It should be livelier than Shanghai! But when I got off my airplane in LA, I did not see a building with more than 3 floors....What IS this place? We drove on the road and the road was shabby....There were not many people....It's spacious....feels like a town in China....It is not illuminating at all....That was my first shock. (YJX)

Despite the fact that America is different from their expectation, Chinese international students seem to appreciate the freedom here and expressed that they experience America as “a country of freedom.” Some participants shared that the Chinese culture that values “success and material wealth” (GZ) has caused them a lot of stress. They expressed feeling at ease in American society, in which they did not feel the pressure of being compared to others and working extremely hard.

For me, I really like the atmosphere. You can relax and be yourself, not worrying how others might think about you, or what social status you must achieve....In China, there's always the pressure. For example, who changed his job? Who is rich? Who is poor?....And then people see you through colored glasses—if you are wealthy they look up on you, if you are poor or have low social status, your family, relatives, and friends would gossip about it....So there is a lot of emotional distress....Here I can be who I am. At least I did not feel like I am being discriminated against, no matter whether I have a job or don't have a job, whether I am wealthy or not....I did not feel that others used money or social status to evaluate me. This makes me feel at ease.

Also, it is easier to afford a house and a car here. In contrast, in Shanghai, as a second-generation immigrant who did not grow up there, it is possible that I would have to work there for my whole life, and could not pay back the loans for housing. Housing is expensive....(YJX)

[Life here] is more stable and at ease. Not many competitions.... You don't have to work too hard. Of course you need to work hard, but you can live life just fine with some effort. You only need to work really hard if you want to achieve a lot. However, in China, it seems like for every goal you have, you need to work very hard. (KNM)

Some participants expressed that they feel freer about being different in the US. They long for the freedom of not being constrained and the acceptance of diversity. For example, participant LS shared that she experienced freedom in choosing her religious belief. In the following statements, participant WUZ expressed sympathy for her lab mate, who felt forced to accept what others wanted her to do in China.

I think in American environment you won't be blamed for being different. In China...For example a woman in my lab told me, 'I don't want to get married'. I support her, I said, 'You need to make sure that's what you want....' We talked for a long time. But she said, 'I don't want to go back to China, because my parents will force me to get married by all means (laugh)....' I think in China people made happiness look the same, they think you are at that age so you must do certain things, and that's how you can be happy. But sometimes it's not good for children. I think everyone is different....(WUZ)

Experiencing Growth

Chinese international students found that the experience of studying abroad and living abroad changed them and facilitated their growth in many ways. They described that their academic ability and English ability improved as a result of studying abroad. Based on their

comments, participants appeared to have anticipated these benefits of studying abroad. Chinese international students expressed that they became “nicer” [friendlier] in the sense that they became more assertive in initiating interactions. They seem to be influenced by their American peers’ outgoing social interactions. They noticed that they adopted new ideas, and became more mature and nicer to others.

Changes in ways of thinking. Chinese international students reported that they changed their ways of thinking in various areas as a result of coming to the US and being exposed to a different environment. For example, participant VLY was touched by “how American parents respect their children’s personality and encourage them to generate their own ideas.” In China, parents are normally viewed as authority figures; it is not uncommon for them to use their “expertise” to direct their children. VLY admitted that she would like to apply this new idea to her parenting. As a result of being exposed to a different culture, Chinese international students expressed that they became more understanding and welcoming of differences.

Before coming to the US, I thought I would not get married before I graduated from college. As a college student, I don’t have a real job or a house....Without a job or income it is not easy to find a wife [in China]. If I work hard in school and find a good job, then it is easier to get a girlfriend. That was my thought...to work hard and to find a good job....After knowing this religion [Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints], I thought I was over-thinking....If two people are good for each other, getting married is good. Although we don’t have anything, to build a future together is not bad. It also did not affect study or work in any negative way. (KK)

Take political issues as an example, this is quite interesting...When others were talking about political issues in China, I often felt, ‘how can they think in that way?’ But in the US, after becoming friends with students from Hong Kong or Taiwan, I feel

like I can understand it from their perspective, although...Everyone has his own opinion. Maybe their ideas are naïve, but I can still be understanding....I can understand a lot more, I think. Knowing how they were educated and brought up, I understood and became more tolerant. This also includes tolerating how Americans view China....I think I became more tolerant. (GZ)

Maturation and independence. Chinese international students expressed that they are “growing up,” becoming more mature, and more independent through their journey abroad. They reported recognizing their responsibilities in life and understanding more about what their parents had done for them.

I did not realize how hard it is to make a living until I came here. I think I should have a greater appreciation for what my parents have done for me. Maybe American students did not think it in this way. They are just independent....But I think, it is better than Chinese ‘boomerang children.’ I don’t support the idea of getting money from parents endlessly or expecting parents to take care of your kids. I think after a certain age, like 18 or 20, you should be responsible for your own life....I realized this after coming to the US....When I was chatting with American students, they said ‘I took a loan to go to school’ or ‘I must get the scholarship.’ Some are getting 3-4 part-time jobs to support themselves. I thought my life was difficult (laugh), I was often tired, but I never need to worry about my finance. (WUZ)

I think what I learned most [from studying and living abroad] is, it is good to leave home. Leaving home and being away from parents made me realize that my parents provided everything for me and I was still complaining. When I was little I was thinking ‘Why should I take college entrance exam? Why should I take high school entrance exam?’ ‘Ah, studying is tiring!’ Now I realize that, oh, life is not just studying. My life was not hard, although my parents gave me pressure they also

provided help, and I only needed to focus on study. I think after I study abroad [I came to this realization]Maybe I would come to this realization in China over time too, but through studying abroad I strongly felt, I need to take care of myself. I never had an idea about any aspect of life, such as paying rent, paying utilities....Eating, housing, transportation...every aspect of my life was taken care of by my teachers and parents. It is not until I came here I realized that, this is how life is. I think this is good. (WUZ)

