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Psychological adaptation of

Mainland Chinese Female International Students:

A Phenomenological Inquiry

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy Degree

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

I-Wen Chan

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to two special people in my life.

To Tsung-Yeh Lee, who encouraged me to embrace the turning point of my life. He has a gentle and yet powerful strength, which has comforted countless uneasy spirits. Years ago, he instilled a seed of hope and love in my heart.

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this study was to obtain a description of Mainland Chinese female international students' experiences of adjustment in the U.S. Thirteen participants were asked the one question that guided the study: "Please tell me in as much detail as you can, regarding being a female and originally from China, your process of adapting to your studies and living in the United States." Participants described their experiences in individual audio-taped in-depth interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, creating thirteen separate transcripts. These transcripts, serving as the primary data source, were analyzed using a phenomenological method. Analysis revealed six interrelated themes that together comprised the thematic structure of Chinese female international students' experience of adapting to their study and residing in the U.S.: (a) Coming to America, (b) My English Ability, (c) Things are Different Here, (d) My Study, (e) Relationships, and (f) Being a Woman. In addition, analysis revealed one experiential ground, Adapt Over Time, which served as the context for this experience. Thorough descriptions of these themes and grounds were presented along with supportive evidence taken directly from the interview transcripts. Findings of the study were discussed in relation to the existing literature and suggestions for future research implications were provided. In addition, recommendations were also offered for the practice of counseling practitioners, international education personnel, and academic/career guidance advisors in higher education, who have the opportunities to interact with the international students in general and Chinese female international graduate students in particular.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The past few decades have seen a significant rise in the number of international students attending colleges and universities in the United States. According to the Institute of International Education (2005), there were 565,039 international students enrolled in higher education in the U.S. during the 2004-2005 academic year. Students from five Asian countries—India, China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan—comprise 46.8% of all international students. The People's Republic of China is second only to India in the number of international students sent to the U.S. (62, 523 students from China).

According to Paige (1990) and Desruisseaux (1998), international students are defined as individuals who temporarily live in a country other than their country of citizenship in order to participate in international educational exchange experiences. These individuals have come to the U.S. on a visa intended exclusively for educational purposes and are registered at an accredited institution. Permanent foreign residents of the U.S. who are immigrants or refugees are not included in this definition.

Studying abroad allows individuals the opportunity to obtain professional knowledge, expand cultural understanding, and enhance self-growth. International students differ in cultural, societal, linguistic, and religious backgrounds, and often possess varying degrees of the preparation and skills necessary for adapting to new living environments and educational experiences in the U.S. These individuals often encounter problems that are unique to them as foreigners, such as language barriers, unfamiliar culture, and lack of family and social support, in addition to the routine problems faced by typical American college students (Church, 1982; Leavell, 2001). As the number of international students entering American colleges and universities increases, the need to

understand and to address their cultural and psychological adjustment problems in this country becomes increasingly important.

Research on the adjustment issues of international students in their host countries has slowly expanded during the past four decades (Church 1982; Leavell, 2001; Pyle, 1986; Spaulding & Flack, 1976; Wilson, 1996). Studies indicate that East Asian international students experience more adjustment difficulties than do their counterparts from European countries (Brislin, 1981; Church, 1982; DeArmond, 1983; Sodowsky & Plake, 1992). In addition, previous research on East Asian international students generally views East Asians as a homogenous group, failing to recognize the fact that these students have a great diversity among their cultural, societal, linguistic, religious, and political backgrounds (Bowman, Rasheed, Ferris, Thompson, McRae, & Weitzman, 2001; Whitman, 1985). Conducting research to differentiate the unique characteristics betweens these groups, as well as the within-group characteristics of individuals from these countries, has been recommended for future studies on international student groups (Kim, 2004; Leavell, 2001; Matsui, 1988).

Gender is another topic rarely addressed in the research of international student experiences. Even though females compose of 45% of the international student group body (Institute of International Education, 2005), surprisingly little research has examined gender differences in the adjustment process. Some studies of international students that do show significant sex differences suggest that female international students experience a wider range and different levels of adjustment issues compared to their male counterparts (Kim, 2004; Leavell, 2001; Razavi, 1988). Some research indicates that special adjustment issues may exist for women from more traditional or

collective cultures where social roles are defined differently than in the United States (Church 1982; Leavell, 2001; Matsui, 1988; Mok, 1999; Tang & Dion, 1999).

This paper is an exploratory study of highly educated Chinese females in their process of adapting to living and learning in the United States. Compared to their counterparts from other East Asian countries, female students from Mainland China encompass a unique variety of political, societal, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, and may have special adjustment issues and different perceptions of their experiences in residing and learning within the higher education system in the United States. Also, female international students have specific adjustment issues in their professional and personal lives distinct from those of their male counterparts.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the various facets of the adapting process for Chinese female graduate students as it is experienced by the individual and to present a psychological interpretation of its meaning. Through the analysis of phenomenological interviews, it is hoped that a better understanding of these experiences will be gained. The first task in discussing the meaning of adjustment in the United States as experienced by the Chinese female student will be to review the existing literature on the adjustment issues of East Asian international students, with a special focus on Chinese students and gender differences. A second task of this study will be to advance an understanding of Chinese female students' adjustment issues beyond the current literature by presenting results obtained in the present study.

In Chapter 2, a review of relevant research literature will be presented. Chapter 3 details the methods used in the present study by discussing the limitations of a natural science methodology for psychology and proposing an alternative phenomenological

psychological research method for the phenomenon under investigation. Chapter 4 presents the results of the study and discusses the themes of the adjusting process as experienced by the Chinese female students in the U.S., giving supporting examples from the data that illustrate each theme. Finally, in Chapter 5, results of the current study are discussed in relation to previous research and with regard to implications for other disciplines.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is presented in three sections. In the first section, research on commonly experienced adjustment concerns of the international student population will be reviewed. The second section discusses factors that may affect the adjustment level of international students. The third section reviews existing literature on Chinese international students and their adaptation issues.

Common Issues in Adjustment for International Students

International students face common problems experienced by traditional American college students, as well as those problems that are unique for foreigners. There is a range of stressors inherent in American college life. The major stressors are: adjusting to the style of college instruction and increased course demands, enjoying individual freedom while succeeding academically, getting along with roommates, handling conflicted values regarding drinking, drugs, sex, and social issues, and solving different types of personal problems such as finances and transportation (Johnson, 1978; Lucas, 1997). Young adults usually experience a sense of homesickness when they leave family and friends behind for college (Klaus, 2000). Klaus suggested that loneliness may be a part of homesickness; since in moving away from home, the individual may not find people with whom he or she can generate a sense of closeness. While international students experience many feelings similar to those of their American counterparts, their homesickness and loneliness are usually more overwhelming, due to the difficulties for international students to visit their families and friends back home or for their family and friends to visit them in the host country.

Psychological Stressors

International students confront "culture shock," which refers to the difficulties faced by anyone living in a foreign country; these obstacles include racial discrimination, language barriers, cultural differences, and logistical issues such as living accommodations and dietary difficulties (Lin & Yi, 1997). When exposed to unfamiliar environments, individuals often suffer emotional distress such as anxiety, confusion, helplessness, and depression (Adler, 1975; Church, 1982; Lin & Yi, 1997), and individuals tend to long for a more predictable and comfortable environment. Anxiety may manifest itself in fear of socializing with locals, a strong longing to be with fellow nationals, and an excessive fear of being cheated and mistreated.

Psychological stressors, such as lack of familiarity with the American educational system, academic demands, changes in support systems, language barriers, and limited cultural understanding, may lead to social isolation for international students (Lin & Yi, 1997). Feelings of homesickness and loneliness, which are prevalent in international students, make students long for their national cuisine, interaction with fellow nationals, and daydream about visiting their families and friends back home. Many international students have a strong desire to succeed academically; some of them develop symptoms of anxiety and depression due to their fear of being unable to achieve their academic goals in the host country's educational system. Previous research has discovered that international students do not typically directly address emotional distress, instead exhibiting their anxiety and depression in somatic complaints such as loss of appetite, poor sleep, fatigue, and vague physical complaints (Church, 1982). Asian students in particular have a tendency to place enormous emphasis on their academic achievement

and downplay their emotional needs. When they seek help, they often complain of lack of motivation, difficulty in concentration, laziness, bad study attitudes or habits, loss of interest in entertainment activities, low self-esteem, irritability and anger (Lin & Yi, 1997).

Language Barriers

The most profound stumbling block that international students report encountering is the language barrier. Language proficiency, that allows individuals to express themselves to others and stimulate responses from others, plays a fundamental role in international students' adaptation to the host country. The academic success of international students depends to a significant extent on their ability to communicate with their professors and classmates and to understand material contents in classroom settings and reading assignments. While native students have had a lifetime to acquire the language skills necessary to function in a variety of tasks, many international students have not had that opportunity. In addition, even though English is widely used around the world, standards and regional accents of the language may vary greatly according to nationalities and geographical areas (Stalker, 1997). Even the most linguistically competent international students may experience some difficulties in understanding the different accents they encounter (Smith, 1993). Many international students have reported that their communication problems are mostly due to not acquiring much of the slang that most American students use in their daily conversations (Leavell, 2001). Language problems can easily lead to feelings of anxiety, frustration, and exhaustion in international students. International students may then decide to shy away from many opportunities for social interaction with the host culture (Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986).

Financial Pressure

The lack of sufficient funds is the second most commonly expressed concern of international students (Cadieux & Wehrly, 1986; Das, Chow, & Rutherford, 1986; Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Lin & Yi, 1997). The Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) requires that international students provide proof of financial resources prior to admission. International students are required to assume full-time student status while enrolled in school. They must forfeit their student status and leave the States should they decide to be enrolled part-time or drop out of school. International students are legally prohibited from working off campus; during the academic semester, they are allowed to work on campus for up to 20 hours per week; during the school break or holidays, they may work up to 40 hours per week. In addition, international students have little or no access to student loans and scholarships, and have to pay expensive out-of-state tuition (Hagedorn & Lee, 2006). Family and personal savings account for the largest portion of financial resources for international students; funding provided by American colleges, universities, or research institutes is the second largest source of financial support for international students, especially for those in graduate school. Financial pressure may not only be a psychological stressor in itself, but may lead to social isolation. An international student under financial pressure often cannot afford to spend money on going out with his or her American and other international friends. This may diminish the opportunity for that student to enjoy a social life and also to acculturate to the host culture.

Social Isolation

A positive correlation has been found between social interaction with the host society and the adaptation of international students. Ward and his colleagues (Searle & Ward, 1991; Ward & Kennedy, 1993) have argued that "adjustment or adaptation can be divided into two broad domains- psychological and socio-cultural. The former refers to feelings of well-being and satisfaction while the latter relates to the ability to 'fit in' or negotiate interactive aspects of the host culture" (Ward & Searle, 1991, p. 210). The quality of host national contact is predictive of international students' psychological well-being. Relationship satisfaction, including connection with hosts, fellow nationals, and other international students, suggests a strong social support system and is positively correlated with decreased mood disturbance. In contrast, socio-cultural adaptation is affected by the quantity of contact with host nationals. The quantity of social contact with the host society may or may not reflect the quality of the contact, however, a greater degree of host contact does provide more opportunity for internationals to practice language, expand cultural understanding, and gain the practical information necessary to facilitate international students' social-cultural competence, which then leads to better adjustment (Ward & Kennedy, 1993).

Developing friendships with Americans, however, is not always easy for international students (Lam, 1997; Swagler & Ellis, 2003). For students who come from a more collective culture, such as that of Asian countries, friendship tends to be more intensive with a smaller number of in-groups. In contrast, Americans tend to form friendship with many in-groups on a less intensive level. Due to the varied definition of friendship and other limitations, such as language barriers, lack of cultural understanding,

and stereotyping by both parties, Asian students often experience their friendships with Americans as superficial and less than gratifying. Interaction with fellow nationals, therefore, becomes essential for the psychological adjustment of international students. Being exposed to an unfamiliar environment and immersing themselves into a new culture usually causes constant anxiety in international students. However, enclaves that the international student forms with fellow nationals can provide the student with some stable and intimate relationships that allow intimacy, congeniality, interdependent reliance, and validation for one's cultural identity and values, which tends to facilitate better adjustment in international students (Church, 1982; Cross, 1995).

Academic Concerns

The educational system of the student's home country may differ drastically from that of the United States. A variety of challenges are inherent in learning in a foreign educational system. Due to issues such as language proficiency, social-cultural background, and educational style, many international students reportedly confront different degrees of difficulty in class activities, for instance in understanding lectures, taking notes, asking questions and participating in class discussions, and writing papers. Outside the classroom, international students may spend more time than their American counterparts on study and preparation (Lin &Yi, 1997). International students who are strongly motivated to succeed in their academic pursuits may choose to spend long hours on schoolwork, which would in return limit their involvement in campus activities, reduce social interactions with other American students, and at times cause relationship difficulties with their significant others.

Factors Affecting the Level of Adjustment of International Students

In the previous section, the commonly experienced adjustment problems of international students were examined. This section will focus on factors that may affect the process of adaptation in international students: cultural distance, individual differences, gender and marital status, coping behaviors, and help-seeking and attitudes toward counseling.

Cultural Distance

According to Hofstede (1997), culture is defined as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (pp. 260). Culture, which is learned rather than inherited, functions as a guideline for social norms and individual behaviors. Cultures around the world vary in many following aspects: the individual's relations to the society and authority, conception of self—particularly the concepts of masculinity and femininity. They also vary regarding norms for dealing with conflict, the control of aggression, and the expression of feelings and care. Lack of cultural understanding can cause miscommunication, unpredictability, and feelings of confusion, anxiety, and irritability.

The phrase "cultural distance" refers to the assumption that the more the home culture of visitors differs from that of the host culture, the more difficult the adjustment will be (Church, 1982; DeArmond, 1983). A number of researchers have examined cultural distance as a significant determiner of adjustment of international students. Individuals from Western cultures are consistently found to adjust more easily and be more socially involved with U.S. nationals; whereas Asian students report the greatest adjustment difficulties, in terms of both severity and number, and are the least socially

involved with the host culture (Brislin, 1981; Church, 1982; Razavi, 1988; Spaulding & Flack, 1976). The effect of "cultural distance" on intercultural contact between international students and U.S. nationals was validated in Kishimoto's (2006) study, which examined the factors associated with U.S. students' intercultural contact with international students. The results of the study revealed that U.S. students were more accepting and reported more social contact with students from Latin America than those from East Asian. In turn, the East Asian students were more accepted and interacted more with U.S. students as compared to students from the Middle-East.

Individual Differences

A number of researchers have examined personal variables that may affect adjustment in international students. Gardner (1962) suggested that people who adjust well to different cultures are those with well-integrated and extroverted personalities, good social and communication skills, and sensitivity to others' needs and feelings. Adler (1977) concluded that individuals with cultural sensitivity, resilience, and clear self-identity are more able to adjust to and serve as mediators and advocates between multiple cultures. Church (1982) conducted a comprehensive review of research of international students and concluded that other individual differences, such as previous travel experiences, personal flexibility, increased modernism, sociability and assertiveness, and more realistic personal goals and expectations of other cultures, may facilitate the process of adjustment. Kim (1988) indicated that openness and resilience are positively correlated with favorable cross-culture adaptation. Openness is manifested in the individual's ability to be open-minded, extroverted, tolerant of ambiguity, and empathetic towards others.

Resilience is characterized by such traits as internal locus of control, persistence, and resourcefulness.

Among East Asian international students—the group that consistently reports great adjustment difficulties—there are particular individual differences that predict adjustment ability. Cross (1995) found that neutral/ positive attitudes toward stressors and situations, social-cultural competence, assertiveness, and direct coping skills are the strongest predictors of adjustment in East Asian international students. Swagler and Ellis (2003) conducted a series of studies on Taiwanese graduate students in the U.S. Consistent with previous research results, participants in the studies almost unanimously identified the language barrier as their most severe adjustment problem; however, the researchers also noted that, regardless of actual language ability, participants who were confident in using the English language skills that they had already acquired reported more social interactions with Americans, which led to better adjustment. Swagler and Ellis (2003) thus concluded that self-confidence in English fluency, as opposed to actual English fluency, was the more meaningful variable for adjustment in international students.

Poyrazli (2001) examined the role of assertiveness, academic experiences, and academic self-efficacy in the psychosocial adjustment of international graduate students. The results of this study revealed that international graduate students who were more assertive reported higher levels of academic self-efficacy and better adjustment. Poyrazli suggested that assertiveness was positively associated with being more proactive in initiating academic interactions and asking for academic help (i.e. utilizing campus

resources, asking a professor or classmate about academic information) which, in turn, leads to higher academic self-efficacy.

Gender and Marital Status

While research on the adjustment of international students is now extensive, findings on gender differences and marital issues are limited and mixed. Lee, Abd-Ella, and Burke (1981) indicated that female international students experience more social isolation, feelings of powerlessness, and a wider range of adjustment problems relative to their male counterparts. In the study by Manese, Sedlacek, and Leong (1988), female international students reportedly perceived adjustment to American university as more difficult, were less confident and more easily discouraged, and were less likely to act on strong beliefs or assume leadership. Wilson (1996), however, found no significant differences between male and female East Asian international students in overall adjustment. Poyrazli's (2001) study, focusing on international graduate students, found that male graduate students reported higher levels of loneliness than females, but did not investigate gender difference in students' level of general adjustment.

Matsui (1988) conducted a qualitative study on female international students from Japan and the People's Republic of China to understand their perceptions of the impact of gender on their experiences in higher education abroad. A number of factors, including country of origin, marital status, familiarity with feminism, field of study, and living arrangements, were examined to differentiate these females' experiences in adjustment to American universities. The results indicated that the Japanese females were more familiar with American feminism; however, under the enormous pressure of traditionally designated gender roles, they felt forced to behave in a "feminine" way while living in

their home country. On the other hand, the political emphasis on gender equality in Mainland China seemed to have had created a social atmosphere that perceived and treated females in higher education as "genderless intellectuals." In addition, factors such as marital status and living arrangements were significant in relation to the adjustment for these females. Single women, especially those from Japan, reportedly enjoyed greater mobility and freedom. Primarily due to economic concerns, females from Mainland China tended to live with other Chinese students and reportedly had fewer opportunities to socialize with Americans and other international friends.

Chang (2004) conducted a qualitative study of marital relationships of Taiwanese international students in the U.S. Several themes were in evidence for the students such as changes of lifestyle, feelings of emptiness, anxiety, and insecurity, marital life difficulties independent from families of origin and lack of resources. The results also revealed that when the difference between the acculturation level of husband and wife widened, the couple reported more marital conflicts and decreased martial satisfaction.

Coping Behaviors

Coping behavior can be defined as the attempt, either cognitive or behavioral, to control an external or internal demand that one perceives as stressful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Individuals differ in their cognitive appraisals of stressors, such as what events are considered as stressful and what behaviors are deemed as culturally appropriate; individuals' cognitive evaluations then determine how they would like to respond and cope with the perceived stressors. Factors that may affect individual differences in the cognitive evaluation of stressors include personal variables (e.g.,

previous experiences), social norms (e.g., gender roles), and cultural differences (e.g., Confucianism and collectivism).

A study by Schwartz (1988) examined coping behaviors among different college student groups. The results indicated that Chinese students were more easily stressed by academic concerns and tended to cope with problems by changing or refining their own behaviors (e.g., study habits, time management); among American students, relationship problems were the most reported stressors and they tended to manage them by manipulating the environment (e.g., negotiation). Schwartz concluded that cultural background plays an important role in the identification of stressors, evaluation of the stressors, and choice of coping responses.

Chataway and Berry (1989) investigated the coping behaviors commonly employed by Hong Kong international students, French-Canadian students, and English-Canadian students. They indicated that coping responses among these students were significantly different in two areas. First, the English-Canadian students were more likely to engage in tension reduction activities (e.g., eating, drug use, and physical work out) than the other two groups. Second, the French-Canadian students engaged in more positive thinking than the Hong Kong or English-Canadian students to reframe their perception of problems and to motivate themselves to accept and/or adjust to the problems.

Help-Seeking and Attitudes toward Counseling

MacCalla (1979) noted that the personality structures and cultural backgrounds of international students were significantly associated with the use of social support. Research indicates that the use of host national support, as opposed to co-national

support, was the best predictor of successful adjustment of international students (Brein & David, 1976; Schram & Lauver, 1988). A study by Boakari (1984) found that Taiwanese international students reportedly feel more comfortable and willing to seek host national support than Korean students.

Komiya and Eells (2002) investigated predictors of international students' attitudes toward seeking counseling services; the results revealed that being a female, feeling comfortable with emotional expressions, and having had prior counseling experiences were associated with more open attitudes toward seeking counseling. Yi, Giseala, and Kishimoto (2004) examined the utilization of counseling services of international students. In their study, those students who sought counseling for personal issues tended to be older, male, and graduate students. The most frequently expressed concerns of the international graduate students were depression, time management related to academic performance, and relationships with romantic partners.