After being here I realized that I truly have grown up, I am not a kid any more. When there is an important decision to make, my first reaction is not thinking about how my parents may think about it any more, but what I think and what I should do. After I made the choice, I need to take responsibility for the consequences, even when it does not go well....My parents cannot be responsible for it, my relatives cannot, my wife cannot, because it is my decision. I think I have grown up. (IB)

Seeking and Receiving Help

Chinese international students shared the kinds of help that they received from other people and organizations. In regard to seeking and receiving help, they gave advice to future Chinese international students about a variety of ways they received support, and things they found helpful in adapting to the new environment, which helped them ease their transition into the American way of life. Chinese international students also found it helpful to simply do the things they enjoy.

Religious/spiritual support from local churches. Chinese international students reported that they received help from local churches. Specifically, they expressed that neighborhood churches provided them with spiritual and social support. It is worth noticing that even though more than half of the participants were recruited through a religious-affiliated university, those who attended different universities also reported receiving help

and support from their local churches. This support helped them see things differently, offered them resources to deal with their difficulties in life, and facilitated their understanding of American culture.

Spiritually....It's like my spiritual world was lighted up....I suddenly have a purpose in life and a circle of people to associate with. Having a circle of people made me feel less lonely and purposeless than before. (YJX)

Participant WUZ mentioned her experience being invited to many activities by church members and her roommate's experience staying at a church member's house before she could find accommodations.

I think they [church members] provided me convenience in life, which includes asking me whether I need a ride to Walmart....During holidays, they would ask me to join them in their celebrations. Specifically, they asked me during Thanksgiving and Christmas, 'Are you going to be by yourself?' 'How about you come and hang out with us?' I think to a certain extent it alleviated my loneliness....Some churches have connections with Chinese international students associations. That's how my roommate came. They picked her up and arranged her to stay at a member's house for several weeks, because she had no place to live....She came here before school started and she had no place to live, so she stayed at the member's house. They [church members] accommodated many Chinese students. (WUZ)

Several participants shared their view that religion is the key to understanding another culture. Participant YJX joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints after she came to the US. For her, her religion helped her understand American culture. She expressed her understanding of Christianity as follows:

I think joining the church is a good thing. After you join the church, you usually go to church. I think Western culture and people's ways of interacting with each other

fundamentally come from religion...Christianity. In China [the influence] is Confucianism, here it is Christianity. If you have a better understanding of the church, your way of interacting or thinking won't be too different from others—Americans. The church taught people what are the fundamental truths, therefore you can learn what is right and what is wrong....In Buddhism [Taoism], we emphasize being 'actionless.' You don't need to do anything, you don't care whether it goes well or not. As a result, you have a peaceful mind. In contrast, Christianity encourages you to love, to forgive, to give, to light up others as a light bulb. This is what they encourage....If you are smiley, friendly toward others, and you want to help others on your own, then it is right, you are on the right track. If you are doing things in a Chinese way—you are you, I am me, [if you] meet someone you just nod and smile, and do not interact a lot with others in daily life—this may not be the right track for them [Westerners], and you may not appear to be a 'lovely person.' (YJX)

University resources and student associations. Chinese international students shared that they benefitted from resources in their universities, but also expected more support from different organizations. Resources they utilized and found helpful were “international student orientation” (teaching students about policy, culture, and how to use different facilities), “academic advisement,” “workshops” (especially their help with resume-writing and mock interviews), “career fair,” “major fair,” “counseling center,” “international student office,” and “language buddy program/cross-cultural partner.”

I think American universities have lots of resources. I like them a lot. Such as mentors and academic advisors in every department....Also, there is an international student office, and a variety of workshops....They are very useful and are free of charge.

(GZ)

On the other hand, Chinese international students would like organizations to put more effort in advertising and arranging activities, to meet Chinese international students' need, especially to keep Chinese international students connected. One student complained, "I never knew there is a Chinese student association in my university before I came, and I never knew what they were responsible for." Another student also expressed that she did not know about the available resources when she is in need of help. Participants seem to expect organizations to take initiatives to reach out to international students.

If every department has an 'international student inclusion' coordinator, things may run smoother. International students don't know where to voice their needs, and those who want to help international students don't know how to offer their help....I think if there exists a certain organization [to deal with those matters], it would be helpful. I think a student union in each department can take on this responsibility. If you have a lot of international students, you need to consider that they may encounter problems in study and in daily life. Therefore, you should provide means to connect them with teachers or American students [who can help]. This is how I think....We did not know whom to seek help from. I was very lonely and did not know whom to turn to...when I had some problems....(YR)

Some students suggested organizations arrange a "forum" that consists of more experienced international students. This forum provides opportunities for these experienced students to share their experiences with new international students. Participants also long for a "platform" that allows them to stay connected and make friends with other Chinese international students, and to connect with potential employers.

When I was at China Association of Commerce, we primarily kept connection with different companies and with alumni. [We dealt with] how to increase connections for students. We provided opportunities for students to connect with alumni, and to

interact with companies. So, I suggested that they (Chinese Student and Scholar Association, CSSA) [connect students to companies and alumni]Especially since a lot of students are not in Business School, I think they are more eager to connect with companies. (VLY)

Help and social support from others. Chinese international students reported receiving help from professors, friends, and family, and being warmed by strangers' acts of kindness. They found it helpful that professors were willing to provide help and adjust their lecture (e.g., to speak slower) to help international students understand. Many participants shared that going to professors' office hours has been helpful for them. With professors' instructions, Chinese international students can better understand what is the most important knowledge they need to learn.

[One example is that] At the beginning our associate dean sent emails to our student leaders. I don't know what he said [to the student leaders] ...but they told me that if I have anything I cannot understand I can let them know, and that teachers and classmates are willing to help....There was a student who specifically told me this, so I think he [the associate dean] is very considerate of international students. Also some teachers came to talk to me about similar things. I think it is very helpful....During meetings, my classmates often asked me, 'Did you understand what we said?' or 'Are you following us?' 'If you don't understand we can explain.' I think it's good. (RLQ)

Chinese international students found it helpful to hear more experienced international students' advice about how to deal with challenges in America and seek help from them. They specifically reported benefiting from getting rides from friends and roommates to go to places. They found talking to friends and family relaxing. One student shared that "I think

establishing one's own circle of friends is very important, because after you have established your own life here, you may feel happier and less homesick" (RLQ).

Sometimes I tell my friends [about my trouble], one of my friends was also applying to a psychology doctoral program....We submitted applications together. We both felt stressed out. So it was sweet to know that I was not alone. (FM)

[In study groups] I communicate more adequately. In the group we had really close relationships, and we did extra-curricular activities together. They also helped me gain more cultural knowledge. (VLY)

Talking to my family is a way for me to relax—I can organize my thoughts while talking to them. At the beginning I may say, 'I have some trouble to share tonight' or 'I am upset', but in the end I often say 'Now I found a solution, this is what I am going to do'(VLY)

Chinese international students found strangers' acts of kindness heartwarming.

Participant BU recalled being offered rides when she got out of grocery stores without a car.

When I first came here, I noticed that strangers on the road often said hi to me....When I got out of grocery stores at night with a lot of stuff in my hands, wondering how to get home, I heard a car stopping near me. Then a person asked whether I needed a ride home. I was very moved. In China, such things rarely happen. (BU)

Proactive participation and self-assertive inquiry. Chinese international students found it helpful to actively participate in activities, ask questions, and interact with both Chinese and American students. They shared that they improved language skills and learned about American culture by participating in more activities.

In learning English, I think what has been most helpful is to be with Americans, and to hang out with them. I was taking classes from ELC (English Language Center), such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing classes. We normally finish assignments from the Internet. I think hanging out with American roommates and interacting with them helped me more with my language than finishing my Internet assignments. (KK)

When I was working on my bachelor's degree, although I have adequate English skills, I did not know much about my major and my future career. I know that accounting is a good major and it will be easy for me to find employment, that's why I chose it, but I did not know about job opportunities and did not do much networking. My last year in college, upon graduation, I realized that, because I was about to graduate, if I couldn't find employment I needed to go back to my home country. I started to join accounting associations and clubs, but it was a little late to do those in the last year. So my advice for new students is to meet more people, make more friends, and participate in more major-related activities. It will be helpful for your future. It takes time and getting to know people might be embarrassing and uncomfortable at first, but it will be very helpful in the future. (KK)

Chinese international students shared that sometimes they need to get out of their comfort zone and challenge themselves by being proactive. Participant YR realized that she needs to let others know that she needs help instead of waiting for people to discover that she needs help. She also expressed regrets that she did not ask for help in the past.

I isolated myself and did not ask for help from my classmates. They won't know the difficulties you are facing and that you need help [if you don't tell them], so I think one needs to be more proactive. Communicating to others is beneficial; one should not shut others out....Sometimes you cannot passively wait for opportunities to come,

you cannot wait for others to discover that you need help. I think being here made me realize that you need to express your needs in order to let others know about them. I think one should be proactive and positive....(YR)

Many Chinese international students that were interviewed realized that making friends with both Americans and Chinese could benefit them. Some students reflected on their experiences, and shared that they wish they had more interactions outside class with American classmates.

I have seen Chinese international students going to two extremes, one is to completely want to get rid of Chinese people and hang out only with Americans, thinking that it is a waste of time being with Chinese and not knowing the locals...the other extreme is to only hang out with Chinese, thinking that I cannot understand Americans, I don't have much to talk about with them, and it is more comfortable being with Chinese. I suggest them not go to extremes, but make friends with both Americans and Chinese. The reasons I say that is... You need to know Americans, but you cannot fit in at first. We also need to support each other as Chinese. Realistically speaking, your Chinese friends can be your greatest resources for you in the future. People from other countries won't respect you if you completely get rid of your Chinese heritage....the other kind who only hang out with Chinese...Since we are here to learn Western ideas and culture, we should make American friends and try to understand their ways of thinking. This is good for us in the future. Why do companies like to hire those who have studied abroad? That's because we are more open. Many American companies have branches in China, they like to hire people like us because it is easy to communicate with us, since we are familiar with their culture and their ways of thinking. We need to raise our value by learning more ideas and cultural knowledge.

So I hope those who come here can make friends with both Chinese and Americans, this can be beneficial in many ways. (YJX)

Sense of purpose and direction. Chinese international students shared that having a goal is important. As stated by two participants, knowing what one wants to get from college makes it easier to “adjust one’s energy” and “find opportunities for oneself.”

I think one should find opportunities for himself. That’s important. Universities have a lot of good resources, if you want to find employment, you can find some activities that help you find a job. I wanted to go to grad school, so I needed to search for research activities and to get certificates that can help me get into grad school....I think we should do things early....A lot of people said it does not matter that in the first two years in college you don’t know what you want to do, but I think, the earlier you find what you want, the better....Like me, I decided to apply for PhD when I was a junior, so I rushed my research experience, but if I started from the first year, it should not be so much pressure....So I think knowing what one wants early on is the most important thing....(FM)

Participant IB shared that if given another chance, he would not go to graduate school until he found a goal for himself by seeking working experience in his field. He reasoned that getting real-life experience could help one know clearer what he wants and thus motivates him in his studies.