A number of researchers have indicated that Asian international students were less open to seek counseling than American students (Tracey, Leong, & Glidden, 1986; Pedersen, 1985) and were more likely to terminate counseling prematurely (Flum, 1998; Sue & Sue, 1985; Tracey, Leong, & Glidden, 1986). Leong and Sedlacek (1986) compared the preferences for counseling sources between international students and U.S. students; however, they reported that international students were more likely to seek help from faculty members and counselors for a variety of issues (i.e. education, career, emotion, and social relationships). American students, in contrast, were more comfortable seeking help from friends and their parents. The authors of the study suggested that having left families and friends back home, a number of factors (i.e., the short length of

stay in the U.S., language barriers, cultural differences, and social isolation) could make it hard for international students to establish the personal and social networks that could provide the kind of support resources they need. These factors may explain why international students prefer to seek formal services provided by the school rather than turn to their friends in the U.S. or their families and parents back home.

Research on Chinese International Students

Matsui (1988) wrote that very little research had focused on Mainland Chinese international students. There was a thirty-year period of academic isolation between the U.S. and the People's Republic of China after War World II due to the lack of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Since the government of Mainland China opened its doors to academic exchange in 1979, thousands of Chinese students have come to the United States to pursue higher education and conduct research (Huang, 1997). The number and the range of research projects dealing with Chinese international students gradually expanded over the past three decades.

Many previous studies on Chinese international students have focused on individuals coming from Hong Kong and Taiwan (Swagler & Ellis, 2003); both of these two entities can be distinctly distinguished from Mainland China in terms of their economic, political, and cultural systems. Due to the greater influence of Western culture in Hong Kong and Taiwan, differences arise between the students from these areas and those coming from Mainland China (Swagler & Ellis, 2003). For example, Taiwanese and Hong Kong students appear to be less traditional and more friendly and receptive toward American culture and attitudes. Taiwanese female students are also reported to be

more ambitious in personal career pursuits compared to Mainland Chinese female students (Ihle, Sodowsky, & Kwan, 1996).

Mainland Chinese students tend to major in hard science fields, such as engineering and life science, and their academic and scholastic aptitudes are widely recognized in U.S. educational and research systems (Huang, 1997; Orleans, 1988). Sue and Chen (1997) examined the adjustment of Mainland Chinese students to American culture and identified three major areas of difficulty in their adjustment experiences: lack of language proficiency, limited cultural awareness and understanding, and academic concerns due to the different teaching and learning styles of the education systems in these two countries. Chen (1996) interviewed five Asian (mostly Chinese) female students and reported that these female students usually felt like outsiders in American culture and perceived their lack of language proficiency as handicap that affected their social adjustment and self-esteem. These female students also reported an enormous amount of loneliness as they had little or no social support in the new country, and academic pressures and limited language skills made it awkward for them to form new friendships.

Conclusions of Literature Review

Although Asian international students share some similarities, there are significant differences among subgroups of these students. Studies of Asian international students should take into consideration variables such as nationality and gender, for a more complete knowledge and understanding of these students. Given the prevalence of Chinese international students in U.S. universities and the paucity of literature regarding the adjustment of female international students in general, the researcher of this study

sought to learn more about the issues that affect the process and experiences of Chinese female international students in adapting to American universities, culture, and society. The next chapter presents the theoretical considerations providing the basis for the research procedure that was used, as well as the specific procedural steps that were incorporated in this study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Ethnic minorities have been historically underrepresented in psychology research. It has been increasingly apparent that individual worldviews inevitably vary as a result of diverse cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. As a trend, psychological researchers recognize that they need alternative research methods with which to study minority groups, in order to reflect the actual experiences, perceptions, and behaviors of individuals who may come from backgrounds very different from those of the researchers (Leong, 1995; Gelso & Fretz, 2001). New research methods must consider the subjective meanings of experience for individuals, instead of focusing on what researchers themselves define as meaningful. Since the researcher of the present study had an aim of understanding how Chinese international graduate female students make sense of their experience of adapting to life and study in the United States, the research paradigm of phenomenological psychology was deemed to be the most appropriate methodology.

The overall purpose of this chapter is to present the methodology that was used in the study to investigate the adapting process of contemporary Chinese female graduate students living in the United States. This chapter is composed of three parts: The first part briefly introduces the current state of phenomenological psychology research, the second part describes the procedural steps taken to collect and analyze data, and the third part summarizes the results of the bracketing interview.

Phenomenological Psychology

Phenomenology arose out of a growing dissatisfaction with a philosophy of science that focused exclusively on studies of material things, a science preoccupied with causal relationships and predictions and that failed to understand both “the experiencing

person and the connections between human consciousness and the objects that exist in the material world" (Moustakeas, 1994, p. 43). Edmund Husserl is generally considered to be the father of phenomenology, which he saw as a foundational science underlying all of the sciences and emphasizing subjectivity and discovery of the essences of experience to provide a logical, systematic, and coherent methodology (Hein & Austin, 2001). Contrasting sharply with the traditional scientific method of understanding human experience and perceptions through pre-theories, hypotheses, and testing, phenomenology proposes a return to reflecting the phenomena themselves as they actually appear. Phenomenological researchers believe that "only knowledge that emerged from internal perceptions and internally justified judging could satisfy the demands of truth" (Moustakeas, 1994, p 46).

Phenomenological psychology is a branch of psychology that incorporates the insights of phenomenological philosophy (Hein & Austin, 2001). Meaningful experiences are considered the basis of all knowledge regarding human perceptions, judgment, and behaviors. The fundamental concept of phenomenological psychology is the belief that individuals do not exist separately or independently from the world, but are always "involved and participate in the world in a dynamic and engaging way" (Hein & Austin, 2001, p. 3). The most basic task of phenomenological psychology is to analyze the concrete descriptions of experience obtained from individuals. The universal structures of experience, or "essence," for general groups of people are thereby revealed (Valle & King, 1978).

To understand a particular phenomenon, phenomenological psychology researchers attempt to approach an individual's experience and life as carefully as

possible, making every effort to be aware of and set aside their pre-theories, biases, and all knowledge related to the studied phenomenon. The process in which the researchers set aside their own pre-theories and biases is referred to as "bracketing," which can be described as a series of self-reflecting cycles that will never reach a completely pre-suppositionless point. By uncovering their own presuppositions and questioning them, researchers can clearly advance their understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Hein & Austin, 2001; Eckartsberg, 2003). Giorgi (1981) explains this method:

> Bracketing means that one puts out of mind all that one knows about a phenomenon or event in order to describe precisely how one experiences it… [Husserl] introduced the idea of the phenomenological reduction, which after bracketing of knowledge about things means that one is present to all that one experiences in terms of the meanings that they hold out for consciousness rather than as simple existants. (p. 82)

This means that in phenomenological psychology, researchers do not describe human experience in terms of what they already know or assume they know, but they describe specific human experiences as they are presented to our observation and awareness.

In phenomenological psychology, researchers obtain knowledge related to human perceptions and behaviors through participants' descriptions of their experiences in a living world. A phenomenological interview uses the words of participants themselves to center on experienced meaning. Phenomenological researchers do not focus on "objective" descriptions of research participants' actions and behaviors. Within the context of a phenomenological interview, the research interviewer approaches the process

with an attitude of respect, making clear to the participant that his/her individual understanding of a phenomenon is what interests the researcher. The participant is viewed as the final authority concerning his/her own experience (Pokinghorne, 1989).

Procedures of Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

Data collection in the present study was conducted in a three-step process. In the first step, the researcher participated in a bracketing interview. Next, the researcher recruited and selected appropriate participants for the study. Finally, the researcher conducted phenomenological interviews with research participants. Each of the three steps will be discussed below.

Bracketing Interview

The purpose of the bracketing interview is to allow the phenomenological researcher to become aware of his/her pre-existing experiences, ideas, and expectations regarding the phenomenon under investigation. By engaging in careful and thorough self-reflection, the researcher attempts to set aside assumptions about the phenomenon under study, seeking to be "as open and receptive as possible to participants' descriptions of their experiences of the phenomenon" (Hein & Austin, 2001, p. 6). It is crucial for the objectivity of the phenomenological study that the researcher is able to listen closely to the actual descriptions of the research participants and perceive the reality of world as a pure phenomenon for the participants. Valle and King (1978) suggest bracketing should be accepted as an infinite process in helping researchers approach the goal of acquiring a transcendental attitude toward the phenomenon under study. Bracketing is a dynamic

procedure; some presuppositions are discovered and bracketed first, then other presuppositions come to the surface to be further bracketed, and so on.

Before conducting any interviews with the research participants, the researcher of this study participated in a bracketing interview conducted by an experienced phenomenological researcher. In the course of this interview, the researcher discussed her own knowledge and experience regarding Chinese female students and their adapting process while studying and living in the United States. This interview was audio-taped, transcribed verbatim, and submitted to an interpretative group for analysis.

Participant Selection

The number of participants used in a phenomenological study is not nearly as important as the variety and quality of the descriptions provided by those interviewed (Polkinghorne, 1989). It is crucial, though, that all of the participants have experienced the phenomenon under study. Thomas and Pollio (2002) suggest that an appropriate sample size for phenomenological research will range from six to twelve participants when there is thematic redundancy and no new information seems to emerge from the narratives of participants. According to the authors, “If redundancy is evident after hearing the narratives of six participants, the researcher may decide that it will not be necessary to interview an additional four or six” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 31). The selection of participants is suggested to be based on three main criteria: (1) They have experienced the phenomenon being studied, (2) They are willing to share their experience, and (3) They are articulate enough to describe it (Polkinghorne, 1989). In the present study, the primary investigator followed all the criteria described above in the process of recruiting, selecting, and determining the appropriate number of participants.

In terms of recruiting, the principal investigator identified participants by talking to several Chinese female students in Knoxville, Tennessee and Atlanta, Georgia who knew other Chinese female students in these two areas who fulfilled the criteria and were interested in participating in the study. During the initial contact with potential participants, the researcher explained the purpose and procedures of this study and addressed issues of confidentiality and informed consent. When individuals agreed to participate in the study, the researcher arranged for the interview at a mutually agreed upon time and place.

Prior to recording each interview, the researcher provided the participant with an Informed Consent Form for documentation (see Appendix A). The researcher addressed and answered any questions regarding the nature of the research, the purpose and procedures of the audio-taped interview, and confidentiality. Participants were informed that (a) they were free to participate and to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalties, (b) they could request the tape recorder to be turned off at any time and/or request that the tape or any portion thereof be erased, (c) the transcript would be reviewed by the researcher and researchers of a phenomenological research group, (d) their confidentiality would be preserved by researchers who were bound by the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2002), (e) they may request a transcript of their interview or a copy of the tape of their interview, and (e) they may contact the researcher if they had any questions regarding the research.

Thirteen participants were interviewed for the present study. At the time of the interviews, nine participants were living in Tennessee, one participant was visiting

Tennessee, and three participants were living in Georgia. All of the participants were graduate students and they ranged in age from 24 to 35 years old. The length of their sojourn in the U.S. varied from 18 months to four years. At the time of the interviews, five participants were enrolled as doctoral students, five were in Master's-level programs, three had recently graduated with Master's Degrees and one of them was actively looking for a job in the U.S. and one was in the process of applying to doctoral programs. The demographic data of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Phenomenological Interviews

All of the participants were asked the same open-ended question: "Please tell me in as much detail as you can, regarding being a female and originally from China, your process of adapting to your study and living in the United States." Participants described their experiences in their own words. The interviewer only asked follow-up questions regarding themes and topics that were introduced by the participants. In order to best understand a particular phenomenon recounted by the participants, the interviewer made every effort to avoid introducing any of her own assumptions, biases, or knowledge she had regarding the investigated phenomenon.

All of the thirteen interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. After participants verified the accuracy of the transcript, all identifying information was eliminated and pseudonyms were used in place of real names in the transcripts. In terms of language used in the interview, the researcher encouraged participants to use English as the primary language. Participants occasionally used their mother tongue, Chinese, when they felt a need to better describe their experiences. When

Table 1.

Demographic Data of the Participants

	Participants (Pseudonym)	Age	Marital Status	Length of Living in the US	Length of Studying in the US
1	Mei	27	Married	1 1/2 years	1/2 year
2	Lan	29	Single	4 years	3 1/2 years
3	Pin	35	Married	3 1/2 years	2 years
4	Ying	25	Single	2 years	2 years
5	Fei	24	Married	1 year	1 year
6	Na	24	Single	1 1/2 years	1 1/5 years
7	Hong	29	Married	4 years	3 years
8	Ling	27	Married	2 years	1 year
9	Bai	33	Single	3 1/2 years	3 1/2 years
10	Yun	30	Single	4 years	4 years
11	Hao	30	Married	6 years	6 years
12	Mong	31	Married	3 years	2 years
13	Yo	29	Single	2 years	2 years

encountering any Chinese responses or expressions, the researcher first translated them into English during the process of transcribing, and then the participant was invited to examine the accuracy of transcribing. After the transcripts were made, the original tapes were numerically coded to protect anonymity and were erased after the completion of the study.

Data Analysis

After the transcripts of the interviews were prepared, the researcher brought the transcripts to a phenomenological research group to be analyzed. With the help of the research group, the researcher developed a thematic structure for each transcript and then an overall thematic structure for all the research participants.

Following Giorgi's (1985) recommendations for data analysis, the analysis of the transcripts was accomplished in four steps: First, the researchers in the research group read over the entire transcript to get an overall sense of the whole statement; second, after the general sense of the subject's description of her experience had been identified, the researchers went back to the beginning of transcription and identified "meaning units" as the focus of investigation; third, the researchers examined these meaning units and identified the psychological insights gained from them, with primary attention given to the meaning units relevant to the phenomenon under study, and last, the researchers combined the meaning units obtained from the transcripts into a consistent statement regarding the participants' experiences. The procedure of data analysis described above was repeated until each transcript had been thoroughly analyzed. At the end of data analysis, the researchers developed a whole thematic structure that included the themes and subthemes common to all or most of the participants regarding their personal

experiences of the investigated phenomenon. This final structure, rather than representing the experience of a particular individual, stood as the essence of the phenomenon: the adapting process of these 13 Chinese international female students in their studying and living in the United States.

Results of Bracketing Interview

The results of the bracketing interview consists of a description of the researcher's own experience and perceptions of contemporary Chinese female students' adapting to their studying and living experiences in the United States. The researcher, originally from Taiwan, is a doctoral student majoring in Counseling Psychology at the University of Tennessee. At the time of the interview, the researcher had studied and lived in the host country for five and one-half years. Language compatibility allowed the researcher to have intensive interactions with Chinese female students on several college campuses in the states of Tennessee and Georgia, because Chinese is the official language for both Mainland China and Taiwan.

Before interviewing any research participants, the researcher engaged in a bracketing interview, which was conducted by an experienced phenomenological researcher who belonged to the phenomenological research group mentioned earlier. In the bracketing interview, the researcher was asked the following question: "As a female originally from Taiwan, could you talk about your impressions of Chinese female graduate students and their adapting while studying and living in the United States?" The bracketing interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The transcript was then brought to the phenomenological research group to be analyzed following the method suggested by Giorgi (1985). After analysis, one ground and six

themes emerged from the bracketing interview. The ground was Psychological Strength, and the five themes contextualized within the ground were the following: (a) Visa and Financial Difficulties, (b) Language Skills, (c) Networking, (d) Dating, and (e) Food.

In the next section, the ground, themes, and subthemes of the bracketing interview are described. The results sections of phenomenological studies typically consist of sequential presentations of each ground, theme, and subtheme that emerged from the transcript. Each of these is presented by naming it first and then briefly describing it. After each ground, theme, or subtheme is named and described, excerpts from the verbatim transcript are presented which are illustrative of the individual ground, theme, or subtheme.

It is emphasized that in this dissertation, each illustrative example is presented *verbatim*. Frequently, there are grammatical errors in the women's English expressions. Despite these challenges, the meaning and intent of the women's responses are clear.

Ground: Psychological Strength

According to the researcher's observations, Psychological Strength represented the context of intellectual and mental capability that had enabled many Chinese female students to effectively deal with the many challenges in their lives and studies abroad and to quickly adapt to their new environment. The researcher described her impressions regarding the exceptional intellectual and academic abilities of these students.

> Many of the Chinese female students that I have personally known are very intelligent and competitive. I would believe that most of them have been the top students in their entire school life. I have noticed that for women who came here by themselves, their personalities usually show a lot of strength, very competent and independent. Just by talking to them, I often can feel a lot of confidence coming out from them. I have met a few of them that could be kind of intimidating. They were so confident that I could tell that they must have always

> been the most competitive students in their life. And I am sure they knew they were good.
>
> For those who come here with an F-2 visa, which means they come here as the spouse of international student. For women with an F-2 visa, most of them have at least a bachelor's degree in China, so they are eligible to apply for graduate school here. A lot of them would apply for graduate school, shortly after they arrive in the US, maybe one year or two after they got here.

The researcher talked about the high degree of resilience she had observed in her Chinese female student friends. She discussed some of the reasons she believed may have contributed to the mental and emotional stamina in this group of women.

> I also noticed that they often have a sense of toughness. Because they are intelligent and capable, a lot of them have been expected by their parents and others in their life to do well in school and everything. And for people to study abroad, to live in another country, they just have to get tougher. Besides, compared to other East Asian female students, Chinese female students really have to rely on themselves more. For example, international students are not allowed to work outside of the campus. In addition, as you know, sometimes the stipends of our assistantships are not enough to cover our monthly expenses. So, for those of my friends who are from Taiwan, Korea, and Japan, their family usually can send them some money for support, if they have a financial difficulty. But Chinese female students really have to rely on themselves. I think that's also a reason that contributes to their toughness….
>
> Because of the financial and visa issues, it is harder for Chinese students to go back home regularly or to have their parents to come over and visit. Sometimes, they feel like a leaf, flowing, or floating, in another country. They have to help themselves to be strong and stay strong, in order to grow their roots on this land.

Theme One: Visa and Financial Difficulties

The first theme, Visa and Financial Difficulties, encompassed the researcher's perceptions of the immigration issues and economic problems often encountered by Chinese female students. First, she discussed the level of difficulty facing people from China who apply for American visas.

> There are a lot of Chinese people who want to come to America. Even though America wants and needs Chinese scholars and outstanding students to come here

> to help the technology, research, and economics, they also control the number of Chinese people that are coming in this country each year. So American government only gives Chinese students six months for a valid visa, which is a very short period of time. Many Chinese students are anxious about going home. They want to go home and visit so much, but they are anxious about it as well, because sometimes there could be a good chance that their visa application can be rejected, and they may never come back to the U.S. again, especially when the relationship between China and American is in tension.
>
> And, a lot of time, it is hard for Chinese parents to come here to visit their adult children. First of all, it could be a lot of money for them to buy air tickets to travel here. Secondly, their visa application could be rejected easily. Let me give you a personal example. My parents can come and visit America anytime they want. My friends who are from Japan or Korea can have their parents to come and visit them anytime if their parents want to come. But like last year, when my husband and I got married in the U.S., we wanted to invite both sides of our parents to come here for our wedding and for them to meet each other. Unfortunately, my parents-in-law were rejected twice when they were applying for the American visa. It was very sad. It was hard for them to apply for American visa. First, they had to take a train for 18 hours to get to the American embassy in Beijing, stayed there one night, and waiting in a long line in the cold weather the next morning. We prepared a lot of legal documents, invitation letters, and family pictures for the visa application. But they were rejected twice by the American embassy and they didn't know the exact reason of the rejection. So it is just hard for both the Chinese international students in the U.S. and their parents at home to travel and visit each other.

Second, due to American immigration laws that prevent international students from working off-campus, and that limits them to twenty hours per week on-campus work during the semester, many of these students experience economic difficulties. The researcher was aware of these regulations and discussed the financial difficulties and related issues that some Chinese female students have encountered while studying and living in this country.

> Some Chinese female students would get pregnant while they are in study. For those who choose to have babies, after the baby is born, sometimes their parents would come and visit, in order to take care of the young mother and the baby for a few months. Their stay is usually six-month long, because of the visa limitations. But, at the end of the visit, the student's parents would bring the baby back to China. Because first, it is very hard for international students here to keep up with

> school while taking care of the baby. And more importantly, with their tight financial status, it is extremely hard, if not impossible, for the young student couples to find a nanny or day care for some extra help, or even to pay things for the baby here. And you know these international students are not allowed to get a party time job for extra money. So they usually have to send the baby back to their own parents who are still in China…. To me, it feels very sad and heartbreaking.
>
> But when the children get older, like three years old or above, then the students may bring them back to the US, because older children are easier to be taken care of. They don't need so much attention like infants do. So there are a lot of sadness, loneliness, and a long period of separation from the babies, Chinese female students just have to have a high tolerance for all of these difficulties, if they choose to have babies in their study.