If after I graduate with my bachelor’s degree, I can work in China or America or wherever for a while, and learn the developing trends of society, learn what are needed for human civilization, what humans need, and what I want. Now it is like...I like mathematics, but in the beginning, I don’t know what I can use it for. Mathematics can solve problem, math problems, chemistry problems, and some basic problems. Mathematics can be used for exams, and for contests. I only know those

ways that I can use mathematics for, but I don't know what other things I can use it for in real life. I don't know what I am learning mathematics for, it is hard to move forward because of the lack of interest. However, in society, you can learn that mathematics can be used in engineering, or economics fields, you don't necessarily need to know how to do it, but you know what exist in the society. So...After knowing all those choices, you can come back to do a master's or a PhD. At this point you already know what is out there and you have a very clear purpose. You can easily learn 10 days' knowledge in a day. (IB)

Service to others. Chinese international students found that helping others made them feel good. Being the ones that often receive help, they found a balance by helping others. They were able to use their strengths and feel less helpless.

I cannot be in a situation that I don't have opportunities of helping others. I feel like I am the person that...If others can run or walk, and I cannot even crawl, that makes me feel uncomfortable. I want to be like a normal person—sometimes others help me, and sometimes I help others. Then I can feel balanced. That's why I like to volunteer....I think it really influenced me, because it made me think I am an important person....I just feel I could not accept the situation [that I am slower than others and cannot help others]When I was volunteering, people said, "Thanks for helping us!" It made me feel happy. (VLY)

Those who want to help Chinese international students can do some service projects with them. I think it is good, because it can make Chinese international students feel that they can help others, and feel less helpless in their lives. (LS)

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this study, participants shared their unique journey navigating the U.S. academic and social environment. They also demonstrated similar challenges and similar patterns of adapting and help-seeking. Drawing upon this study's findings and placing this information in the context of existing research, participants' experiences are discussed within the following three aspects of their acculturation: language, culture, and learning; seeking help; and preparation and growth.

Language, Culture, and Learning

The difficulties reported by participants of this study are consistent with previous studies. In particular, difficulties associated with language barriers and communication are the first challenges Chinese international students face upon entering the US (Zhang & Mi, 2010). One major reason for experiencing these challenges is due to their lack of practice speaking English in their home country. Chinese international students also indicated that they experienced difficulties adjusting to the differences between the American and Chinese cultures. Additionally Chinese international students emphasized that another major challenge was adjusting to learning in an American university classroom.

Based on Sawir's (2005) interviews with Asian international students who studied in Australia, students' native countries primarily emphasized reading and grammar in second language teaching. As a result, students rarely had an opportunity to practice spoken English. Their lack of practice and confidence in speaking English prevented them from actively participating in university classes (Hellsten, 2002; as cited in Sawir, 2005).

One study identified five difficulties associated with teaching English in Asia (Littlewood, 2007). The first difficulty was "class management" (Littlewood, 2007, p. 244). Because of the large size of classes, teachers struggled to balance between controlling the class and facilitating student-centered learning activities.

The second difficulty was “avoidance of English” (Littlewood, 2007, p. 244). This difficulty refers to the tendency of using one’s mother tongue in solving problems rather than the target language during language-learning activities.

The third difficulty was described as “minimal demands on language competence” (Littlewood, 2007, p. 245). It was found that students tended to generate the least English possible to complete tasks. In problem solving tasks, teachers did not require students to fully communicate in English.

The fourth difficulty was “incompatibility with public assessment demands” (Littlewood, 2007, p. 245). Teachers tend to *teach to the test*. In other words, teachers cover information that students will be tested on in important exams, such as college entrance exams. These types of tests emphasize reading and vocabulary. In order to meet the test requirements, English teaching curriculum is also aligned with demands of the testing. Both the teacher and the curriculum typically overlook the importance of practicing the spoken language. Although many teachers and educators have recognized the conflict between meeting requirements and teaching effectively so that students can communicate in real world settings, societal and parental pressures force educators to practice ineffective teaching that does not adequately prepare Chinese students for American universities.

The last difficulty is “conflict with educational values and traditions” (Littlewood, 2007, p. 245). The communicative learning style seems to be incompatible with Asian cultural values about learning (Littlewood, 2007). Because of these difficulties, English teaching in Chinese classrooms fails to prepare students sufficiently for communicating with Americans.

Although Chinese students and parents may believe that English classes and additional language preparation are sufficient to help students communicate in English, in reality even those who demonstrate adequate English skills still struggle to communicate

with American students (Zhang & Mi, 2010). For example, in this study, Chinese students reported delayed processing, that it took time to form thoughts into English sentences. Additionally, participants reported the awkwardness of not having a topic to talk about with Americans. In particular, they reported struggling to understand jokes; such as IB's statement "I could not laugh at American jokes, even if I understand every word of it." He explained that growing up in a very different environment makes it hard to understand the cultural context of American jokes.

Humor is a universal phenomenon (Erdodi & Lajiness-O'Neill, 2012; Nevo, Nevo, & Yin, 2001). People use humor for a variety of purposes, such as enhancing one's image or one's relationships. More specifically, humor increases personal satisfaction. Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir (2003) identified four types of humor: affiliative (enhance relationships with others), self-enhancing (enhance self), aggressive (enhance self at the expense of others), and self-defeating (enhance relationships at the expense of self). People with more collective cultural values tend to use affiliative and self-enhancing humor more than the other two types of humor, since they tend to maintain a positive profile of themselves and each other (Chen, Watkins, & Martin, 2013).