Theme Two: Language Skills

The second theme, Language Skills, reflected the researcher's awareness of the relative strengths and weaknesses in the English language skills of the Chinese students.

> Another difficulty for Chinese students could be their English ability in communications…. On the one hand, they told me that their English teachers in middle school and high school probably were not very well trained, so Chinese students' English pronunciations are not always very accurate. That could make it hard for others to understand them, especially at the beginning. On the other hand, most of my Chinese student friends speak English with some British accent. That was how they learned English. So I guess they probably need more time adjusting to the American accent when they just get here. And it takes others longer time to get used to their English as well. So for Chinese students, their oral English is not as good as other students from other Asian countries. However, they usually have a big, huge, tremendous vocabulary. Among the East Asian students, Chinese students always have the highest average score of GRE and TOFEL. My friends told me that they prepared for those exams for a long time. Sometimes, they started their preparation for those exams at the first year when they entered college.

Theme Three: Networking

The third theme, Networking, conveyed the researcher's descriptions of how Chinese female students develop strong interpersonal networks and effectively utilize resources in their living environments.

> My other impression about Chinese female students here is that they are very exploratory, flexible, and resourceful…. They are very good at learning ways to interact with their environment. They are very good at building a strong social, interpersonal network, which includes other Chinese students- and there are Chinese students everywhere on the U.S. campuses- and also Americans, like their professors, colleagues, peer students, or people at church. They seem to be comfortable at asking help from others when they need some help. I see them as very flexible people. They take initiatives and get themselves familiar with their community. That could be a very important thing when they were looking for jobs, or financial aids while in school. That's something I value so much, it is really their strength. For example, they often are good at getting information like: coupons, discounts, sales, promotions, free stuffs, free meals, et cetera. Well, as you know, graduate students almost always have tight budgets, and Chinese female students are good at gathering this kind of information and share it with each other. I am from Taiwan, and I also know other female students from Taiwan, Korea, or Japan, those East Asian countries. I noticed that Chinese female students usually are just more resourceful and exploratory compared to the other groups.
>
> Another reason that there is this strong interpersonal network among Chinese students is probably because they get together and socialize with each other a lot. And when new students just arrive, they don't have a car, so they would set up a time with other students who have cars and do grocery shopping together every week. They help each other. And sometimes they go out together and visit different places on the weekends for fun and to relax, like Smoky Mountain, and other areas.

Theme Four: Dating

The fourth theme, Dating, reflected the perceptions of the researcher regarding the phenomenon of romantic relationships for the participants. Gender issues within the context of dating and marriage were also briefly discussed.

> For female students who came here with an F-1 student visa, many of them came here single, not married. It is interesting to see who they date here. It is interesting to see the dynamics of dating in the Chinese student group. A lot of Chinese male students would go back home and bring a wife here. Therefore even though there are more males than females in the Chinese student group here, a lot of times, it is difficult for Chinese female students to find a suitable Chinese mate here. Of course Chinese males may have some difficulties in finding a suitable girlfriend here as well, but many of them would go back home to marry. I have heard that, especially for those from the country areas in China, going to the US is still a very attractive thought, because it usually means that one's material life can be

> significantly improved. So, many women in those areas would like to come over here. On the other hand, I am guessing another reason that Chinese men like to go back to marry someone there is that they can marry a woman that is less intimidating, in terms of their educational level, intellectual ability, and psychological strength.
>
> I have observed some Chinese females who spent a lot of time on finding appropriate males to date. These females could date Chinese male students, students from other countries, or local American males. Compared to that, Chinese male students usually only date the females from their own culture.

Theme Five: Food

The fifth theme, Food, conveyed the primary investigator's perceptions of the role food plays in many Chinese international students' foreign lives.

> Often time when I am socializing with my Chinese student friends, the topic of food would come up in our conversation a lot. I think, China, this country, loves food so much. Chinese people often get very upset when they come to the U.S. and realize that it is hard for them to get oriental Chinese food here, because, almost always, Chinese food here has been adapted to the American taste.
>
> Chinese people enjoy talking about food when they get together. They talk about where to get the specific ingredients and how to make the specific dishes that they used to have at home. They learn cooking in their leisure time here. Many of my friends had never cooked when they were in China, because their parents cooked for them or it is just very easy and affordable to buy food in China. They didn't have to learn how to cook. But now, a lot of them have become good chefs, because they have to learn how to cook in order to satisfy their stomach.
>
> When I visited China in November, 2004, I was amazed by the food they have over there. In the restaurants, their cooking is amazing, in terms of cooking skills, the taste, and the presentation. It was just amazing, so delicious, and so beautiful. Some people say Chinese food is oily, but I think that is a stereotype. The food I had in China was so pretty, so colorful, so creative, and so delicious. Wow, just a lot of great varieties.

The goal of this bracketing interview was to enable the researcher to become aware of her own pre-existing ideas regarding the adapting process of Chinese female students as they live and study in the United States. To sum up, a ground and five themes emerged from this bracketing interview. Themes that emerged from the transcript were:

(a) Visa and Financial Difficulties, (b) Language Skills, (c) Networking, (d) Dating, and (e) Food. These five themes were contextualized within the ground of Psychological Strength.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to provide a description of the adapting process and coping skills of a group of Chinese female graduate students in the U.S. Thirteen women were interviewed and were asked to describe their process of adapting to living and studying abroad. The researcher audio taped and transcribed verbatim each of the interviews. All of the interviews were conducted in English. Quotations from the transcripts used in this chapter include the exact grammar used and word choices made by the research participant. A sample transcript is presented in Appendix B.

This chapter includes an introduction of the participants and their interviews, an overview of themes that emerged, and an in-depth description of the thematic structure obtained from an interpretive analysis of the interview data. Quotations from the interviews will be used to illustrate the themes and sub-themes that emerged. All identifiers, including names, places, and universities, have been either removed or changed in order to protect the participants' confidentiality. When short quotations are used, they are included as part of the text. When longer excerpts are needed, they are offset from the text, single spaced, and indented. The statements of different participants are separated by a double space. In some instances a portion of an interview is omitted if the investigator determined it was irrelevant to the overall meaning. Deletions made within a sentence are indicated by three ellipses. Otherwise, participant quotations are presented verbatim from the transcripts. In the next section, a description of the participants and their interviews will be presented.

Description of the Participants and Their Interviews

Thirteen females originally from China who had the experience of studying in the U.S. participated in this study. At the time of the interviews, nine participants were living in Tennessee, one participant was visiting in Tennessee, and three participants were living in Georgia. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 35 years old. The length of their sojourns in the U.S. ranged from 18 months to four years. At the time of the interview, five participants were enrolled as doctoral students; five participants were progressing in Master's level programs; three participants had recently graduated with a Master's Degree and one of them was actively looking for jobs in the U.S. and one was applying to doctoral programs. In the following presentation, each participant has been assigned a pseudonym in order to protect her confidentiality and to more finely portray her experiences.

The first participant of this project, Mei, was in her mid-twenties at the time of the interview. Mei accompanied her husband, who was then an international student also from China, to America. She shared her initial impressions of America, including the layout of the cities and its diverse populations and cultures. She talked about some of the difficulties in making the transition to this country. Mei shared an array of coping strategies that she utilized in her adapting process.

Lan, the second participant, was in her late twenties at the time of the interview. She came to America for her graduate studies. Lan discussed her initial adjustment process as a foreign student. She was aware of her improvement in the English language and her significant personal growth during the past few years. Lan shared her experience in exploring her career interests. She talked about her decision to change her major to a

field that was completely new to her and her family. Lan also discussed some differences between the educational systems and cultures of China and America.

Pin was the third participant of this study. She was in her early thirties during the interview process. Pin also came to this country to accompany her husband, who was an international student. She discussed learning about the English language and American culture at a local church and about the differences in the teaching styles she observed in her own country and America. She also expressed her strong belief in education. Pin revealed that she had a child under three, but that due to financial pressures, she and her husband were forced to send the baby back to China to stay temporarily with Pin's parents.

The fourth participant interviewed, Ying, was a single female in her mid-twenties. Ying discussed her experiences during the two years she was applying to American graduate programs. Ying also talked about the complex process of her application for an American student visa. She spoke about the many reasons she wanted to stay in the United States. She discussed some of the economic and political disparities existing between the societies of China and America. Ying encountered two major crises during her first year of doctoral study and described how she struggled through and finally overcame those obstacles with faith, determination, and optimism. Ying was very aware of the emotional distress and relationship issues that many single Chinese female students, including her, would experience during their studies abroad.

Fei, the fifth participant, was in her mid-twenties, married, and had one child. She had lived and studied in the United States for one year at the time of the interview. Fei initially expressed great confidence in her own adaptability and explained the factors that

had contributed to her successful transition. Fei later disclosed that she had had several panic attacks, which were the result of being completely overwhelmed by schoolwork. Fei talked about the various resources she had utilized to cope with stress and anxiety; she also developed a healthier lifestyle. Fei was aware of some differences between life in China and the States. She briefly discussed the reasons that she believed made her Chinese friends interested in emigrating to the United States. Fei explained that technology, such as the internet and web cameras, had been tremendously beneficial in connecting her with her parents still living in China.

The sixth participant interviewed, Na, was a single female in her mid-twenties. At the time of the interview, she had been living and studying in the U.S. for one and a half years. Na was aware of many difficulties in her adjustment to the life and study in a foreign country. The difficulties were primarily related to her limited language ability, age, gender, personality, and career concerns. She described the coping skills she had utilized to reduce her feeling of loneliness. She discussed feeling a strong sense of pressure, which derived from the fierce competition among the Chinese student population. Na also discussed the gender issues in friendships and romantic relationships faced by female students of her nationality. She talked about the reasons she wanted to return to China once she finished her studies.

The seventh participant interviewed, Hong, was in her late twenties, married and without children, when she participated in the interview. She had been living in America for four years and studying in a graduate program for three years. Hong discussed her abrupt decision to move to the U.S. to attend to her student husband. She discussed her emotional distress in the first year of her new life; she was aware of the identity crisis that

many international student wives undergo. Hong talked about several factors that impact how Chinese international students choose new majors or professional fields in the States. Hong also described the process of adjusting to her own graduate studies and profession. She discussed the efforts she made to balance family life and professional obligations. Hong also discussed specific issues of friendships and intimate relationships faced by Chinese students away from home.

The eighth participant interviewed, Ling, was a married female in her late twenties. At the time of the interview, Ling had lived in the U.S. for two years and studied for one year. She described in detail her adjustment process in the U.S. Ling was observant and discussed many cultural differences, primarily regarding interpersonal relationships, between China and America. Ling discussed the question of whether she and her husband should stay here or go back to China in the future. Ling was also aware of the common financial concerns and reduced socio-economic status for Chinese international students when they immigrate to the U.S.

The ninth participant interviewed, Bai, was a single female in her early thirties. Bai talked about what drove her to pursue a doctoral degree in the U.S. She discussed the intricate process of applying for an American student visa. Bai observed the many social, cultural, and interpersonal differences between China and America. Bai expressed a strong interest in learning English and American culture and considered it her mission to share Chinese culture with her new international and American friends. Bai adjusted well to her life as a student in the U.S. She was appreciative of the solid financial support provided by her department. Bai discussed some awareness of the issues confronting women in male-dominated professions.

The tenth participant interviewed, Yun, was in her late twenties at the time of the interview. At that point she had lived and studied in the U.S. for four years. Yun discussed her thoughts and feelings related to the inconsistent advising system in American graduate programs. Yun described the difficulties in the initial stage of her stay here; she received limited support and had few friends here, unlike her very positive experiences in China. Yun was aware of many cultural differences and language problems that could hinder Chinese students in their efforts to form close relationships with American students. Yun discussed the personal growth she had experienced during the past few years.

The eleventh participant, Hao, was a married female in her late twenties. She had studied in the U.S. for six years at the time of the interview. Hao discussed in detail her process of refining her command of the English language. She talked about some personal qualities that enabled her to adapt to American culture, including flexibility, curiosity, sociability, determination, and being proactive. She discussed her personal and professional growth. Hao was aware of some of the advantages and disadvantages of being a woman in her profession. She also compared the social and educational phenomenon of China and America.

The twelfth participant, Mong, was a married female in her early thirties. Mong discussed the language barriers in her personal life and professional world. She discussed the difficulties of adjusting to her new marriage. She talked about the work restrictions imposed by immigration laws and the resulting negative effects on her marriage and herself. Mong also revealed that she had sent her baby son back to China because of her

financial predicament. Mong was aware of some of the cultural differences between her home country and America.

The thirteenth participant interviewed was Yo, a single female in her late twenties. Yo explained that she felt very confident at the beginning of her academic life in the U.S. She attributed it to her solid language skills and previous work experience in China. Yo discussed the many activities that she engaged in to enrich her life as a student. Much effort had been put into her schoolwork and job search. Yo discussed her frustrating experiences in searching for a job after graduation. She was aware of many of the gender issues confronting international students.

In summary, descriptions of the participants and their interviews were provided to distinguish each of the participants and to provide a better understanding of their academic experiences in the U.S. Within the context of describing their adapting processes in the U.S., participants discussed their reasons for coming to the U.S., their preparation, and various pressures of residing in the U.S. They discussed their awareness regarding language issues and cultural differences. They talked about their values, achievements, and struggles within the American higher education system. They processed their expectations and concerns about their future careers. Some of them shared personal experiences and observations regarding what it is like for a woman, whether single or married, to live and study in a foreign country. In the next section, the ground and themes that emerged during the phenomenological interviews will be presented and discussed.

Phenomenological Analysis

The experience of adapting to the life and study in the U.S. for Chinese females was described by thirteen participants. Six themes and a ground were revealed as the result of an interpretive analysis using a phenomenological method. The six interrelated themes emerging from the analysis were: (1) Coming to America, (2) My English Ability, (3) Things Are Different Here, (4) My Study, (5) Relationships, and (6) Being a Woman. Themes that emerged in this study were contextualized by the ground of Adapt Over Time. A detailed outline of the themes is presented in Figure 1.

The thematic structure of the results is presented in Figure 2. The figure represents the six major themes of the experience of adapting to life and study in the U.S. for Chinese female graduate students. The major themes are contextualized within the frame of the ground, Adapt Over Time. They are arranged so that no one major theme stands out as more central than any of the others. The dashed lines linking the themes emphasize how each theme relates to the others. The ground that contextualizes the themes is also present and represented by the outer circle. The process of adapting to foreign academic life, as experienced by the participants, is more dynamic than a graphic structure can depict. Aspects of each of these themes were present at various moments throughout every interview, although the importance of each of the six themes fluctuated. Since the ground set the stage for understanding the six major themes, it is presented first. Following the presentation of the ground, the six main themes will be reviewed and discussed.

Outline of the Themes

Ground: Adapt Over Time

- *A.* When I First Arrived
- *B.* What I Had to Do to Help Myself
  1. Keeping a diary.
  2. Keeping myself busy.
  3. Talking to myself.
  4. Support by husband and family.
  5. Help from friends.
- *C.* Now I Feel…

Theme One: Coming to America

- *A.* Why I Chose to Come to America
- *B.* Preparing for the Language Exams/Applying for Graduate School
- *C.* Applying for a Visa
- *D.* As a Spouse of an International Student
  1. I lost my independence.
  2. Money was a problem.
  3. I sent my baby back to China.

Theme Two: My English Ability

- *A.* My English Was Not Good
- *B.* How I Improve My English

Theme Three: Things are Different Here

- *A.* Compare the Two Cultures
- *B.* Americans Like to Talk
- *C.* Collectivism vs. Individualism
- *D.* Different Lifestyle
- *E.* Food
- *F.* Without a Car

Theme Four: My Study

- *A.* Teaching/Advising Styles
- *B.* Education Is Very Important in Chinese Culture
- *C.* I Work Hard and Do Well in School
- *D.* Study Is Hard Here
- *E.* I Don’t/Didn’t Like My Major
- *F.* It Was Hard to Change A Major in China
- *G.* Pressure from Parents
- *H.* How to Choose a Major
- *I.* There Are Many Limitations

Figure 1. Outline of the Themes

Outline of the themes (continued)

Theme Five: Relationships

- *A.* Friendship
  1. It is hard to make friends here.
  2. With Chinese friends.
  3. With other international students.
  4. With Americans.
- *B.* Dating and Getting Married
  1. Marriage is a big issue.
  2. Whom to date.
  3. Relationship concerns.
- *C.* My Marriage
  1. Responsibilities/Sacrifice as a wife.
  2. Difficulties in my marriage.
  3. Connecting with my family.

Theme Six: Being A Women

Figure 1 continued.

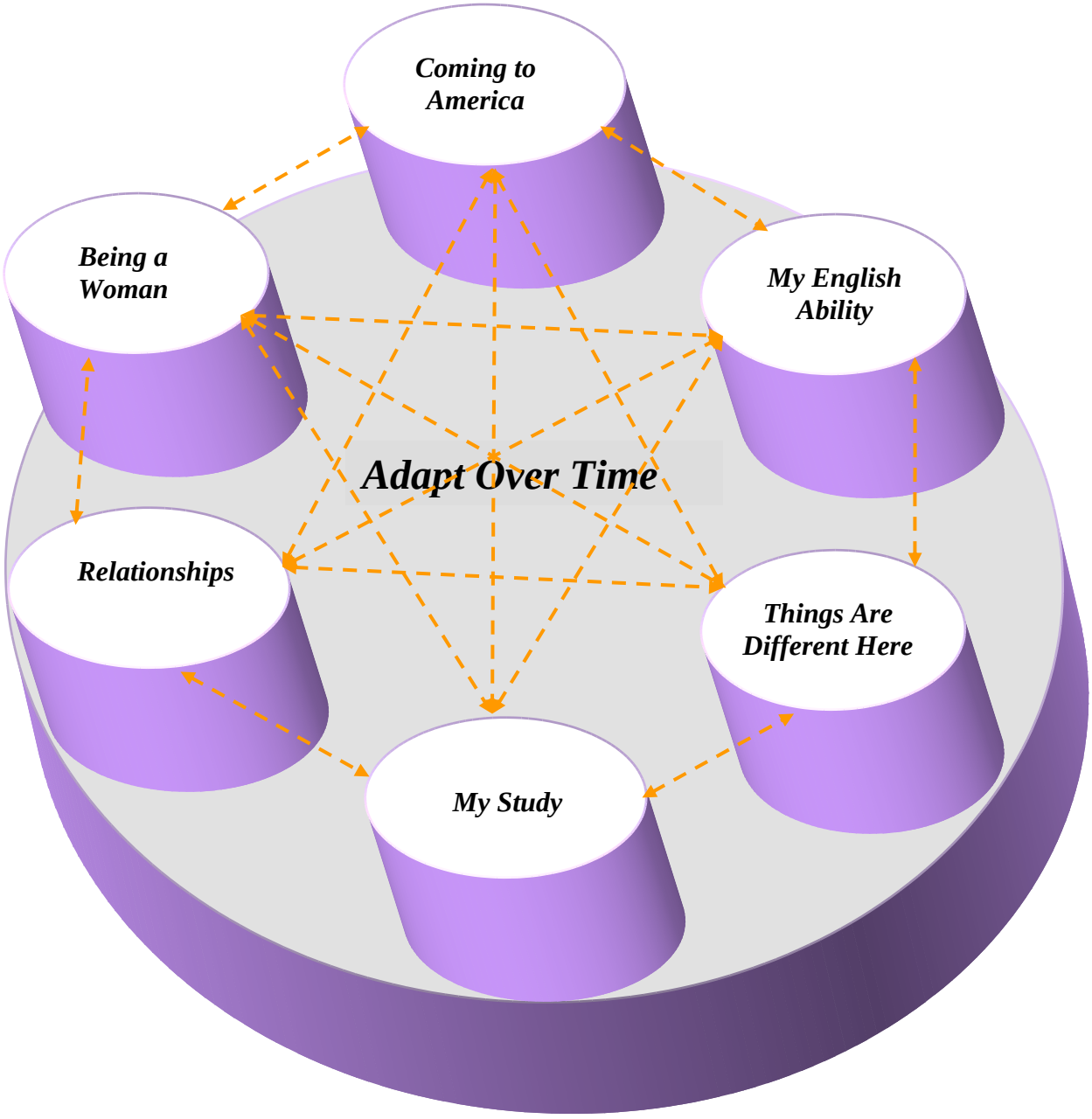

Figure 2. Thematic Structure of 13 Chinese Female Graduate Students' Adaptive Experience in Studying and Living in the United States

Ground: Adapt Over Time

The ground of Adapt Over Time provides the context against which the themes of the experience of sojourning in the United States become figural. The participants' experience of studying and living abroad was characterized by adaptations that occurred over the passage of time. Adapt Over Time represents the context of time and its continuous flow where the participants' perceptions of themselves and of their host country changed throughout their sojourning as they encountered new experiences and a wide range of challenges. For example, one of the research participants stated that she liked the wording of the research question asked at the beginning of the interview: "It's good that you used the word 'process' because it meant I am still experiencing the adaptation, which is exactly true" (Ling). Another participant began her interview with the following statement:

> Mong: In 2001, November 24, I arrived in America. It has been three years now. I want to talk about some difficulties that I have been experiencing after I came here, about how I adapt to a new country and a new life in these three years.

In the context of Adapt Over Time, participants described their initial impressions and different reactions to the host country when they first arrived. They explored and applied various coping strategies to overcome feelings of loneliness, helplessness, anxiety, and loss of self-confidence. They evaluated their current adjustment status and personal growth through the sojourning process with the passes of time. The Ground, Adapt Over Time, described by the participants was characterized by three subthemes: (a) When I First Arrived, (b) What I Had to Do to Help Myself, and (c) Now I Feel….

When I First Arrived

Most of the research participants in this study described their first encounters with the host country. Two of the participants, who originally came as spouses of international students, reported feeling excited and were satisfied with their new lives in the host country. They were aware of the comfortable natural environment here such as the fresh air and the spacious and beautiful city layout. They were aware of the diversity of ethnicity in this country. Without the pressures of study, these two female participants were able to enjoy the excitement of living in a country new to them.

> Mei: I remember clearly the first day that I came here. I was so excited about the views before my eyes…. The view here is very different from the cities in China. The buildings here are very high. China has a lot of populations. But here, it is not that crowded. There are not that many people on the road. The houses are big and beautiful. And the air is very fresh. That is the most important thing to me. The air is very fresh. The sky is very blue. Everything was new and fresh to me. So I just felt very excited about the new surroundings. People here have different skin color. There are black people, white people, and people from many other countries. The only feeling I had at that moment was excitement.

> Ling: I still remember that when I just arrived here, everything was beautiful in my eyes. At that time, I only came to accompany, to stay with my husband, who is also a graduate student at our school. At that time, I didn't have to experience any pressure from school or socializing with people from different cultural background or ethnicity. At the very beginning of my stay here, life seemed wonderful. The American friends that we had were all very nice. Because of my background, I am a Christian, and most of my American friends were Christians, we shared very good friendship. I think our friendship facilitated my adjustment in living in the US.

One participant stated that by contacting and talking to other Chinese students who were already studying and living in the States, she had learned a great deal about the new environment before she even arrived. She believed this had helped her to anticipate and better prepare for the cultural shock and psychological distress that international students would typically encounter at the initial stages of their sojourning.

> Fei: My friends have told me that the graduate study in the US would be more intensive than the undergraduate study in China. The study here would be much, much harder, they said. They said the cultural differences, the cultural shock, could be a problem. They said maybe you won't like the food here. Also, the environment here is very different from China. Of course I was not sure which city I would go to. And someone told me that maybe the city I was going to could be below my imagination…. But, maybe it was because I had prepared myself psychologically for moving to an American country place for study, I didn't think there were too many differences, not many unbalances for me. Before I came in, I had already known some students here. They gave me many help after I arrived here.

Most of the participants who came as students reported feeling lonely shortly after they first arrived in the host country and its new environment. They found it difficult to live by themselves because the new environment was very different from their home. Some of the examples of difficulties relate to the style and taste of food, means of transportation, and intense feelings of loneliness resulted from the lack of social support at the initial stage of their sojourning in the United States.

> Lan: When I first landed at this foreign country, my first feeling was: I was so lonely there, since this country was totally unfamiliar to me, and the buildings and the food, and all the things around me were so different. Since I arrived here by myself, I had to do everything by myself to set up my life here, like I got to rent an apartment, and I needed to buy a bicycle to commute between school and my apartment. I think the starting point was the most difficult time for me. Loneliness was my primary feeling when I first arrived here.

> Yo: Of course everybody would experience some loneliness, after moving to a new country. I remember when I first came to [name of her complex] in an afternoon. I moved all the stuff into my room, without a bed. So the first night, I slept on the floor. I didn't have a standing lamp but a small desk lamp. That's the only lamp I had for the first night. I felt really bad that night. I cried. I asked myself, "Why would I come all the way to this far-away place and stay in this shabby little room to do the study?"

> Yun: When I first came here, I found it very hard to live here by myself. When I was living in China, I had a lot of friends and everyone was very friendly. When I came here, it seemed that everyone was so busy. They didn't really spend time with me to help me get used to here. But fortunately, there was a Chinese guy in my lab. He took me to do some grocery shopping when I just arrived, so I could

> have something I needed in my apartment. But for the rest of that month, I was actually alone, all by myself. I felt very lonely. I didn't have any friends.

The When I First Arrived sub-theme focuses on the initial experiences of the research participants when they began their sojourns in the U.S. The women from China were excited and satisfied with their new environmental surroundings. One participant shared that talking to and learning from other students from China was very helpful in getting her through the initial state of her sojourning. However, loneliness was a significant negative aspect of their early days in the host country. Several of the research participants talked about their intense feelings of loneliness and how they worked through these emotions.

What I Had to Do to Help Myself

After experiencing the initial feelings of excitement and/or loneliness, the Chinese female students in the present study gradually started to encounter a variety of challenges in their studies and daily lives in the new country. For example, one of the participants, Mei, experienced a significant drop in self-confidence shortly after her initial feeling of excitement receded.

> Mei: With the time going on, I was not excited anymore…. I became very nervous about everything around me, including sleeping at night. It may sound ridiculous, but it was true…. I was not good at speaking English at that moment, so I felt very lonely. I couldn't communicate well with other people and find a good friend, and I couldn't do what I would like to do. I could do nothing. I just stayed at home…. if I was in a trouble, I had to ask people for help…. I could not express myself well and other people could not understand me…. I was very sad and disappointed at myself…. I lost my confidence and my courage… I became not willing to talk to other people….On the one hand was that I wouldn't want to ask other people for help. The other hand was that I had to ask them to do me a favor when I was in a trouble. Hence, I couldn't find a balance between the two aspects. Hence, I just got loneliness and unhappiness… it was really depressing. It's like you were in a dead road... I couldn't find a way out…. But I realized that I could not be like that anymore….

The research participants encountered many challenges in their sojourn that will be described in detail in later sections. The focus here, however, is on these Chinese female students' adapting process in resolving self-conflicts and relieving their sense of loneliness and isolation during the period of sojourning. The various coping strategies these participants utilized to better adjust to their academic pursuits overseas included: Keeping a Diary, Keep Myself Busy, Talking to Myself, Support by Husband and Family, and Help from Friends.

Keeping a diary.

Many participants in this study kept a diary, noting the times when they were struggling with feelings of loneliness, isolation, helplessness, and hopelessness. One of the participants, Mei, experienced a significant drop of self- confidence shortly after she lost her initial feeling of excitement.

> (Mei) I wrote a lot in diary to release my depression. It was a very good and efficient way. In the diary that I wrote, I found, actually I could have a strong strength and lots of hope in my mind. The deeper I dug into my mind, the more I found a real world in my mind…. I struggled with myself. It was very hard to be in a struggle with yourself. It was very difficult for a person to do that. People say that, "Our biggest enemy is ourselves"… I had to try my best to find a way to get rid of that situation and to find a better place for myself. That was my goal.

Like Mei, another participant also kept a diary as a way to express her feelings of loneliness in living in the host country. "At that time, I felt it was hard and lonely, so I kept writing a diary," said Lan.

Keeping myself busy.

But shortly after this initial period of adjustment, the participants shifted their focus onto schoolwork and research to distract themselves from both boredom and loneliness.

> Lan: Several days later, I stopped keeping a diary. I bought new textbooks…. I studied. I put my majority of time in studying. Since this is a different country, I have to work hard to gain my self confident in this country and in the program here.
>
> Mei: I gave myself a good schedule and supervised myself to study hard for applying for graduate school and to work hard. Since then, I felt more sufficient and not vulnerable.
>
> Yun: It was not all about loneliness. It was like…. I had nothing to do and nowhere to go, so I had to go to my lab to do research. Even though I didn't want to study, I still went to the lab…
>
> Na: Keeping me busy is the key…. That's another way of distracting myself from loneliness…. I started to stay in my lab working most of the time. When you are busy, you don't feel loneliness.

Talking to myself.

Many participants emphasized positive self talk when discussing how they overcame their challenges of studying and living abroad.

> Ying: You always have to tell yourself, each time you have to be calm, to find a way to solve your problem. But if you couldn't, you have to tell yourself, "Everything is fine. Maybe this way doesn't work. We can find another way." You can't just let yourself be desperate.
>
> Mei: Sometimes I wanted to quit that job, it was so tiring. But I told myself: "I can not quit. If I cannot insist in this job, I will quit any job easily." Anytime when I face difficulties in the future, I tell myself don't give up. It was just a testimony. Now I became more independent than I used to be. It was like a training that helped me to gain strength.

Support by husband and family.

One thing that was conspicuous in regard to the problem of isolation was that, compared to single females, who reported experiencing more loneliness in living in the host country, married participants often stated that they had gained substantial support from their husbands and families.

> Mei: Another reason that led me to change was my husband. My husband gave me a lot of encouragements. I know he is very busy everyday, but he still saved time to stay with me and talk to me. He gave me a lot of encouragements. That was very important.
>
> Pin: I was pregnant, but I don't think it was a hard time for me. Since I was living with my husband, we took care of each other. Also I often called my parents on phone and got their advices about pregnancy. They gave me some suggestions and information about how to take care of myself and the baby. They told the kind of food I should eat. The kinds of things I should do in pregnancy, like taking a walk every day.
>
> Fei: My husband was very helpful as well. I learned many things from him. He came to the US earlier than I did. He helped me to adjust to my stressful study life… my family also gives me a lot of support.

Help from friends.

Utilization of social support was a crucial factor in determining these Chinese female students' adaptation level in the U.S. Most participants talked about the substantial help and psychological support received from their friends.

> Pin: Sometimes you would feel a little lonely, in addition to your studying and preparing for exams. But the students and friends in the church... they would take me to the church and attend some English and Bible studying classes. These activities enriched my life in that period of time.
>
> Fei: Before I came in, I had already known some [Chinese] students here. They gave me many help after I arrived here…. If I wanted to buy grocery, they would take me to the grocery store. They have cars. They would take me to places that I needed to go…. I tried to spend a few hours every day to hang out with friends, go shopping together, visit them at home, etcetera. Talking to people really helped me to release my stress.
>
> Yo: In my spare time, I tried to socialize and make friends here. I joined the Chinese student association here at [name of her university], and I found it a good place to make Chinese friends…. We organized shows and gathering programs for everybody to join and enjoy. That helped me to relieve my loneliness living in the United States.

In addition, one of the participants, Fei, had experienced panic attacks as a reaction to school stress. Referred by her medical doctor, she sought help from the counseling center

on her campus and learned to better take care of herself and to manage stress more effectively.

> Fei: One day, after I came back to my apartment, I noticed I couldn't concentrate. It drove me crazy. I couldn't focus on anything. I was so nervous. I couldn't calm down. I couldn't talk or think. My hands and legs got numb. I was shaking, and I started to have difficulty in breathing…At first, I thought there must be a problem with my heart. So I went to the student clinic to check for my heart and the doctors told me there was no problem with my body. But the doctors there asked me to go and see a psychologist. So I went to see the psychologist at the counseling center on the campus. I went to the center every week to talk to the psychologist. She was very patient. Even though I had recovered after talking to her for only a few weeks, I was still willing to go to talk to her, just like talking to a good friend. It was very helpful… In the process, by talking to the psychologist and some Chinese friends here… I learned to live for myself… now I have learned to enjoy my life, instead of pushing myself to work all the time.

Now I Feel …

The third subtheme of the ground Adapt Over Time is Now I Feel…. Participants in the present study discussed and evaluated their personal growth in the experiences of sojourning. They felt that through the process of fighting against and overcoming the many challenges of living in a foreign country, they had experienced significant self growth, especially enhanced psychological strength, maturity, and self reliance.

> Fei: Now I feel that I have adapted to life here totally. Like I said at the beginning, I have always believed I have good coping skills.

> Yun: One thing I have noticed is that, in the past, when I faced some difficulties or troubles, I would always ask friends to help. I would think, "Who can help me with this problem?" rather than thinking, "What can I do to solve this problem?" But now, I would always ask myself to solve the problem first, if not, then I would ask people to help. So I have become more and more independent. It is a good thing for me. For example, in the past, when I was moving, I would not move the boxes and stuff by myself. I would wait for my guy friends to do that for me. But now, I would spend one week to move the stuff by myself, little bit by little bit. I would not ask help from others, if that is not very necessary….I feel that I have become more independent now.

> Mei: That is what I have come to realize…. If you need to let yourself cheered up, you have to cheer up yourself. Don't rely on other people's help. That is the true help that you need. What you need is yourself, only yourself. People have to be independent, and confident. So this is the process how I became more independent than before. Even though I have been here for a short time, compared to some others who have stayed here for several years, I had gone through a lot of experiences…. I feel like myself again. Now I think, no matter what will happen in the future, I will be optimistic and confident in facing it, keeping trying. I don't give up, forever.

> Hong: I have become more and more comfortable talking to others about my personal feelings and thoughts to my friends. I guess maybe that's because I have got used to the U.S. culture. I am changing…. I think it is a dynamic process. When people get into a new environment, they learn, they explore, and they change. I feel I have changed. I have learned to become more open now. I have many friends now.

Several of these participants discussed their thoughts and beliefs on how to adjust well to a new environment and culture. They described the keys to adjusting well in a foreign country to be openness, reaching out, believing in oneself, being intentional, and taking the initiative.

> Bai: I think it is very important to open your mind to accept and try new things in a new environment. You can't isolate yourself. If you need help, just ask for help. That's very important. Since you are living here, you should talk to people here and interact with them. You have to try on new stuff here. Don't say, "Oh, this is different from what I used to have, so I don't want to try it." That's not good for yourself. Many times, things have no good or bad. They are just different.

> Hao: I always like to tell new students that it will be helpful and important to take initiatives. It is very important. Do what you think is important and stick to it. Different people would have different ways to do things. But it is important that you believe in yourself, do it, and do it right…I also think self confidence, being willing to change yourself, to be open and accept problems are very important for one person to adapt to, or to establish a new identity in the U.S. Otherwise, you will fall down. Also, keep thinking, keep analyzing is important. Keep recalling what you have done, and establish things on your past experiences and accomplishments. One person has to learn from his past.

To conclude, the ground of Adapt Over Time reflected the different stages of the participants' sojourning experiences and included three subthemes: When I First Arrived,

What I Had to Do to Help Myself, and Now I Feel …. In the second subtheme, What I Had to Do to Help Myself, the participants employed a variety of coping strategies to overcome their psychological distress, including Keep a diary, Keep myself busy, Talking to myself, Support by husband and family, and Help from friends.

Theme One: Coming to America

The first main theme, Coming to America, encompassed the participants' experiences and perceptions of moving to and residing in a foreign country. Participants described their own reasons for sojourning in the U.S. They discussed the process of applying for American visas, graduate school admission, and financial aid. They were also aware of various challenges and emotional difficulties that they experienced when they encountered a new culture and an unfamiliar environment. The Coming to America theme will be presented relative to the following four subthemes: Why I Came to America, Preparing for the Language Exams/Applying for Graduate School, Applying for a Visa, and As a Spouse of an International Student.

Why I Came to America

Eleven out of thirteen of the participants in this study discussed their reasons for moving to and residing in the U.S. when they were asked to describe their adaptive process in living and studying in the U.S. Eight of the participants emphasized that sojourning in the U.S. has been a valuable experience and a great opportunity. They often began their description of their reasons for sojourning as a quest to expand their cultural experiences and worldview, to be a student again, and to acquire quality education in the U.S.

> Mong: I enjoy staying here. It's a good choice that I have come to American. If I were still in Shanghai, maybe I would just be a boring working female. But here, I

could make friends, I could do study again which is what I have always wanted to do.

Hao: I am curious about different cultures. That's why I came here at the first place. When I graduated from college in China, I felt that, "Mmm, maybe I want to see more than China." That's why I came to the United States. I think the cultures between China and America are very different. I want to understand them.

Bai: I would like to talk about why I came to the U.S. The reasons are, first, I could get a PhD. here. The quality and reputations of the graduate education in the U.S. are probably the best in the whole world. Many of my classmates, both from my high school and my college, have come to the U.S. for study before I did. I learned that their experiences in the United States have been pretty good. So I decided to come here too. I decided to pursue a higher degree, because I wanted to do something that would be more challenging. What I did before I came to the U.S. was some kind of technical work, and that was not very challenging. I thought I would like to have a career that would be more challenging. So this is the first reason why I wanted to pursue a PhD. in the U.S. The second reason was that I wanted to gain more life experiences. It seemed very interesting for me to go abroad and live in another country. I would have more experiences. Lifetime is too short. I wanted to have some different experiences in addition to my career. Actually, I did. I have seen different backgrounds of people here. Now I speak a different language. It is a totally different land, as beautiful as my home country, China, is. Third, as a person from China, if I can get a job here after I graduate, I probably could make more money than if I worked in China. That's also very important for me, because I would like to travel to other countries and cultures. So if I can get a job here, I will have more chances to travel to many different places in the world.

Some participants discussed the social and economic opportunities that supported their reasons for studying in the U.S.

Hao: I think there are more job opportunities for females in this country, because they have laws that protect racial and gender minorities, and disabled individuals. So this country is a better place, compared to China, when it talks about genders at work…I think female engineers get more respect and opportunities in the United States.

Ying: I have to say, it is a very good opportunity for me to learn more about a foreign language, and to experience how different lives are in China and in America. Also, it is a good chance to live up. In China, we don't have that many opportunities to reach a good life. But here it gets a lot of opportunities. I think to

> come to America is a very good opportunity and a good experience…. I would want my children to live in a stable and developed country. If you have an opportunity to live in America, you would want your babies to be born in this country… They have better education. They have better opportunities in many ways.

Three of the six married participants described their primary motive in sojourning was to accompany their husbands, who were international students and arrived in the U.S. before their wives.

> Mong: I came here to reunion with my husband; I was an F-2.
>
> Pin: I came to the U.S. in 2001. Now it has been three and half years. For the first year, I was a dependent of my husband, who was studying here… My visa type was F-2, since my husband had an F-1 visa. With an F-2 visa, I can stay in the U.S. as long as needed.
>
> Hong: I came here as a dependent of my husband. I was an F-2. I am talking about our visa type. International students hold F-1 visas. I was a dependent of an international student, so I had an F-2 visa… I wasn't prepared to come to America. Not like many other people, who knew they were coming to America for a long time. I came here in a rush. My husband suddenly decided that he wanted to come to America and he came shortly after he made his decision. So I had to change my plans, quit my job, and follow him to America. I was kind of confused and shocked in the process.

Preparing for the Language Exams/Applying for Graduate School

The second subtheme of the Coming to America theme is Preparing for the Language Exams/Applying for Graduate School. Participants often described their process in preparing for the English exams required by most graduate schools and programs in the U.S., including the Graduate Records Exam (GRE) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOFEL). Many participants also described their experiences applying for graduate programs before they began living in the U.S., or after they had joined their husbands in the U.S.

Ying: I spent two years, totally two years, that much time to prepare to come to America. We have to take GRE and TOFEL, all the applications, and the materials. I spent four months on preparing for GRE. I didn't go anywhere. I just stayed at home and studied for it. For TOFEL, I prepared for it two years ago, but at that time, I was young, I didn't think it was that valuable for me, I didn't pay much attention to it, so I did very badly at the first time. I had to take TOFEL a second time. So, there were a lot of struggles in the preparation.
Pin: I remember that in the first year, I was preparing for the TOFEL and GRE exams, but I was not sure if I could get in the school or not, and if I could get an assistantship or not. If I could get in the school and get the assistantship, it would be a good thing. If I couldn't get in the school or get the assistantship, what should I do here in this country? As an F-2, I could not work. I had no ideas. I was not sure. I was very worried everyday.

Mei: Money was not the biggest problem for us. However I didn't want to give him [my husband] any more pressure and I wanted to earn money, using my brain and my hands. I am a member of the family, so I have a responsibility for the family. I told myself I could do something for my family. I gave myself a good schedule and supervised myself to study hard for the language exams and applying for graduate school.

Hong: I spent time on preparing for GRE and TOFEL to apply for graduate school. One of my friends brought a lot of study materials for GRE and TOFEL with her from China. I came here very soon. I didn't think about preparing for those test materials when I was coming here. I shared the study materials and information with this girl. She also showed me some websites. I got some audio and video information from the websites for the preparation. But most of the time, I studied for the exams by myself. Then I took the GRE and TOFEL, and I got good scores in both exams. After that, before I applied for graduate school, I had to choose a major. I used to teach in university. I have always wanted to do things related to education. I have a strong feeling about education. I want to do something in the education field. I applied for three different programs in the education college.

Ling: …A year later, I started to go to school. I applied for graduate school and was assigned with an assistantship. I thought, "Since I have been admitted to the graduate program and assigned with funding, I should explore this opportunity." Then I started my journey of studying in the U.S.