Besides this difference, Chinese often use humor to teach or make a point. It is primarily used in cross talks or witty skits, two forms of Chinese traditional art. In daily life, however, the use of humor is often suppressed. The lack of humor in daily life makes the Chinese different from Americans in humor styles. Moreover, Singapore students of Chinese origins were found to favor different kinds of jokes (more aggressive and fewer sexual content jokes) than Americans. This demonstrates that culture affects both the content and the form of jokes (Nevo, Nevo, & Yin, 2001).

Jokes originate within the context of cultural traits and values, and naturally reflect cultural interests (Erdodi & Lajiness-O'Neill, 2012). Therefore, we may expect people to

have different opinions about jokes because of their unique cultural backgrounds. In Erdodi and Lajiness-O'Neill's (2012) study, Hungarians rated ethnic jokes (jokes that based on exaggerated stereotypes toward certain ethnic groups) as funnier than did participants who were bilingual or English speaking. This result provided evidence that culture affects how individuals perceive and appreciate the humor in different types of jokes.

In the current study, participants' responses demonstrated that Chinese international students may possess a different type of humor than Americans. Chinese students may also lack cultural understanding. Their limited language skills may also prevent them from understanding American jokes.

In general, Chinese students use a different learning style, more commonly utilized in China. As noted by Wong (2004), a didactic teaching and teacher-centered teaching style is more familiar to most international students. While western education places an emphasis on students' understanding and application through facilitating discussion and questions, Eastern education does not encourage students' discussions and questions. Instead, Eastern education focuses more on memorizing, learning concepts, and preparing for tests (Henze & Zhu, 2012). This style hinders classroom participation. Chinese students also reported being unable to participate in discussions because of others' use of slang, colloquial language, and non-course-related topics during class (Sun & Chen, 1999).

Yamazaki's (2005) study aimed to make connections between high-context and low-context culture. The study examined cultural differences in learning and found that the Chinese tended to learn through reflective observation while Americans tended to rely more on active experimentation. The Chinese also tended to learn from more abstract ways, as opposed to learning from concrete experiences.

Culture and previous learning experiences appear to contribute to Chinese international students' passive learning. In this study, even for Chinese international students

who have been in the US for many years, the differences between eastern and western learning continue to create academic challenges for them.

Seeking Help

Chinese international students face many initial challenges in daily life. For example, they are often unfamiliar with finding housing, opening a bank account, and opening a cellphone account. They often do not have a car to get to places they need to be. At the same time, they are reluctant to seek help. The desire to be strong and independent prevents them from getting the help they need at the moment. This presents a dilemma for Chinese international students. As they adapt to the new culture they are faced with great challenges and may feel helpless, yet they are reluctant to seek help.

Many participants suggested future Chinese international students be more proactive in seeking opportunities, asking for help, and asking questions about things they do not know. However, many of the participants failed to realize the importance of taking advantage of available resources, even though they were aware of the resources. Often times, when they finally acknowledged needing assistance, it was “a little late.” While learning from one’s mistakes, participants encouraged newcomers to be more proactive and less passive during their initial transition to the US. In particular, more seasoned participants encouraged newly arrived Chinese students to identify goals that would assist them in purposefully and successfully navigating through initial acculturation, including academic and social life.

One may ask, why are Chinese international students passive in adapting to the new environment? Aren’t they responsible to voice their needs?

These questions are often difficult to answer. For example, East Asian culture emphasizes the importance of self-reliance and, when needed, relying on one’s family and inner circle of trusted friends, not strangers. When seeking help from others, Chinese students may feel that they burden and jeopardize social relationships. For Chinese students,

these perceptions are associated with shame. Based on Chinese culture, when individuals are faced with personal difficulties, self-coping and withdrawal are the accepted coping strategies. In contrast, American culture offers individuals the freedom to seek help and to express emotional distress (Mortenson, 2008).

Furthermore, Markus and Kitayama (1991) identified the concept of reciprocal interdependence in Asian culture. In collective cultures, such as Chinese and Japanese culture, instead of directly asking about one's needs or requesting what one wants, people are encouraged to imagine what another might want, and then to provide for that need. To maintain social connection, this reciprocal process is required. In contrary, being indirect is discouraged in the US. Although many participants gradually developed an appreciation for American directness, being direct was initially difficult for them.

In the same study, Markus and Kitayama (1991) offered an example of reciprocal interdependence. Their example involved an interaction between two friends (W and Z). W invites friend Z over for lunch. Z likes turkey sandwiches. In the U.S. culture, W would directly ask Z what he wants, then would give Z what he requested. In the U.S. culture, this interaction is considered direct and respectful. In a collective culture, W may ask Z, "What do you want for lunch?" Z may respond, "I don't know;" or "Anything is good." Z responds in this manner because he does not want to inconvenience W. In this example, Z's indirectness is considered to be polite and thoughtful of W. In the Asian culture, W would think back on previous experiences and offer Z a turkey sandwich, saying, "I made you a turkey sandwich because I remember last week you said you like turkey better than beef." Z would thank W for the offer, telling him that he likes turkey sandwiches. This reciprocal process requires both of the parties to constantly consider and take the role of each other.

In the interviews, KK was politely claiming that he was full at dinner, while he was expecting the host to take his role by insisting that he should eat more food. If the host kept

offering, KK would probably say something like “This is a lot of food. I am really fine. I have already troubled you so much... But if you say so, I will eat a little more.” However, the American family took his words at face value and cleared the dinner table, assuming he had enough food. In this case, the interaction did not follow the reciprocal process. After being in the US for a few years, KK learned to appreciate directness, but at first this was a shock for him.

In the current study, Chinese international students expressed appreciation for those who offered support without the students having to ask for assistance. Some students reported feeling grateful when offered a ride or invited to activities. This is consistent with the concept of reciprocal interdependence.