Applying for a Visa

The third subtheme of the Coming to America theme is Applying for a Visa. Participants often described the obstacles they encountered while applying for an American student visa before coming to the U.S.

> Bai: I had a little hard time to come here at the beginning. My request for American visa was rejected at first. You know, I was upset. I was denied by the American visa officer. But fortunately, I got the visa in my second time of interview. So I came here a little bit later… I was one semester late…at the first time, the reason of the rejection was, well, actually it is something that I still don't quite understand…There are many Chinese students who come to the U.S. to do their schooling every year. But when we have the visa interview, we need to prove that we don't have any intention of immigration, which means we will go back to China after our graduation. But the truth is, more than 90% of the Chinese students don't want to go back after they graduate. The visa officers know it too, and probably they don't mind, because if you don't want to keep these people in the U.S., you just don't give them jobs, and they will have to go back. But if they could find good jobs here, they would stay here…Most people who were rejected by the visa officers got the reason of the result for having immigration intention. The officers would say, "You have immigration inclination," which means you may want to stay in the U.S. after graduation. I was rejected by this reason…. [In my second interview,] I didn't do anything special. I got the same things that were needed for the interview, which included my offer letter, my passport, the I-20 form, and other paper work to prove that I was going to go to school in the U.S. to pursue my PhD, and I got plenty of money, the assistantship. I had proof that my assistantship would cover the expenses of my study here. I got the visa in the second interview…I still got the same school offer. I don't know why the results were different. Maybe, it was only because I met another officer….I guess, the American visa offices have limited offers for Chinese students…It is not because of the applicants, but only because there are too many people applying for the visa. This is my guess. A bunch of students come to the U.S. for school each year. I guess that is why they control the numbers of Chinese students in the U.S.

> Ying: Getting the American visa was also a hard time for me. I was rejected for the first time. The Visa officer just gave me two minutes, and he said he didn't believe I would go back to China after my study. He said, "I think you have to stay in China for more years"… The visa officers don't want you to stay in the U.S. after your graduation. So after he rejected me, I was crying. It was like, after you spent two years working hard to prepare for the exams and the applications, everything seemed ok, and the officer just said, "No, I can't give you the visa." It was very frustrating. But, after twenty days, I went back to the visa office again, I saw the same officer with all the same materials. But this time, I was very

> confident. He just talked to me for one minute this time. He said, "Well, you were rejected by me last time, why you are applying again?" I interrupted him this time. I said, "Yeah, I do think you are a very nice officer, and I am pretty sure I would definitely come back." Then I gave him several reasons, examples of why I would come back to China after graduation. After a minute, he said, "OK. OK. You don't need to say that much. I will give you visa as you wanted"…I told him that I am the only child in my family, so I would definitely come back. But I think this was only one of the reasons I got approved. You have to be very confident…. You have to be prepared for the officer's questions, very specific questions.

As a Spouse of an International Student

A fourth subtheme of the Coming to America theme is As a Spouse of International Student. Participants who initially came to the U.S. with an F-2 visa, which is issued to the spouse/dependent of international students, often noted that there are many pressures and distresses embedded in the initial process of their sojourning in the U.S. as the spouse of an international student. The difficulties include I lost my independence, Money was a problem, and I sent my baby back to China.

I lost my independence.

Several of the married participants perceived a significant loss of personal identity and individual independence after moving to the U.S. as the spouse of an international student. They ascribed the loss of identity and independence to the drastic drop in their social-economic status, as well as to a new gender role in marriage after moving to America.

> Hong: Like the girlfriend that introduced me to the women's group at church, she used to work for a big business company. She was used to a life with her own career. I used to teach in university. Some other women worked for government or in other fields. But when we came here, we felt lost. We felt we had lost ourselves. When we were in our own country, we had our own social and economic status. We would be working, having a stable job, or some of us could be very young and still studying in college. But we have our own social status and personal identity. We were independent women in our own country. But when we came here, in the official paperwork, we are called "dependents of international students." So we have to separate our previous values and identities…I lost

myself. I felt I had to attach to somebody else. I am not myself anymore. I was teaching in a University before I came to America. I loved my job. After I came here, I was aware that my self-esteem gradually went down. I just didn't feel good about myself. I have always liked to do things and make decisions by myself.

Mong: Another experience that shocked me was that I cannot work. When I was in China, I was a senior manager at a human resource department. I had a good salary. At that time that I decided to come here, I just got another promotion. So I had to leave a good opportunity. I had to give it up…When I just came here, I didn't plan to study. I just wanted to look for job. Any kind of job that could let me earn money by myself would be ok. But, because I came here to reunion with my husband, I was an F-2, I had no legal right, no privilege to work. I think that's very bad. I lost my independence because I don't have a job. Because you can't work, you have no opportunity to be independent. You have to depend on your husband. Although my husband doesn't care whose money it is, I think it would be better if I spend the money that I earn by myself. But I could not work…because my status at that time was F-2. So I had to be a housewife, but actually I am not that kind of person, to just stay at home. But I had no choices. This made me feel very unhappy…I had a very good job in China before I came here. But I couldn't even work after I came here. It is sad. I often feel very frustrated by that…I felt upset a lot. I felt I lost self-confidence. I kept thinking, "Why can't I work?" "Why can't I make a living by myself?"

Mei: Because of my status [F-2 visa], I could do nothing. I just stayed at home. It's like you were in a dead road…I couldn't find a way out…I had always been an independent person, but here I felt like a baby, very limited and vulnerable. But I was not a baby. I was an adult. I could not be a baby. I could not accept the truth that I had to be dependent on my husband. I felt very limited. That was the fact, but I could not accept that. So it was very conflicted. I was not myself. It was just not me.

The following participant was particularly aware of the new gender role in marriage that many Chinese women would have undertaken after leaving from their own careers and independent lifestyles in China and coming to the U.S. as a dependent of their student husbands.

Hong: Between husband and wife, even if you are a family now, I believe that you, as a woman, still have to keep your own identity. It is very important. But here, I had to attach myself to my husband. I know my self-confidence went down in that period of time…I was kind of confused and shocked during that period. I didn't know what to do. I often felt depressed in that period of time. I felt very trapped…When we were in our own country, we had our own social and

economic status…We were independent women in our own country. But when we came here, in the official paperwork, we are called "dependents of international students." So we have to separate our previous values and identities. Even if it is a small thing and most people don't pay attention to it, this hurt me so much after I arrived here.

Money was a problem.

Financial aid, such as graduate assistantships and fellowships, was very crucial in shaping these international graduate students' personal lifestyles and family finances. Several participants experienced financial constraints after moving to the U.S.

Ling: Life became very different after I came here, especially money wise. My husband and I are living in a very sparing lifestyle. We always have to stick to our financial plan. We have to expect what would happen in the future and save money for it. I never did it this way while I was in China. I would just spend whatever I earned that month. I didn't have many concerns, especially money wise…many of our friends feel that their social status has moved down as they moved from China to America. Socially and financially, we are moving downward. If we were in China, we wouldn't have to worry about money…Both my husband and I have an assistantship, so we don't really have a big concern about money. My husband and I are doing all right with our finances, especially compared with some of our friends.

Ying: Last year was the hardest time for me in America. For us, we cannot afford the expense of the tuition. As foreigners, we could not borrow student loans either. It was the first big problem for me in the U.S. My department could not pay me for next year or the following year, so I had to find some funding for my study all by myself. But for me, I didn't have any other sources for funding, and I didn't want to tell my parents about the money problem...I didn't want to let this problem bother my parents. If I said something, they would help me, but it would be a very big problem for my family too. So I was struggling during that period, it lasted for half a year, starting from January to August. I was trying my best to find a source for myself.

Pin: My husband was a student at that time. We didn't have a lot of incomes to prepare for the baby's coming… I remember that in that year, although I was preparing for the TOFEL and GRE exams, I was not sure if I could get in the school or not, especially if I could get an assistantship or not. If I could get in the school and get the assistantship, it would be a good thing. If I couldn't get in the school or get the assistantship, what should I do here in this country? As an F-2, I could not work. I had no idea. I was not sure. I was very worried everyday. I didn't know what I should or where I would go. So I just thought, as long as I

make efforts, I should get something in return. So I kept doing things, hoping that my efforts would be paid back somehow.

Mong: When I was in China, I was a senior manager at a human resource department. I had a good salary. At the time that I decided to come here, I just got another promotion…After I came here, I had to face financial pressure. For example, when I was applying for graduate school two years ago, I got three admissions. One of the programs was the top one in that field in the U.S. that year. The other one, a human resource program, was the top three in that field in the U.S. that year. But both of these two programs didn't give me financial aids. Only the program I am studying now gave me financial aids. If I were in China, I would definitely choose one from the first two programs. But because my husband was a student and I could not work, we did not have the ability to take that risk, to pay so much money for so expensive tuition. So I had to give up. This choice will affect me all my life, my whole future…When I was making this decision, I spent a lot of time thinking. I really liked the first two programs. But, I couldn't choose them…My life here is not what I wanted. But I only realized it after I came here. I hope it is because of our financial situation that made me feel this way. I think maybe all of these bad experiences are because we don't have much money. If we have much money, maybe we would see our life here totally different. I hope the money is the main reason. I really hope so. If money is the reason, I think we can change it after both of us get a job. But I am not sure. If money is not the main reason, then I will need to think about my life goal again.

Some participants mentioned that although they did not have financial problems, they were aware that other Chinese students had financial difficulties.

Ling: For some of our friends, money is a big problem. It is like everything they think about, every decision they make is financially grounded. They have to think again and again when they spend money. They have many limitations when they need to buy something, and it is not only limited to big purchases like cars and things like that. It is even harder for married international students, especially if their spouse or even children have come and are staying with them. For those families, instead of having a longer-term financial plan, they just have to think of how they could make it till the end of this month. So I say most Chinese students are moving down in terms of social mobility once they move here. They would not have the same financial insecurity had they stayed in China.

Bai: I think I am very lucky here. I know many Chinese students, or actually international students in general, don't have enough funding to support their studies. They have to struggle and find ways to get the money to pay for their tuition and living expenses. I know I am a lucky one to have enough money for study. I never had to worry about money here. I am very lucky.

I sent my baby back to China.

Two out of the six married participants gave birth while they were in the U.S. In both cases the parents of the women had come to the U.S. to help take care of the new mothers and the babies. When the babies were six months old, both of the mothers decided to send their babies back to China with the grandparents. They ascribed this decision to financial and time constraints for couples when both spouses are international students. They discussed their feelings and thoughts regarding this difficult decision.

> Pin: I got pregnant and gave birth to my baby before I started my graduate study. I sent my child back to China to let her stay with my parents, right before I began my study. There are two major reasons of why I sent her back to my parents. I want my parents to take care of her in China because of the problem of time. You know that school life is very stressful and time consuming. If I study, I cannot take care of my baby. I think it is a good choice for her to stay with my parents in China. My parents can take better care of her than I do when I am still in school. The second is because of the income. As a student, you do not have a lot of money to ask for a nanny to take care of your children, especially in this country. We do not have family here. Our friends are also students themselves and very busy. You have to take care of your children by yourself. But in my country, China, you don't have to worry about money to get your children babysitter…At the beginning, I really missed my baby a lot. But also I believed, and I still believe, this is a good choice for my baby and the whole family life. Since I have this opportunity to go to school, to get good education, I think I should cherish it and hopefully I will get a job. In the future, I do not think I will need to concern about money for raising my child, because I have got good education and I will find a good job to earn money for my child and the whole family. After my husband graduates from his doctoral study, he will get a job too. So, I think we will give our child a very good life. Actually our child is three years old now. I have just finished my master's study. We are planning to bring her back very soon. My parents will visit us once we find a job, and they will bring our baby together. I am very excited. My child will always stay with us from then.

> Mong: I had my son six months ago…My parents came here to take care of my baby, so I could still concentrate on my study. I sent him back with my parents two weeks ago. My husband is not living with me now, and I have to concentrate on my study. Also, my husband and I don't make enough money to hire a babysitter. There is no one here that can help me to take care of my child when I have to go to school. So, because of all of these, I had to send him back to China to stay with my parents. It is difficult for a new mom to send her child to China,

> but I have to now. For the past three years, my only achievement is having my son. I want to earn enough money to get him back to me as early as I can. I don't want to be kept far away from him for too long, if my husband chooses to work in America.

The first theme, Coming to America, encompassed the participants' experiences and perceptions of relocation to America. They discussed their reasons for sojourning in the U.S., the enormous efforts they expended in applying for American visas, preparing for the language exams, and applying for graduate school admission. The married participants were aware of the discouraging changes in their self image and of the variety of difficulties embedded in their marital relationships and family life during their sojourning in the host country.

Theme Two: My English Ability

The second theme, My English Ability, reflected the participants' awareness of the language difficulties that they encountered in the U.S. Most participants perceived their limited English language abilities as a barrier to communication and interaction with the environment during their lives abroad. They discussed strategies for improving their English language skills. The theme, My English Ability, will be presented relative to the following two subthemes: My English Was Not Good, and How I Improve My English.

My English Was Not Good

Participants described the difficulties they faced in communicating and interacting with others due to limited English language facility. Three participants who originally came to the U.S. to accompany their husbands revealed the emotional distress many international student wives, including themselves, had encountered due to the language barrier.

Mei: You know I was not good at speaking English at that moment, so I felt very lonely. I couldn't communicate well with other people or find a good friend…My husband went to school everyday. There was no people around me; only myself. I couldn't talk to other people, because they also had their own things, their own work. So only I could do was staying at home, and try to do something related to America, English, because I was not in my own country, China….I was afraid to deal with everything, anything, personally…For example, if I was in a trouble, I had to ask people for help…I could not express myself well…Other people could not understand me either. What could I do? I was very sad and disappointed at myself. For that weakness, I lost my confidence and my courage. That was a very sad thing.

Mong: When I was in China, I worked as a senior manager in the human resource department. Everyday, I communicated with many people. I had no problem communicating. Even if somebody that was not easy to get along with, I could communicate and make friends with him. But now, because my English is not very good, I often feel very upset when I have to communicate with others…When I just came here, even if I just wanted to go to the bank to deposit money, it was not easy for me to communicate with the teller. I think that frustrated me very much. It was so simple, just making a deposit, but I could not do it well. So it became totally different and very difficult. I feel limited in this environment, because I cannot use the language well.

Hong: These [international students'] wives have language problem. They are afraid of talking to other people, because this is a new country, a foreign country that speaks another language. Some of them can speak English, but they may not be confident enough to talk to many people. Because of the language problem and their social and economic status change, they may feel confused and feel that they have lost themselves.

Other participants spoke about some of the difficulties or inconvenience they experienced in their academic, personal, and social lives due to the language barrier.

Hao: When I first came here, I noticed that my English listening was better than my spoken English. I could understand what was on the TV most of the time, especially news programs. If it was something like soap opera, especially if people spoke very fast, I would have some difficult time following. On the other hand, I couldn't speak very well. It was like my thinking process became very slow when I spoke English.

Na: The first problem I encountered was the language problem…I can still remember that on the second day I arrived here, I met my advisor and several other professors. They talked a lot, very fast and fluently, in English, their own

native language, which I was not used to at that time. That made me very depressed and tired…At school, after I listened to English for two hours, I would feel very tired, because you have to translate English to Chinese at the first moment, and then you reflect what the exact meaning it was…I still can't participate fully in their conversations…it is a little embarrassing for me to be in those parties and conversations.

Yun: Talking to one American is a lot easier than trying to talk among a group of Americans. For example, I feel very comfortable talking to one American. But when I sit in a group of Americans, it becomes very hard for me to catch up their conversation. They speak fast when they talk to each other. They would use slang and other difficult words that I don't know, so I can't understand what they are talking about. If I can't understand what they are talking about, I can't participate in their conversations. So I feel very tense when I am among a group of Americans.

Pin: In the classes, you have to use a lot of scientific terminology. But before I joined this school, I had never talked in those terms. At the beginning, it was very hard to understand the class contents. English is not my mother language. For most international students, English could be a problem. They may understand the general information. But they may not understand the details of contents in class. Because of the language problem, I had to spend extra time studying after class, to read the materials after class and before the class. Especially, at the beginning, I took more time than other students to understand the contents and the new knowledge.

Bai: One thing I don't like about living here is reading. When I was in China, I read a lot, of course in Chinese. But here, Chinese books are very limited. I couldn't find many Chinese books here. As I told you earlier, I wish I could read in English as well as I read in Chinese, but I couldn't…Also, it is still difficult for me to watch and understand American TV or movies. When I watch TV at my apartment, I often have to turn on the caption. When I go to the movie theater, sometimes I don't understand the movie, because there is no caption. I often feel like a blind or a deaf living in this country, because many words are very meaningful for Americans, they know the background and the exact meaning of and behind the word or phrases, but I don't…daily English is ok for me now. But, I can't read a series of books or watch a movie just for entertainment and relaxing. I have to focus, to concentrate a lot to understand language. As a result, I don't get to relax or entertain myself by reading a book and watching TV and movies.

How I Improve My English

While most participants acknowledged that a limited English proficiency could inhibit their personal, academic, and social lives, they were also very active in refining

their language skills. Several of them spoke about their motivations and the great efforts they had made to improve their English.

> Pin: I had some opportunities to talk to some American friends in church. I learned about American culture and language. They also helped me to improve my oral English.
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> Hong: When I first came to the U.S., I was lucky to know one Chinese girlfriend. She introduced me to a local organization…that helps international students to get used to the U.S. I knew an American girl…who was a Master's student in ESL program. My Chinese girlfriend, this American girl, and I often visit each other's apartment once or twice a week. We did things together, like reading Bible, talking about American customs, learning English, et cetera…Even if my English was not so good, I gathered courage to talk to people…
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> Lan: There was a professor in my program, who was from Taiwan. He was very caring towards us, especially Chinese international students. This professor always saw us talking to each other in Chinese, whenever we were in class or after school. When Chinese students get a chance to get together, we would talk in Chinese. This professor didn't like that. Every time he saw us talking in Chinese, he would painstakingly suggest us not to talk in Chinese. He would say, "It is a great opportunity to live in a different country. You should utilize this opportunity to learn English." After he talked to us several time, I realized he was right. So I did what he said. I tried to talk to everyone in English, including my Chinese friends. At the same time, I also got a teaching assistantship. It was a very good experience for me to practice both my English skills and teaching skills. I was learning English from my undergraduate students. Talking to my students and friends in English built up my language proficiency quickly.
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> Bai: At first, when I just arrived here, I was very shy about talking in English. Later, I realized that if you are willing to open your mouth and just speak, you will make progress every day. I think my English is still far from good enough. I wish I could read in English, not only in newspapers or magazines, but some more serious books without any problem…I want to read more books, especially in history and culture…I want to be able to participate in conversations. I want to enjoy having conversations with my American friends…I often couldn't find an appropriate way or word to express myself. I guess that made me shy, and I did more listening than talking. Now, I still don't talk much, but my spoken English is much better now. I won't feel nervous to talk to others in English now, no matter to Americans or to people from other countries. I feel more confident about my English now.

The following participant invested much time, effort, and energy in refining her English language ability. Here are some of her experiences regarding this learning process.

> Hao: I went to see [an English professor] after I got the [oral] test result. I asked him how I could improve my oral English….So the professor told me, the first thing for me was to get to know the names of all the items that I want to use. This was his first suggestion…. I got an illustrated dictionary, which is originally for kids. It has different categories, for example, "supermarket"…The pictures are very helpful for me to get an idea about the vocabulary even if I don't know what they mean…Whenever I went to a supermarket, I tried to connect what I saw in the store with what I had read in the dictionary…The second suggestion he gave me was to watch a lot of TV. So I bought a TV set. He also told me to watch movies in videotapes…He asked me to watch the video with the caption on for the first time, or even with the second time. If you feel confident enough that you could understand the dialogues without the captions, then you can turn it off and watch the whole tape again…His third suggestion was, of course, to interact with local people, like American students, as much as possible. So these were the three suggestions he gave me, and basically I followed all his suggestions…If I read something I didn't know, I came back to my apartment and checked it in the dictionary. That's how I increased my vocabulary. At the beginning, I had to force myself to look into dictionary all the time. But later, it became a habit…Also, the International House on the campus matched us with American students who wanted to make friends with international students and to help them learn about the English language and the American culture. At that time, my roommate and I were matched with two American girls…We would go out to eat and do things together…I used to subscribe magazines, like News Weeks, Times, People, etc. Everyday, I would read out one article, loudly and clearly, to entertain myself. I did that for one year…I also took several undergraduate classes. I took communications classes, because I wanted to know the most efficient way to communicate with others…I also went to the hearing clinic on the campus. They had free English classes for international students…Another thing I did was: when I speak, I would correct my mistake if I notice it. For example, at first, I didn't use: "He is," "She is," "I am," or "You are." I would use "is" for everyone or use "he" and "his" for both genders. Or I often used a wrong tense. Like, if that was a past tense, I still used the present tense. But I tried to be aware of these mistakes. If I said it wrong, I repeated it with the correct tense. For quite a long time, I have been doing it. Gradually, I see the improvements. Now I feel much more confident about speaking English.

The second theme, My Language Ability, reflected the participants' observations related to their English language proficiency. Most of the participants viewed their

limited English abilities as barriers to efficient communication with others in their new environment. The participants also discussed their experiences in enhancing their English ability.

Theme Three: Things Are Different Here

The third theme, Things Are Different Here, encompassed the participants' perceptions of cultural differences between their home and the host country. For example, one participant mentioned that her friends had warned her about the cultural differences between China and the U.S. even before she entered the host country.

> Fei: My friends have told me that the graduate study in the U.S. would be more intensive than the undergraduate study in China. The study here would be much, much, harder, they said. They said the cultural differences, the cultural shock, could be a problem. They said maybe you won't like the food here. Also, the environment here is very different from China…

Participants described cultural traits that they found different or interesting during their lives in the U.S. They also revealed the efforts they made to comprehend and immerse themselves in American culture, that they enjoyed sharing their own culture with their new friends, and their experiences in living in two cultures simultaneously. The third theme, Things Are Different Here, will be presented relative to the following subthemes: Compare the Two Cultures, Americans Like to Talk, Collectivism vs. Individualism, Different Lifestyle, Food, and Without a Car.

Compare the Two Cultures

Participants were aware of the many differences between the cultures of China and America. Several participants discussed their process of comprehending and adjusting to the differences and integrating new changes into their personal lives. The

following participants shared their awareness of living in an environment that is very different from their own.

> Bai: Before, when I was in China, I always thought things were supposed to be grounded in a certain way. That's what I was taught. But here, I learned to see things from different aspects…I automatically compare these two cultures all the time. For example, if I see something that is happening in the U.S., I ask myself whether I see similar things happening in China. If there are, I compare these two things in my mind to see if there are any differences between the two cultures. Even with the language itself. It is very interesting to do comparison between the Chinese language and the English language. Sometimes you can see very funny stuff by comparing these two languages. For example, I told my friends in China that, everything in America is bigger than that in China. In the U.S., people are bigger, vegetables are bigger, even their chick bumps. They call it "goose bumps." But in Chinese, we say it "chick bumps." So I said to my friends, "In America, even their bumps are bigger!"
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> Hao: I think the cultures between China and America are very different. I try to understand them. I attended to celebrate different holidays here like Thanksgiving. I would try to read more about it, like, what is Thanksgiving for, what kind of food they cook on that holiday, and how they celebrate that holiday? I did reading for each holiday. In the Halloween parties that I have been to, even though I was not dressed up as good as the American students, I still went and experienced it with the local people…and you also get a lot of cultural understanding from TV. I watched a lot of TV, videos, movies, especially TV. I watch TV news every day. That has become a habit now. So when I try to talk to other people, I have something new every time to talk about. Like if there is a high profile, like Michael Jackson's case, we can talk about that.
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> Bai: It is very interesting to compare the two cultures. Also, I think American people do know a little about China, but it's really limited. So I am always very happy if somebody here would tell me something he knows about China. I am also very willing to introduce Chinese culture and society to Americans. I wish I could learn more about both cultures…If you live in a place for a long period of time, you may gradually get used to it, no matter good or bad. I have been back to China to visit my parents and family twice already. Every time when I went back, I would feel different about some things in China, in a totally new way. It's like those things had become new or different to me. I mean, after staying here for a while and going back to China later, I would always feel different about something that I used to feel familiar or reasonable when I was living in China.
>
> Ling: I am living in a place and studying in a program where I don't have much backup from my own culture. That makes it a must for me to live well by accepting and immersing myself into this environment…I see some good qualities

> in this culture, but I also see some qualities that I am not used to. But it probably will be the same with every country and every culture, including my own country, China.

Americans Like to Talk

The second subtheme of "Things are Different Here" is: Americans Like to Talk. Many participants were aware that Chinese people and Americans often relate to others in distinct styles. Several of them noted that Americans tend to be much more outgoing and talkative than the Chinese. Self-expression is more emphasized and essential in American interpersonal relationships than in Chinese culture. Some participants observed how these two cultures place different value on individualism and collectivism, and how these cultural characteristics impact individuals' personal and interpersonal lives. Two participants compared the different expectations regarding conversation in China and America.

> Na: Chinese people tend to be more conservative. I was not a shy girl back in China. From my American friends' point of view, now I am a shy girl. Americans seem to talk a lot every day, it's like they can talk for an hour without a pause. Talking is their daily activities. But if you are back in China, if people are strangers to each other, they won't talk to each other a lot. Even with your own friends, if they are reading something or thinking about something, they won't talk much to each other. But here in America, you will hear strangers say "Hello!" to you and they want to talk to you, especially, when you are from a different country.

> Lan: In Chinese culture, if a person is shy, it is OK, it is acceptable. When Chinese people get together with each other, they don't do as much as discussions as Americans. It is very acceptable if you don't talk in a class in China. Here, if you don't talk in your class, or express your opinions to others, people will think either you are timid or you don't understand what they are saying. They want you to talk and express opinions.

Collectivism vs. Individualism

Several participants compared the different emphasis on individualism and collectivism between these two cultures. They also talked about the pros and cons of each interpersonal style from their personal experiences.

> Lan: The difference between these two cultures is that in the Chinese culture, we emphasize on the interdependence in our relationships. But in American culture, they focus on independence, or individualism…For example, people might have marital or interpersonal conflicts…[Chinese people] would try to solve it by themselves, rather than see a counselor, get a divorce, or simply walk away from problems, since they want to maintain things as they originally were, instead of making a big change in people's lives.
>
> Hao: People here are more respected no matter of their gender, age, sexual orientation, or social-economic status, you know. In our case, as long as that is a woman's own choice to pursue higher education, even a doctoral study, nobody would tease her. This is a positive thing of individualism that we should learn from this culture.
>
> Fei: In China, the parents and the whole environment send you the message that you should always work hard and be a successful person. It is like you need to live for other people, not for yourself. In the process [of recovering from panic attacks], I talked to the psychologist and some friends here. I realized that, the life in the states is very different from the life in China. People here don't care much whether you are successful or not. You can explore what you want to do in your life. It was a gradual process for me to realize this difference.
>
> Bai: Here, people have more freedom. Like you can do things in your own ways, and nobody would easily criticize you. You could also interpret it as nobody cares…But I like it, because I feel more freedom in interpersonal relations now. People could do whatever they want as long as they obey the laws. But in China, I often felt too much pressure from other people…Chinese people care more about others' business. For example, you family members, relatives, friends, colleagues at work or even neighbors, would always keep an eye on you, or feelings like that. But here, people are encouraged to have different ideas and to be creative. That is different from China. In Chinese education, children are always taught to follow the authorities, to follow the rules, and behave. They would say: "You can't break the rules. You can't do this. You can't do that. You can't do things in your own way. You have to do it in this certain way only." I was educated in that system for totally 16 years. When I just came to America, I felt very good, because there are less rules here, but more freedom. Maybe different cultures have their own different traditions. I like this flexible side of the U.S.

Different Lifestyle

This is the fourth subtheme of "Things are Different Here." Most participants discussed their awareness of dissimilar lifestyles in China and the U.S. For this group of females, shopping was apparently a crucial daily activity in their lives in China; it was also the most frequently mentioned topic in this section.

> Mong: Another thing about my adaptation here is that lifestyles are different here from China. In China, there are so many shopping malls and restaurants, everywhere. A lot of them are in walking distance from my office or my complex. Also there are many entertainments for you to spend your free time. But when I just came here, I could not drive. If I could drive, in my free time, I probably could go shopping…But now, I seldom go shopping. I have only bought three clothes after I have come here, during these three years.
>
> Fei: My hometown and the city in which I did my undergraduate are both very developed, modern, and fashionable…There are many small stores you can shop, karaoke, and small restaurants that you can enjoy and spend time. There are also many fun places to go for fun…. But there are not so many [indoor] activities to do here. The town I am living now is not that fashionable. Often, I can't find the clothes that are cute to fit me. I didn't believe it when my friends told me about this. I thought America must be a fashionable country, everywhere in America.
>
> Na: Some hobbies I had back home are not suitable here. Like shopping is not convenient at all here. There are not many places to go for shopping…Karaoke, my friends and I went to karaoke a lot…When I was in China, we used to go to bars a lot, once or twice a week. But here, I can't find suitable friends to go to bars together, so I just deleted bars from my entertainment list.

The following two participants mentioned and appreciated the opportunities afforded by the many outdoor activities in the U.S.

> Hao: If I were still in China, people would ask me, "Why do you like hiking? It's just walking. So boring!" But I have found hiking very fascinating. I have hiked a lot of places in the Smoky Mountain. I have found that this country gives me a strong impression that everybody is individual and can choose what he or she wants to do, even for their hobbies.
>
> Fei: But on the other hand, there are many outdoor activities available here. Just driving is an enjoyable activity to do. Or you can go fishing, go hiking, take a train for three or four hours, etc. There are less indoor activities here, but there are

many outdoor activities you can do here, which you don't get to do that much in China. Lifestyle here is more layback and leisure in China, and of course it depends on where you are from and where you are at now.

Food

Food is another topic that most participants discussed in the course of their interviews. They mentioned the distinct differences between Chinese and American food. For many participants, Chinese food was usually associated with fine memories and occasions that participants had shared with their family and friends. They missed the familiarity and delicacy of food in their home country, which often motivated the participants to learn to cook Chinese cuisine. Some participants began to enjoy Western food and could even cook some dishes themselves.

> Na: Food is another problem. I used to spend a lot of leisure time enjoying good food, eating out with friends while I was still in China. But it is not possible to enjoy a lot of good Chinese food here. Well, maybe in LA or New York, there will be more good Chinese restaurants. But in [this city], there are not many Chinese restaurants. I still got a Chinese appetite. I am not used to Western food.

> Fei: When I just arrived in the U.S., I couldn't eat American food. I could only eat Chinese food. But now, I have started to enjoy some American food.

> Bai: I think "food" is another thing important to me. I have had many dreams about food, more than once, you know, many times. In the dreams, I was back in China and was ready to eat a bunch of good food. But then I woke up and didn't eat anything. I never, I never ate it. I always saw the food in my dreams, but somehow I woke up. I always woke up before I ate [Laughter]. I cook for myself a lot. I like my cooking. But still, I miss some Chinese food, especially the very delicate, special Chinese food, the kind of Chinese food that you couldn't cook by yourself, that you have to have it in the restaurants. I also miss my mom and my dad's cooking. But it is ok. It is not a big problem for me. One advantage of living here is that you can taste a lot of different styles of food here, food from different countries. Not only Chinese food, but also Italian, Mexican, American, etc. I like to eat out to try different food. I can cook some Mexican food, like fajitas and tacos. Sometimes I cook Italian food too. But I still make Chinese dishes most of the time.

One participant had had a part-time job in the household of an American family. She discussed some novel incidents she experienced while learning various food preparation and cooking skills.

> Mei: One example…was that the fruit salad needed seven different fruit. Seven different fruit had to be washed clean first and peeled clean, and cut into a special shape, using a special method. It was a special way, not the normal way that we cut it. It was very strange to me…they taught me how to prepare and cut fruit. Different fruit require a different way of cutting. It's very interesting…I tried to learn different cooking based on their need. Mostly I learned it by myself, step by step. I became comfortable cooking American food…I learned how to make American food, Italian food, Japanese food, and many other food…[This experience] let me realize that there are so many delicious food in the world, in addition to Chinese food. So I had a very good time working with that family.

Without a Car

This is the sixth subtheme of "Things are Different Here." Transportation was another topic that most participants had discussed as part of their process of cultural adjustment. Transportation systems in the U.S. are quite unlike those in China. Mass transportation is the primary means of commuting and traveling in China. Most of the participants did not have a car at the beginning of their stay in the U.S., and they found it very inconvenient to get to places without driving.

> Fei: Car is very important here. You have to have a car to go around. In China, we have a very huge public transportation system. It is better to take public transportation than to drive your own car. When you take a bus or subway, it will help you to save time. There is a lot of traffic, if you drive, it will give you a lot of traffic jams and you will have problems in finding a parking space. But here, it is different. People told me, if you don't have a car, you can't experience the real American life. I had no car. Whenever I wanted to go out, I had to either wait for a long time to take a bus or to carpool with others. But both were not convenient here.

> Pin: My husband and I didn't have a car. We only depended on public transportation. But sometimes it was very hard to get to somewhere without a car, especially on the weekends.

> Na: More importantly, I don't have a car. The public transportation here is not very developed. I have to wait buses, maybe for an hour. That's not convenient at all.

Most participants commented on the inconvenience of public transportation in their host country, and one participant commended the great convenience and efficiency of e-ticket booking system in the American travel business and compared it to the old-fashioned booking operation system in China.

> Bai: For example, compare to the U.S., there are many things in China that could be improved to a better level. For example, I really hate the railway services in China. In China, railway is the main transportation for people to travel between cities and provinces. But I don't think the railway service is good enough in China, actually it is far away from good. When I was in college, I took trains to go home during breaks. At that time, I didn't like the railway service, but I didn't have a good idea about how it could be improved. But, now I have a better idea about why the railway service is not good and how it could be improved. For example, the railway station is not very convenient for passengers to walk. Another thing is that the e-business, business that is done on the internet, is very convenient and popular in the U.S. If you want to take a trip to somewhere, you could book your air tickets, reserve a hotel room, and rent a car at home on the internet. Then they are ready to go. But in China, it is still very complicated and inconvenient to travel. In China, you still have to buy train tickets in person. You can't buy it on the internet or by a phone call. Also, you cannot buy tickets for a round trip. You have to buy your train ticket to your destination first. After you arrive in your destination, you have to buy your ticket back home again. There are just no round tickets sold. It is very inconvenient. When you see something better here, you would automatically think about how you can make a progress back home.

The third theme, Things are Different Here, encompassed the participants' awareness of cultural differences between their home and host countries. The participants described their experiences of constantly comparing the two cultures. They also discussed their observations regarding the differences in interpersonal style, lifestyle, food, and transportation in China and America.

Theme Four: My Study

The third theme, My Study, conveyed the participants' experiences and concerns in their academic and occupational lives in the U.S. Some participants spoke about the differences between the teaching styles and advising systems in Chinese and American higher education. Several participants discussed the immense value that Chinese society has traditionally placed on education and about the pressures they experienced due to this unique cultural-educational phenomenon. Many participants evaluated their own academic performance. Several participants revealed their lack of interest in the subjects in which they majored; many discussed their specific considerations during the process of selecting a new major in the host country. While most of the participants were still progressing in their graduate studies, many had expressed their expectations and legitimate concerns regarding their future career prospects. One participant revealed her job search process in the States. The theme My Study will be presented relative to the following subthemes: Teaching/Advising Styles, Education Is Very Important in Chinese Culture, I Work Hard and Do Well in School, Study Is Hard Here, I Don't/Didn't Like My Major, It Was Hard to Change a Major in China, Pressure from Parents, How to Choose a Major, and There Are Many Limitations.

Teaching/Advising Styles

Several participants were aware of the differences regarding teaching styles, academic freedom, focus on research versus coursework, and the power of academic advisors in the educational systems of China and America. Firstly, the following two participants compared the different teaching styles in China and the U.S.

> Pin: The teachers here would actively invite students to participate in the class. I found most students in that class like to participate into the class activities

> actively. Unlike when we were in China, we would just listen to English attentively. We didn't get to participate and express ourselves in China. It was very interesting that we can discuss, share, and participate in the classes.
>
> Bai: In China, we don't have many choices, in terms of the way the teachers lecture or the textbooks they choose. But here, the professors can teach in their favorite ways…Before, when I was in China, I always thought things were supposed to be grounded in a certain way. That's what I was taught. But here, I learned to see things from different aspects, which is very important for training researchers.

Then, the following participant contrasted the different focuses in the graduate schools between China and the U.S.

> Bai: Here, the graduate level courses have a lot of homework and exams, which I was surprised. In China, we didn't have much homework or exams in graduate level courses…But it seemed that professors in China feel that course work is not that important for graduate students, compared to undergraduate students. They think research is more important for graduate students…But here, in my department, there are no easy courses at all. Every course is tough. We need to study hard for each exam.

Finally, the following participant discussed her thoughts about the less-structured system of advancement, the difficult requirements, and the power the academic advisors exercised in American doctoral programs.

> Yun: Doctoral study is very hard here. Before I came here, I thought if you follow the guideline of the program and finish all the coursework, you will get your degree. I thought there would be a fixed schedule for the students, but it was not like that here…I found out that if you couldn't finish your experiment, there is no end of your PhD study. If your professor doesn't agree, you can't graduate. I think in America, the advisor is so powerful…It is possible to graduate in two and half years with a PhD. It is also possible that professors keep you doing experiments like there is no end. It all depends on the advisor.

Education Is Very Important in Chinese Culture

This is the second subtheme under the fourth major theme—My Study. Many participants spoke about the enormous emphasis that the Chinese culture has traditionally placed on education. Some participants agreed with this emphasis. Others discussed the

frustration they experienced while growing up with this continual focus on study in China and compared it with their current experience of living and studying in the U.S.

> Pin: Education is very important in Chinese culture. In my culture, most people believe that if you get educated, you will have more chances than others to earn money. At this point, since I have this opportunity to go to school, to get good education, I should cherish it and hope I will get a good job. I do not think I will need to concern about money for raising my child in the future, because I have got good education. I believe that I will find a good job to earn money for my child and the whole family.
>
> Hao: In China, when we were growing up, what our parents and the entire society tried to put in our mindset was that, "You have to study. If you don't do well in school, you're not good at anything." So it's like you couldn't do anything but study. You have to be good at school, and then maybe you would become somebody later, and then you probably could do something else besides study. Study was the only thing we had. That was very frustrating. We were not aware of anything else that we could be capable of besides study. But this country [America] gives me encouragement. People here are encouraged to explore their own way. Life is not all about study. That's something very valuable that I learned here. I saw the differences between this country and my country.
>
> Fei: In China, my family, relatives, and friends have great expectations on me…Well, because you are studying in the U.S., in their eyes, you are already successful and you should become more successful in your school and future career life. They think America is the country where you can make yourself most successful. You may not understand it, but this is how Chinese people think, for most of them. They think people who come to the U.S. for graduate studies are the most competitive ones, because America is the most powerful country in the world now. From their words, from their eyes, and from the ways they talk to you, you would know that.

I Work Hard and Do Well in School

Many participants reported performing well in their studies. Some of them analyzed the factors that had helped them to excel in their academic and professional endeavors. First, the following are two examples of how these participants evaluated their own academic performance here.

> Lan: I worked hard and got good grades in my courses. In the first semester, I got straight A's. I did rotations at four different labs. I did well in all of the labs, so all of the professors wanted to keep me in their lab.
>
> Ling: I got straight A's in the courses in my program up till now. I got great remarks from both places that I work…the professors and my colleagues think that I must have adapted to my American life and study very well. They often say it is hard for them to imagine that a person who speaks another language could study so well in this field, especially that it was not my major in undergraduate…In that sense, I know I am adapting well in my study.

The following participant used different examples to explain that her determination had contributed greatly to her outstanding performance in school.

> Hao: I have to read a lot of technical papers. If I read a lot of technical papers every day for a couple months, when I start writing, I would feel that my thoughts are just flowing. But if I don't read a lot for a certain period of time, I would have the writer's block. So I try to read papers constantly, one paper after another, although I don't like to do it…I also had to do a lot of practices before I was able to speak fluently in the presentations. Each time before the big presentations, I would practice for at least thirty times. But that is what it takes to help me speak well. My professor has been very impressed with how much I have improved in the past several years.

The following participant also used a couple different examples to illustrate how she managed to perform well in her academic and professional worlds, while balancing her family responsibilities. Her most important traits were good time management and being proactive.

> Hong: I got used to my new major very soon. I wrote a few proposals to conferences in my first semester, and all of them got accepted. So I went to some conferences in my second semester, which gave me a lot of confidence…I felt that I had the ability and the talent to study in this field. In addition, my GPA of that semester was 4.0, which also brought me some more confidence, even if I felt incompetent at the beginning of that semester.

She was unusually initiative in situations where she encountered professionals in her filed, even without fluent English skills.

> Hong: Going to conferences also brought me a lot of confidence and information in the field. Even if my English was not so good, I had courage to talk to people in the conferences. I saw myself as a new scholar. I asked people in the conferences to teach me some academic skills, such as how to read and write journal articles and which books to read. I read those books and learned from them. I wrote emails with these scholars a lot, exchanging our ideas. I also gained help from the professors and friends in my program. I was willing to ask for people's help. Even though the scholars and professors are busy, if you are willing to ask and express your interests in learning, they will be happy to teach you.

This same participant also revealed her level of determination and sense of purpose.