According to the interviews, many Chinese international students reported gradually becoming more proactive and direct across time. While it is important for Chinese international students to learn more about the U.S. culture and to step out of their comfort zone, asking for what they need, Americans who are eager to assist Chinese international students may offer their help and support. For example, Americans need to consider the hesitancy of Chinese international students asking for assistance, and should take the initiative to invite Chinese international students to events that are informative about the U.S. culture. Americans will assist with Chinese international students’ acculturation by taking steps to encourage inclusiveness.

In response to the interview question—“What has been helpful for you in adapting to the U.S.?”—many Chinese international students expressed that they felt good about volunteering. They expressed that helping others made them feel less vulnerable and helped them recognize their own values. Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, and Tang’s (2003) study showed that older adults—a vulnerable population who often report feeling isolated and unneeded—who engaged in more volunteer work, reported a higher level of well-being.

Research conducted by Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, and Keltner (2010) answered the question, “Do those with less give less or more?” Their data indicated that because of their egalitarian values and feelings of compassion, people from lower social classes are more prosocial than those from higher social classes. Similarly, although international students are often perceived as needing help, opportunities to assist others may actually facilitate their personal well-being and increase their self-confidence and social connectedness.

Preparation and Growth

Based on the interviews, prior to their arrival, Chinese international students appeared to be unprepared for living and studying overseas. A few participants expressed that studying abroad was not totally their own choice, but that they were strongly impacted by family members. In this study, participants seem to have limited understanding of the cultural norms in the U.S. and experienced a period of “culture shock.” Most of them had unrealistic expectations of America before they came, especially about the atmosphere. They imagined America to be very lively, affluent, and urban. They were surprised when they discovered that their university setting was in a very spacious suburban area and did not look like a typical Chinese city. On the other hand, as they imagined, they experienced America as a country of freedom. They reported initially enjoying the variety of ideas and ultimately adopted many new ideas after a few years in the US.

It is interesting that after being in the US for a few years, Chinese international students were able to adopt different American ideas and practices. This raises the question, would Chinese international students more readily adapt to the American society if they initially had more realistic expectations of life in the US? As Ma (2012) pointed out, many Chinese parents and students are busy meeting the academic requirements for studying abroad but are unaware of the social and psychological preparation needed for studying abroad. As mentioned in the interviews, many participants first learned to cook and drive in

the US. Together with the unfamiliarity with culture and learning, Chinese international students are truly stretched during the initial and ongoing acclimation to this new foreign culture.

It was reported that many Chinese children focus so heavily on their academic studies that they have little real life experience. Indeed, acclimated Chinese international students reported that they have “grown up” and become more independent. A great number of young adults in China live with their parents and are financially dependent on them. One contributing factor to this dependency on parents is the one-child policy, which leads to overprotectiveness and spoiling (Hays, 2008). Other factors leading to young adult dependency on parents are the increasing living expenses and difficulties in finding a job in China, particularly for this current generation (Farrar, 2013).

Chinese standards for entering adulthood are more defined by the responsibilities toward others (Huang, 2012). One enters adulthood when he/she gets married, becomes a parent, and has a job. For Chinese college students, these life events normally do not happen until after college. In fact, until 2005, China had rules against undergraduate students getting married. This confirmed some participants’ viewpoint that they view themselves as *a kid* in Chinese culture.

As previously discussed, Chinese international students—both undergraduate students and graduate students—may experience the transition to adulthood during their studying abroad (Huang, 2012). Being exposed to the U.S. culture may facilitate this transition. Interestingly, in this study, several participants indicated they married and reported being influenced by American religious and societal norms that encourage marriage and starting a family.

Implications for Practice

In general, Chinese international students seem to be unprepared for studying abroad. Part of the challenge is their lack of life skills that are required in order to live independently. They may benefit from learning how to live independently before leaving their home country. Some of those skills include cooking, driving, finding information, etc. At the same time, in order to gain a better understanding, they may consider learning more about the culture they are going to live in, and talking with people who have previously lived abroad. Studying abroad is a big decision, it is suggested that Chinese students form a reasonable expectation before making a decision to study abroad. As suggested by many participants, Chinese international students need to step out of their comfort zone and become more proactive, participating in activities and asking for help.

In comparison to U.S. universities, Chinese universities do not offer as many resources to their students. Therefore U.S. university services, professional and student organizations, and professors may need to extend themselves in reaching out to Chinese international students, raising awareness of available services. Given that many Chinese international students have limited understanding of the host culture, an orientation may be helpful.

To help new Chinese students adapt to the new environment, universities may consider connecting new Chinese international students with more experienced Chinese international students (e.g., panel discussions and forums). Universities and other organizations may also consider forming a support system for international students that they can turn to for questions and help. Eckhart (2014) from Ohio State University suggested that universities develop programs to help international students orient to American learning and their life in America. In Ohio State University's orientation program they arranged culture-based communication activities to familiarize Chinese international students with American

mindset. They asked Chinese international students to knock on instructors' doors to introduce themselves, taught them how to lead a team meeting and start networking, and expanded their narrow focus on taking tests. This is a good example of a university's successful attempt of helping Chinese international students.

On a personal level, one suggested way of helping Chinese international students is to help them use their strengths to help others. By helping others, they may feel less vulnerable and isolated. Those who want to help Chinese international students may consider inviting Chinese international students to activities or holiday gatherings. Those events may help them gain more understanding of the U.S. culture and become closer to American students. In this study, only two participants reported visiting with a mental health counselor. One other participant reported she intended to go to counseling but did not follow through with an official visit because of the questions asked in the initial paperwork. The paperwork asked her to indicate whether or not she was depressed or suicidal, which caused her to rethink about her own problems. Ultimately she did not feel her situation was serious enough to require counseling. Similarly, several other participants expressed that their issues were not severe enough to go to counseling.