> Hong: The first thing is organizing your time and ideas. An example is that, if you have an idea about your future dissertation, you write it down and put that as your long-term goal. Also, every semester, once I finish my papers for each course, I then submit them to conferences. It is my way of saving time. In that way, I could have some time to do stuff for my family life, and still doing well in my study and research.

Study Is Hard Here

This is the fourth theme under My Study. For some participants, the experience of academic life overseas was more stressful than they had expected. Two of them described the crucial roles their advisors had played in their pursuit of doctoral studies. One participant revealed suffering from panic attacks triggered by academic pressure. Two participants discussed how lack of English proficiency and cultural differences could be obstacles to international students' learning experiences.

> Yun: Doctoral study is very hard here. I think I was not well prepared for the Ph.D. study…during the past three years, I asked myself every day whether I should give up my doctoral study. In the past three years, I have changed the subject of my experiment for three times. If you couldn't finish your experiment, there is no end of your Ph.D. study. You don't know how much you need to do in order to graduate.

> Ying: My ex-advisor told me, she didn't think I could finish my Ph.D. study successfully. First of all, she didn't have the financial aids for me. Secondly, she said I needed more research experiences and she also said my personality was good for another area, but not for research…I was very sad when she said that…I have never told anybody about this before, because it is a shame on me. Because

the professor was telling me: “Maybe you are not a good student”…She just told me that, “I think it would be better if you only pursue a Master’s degree, rather than a Ph.D.” I was very depressed at that time.

Fei: Last summer, many people had told me that one class in a summer term would be hard enough. I still took two classes because I wanted to finish my study in two years…Both classes were very hard and intensive. I had to write a paper every two days. I spent long hours studying and working in my apartment. I was really stressed…At first, I didn’t notice anything unusual. I thought being busy with study could at least help me get rid of my loneliness. But toward the end of the semester, I felt overwhelmed. One day, after I came back to my apartment, I noticed I couldn’t concentrate. It drove me crazy. I couldn’t focus on anything. I was so nervous. I couldn’t calm down. I couldn’t talk or think. My hands and legs got numb. I was shaking, and I started to have difficulty in breathing…

Na: I think most foreign students feel more pressured than American students. For foreign students, American society is especially competitive…In my undergraduate, I never thought that I must be a straight-A student. But here, I feel that I have to. Here when I talk to a friend, sometimes he or she would say “I had an exam today. I feel that I didn’t do well today. Perhaps I would only get a B+ this time.” At that time, I may have just got a B. So I realized, “Wow, everyone is so excellent here. Everyone is having A’s.” So I started to compare myself with the others.

Pin: Once I attended the school, I felt it hard to handle all the work...At the beginning, it was very hard to understand the class contents. For most international students, English could be a problem. We may understand the general information. But we may not understand the details of contents in class. Because of the language problem, I had to spend extra time studying after class, to read the materials after class and before the class. Especially, at the beginning, I took more time than other students to understand the contents and the new knowledge.

Ling: I am the only international student in my department…I am studying something, which is all based on the Western mentality and ideology…It is often very hard for my points of views to get recognized by others in this environment. Students in my program sometimes could be very narrow-minded and nailed down to very limited and certain practices and ideas, and that made me very uncomfortable sitting among them as a foreigner. In many classes, I don’t think it would be a good situation for me to speak up my own experiences and beliefs. I don’t feel prepared to be the center of the whole attention or to defend my own cultural and value background all by myself.

I Don't/Didn't Like My Major

Several participants revealed that they were not enjoying or appreciating their major subject. Some of them became aware of this frustration while they were still in China. A few participants discussed how they struggled through the predicament.

> Mong: Accounting is not what I like. But to make a living, you don't think about what you like.
>
> Lan: Before I began my study in biology, I thought it was supposed to be as interesting as what I learned in the high school…But it was totally different…I was very frustrated…I was confused about my future career.
>
> Na: After I entered my program in 2003, I found it not that interesting. Since I formally joined the lab, since I started to work, I found the major was not that interesting. I am not good with hands-on work, the experiments. But, I got to do something about it, even if I found it boring. I either had to do it or I had to transfer to another program. I chose to drop out of my doctoral study and pursue a master's degree. This is what I had to do.
>
> Hao: I didn't know what I wanted. I didn't enjoy my study. I actually tried to read as much as I could about each subject in our field, to try to see if there was anything that I would be interested in. After all the frustrations, I felt that I have to find a way to focus myself. I couldn't waste all my time trying to figure out what I wanted to do. So I started researching what I could do with this major, to see if I could have a future in it. I read and read and finally decided to do medical devices…After figuring it out, I felt all relieved, I could calm down, and I could actually study from that point.

It Was Hard to Change a Major in China

Although a dislike of one's major was common among the research participants while they were studying in China, none of them had changed to another concentration. Participants disclosed that several factors had made it hard for them to change their majors or programs while they were still in China. The following two participants discussed the inflexible educational system in Chinese higher education.

> Lan: When I came here, I realized that it is not uncommon or unacceptable for people to switch majors to other fields. But it is a rare thing in China.

> Hao: Probably you don't know this, but in China, you would choose a major before taking the college entrance exam. But at that time, what you have learned about a major may be very different from what you would actually learn in that major later. And you can't change your major. Changing major is difficult in China. If you want to transfer to another major, you have to pass their exam, and you have to talk to the dean or department head to get their approval before you can transfer. Things may have changed and improved. I hope it has.

The following participant mentioned that limited access to information on academic majors and careers in China had kept their college students from being able to choose a major according to their own academic interests and aptitudes.

> Lan: In China, many fields, like psychology, are far behind. I didn't get to know about it until I took some psychology classes here, in the U.S. Since there was no psychology department in my college in China, I never thought about switching to a psychology department. There wasn't such an opportunity for me.

Pressure from Parents

This is the seventh subtheme of My Study. Chinese parents tend to pay great attention to and actively involve themselves with their children's decisions on education and careers. Some of the participants in this study had experienced intense pressure from their parents when they transferred to a new major or program. The following two participants shared how they negotiated with and persuaded their parents regarding their change of program in the U.S.

> Lan: Before I came to America, I wanted to change my career…But there wasn't such an opportunity for me…I felt a great amount of pressure from my parents. They were very upset when I told them that I was thinking of changing my major and future career. So this time, I didn't tell them until I had made this decision to switch my major. They were shocked when they heard about this decision…It was a big shock to them. But I tried hard to tell them why I made the decision. I tried to make them understand me.

> Na: I actually had an argument with my parents, especially with my mother. She wanted me to stay in the U.S. for several years, to get used to the life here. She said, "At that time, you could say whether you like to live in the U.S. or not." She doubted about my decision of quitting my doctoral study. She thought once you

> start something, you got to pursue it till the end…To her, getting a Ph.D. is very important…Another reason, I think, is that she understands the job market in China is quite competitive, but she doesn't know anything about the U.S. To her, the U.S. is kind of like the Utopia. But I told her that I feel very lonely in the U.S. I found there are still many opportunities in China. I also told her that I found that my major is not interesting for me anymore. I don't want to spend any more time on it. So finally she agreed with me.

How to Choose a Major

Selecting a new major while in the host country was a very common experience among this group of Chinese female students. Nine of the thirteen participants had either applied for or transferred to a new graduate program during their stay in the U.S. Several participants discussed their personal experiences or observations of their friends' experiences in selecting a new major. The following excerpts reveal some of the factors that have probably influenced many current Chinese students' decision in selecting a major in the U.S.

> Hong: Many friends of mine now major in fields that are different from what they did in China before…they want to stay in America after they graduate. But many of them have to change their majors to so-called "good majors," which are good for job hunting in the U.S., such as accounting, statistics, computer science, et cetera. They chose these programs as majors, even if they don't like these subjects…They just changed from their former majors and occupations to a new major, a new field, to help them find jobs easier in this new country.

> Mong: People told me that accounting would be an easy major to help me get a job here. It is a technical job. You don't need to communicate with others as much as the other majors would require. So I chose accounting as my major, but this choice made me upset for a long time. I felt that I had to give up what I really wanted. Because the work is not something I like, I do not feel the motivation to work hard in it. So I am not sure if I have made a right decision.

> Ying: I tried so many programs, like with the Sociology, the professor said, "I would like to give admission to you. But we don't have financial aids for you." With Political Science, there was a Chinese professor, he asked me, "After graduation, what can you do in the U.S. with a degree in Political Science? For Chinese people, it is not a brilliant future." So, it was like, you have so many choices, but actually, you don't really have many choices, if they can't offer you

> financial aids. I didn't even know if I were interested in sociology, or political science, or psychology. All I wanted was a professor who could accept me and offer me financial aids. I didn't have any research interests or specialty. I didn't even know what my research interest would be. But I had to choose one…So [my current advisor] accepted me, this major is not bad. I can understand what the professor says in the class. I can read a paper for my assignment. That's it. That was another sort of sadness as being a foreigner in this country.
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> Ling: I have thought about getting a Master's in statistics, because I have a very solid mathematical background and it would be easy to get a job with a statistic degree, both in China and America. If I choose to work in America, a statistic job will bring me up to a level where I don't have to worry about my cultural and linguistic background. If I stay in the social science field, I will still have to experience many difficulties and challenges regarding social compatibility, if I want to stay here. But if I want to go back to China, I really have to think about how to transform what I have learned here to fit the needs of Chinese culture and society.

Only a small number of the participants were able to choose a major according to their personal interests.

> Hong: After that, before I applied for graduate school, I had to choose a major. I used to teach in university. I have always wanted to do things related to education. I have a strong feeling about education. I want to do something in the education field. I applied for three different programs in the education college. I made appointments with professors in those programs to introduce myself, to talk to the professors, and to learn about what each program does and studies…Finally, I chose my current program.
>
> Lan: I met a marital therapist. He recommended me the book by Viktor Frankl—*Man's Search for Meaning*. It influenced me so much. I appreciated many statements in his book, such as "Men can better their lives" and "Men can be the changes they want to be." I was strongly encouraged by that. I had the feeling that "I want to change my life." I also wanted to try my best to help others to better their lives…I started taking psychology courses. The more I learned about psychology, the more I felt that it would be a good fit for me and that I would enjoy this career. I talked to some psychologists. They told me that psychology is a tough career, and that you have to work seven days a week, doing very intensive work. But I don't mind. I think the most important for a person is what he likes most. If he enjoys the things he is doing, there is no such a thing as hard work. That doesn't matter at all. If he really doesn't enjoy one thing, even if it is a very easy task, he would still feel bored.

There Are Many Limitations

This is the ninth as well as the last subtheme of My Study. Many participants admitted of feeling limited by their status as international students living in the U.S. This feeling was commonly revealed in their attitude toward study, in the process of establishing themselves among the various graduate programs, and while searching for jobs. One participant believed that, as a foreigner, she had to study harder in the U.S. in order to become competitive in the career market in there: “Because I am an international student, I really have to work harder, to study as hard as I can, to get the degree and find a good job here” (Fei). Another participant discussed her feelings of uncertainty and limitation while living in the U.S.

> Pin: I feel there is always a sense of uncertainty. It is really hard for me to know, to predict, what will happen next. I remember that in the first year, although I was preparing hard for the TOFEL and GRE exams, I was not sure if I could get in the school or not, and if I could get an assistantship or not. If I could get in the school and get the assistantship, it would be a good thing. If I couldn’t get in the school or get the assistantship, what should I do here in this country? As an F-2, I could not work. I had no ideas. I was not sure. I was very worried everyday. I didn’t know where I would go. Sometimes, I just think, as long as I make efforts, I should get something in return. So I keep doing things, hoping that my efforts will be paid back somehow.

Two participants were unable to major in subjects they enjoyed. They concluded that as foreigners, their choices and opportunities often become limited because of their financial and linguistic disadvantages.

> Ying: I never thought about what my research interest would be. When I recall my two years here, I realized that I was always in a situation that I had no choices, and I had to find a program to study in, because I had to live in America. I told myself that I had to stay here. It was kind of sad. If I were in China, I could choose from different areas. I could evaluate my choices. But here, living in a different country, you are not a rich person in this country, so you have to be limited in many ways.

> Mong: Before I came here, I was a senior manager in a Human Resource Department. I got an MBA in China and I had five years of working experience. When I was in China, if I had to look for jobs, I would look for what I would enjoy. That was about self-growth and self-realization. I made good salary and I didn't have to worry about money at all. After I came here, I had to face financial pressure. For example, when I was applying for graduate school two years ago, I got three admissions. One of the programs was the top one in that field in the U.S. that year. The other one, a human resource program, was the top three in that field in the U.S. But both of these two programs didn't give me financial aids. Only the program I am studying now, accounting, gave me financial aids. If I were in China, I would definitely choose one from the first two programs. But because my husband was a student and I could not work, we did not have the ability to take this risk, to pay so much money for so expensive tuition. So I gave up. In addition, the first two programs may not be very good for foreigners, because they will require a lot of communications in English. I didn't feel confident in my English communication skills. So I chose accounting. This is another reason I gave up. When I was making this decision, I spent a lot of time thinking. I really liked the first two programs. But I couldn't choose them…. Accounting is not what I like. But to make a living, you don't think about what you like. Actually, I don't know if that was a right or wrong decision now. This decision will affect the track of my future career. Maybe fifty years later, I could look back and know whether this decision was right or wrong. But I had to give up my dream because I had no choice here. So, all kinds of things became limited after I came here.

Many participants had assumptions about the potential difficulty of finding a job in America because of their status as international students. The following excerpts depict some of these concerns.

> Pin: When searching a job, it is a lot tougher for foreigners. There are some limitations, restrictions, on international students. When you apply for a position which fits well for you, you may find out that because you don't have American citizenship or permanent residency, you are not considered for the position. If the employers can't find an American to do the job, they may hire a foreigner. So, this is another reason that international students often feel limited and uncertain living in this country.

> Ying: I just hope I can get a job after graduation. I can see there will be another struggle for me five years later, because I know it won't be that easy for me to get a job here as a foreigner. It took me half a year just to find an assistantship. I don't know what will happen if I am going to find a real job in the U.S. Each time I think of job search, I get a headache. I don't want to think about that.

> Ling: I think about my future a lot. I think about when I finish my current study, whether I should stay in my current program and get a Ph.D., or transfer to another program to get another Master's degree, or just graduate with my current Master's degree and find a job. I think it would be a lot easier if I were an American, wanting to get a job with a Master's degree. But for me as a foreigner, I know it would be very hard. A lot of job positions that I have been looking at are only open to American citizens. Almost all the jobs positions I have looked at have this limitation.

Relevant to the theme of My Study is the experiences of find a job after graduation. At the time of the interview, one participant had graduated and was looking for jobs in the host country. She discussed her experience of having fewer options in that pursuit because of her status as an international student.

> Yo: Some companies make it clear that you need to be a U.S. citizen to be hired. But some companies didn't say it upfront, so you have to find it out yourself. Some companies didn't tell me whether or not they could hire international students, so I went to their interviews, did their assessments, and successfully passed. But later on, I found out that they actually couldn't give me an offer because of my status… So later, I tried to find out the company policy first, and then I would decide whether I should apply for that position or not…Unlike American students who can look for jobs and see if they like it or not, I have fewer choices. I am actually looking for a company that would accept me. I can't put so much emphasis on whether I like it or not. My thinking right now is, if the company can accept me, I will work for it no matter what. Whether it would be a good fit for me? I can't guarantee. I am getting more and more realistic. I have really become less optimistic.

The following was some of this participant's actual experiences in job search in the U.S.

> Yo: I am looking for jobs in the U.S. I basically depend on the internet. I posted my resume on the monster.com and refresh it as often as possible. I also applied for jobs on other job search engines…On the other hand, I sought help from Career Services on our campus, to get their advices. I remember that somebody at the career center talked about how important network is. But my problem is: I haven't found a very efficient channel to network for jobs…Job searching can take a lot of time. It is not only that you have to do research on the internet, you also need to make phone calls to people that you know to learn more about the culture of a particular company, to see if you could match that company's culture. For international students, it is especially hard, because you don't know if that company can hire you or not because of your status as an international.

She shared some more wisdom in retrospect by reflecting what she could have done differently in her job search that could have made it easier for her to find and secure a job in this country.

> Yo: In my second year, things changed. According to the statistics then, the economics in the U.S. was booming up. So I thought, "I really should graduate earlier" I was pushing myself to graduate earlier…But actually, now, when I look back, I really shouldn't have rushed it. I should have slowed it down. In my last year, I should have allowed myself more time on job search, instead of taking four courses. I also think I should have spent more time at the beginning of my study to make connections with possible opportunities like doing internship or part-time jobs. These might make it easier for me to get a job now.

The fourth major theme, My Study, reflected the participants' perceptions of and experiences in the American higher education. They compared differences in teaching style and advising systems, as well as the differing value placed on education by Chinese and American societies. The participants also discussed their academic successes and difficulties, their dislike of and/or change of their major subject, the academic pressures imposed by their parents, and any decisions in selecting a new major subject or career path during their sojourning. The participants were also aware of a wide range of career-related limitations imposed on them due to their status as foreigners in the host country.

Theme Five: Relationships

The theme of Relationships encompasses the Chinese female students' perceptions of a range of interpersonal relationships in their sojourn. The descriptions cluster around three subthemes: Friendship, Dating and Getting Married, and My Marriage. The participants described their experiences of friendship in general, in school and work, and with specific ethnic groups. In addition, unmarried participants discussed

their romantic relationships, while married participants focused more on marital and family relationship issues.

Friendship

All of the participants in this study described specific experiences encountered while making friends overseas. Most of them described how difficult it was to make friends in their host country and compared that with their previous experiences in China. The research participants were aware of differences in their friendships with members from different ethnic groups in the U.S.

It is hard to make friends here.

Several of them indicated that it was hard to form close friendships in the host environment, mainly due to pressures at work/school, language barriers, and cultural differences.

> Yun: In my first month of being in the states, I was alone, all by myself. I felt very lonely. I didn't have any friend. Later on, I realized that everyone was so busy because they were struggling with their own study and research… it was so hard to meet people or to make friends.
>
> Na: People in my lab are not always in a good mood. Everyone in my lab is just busy with their own work, busy thinking about their experiments…And you may ask me why I don't make friends outside of my lab. The problem is, where and when? Because I am very busy in the lab, I don't know where and when to find a friend. Maybe on the bus is the best time for me to meet people. It is the most precious place for me to meet people. Twenty minutes in the morning and twenty minutes in the afternoon.
>
> Mong: To make good friends here is even more difficult. But if it is in China, you won't feel hard. You can make friends with even strangers, easily, who could talk to you and understand you fully, without explanations or with any language difficulties. But here, if you meet a stranger, most of the time, they will be from other countries and cultural backgrounds. A lot of times, you would have to explain what you say and what you mean. That's kind of frustrating.

Even though loneliness and difficulty in making friends may be inevitable for international students, regardless of their country of origin, one participant said that this could be different for students of different nationalities.

> Bai: I guess maybe for Chinese and India students, the situation is easier, because there are a lot of Chinese and Indian students here. It is easier for you to adapt to the new environment, if there are someone who are from your own country too. Most of the time, your fellow people are very willing to help you. So the situation is probably much better for Chinese and Indian students, compared to students from other countries.

A few participants described their positive experiences of interacting and forming relationships with people at work.

> Bai: In our lab, we have a lot of parties. Students in our lab are from many different countries. Every time when we party, we would bring different food and exchange it.

> Ling: I got great remarks from both places that I work at. In the letter that I got from my department, it said that, "You have a very positive relationship with your peers." I have always been a very caring, understanding, supportive, and open-minded person, and I always try to see the good qualities in people.

Many participants described and compared their friendships with different ethnic groups, including: (a) With Chinese Friends, (b) With Other International Students, and (c) With Americans.

With Chinese friends.

When discussing their interactions with their Chinese counterparts, participants brought out a common factor of how important celebrations of Chinese festivals were in their experiences. Several participants mentioned that they celebrated traditional festivals with their Chinese friends, colleagues, and local communities.

> Bai: The Chinese students in my lab would get together on the weekends or celebrate Chinese festivals. We also go to the celebration parties held by the Chinese community in town.

> Yo: I joined the Chinese student association at [my] university, and I found it a good place to make Chinese friends…Every year, we have at least two big events. One is the Chinese New Year Festival. The other is the Moon Festival. We created and pulled together shows and programs for everybody to join and enjoy.

A few participants revealed that it was not always easy for them to develop strong friendships or to feel close to other Chinese students. They explained that their age and gender differences, marital status and family obligations, and busy schedules at school or work were usually the reasons responsible for difficulties in forming close relationships with one another.

> Na: In my major, there are much more males than females. I don't know how to find a topic to talk to a man…Also, most students and colleagues were much older than me...There is a gap between us…For married students, they have to focus on their studies and families, so their interests are very limited. The topics of our conversations are often limited to baby talks, marriage, or their study… I found it very boring… So even with other Chinese students, sometimes I cannot find a common topic with them. It is like you two have to try hard to find some common topics to interest each other. I don't know. That just makes me feel really sad.