For Chinese international students, counseling centers were not perceived as a place they would go for help, unless their situation was so extreme that they could not help themselves. Going to a counseling center also seemed to elicit uneasiness. Therefore, counseling centers may consider reaching out to international students through outreach programs in order to correct preconceived misconceptions about counseling.

Limitations

In this study, most participants attended a large private religious-based university. In comparison to those participants who attended other universities, Chinese students attending the private university reported a friendlier atmosphere. They also reported interacting with a

relatively small number of Chinese international students. These students tended to interact with American students more and expressed a greater desire to *fit in*. In contrast, the few participants from other universities, who associated with a larger group of Chinese international students, did not exert much effort to make friends with American students. Additionally, participants did not express a high level of frustration regarding socializing with American students. However, because of this study's small sample size, these particular conclusions about making friends and socializing with American students may not accurately represent all Chinese international students.

In general, this study's conclusions may not be applicable to Chinese students attending other universities with larger numbers of Chinese international students. Most participants in this study did not express a great desire to be "White" or, on the other extreme, to only associate with those in their Chinese circle of friends. While this might be the case for most Chinese international students, a few may be more extreme in their views on acculturation and assimilation. In comparison to the more moderate views on fitting in with the American culture, Chinese international students with more extreme views may encounter different challenges and find help in different ways than are expressed in this study's findings.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study explored Chinese international students' experiences adapting to the U.S. culture and learning environment. The results suggest that Chinese international students need more guidance than they generally received about how to navigate through the experience of studying abroad, specifically in areas of learning, cultural communication, and living independently. In order to bridge the communication gap between international students and the natives, it is also necessary to study the experience and reactions of those who interact with international students (Kung, 2007). Future research could focus on

experiences of American students, professors, and other university staff regarding their interactions with Chinese international students. Topics to explore include identifying barriers and misunderstandings between Chinese international students and the natives, as well as finding ways to help them connect more easily.

In terms of helping Chinese international students get oriented to the U.S. environment, most universities provide orientations for new international students. It is surprising to see that many of this study's participants were not aware of the available resources or did not utilize those resources, even when they needed assistance. Therefore, future studies should gather feedback from Chinese international students in order to examine the perceived effectiveness of these orientations. Universities could take this feedback and find ways to improve orientations, making this experience more effective and accessible to Chinese international students.

Although Chinese international students in the current study did not mention incidents of racism or marginalization because of their ethnicity and cultural background, future studies may investigate this aspect of acculturation. Our findings were somewhat unexpected, given that existing literature suggests that international students are likely to experience racism and discrimination (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Conclusion

This qualitative research examined 13 Chinese international students' experiences regarding their stay in the U.S. and their adaptation to the U.S. culture. Common to each participant's experiences, the journey of adapting to the U.S. and their American university involved facing difficulties, understanding differences, experiencing growth, and seeking and receiving help.

Because of my own bias, I expected Chinese international students to be more proactive in resolving issues that came up during their acculturation process. However,

according to the interviews, Chinese international students seem to be passive in finding solutions to their challenges. Rather than taking charge of their adaptation process, the students in this study seemed to approach this process in a somewhat directionless and unplanned manner.

Initially, Chinese international students who participated in this study reported experiencing a period of loneliness and helplessness. Upon entering the American university, they also admitted not feeling comfortable fully assimilating into American life. They had difficulty understanding the complex details of American life, and lacked the knowledge and resources to navigate their way through the new environment. Gradually, they became more comfortable negotiating the details of their new environment and creating a sense of order and consistency in their lives. They made friends, learned cooking skills, improved their English, resolved differences, became more active, and ultimately found their own direction. Based on their experiences and *lessons learned*, they were able to offer sage advice to future Chinese international students. They encouraged newcomers to be more proactive, to ask questions, and to seek help when needed.

However, for the more seasoned Chinese international students, their story does not end at this point in time. Interviewees reported ongoing challenges in many aspects of their lives, such as continued difficulties in their academic learning and in understanding the nuances of the American culture. They also reported difficulty building social networks and challenges when seeking employment. Without the help of others, these challenges are difficult to face and resolve.

As discussed previously, Chinese international students face many challenges that are deeply rooted in cultural differences. These types of differences are not easily resolved. To adequately address these challenges, more instruction and education about navigating the U.S. culture are needed. Chinese international students must also consider that differences do

not always need to be perfectly resolved: Some differences make you unique as an individual.

Chinese international students bring diversity to U.S. campuses. By supporting their adjustment to their new environment, universities assist these international students in helping them reduce their stress and helping them find greater satisfaction in their social and academic lives. Universities need to identify and implement specific strategies and activities to help facilitate cross-cultural communication between international students and their American peers. More specifically, as Chinese international students integrate new ideas and become accustomed to the American way of life, American students can also become more actively involved with Chinese international students, raising their own sense of cultural awareness and gaining a better understanding of the Chinese culture.

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APPENDIX A: Email to the Contact Person at the International Student Office

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Zhen Li, I am a graduate student in Counseling Psychology program at Brigham Young University. As part of my doctoral research, I am conducting a study to explore the acculturation process for Chinese international students in their initial transition to the U.S. I am conducting this research under the guidance of my chair, Dr. Melissa Allen Heath.

I am looking for Chinese international students who come to the U.S. to study in an undergraduate or a graduate program and have completed at least 2 years of study. This research has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of Brigham Young University. I would be very grateful if you could forward my request to the Chinese international students at your university. If you have any questions or concerns about the research you may contact me (email address: lizhen89101@gmail.com) or my chair (email address: melissa_allen@byu.edu). Thank you for your help!

Sincerely,

Zhen Li

APPENDIX B: Email to Participants

(English and Mandarin Chinese versions included)

Dear Chinese International Student,

I am a doctoral student in the counseling psychology program at Brigham Young University. I invite you to participate in my study on Chinese international students' acculturation experience. To participate, you need to be from mainland China, have been studying in the U.S. for more than 2 years and had never been to the U.S. before you start your program. You will be asked about your experiences adapting to the U.S. and the strategies you found helpful. Interviews will be conducted through Skype in Mandarin Chinese and last for 45 minutes to 60 minutes. You will be rewarded a \$20 gift card after the interview. Your responses would be very valuable to help others understand more about Chinese international students' acculturation experience and find better ways to help Chinese international students in the future!

Please email lizhen89101@gmail.com to schedule an interview. Thank you for your support and for taking the time to participate!

Hope you have a great semester!

Sincerely,

Zhen Li

来自中国的留学生，

我是杨百翰大学咨询心理学专业的学生。我邀请你参与这个关于中国留学生文化适应的经历的研究。作为参与者，你需要满足以下条件：来自中国内地，至少在美国完成了两年的学习，并在赴美留学前没探访过美国。你将被问及你在适应美国的过程中的经历和对你有帮助的应对策略。访谈将通过Skype采用普通话进行并持续45分钟到60分钟。访谈过后，你将收到20美元的礼品卡一张。你的回答对他人了解中国留学生的文化适应经历和帮助未来的中国留学生非常有帮助。

请联系 lizhen89101@gmail.com来预约访谈。

谢谢你的支持和参与！祝你有一个顺利的学期！

李桢

APPENDIX C: Consent to be a Research Subject

(English and Mandarin Chinese versions included)

Please read the information below to decide whether you would like to participate.

Introduction

The study is about Chinese international students' acculturation process in their initial transition to the U.S. To participate you must be an international student from mainland China who came to the U.S. to study in a university and completed at least 2 years of study, and have never been to the U.S. before.

Procedures

If you agree to participate, the following will occur:

- You will contact the researcher with the information below and set up an interview in a convenient time for you and the researcher.
- You will be interviewed through Skype about your experiences adapting to the U.S. for about 45 to 60 minutes.
- Your responses will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy in transcribing your statements.
- The researcher may email you at the end of the study and ask your feedback about data analysis results.

Risk/Discomforts

Risks of this study are expected to be minimal. Participants may experience temporary emotional discomfort. Any concern would be addressed during the interview and the interviewer would provide information about community resources for counseling if necessary.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research. It is hoped, however, that this study may identify strategies that are helpful for Chinese international students and serve as a resource for future Chinese international students. It is also anticipated that this study can help the society have a better understanding of international students' acculturation experiences.

Confidentiality

Your responses will be kept confidential and anonymous in the analysis and in any reports of research findings. Only people in the research team would have access to the raw data. Qualitative data will be stored through electronic devices throughout the research period. Names and other identifying information of the participants will be protected.

Compensation

At the end of the interview you will be given a \$20 gift card for possible compensation for your time.

Participation

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without penalty.

Questions about the Research

If you have questions about the research, you may contact Zhen Li, Counseling Psychology, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602, email lizhen89101@gmail.com; or Melissa Allen Heath, Associate Professor, Counseling Psychology, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602, email melissa_allen@byu.edu.

Questions about Your Rights as Research Participants

If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant in a research project, you may contact IRB Administrator at (801) 422-1461; A-285 ASB, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602; irb@byu.edu.

Statement of Consent

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

Name (Printed) _____ Signature: _____

Date: _____

知情同意书

请阅读以下信息来决定是否参与研究。

介绍

本研究是关于中国留学生初到美国时的文化适应过程。参加研究的前提是，你必须是来自中国内地的留学生并至少已经完成了2年的学业，并在留学前从未有过赴美经历。

步骤

如果你同意参与，以下情况将会发生：

- 你将通过以下信息联系研究者并预约合适的时间进行访谈。
- 你就适应美国的经历与研究进行45分钟到60分钟的访谈。
- 为了确保对你的回答的准确记录，访谈将被录音。
- 研究者可能在研究的后期给你发邮件来询问你对数据分析结果的反馈。

风险

参与研究的风险极小。参与者可能会经历暂时的情感不适。任何顾虑在访谈过程中都将有机会得到解决，必要时访谈者会提供社区心理咨询资源。

获益

参与研究对你不会有任何直接的获益。但根据预期，本研究可以确定一些对来自中国的国际学生有帮助的应对策略，并为未来的中国留学生提供资源。此外，研究可以帮助社会更好地了解国际学生的文化适应经历。

保密性

在分析和报告中，你的回答将会被匿名化和保密。只有研究小组的成员能够接近原始数据。定性资料将通过电子设备存储。姓名和其他识别信息将得到保护。

补偿

访谈结束后，你将收到一张20美元的礼品卡作为对时间的补偿。

参与

你的参与是完全自愿的，并且你可以在任何时候退出而不用承担任何后果。

关于研究的问题

如果你对研究存有疑问，你可以联系Zhen Li, Counseling Psychology, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602, 电子邮件lizhen89101@gmail.com; 或 Melissa Allen Heath, Associate Professor, Counseling Psychology, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602, 电子邮件melissa_allen@byu.edu。

对参与者的权益的疑问

如果你对作为参与者的权益持有疑问，你可以联系IRB管理人员 (801) 422-1461; A-285 ASB, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602; irb@byu.edu。

同意声明

我已经阅读、理解和得到以上知情同意书的副本，并自愿参加此项研究。

姓名（印刷体）_____ 签名:_____ 日期:_____