> Ying: I don't have many good friends here. Everyone is very busy with their work and study. The Chinese students would help you when you need help. But, you don't feel good to bother them if it is not a serious problem, if the problem isn't something you can't handle by yourself. So, you don't really have a lot of time to make friends here.

> Hong: No, I never talk to my friends here about these personal issues. They are busy. Also, I could not find someone that I could trust, to talk about deep thoughts on my mind. I have to feel that I know them very well, if I want to talk to them about my real thoughts. We may go out to movies, have fun, and do things together. But I could not share my real thoughts with them.

With other internationals students.

The participants explained that making friends with other international students was usually much easier and more comfortable compared to being friends with Americans. The participants and their international student friends shared similar

experiences and concerns in their sojourn experience. They also tended to show more interest in building friendships with one another.

> Ling: Some of my friends don't speak English well enough to communicate with American friends in an American way. I got a sense that many American friends feel that they are interacting with international students because they want to "help" the international students rather than really wanting to make friends with them. It is very disappointing.
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> Yo: Most of the American students in my program would just come in for the class and leave after the class. You don't have a chance to really talk to them. They have different concerns in their lives… Considering I speak some Korean, I made Korean friends here. We know each other's concerns and life experiences here, so it was easier to communicate with them…I made friends from all over the world, not just from China, but also friends from Russia, India, and several other countries… Making friends with other international students helped me to feel good, to adjust to my life here.
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> Hong: I like to meet new friends. Participating into church activities was a good way of learning about American culture and making friends. There was a women's group at the church. What we did was, a lot of women like me would bring our hometown food and exchange food with women from different countries. We also did some art crafts…I called this church group as women's gathering group. We shared our situations and supported each other and learned about American culture. Sometimes we talked about marriage and relationship issues.

With Americans.

Many participants shared their positive experiences of interacting with members of the local American community at church. The participants said that these individuals were very friendly toward international students and would help the latter adjust to their new life in this country in several aspects. For example, American Christians would provide free English lessons and Bible study classes to help international students to enhance their English language skills and American cultural understanding. Churches would frequently organize social activities for international students to enjoy, to learn about American social life, and to help connect them with the local American

community. People at church also provided assistance and support for international students in need.

> Yun: Some of my friends go to church, because American people at church are very nice and friendly. They could also learn English and American cultures.
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> Hong: When I first came to the U.S., I was lucky to know one Chinese girlfriend. She introduced me to a Christian organization…that helps international students to get used to the U.S. I knew an American girl…who was a Master's student in ESL program. My Chinese girlfriend, this American girl, and I often visit each other's apartment once or twice a week. We did things together, like reading Bible, talking about American customs, learning English, et cetera. We sometimes went to eat out. Sometimes we participated in activities in this American girl's church. Even though I am not a Christian, I am an atheistic, that experience was very helpful for me.
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> Ling: Because of my background as a Christian, most of my American friends were Christians. We shared very good friendship. I think our friendship facilitated my adjustment in living in the U.S.
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> Pin: At that time, my husband and I didn't have a car. We only depended on public transportation. But sometimes it was very hard to get to somewhere without a car. The American students at the church would provide me with transportation. I remember that when I had to take my TOFEL exam, I got a ride from an American student. They were very nice to me…At that time, I was pregnant. Although they were students, they did a baby shower before our baby was born. They came to our apartment. They gave us baby shampoo, baby blankets, and toys. Things like that. I really appreciate their gifts and care. It felt very warm.

A few participants revealed some difficult or unpleasant experiences that arose while interacting with American friends. Mainly these difficulties rise from the language barriers and cultural differences between the Chinese and America groups. Some of cultural differences here involve the different meanings of friendship and the different styles of social gathering and partying in each culture.

> Ling: I like American people. Most of them are very friendly and have a good sense of humor. But sometimes their friendliness could be superficial. For example, many of my fellow students and colleagues are Christians. I just assumed that they must be very nice and helpful, since they are majoring in this

> caring profession while holding on the Christian values…But that is not always the case, because they love to criticize and gossip about other Christians…After I realized that, I cannot help but wonder what they really think of me? I wonder if they had any other intentions toward me when they were being nice to me.
>
> Yun: In our lab, there are a few American students, one Thai student, and the rest of us are Chinese and Indians. I go to American students' parties. American students sometimes said to me, "you are unique." I asked them, "Why?" They said, "Usually Chinese students stay with Chinese students. They don't go to American parties, so we think most Chinese students don't want to be our friends." I think there are some misunderstandings between the two groups, because Chinese students do want to be friends with Americans, but sometimes they feel that they are not welcomed in the American parties. The truth is Chinese students and American students don't have common language in the parties, because of the language problems and their cultural differences…Talking to one American is a lot easier than trying to talk among a group of Americans. For example, I feel very comfortable talking to one American. But when I sit among a group of Americans, it becomes very hard for me to catch up their conversation. They speak fast when they talk to each other. They use slang and other difficult words that I don't know, so I can't understand them. If I can't understand what they are talking about, I can't participate in their conversations. So I often feel a lot of tension when I am among a group of Americans. I think that is why many Chinese students feel uncomfortable going to American students' parties…On the other hand, American students love drinking, but most Chinese students are not interested in the American drinks. That is a cultural difference. Especially for young American students, drinking is the only thing they do in their parties, and their parties often start very late like 10 or 11 at night. I don't think Chinese students enjoy the American students' drinking culture. So I guess that's why Chinese students don't go to American parties. In Chinese parties, there is often a lot of food. People get together to talk and enjoy the food. After the meal, they sing karaoke, play cards, and do other stuff. If Chinese students don't enjoy American drinking and don't understand American jokes, they won't feel fun in the American parties. It is the same with American students when they go to Chinese parties. Later on, they just stop going to each other's parties. So I think both groups just need to take more courage to get used to each other's party cultures, before they can finally enjoy each other's parties.

Although it could be difficult for the Chinese female students to build close relationships with their American friends because of the language and cultural issues, some participants shared their positive attitudes and efforts in initiating interactions and facilitating rapport between their American friends and themselves.

> Yo: In my spare time, I tried to socialize and make friends here.
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> Bai: We have several Chinese students in the lab. We would invite everyone in the lab to have parties and celebrate Chinese festivals like the Chinese New Year. I like to participate into conversations with my American friends. After I have lived here for three and half years, my English is better now and I have made more American friends.
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> Hao: I tried to understand [American friends'] slang and jokes. If they said something that I didn't understand, I would ask them, "Could you say it again?" Then I would remember the joke or the slang. One thing that comes along in this process is that, with better English, I have made more American friends.

Dating and Getting Married

There were six single participants in this study. This subtheme, Dating and Getting Married, reflected these single participants' discussions on the importance of dating and getting married and their comments about whom Chinese international students tend to date.

Marriage is a big issue.

Three of them spoke about the importance of dating and getting married for females at their age.

> Yo: Dating and marriage are quite important for people of my age.
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> Na: Being a single Chinese female, marriage is really a big issue…Many Chinese guys here are already married, even if they are only 22 or 23 years old. For many Chinese students, they probably already had a boyfriend or a girlfriend in college. If they stay in China, this couple may not get married soon after college graduation. But if one of the couple is going abroad, they get to think about their relationship. Either they break up, or they get married. The average age of getting married among the Chinese students here are much younger than that back in China.

Na continued to discuss her observations and personal thoughts about young Chinese students' decisions of getting married early.

> Na: When I arrived here, I found that many people, even young girls at my age, are eager to get married soon. I can't understand that. But there are several Chinese girls here that are of my age. They all went back to China in summer or winter last year and got married with their boyfriend. Their spouse then came to the U.S. to accompany them… I am not ready for marriage at this age, just like my good friends back home. We don't think about marriage actually. It is a shock for me to see so many girls getting married so early here. In this narrow environment, because of loneliness, many of the Chinese students would get married early.

Whom to date.

The following two participants talked about the types of males available for Chinese female students to consider when it comes to dating.

> Na: To find your Mr. Right, it seems that you have many opportunities here- there are Chinese guys, American guys, and people from some other countries. But there are actually not that many Chinese guys here for you to choose from. Many Chinese guys here are already married, even if they are only 22 or 23 years old. For many Chinese students, they probably already had a boyfriend or a girlfriend in college. If they stay in China, this couple may not get married soon after college graduation. But if one of the couple is going abroad, they get to think about their relationship. Either they break up, or they get married. The average age of getting married among the Chinese students here are much younger than that back in China…As I mentioned, you could have another choice- to have an American boyfriend. But I think, the cultural and language differences could be a barrier, or they may not. I don't know. The cultural differences may be a barrier for communication, but the freshness may help the couple, I guess.

> Yo: One of my close friends here is also from Shanghai. She has actually settled down in this city because she married a guy from Dutch. They met here and married here. I have another two girlfriends who married Chinese guys. I got a feeling that, as a female, if you keep your options open, you could not only meet Chinese guys, you can also meet guys from other countries.

Other relationship concerns.

Two participants discussed accidental pregnancies that had happened to their female friends. Hong said, "Some of them would accidentally get pregnant and have a baby." Another participant shared more details regarding this issue.

> Ying: I know that, for many Chinese female students here, if they are single, they may spend a lot of time with their boyfriends, just to have someone to accompany them. Sometimes, the girl may get pregnant by accident, and the couple has to get married soon. Even if they may have just dated each other for a little while, but because of the baby, they will decide to get married. I can understand why they need to get married so soon. I don't know if it is good or bad. But, I think I can understand it. It is very lonely living in a new country by yourself.

This participant continued to share her personal experiences and difficulties in a current relationship.

> Ying: My boyfriend and I have some conflicts about when we should get married. He is a student too and he is thirty years old now. He always says he doesn't want to get married early. He said he doesn't have a plan of forming a family within five to ten years…To be honest, if we don't get married in five years, I don't think I would continue to wait in this relationship. For a woman, you still have to get married and have children, no matter you are poor or rich…When my graduation day comes, if he still needs more time to establish his career, we will break up. I guess. I don't know.

My Marriage

There were seven married participants in this study. Several of them discussed the attention and support they devoted towards their husband, as well as some of the marital difficulties that they had experienced while living in the U.S.

Responsibilities/Sacrifice as a wife.

One participant discussed her constant struggle to balance her obligations to both her marriage and her career. Being ambitious about her studies and her future career, this participant was eager to discover a way to stabilize these responsibilities.

> Hong: As a married female, I have a lot of responsibilities as a wife. I experience many conflicts, mainly time conflicts, between how to be a good wife and a good scholar at the same time. I want to be a good wife. I want to make dinner for my husband every day, because I love him. I think a lot of Chinese women are willing to sacrifice themselves to make their husbands to have a good, comfortable, and successful life. That's not a bad thing. But I want to balance between being a good scholar and a wife. I want to balance between my family responsibilities and my study, or my career in the future. I want to balance among all of them…I

> talked to some female faculties about these issues. Many of these female faculties have even more complicated situations than mine, because they often have kids…Kids have their own feelings and wants. You would want to make them happy because you love them. You wouldn't want to treat them casually. But it is time consuming to taking care of children. One of my professors shared with me her secrets. She always kept two small notebooks. One is for her family life. The other is about her academic stuff. She told me, "You have to be a good organizer of your life, if you want to have both an academic career and a family life."

One participant said that her husband put his complete attention into his research, and as a result, she had to take most of the responsibility for family life. She also had to teach him how to take care of his daily activities.

> Mong: I had to teach [my husband] a lot of basic things in life such as how to communicate with each other in our marriage, and what to wear for his work everyday. Before I came to the states, he didn't know and he didn't care about what he wears to his work. I also had to remind him to shave his beard. You know. All things like that. Another example was that, when my parents visited me six months ago, I had to prepare all the legal documents by myself. He never helped me or did anything. He just focuses on his work He just focuses on his research. He doesn't think or care about anything else. I don't understand him sometimes. I don't know why he doesn't care about anything but his work….

This participant continued to discuss her perceptions of family responsibilities as they were divided between her husband and herself.

> Mong: I am kind of traditional in this way. If my husband can obtain some achievements in his field, everything would be worthy. Yeah. I think in a family, one person has to sacrifice. If both people focus on their study, their research, or their jobs, I think nobody can take care of the family. If he can achieve in his research work, I think my sacrifices would all become worthy.

Difficulties in my marriage.

Several participants shared that they had experienced problems in interacting with their spouses. Communication was sometimes a problem in the marriage of the following participant.

> Ling: Sometimes when I complained about the stress that I experienced in school, [my husband] responded to me that, "Well, you just want to be perfect, and that's

> probably the reason that brings you everything that you are experiencing. You should just relax a little bit, and don't think much. A lot of people who don't speak English well could still live happily. Why can't you?" It is hard to fight back his words. I often found it hard to talk to him about what I am experiencing in the classroom, in the working setting. It is hard, because it needs a lot of explanations…it is hard for my husband to open a dialogue and talk about what he has experienced during the day. I don't know why.

One participant shared examples of the problems in the initial stage of her marriage and her process of adapting to her marriage during the past few years.

> Mong: I came here right after we got married. I think if you want to love someone, it is easy. But if you want to live with someone, it is difficult…I was still romantic at that time. His birthday was a few days later than the date I came to America. So I bought a ring for him and brought it from China to give him a surprise. But a few days later, my birthday came, and he forgot about it totally. I thought he was careless. I gave him several hints, but he still didn't understand. He didn't know what I wanted, so I felt so frustrated. I thought he didn't care about my feelings…I left so far away from my hometown, my family, and my job for him to come here [tearing up]. I was very upset. I didn't know whether it was a right decision for me to come here at the first place…I came here for love. But this love was not like what I expected. I asked myself, "Is this the marriage I want?" I began to suspect what I wanted about this marriage. You know, when I was home, my parents, especially my mom, would always give me birthday presents. My friends would also give me birthday presents and we would celebrate. But when your husband doesn't give you anything on your birthday, you just feel…lost. I guess. But that is ok now. Now when my birthday comes, I just don't anticipate anything to happen, so I don't become angry at him…Yeah, I gave up. Actually now it feels funny to think about this.

In retrospect, even though her marriage life had a very tough beginning, this participant now saw it as a typical part of the adjustment process in most marriages. She also discussed the positive qualities in her husband that had enabled them to overcome the obstacles in their marriage.

> Mong: I think there were many difficulties in the first stage of our marriage. But now, we have got a lot familiar with each other. Everything has become better. My husband has a good temper. When I felt upset, I would want to argue with him, but he has such a good temper that everything just becomes calm in our marriage. This is a good quality of him. I think this is an advantage in our

> marriage. I think I have got used to marriage. You cannot ask everything to be perfect, even for your husband. I think this is also part of the adaptation.

Connecting with my family.

The participants discussed their interactions with their parents and friends who lived in another part of the world. Technological instruments, such as international phone calls, instance messenging, and web cameras had enabled the research participants to regularly talk to, see, or share pictures on-line with their parents, young children, and friends still living in China.

> Pin: I was also pregnant…I often called my parents on phone and got their advices about pregnancy. They gave me some suggestions and information about how to take care of myself and the baby…Now my child is in China with my parents. They would send me the pictures of my child by the email.

> Fei: I think the most important thing in life is family and friends, especially for international students. Most students would experience homesickness. I think I am lucky to live nowadays, because it is convenient and not that expensive to communicate with someone in another country through internet…I am the only child in my family. I still call my parents every day. Yes, at least once every day, because I miss them a lot, and I know they miss me a lot too. This is the only way I can do to help them to be less depressed…By calling my parents every day, I feel I am still connected to them. I never feel they are far away, I just feel that they are in another city. Also, I am very proud that my parents can use internet and instant messengers to communicate with me. They can see me through the web cam too. I am very proud of them.

> Bai: My parents and I still miss each other a lot…It is convenient that we could call and talk to each other on the phone, or to see each other on the internet with web camera. So it is not too bad now. The quality of web camera is not that good, but it is ok for me, as long as I can recognize my parents and friends on the screen.

There is another topic that was mentioned twice and appears to be relevant to the subthemes of Dating and Getting Married and My Marriage. Two participants mentioned that they wanted to have a child sometime soon in the future. However, they believed that

as international students themselves, their limited time and finances would become a problem should they do so.

> Ling: My husband and I think a lot about when we should have a child…But it would be hard to have a child while both of us are still in school, because of our limited time and finance. If my husband can find a job after graduation, we will have a baby then. Hopefully I will also get my own degree and find a steady job, which doesn't have to pay me a lot. But I hope the job can give me a more flexible working schedule, to take care of my children.

The following participant was single and in a dating relationship at the time of the interview. She discussed that being able to have a child was the reason she wanted to get married soon. However, she was aware of the difficulties involved with having a baby while being a student in her host country.

> Ying: Because I want to have my own babies…But as long as you are a student, money would always be a problem…You can't afford a child, because you don't have enough money to pay for what a child would need. By the way, you have too much study and research work, so you can't take care of a baby by yourself while you are going to school. And babysitting is so expensive in this country.

In summary, the fifth major theme, Relationships, encompassed the participants' observations and insights regards their friendships with members of different ethnic groups, their dating or marital relationships, and their connections with their families back home.

Theme Six: Being a Woman

The sixth theme, Being a Woman, was a minor theme compared to the five major themes. While many participants discussed their experiences in adjustment to the U.S. from their perspective as women, only a few participants had specifically discussed how they perceived that gender may or may not have affected their personal, academic, and

professional lives. For example, one of the participants discussed how gender may affect one's adjustment to a foreign society.

> Hao: If you are a guy, when you want to ask a question about something, sometimes you feel intimidated to do so. But if you are a girl, there is nothing to lose, because people are always willing to help girls out.

One of the participants was very aware of her desire to remain independent as a woman after being married: "Between husband and wife, even if you are a family now, you as a woman still have to keep your own independence and identity" (Hong). She continued as follows.

> Hong: As a married female, I have a lot of responsibilities as a good wife. I experience many conflicts, mainly time conflicts, between how to be a good wife and a good scholar at the same time….I want to balance between my family responsibilities and my study, or my career in the future…I talked to some female faculties about these issues.

Seven among the thirteen participants were majoring in fields such as engineering and natural science, which have traditionally been dominated by males. The followings are their perceptions of gender issues at school and/or work in the U.S.

> Yo: I think nowadays the society is not so biased against women. If you want to do something, you can go and pursue it even if you are a female. But, on the other hand, you won't be given advantages in competitions simply because you are a female. Also, I found that American girls are very strong, both mentally and physically, so they can compete with their male counterparts. That's something I am impressed. Males and females here compete with each other at the same starting point, or at least very close.

> Bai: Most of the time, I don't feel gender as an issue at all. In our undergraduate program, males are the majority...There are very few American females in the undergraduate engineering program. But in my lab, we have several female graduate students from other countries such as China and India. I think we have a good mix of gender and nationality in our lab. I have been to some conferences. I could tell that there are very few females in the engineering profession in this country, but personally I have not felt any difference about being a female in this field.

> Hao: Being a female actually has brought me some advantages at school...But personally I tried to ignore the gender thing. I don't let myself to use my gender as an excuse. I don't allow myself to do less work only because I am a female. But still I think the professors sometimes are easier on the female students.

The perception is that being a woman is not a disadvantage in the U.S.

One participant was particularly observant about the various phenomena surrounding gender issues in the work place. She compared the levels of friendliness toward highly educated women in Chinese and American working environments and societies.

> Hao: Being a female, we also have some other advantages. Especially in my current program, it is a male-dominated program. It is always the girls that would find jobs first…Talking about our field, engineering, I think, there is actually more sexual discrimination toward women in China…when I graduated from college, I couldn't get a job in my own field. The companies put their job requirements like this, "First of our job descriptions: We don't accept female applicants." There were thirty students in my year. Five of us were girls, and none of us worked in the field of engineering…We tried, but nobody wanted us.

This participant discussed how women in China may have difficulty getting married if they decide to pursue graduate study. She believed that most Chinese men are still uncomfortable with the idea that their wives may be more highly educated and earn more money than themselves.

> Hao: In China, there is a female higher-education syndrome. People tease that there are three genders in the world: male, female, and female doctors. That is a concern for a lot of females when they were considering pursuing a Ph.D. They have to take care of their personal business first, I mean, if they don't find a boyfriend or a husband first, once they get their Ph.D., the stigma will be there, and nobody wants to have a female Ph.D. as their wife.

This participant spoke from her personal experiences and discussed the existing gender discrimination against women in the job market in China.

> Hao: I think in China, there was actually more sexual discrimination. When I graduated from college, I couldn't get a job. The companies put their job

> requirements like this, “First of our job descriptions: we don’t accept female applicants.” Yeah, a lot of companies were like that. We had thirty students in my year. Five of us were girls, and none of us worked in the field that we majored in. One of us became a sales representative. One became a librarian. One girl also majored in computer science so she got a job in that field. Another one eventually went to England to pursue her graduate study. I had both engineering and business degrees, so I found a job in business area. None of us got a job in our professional field. We tried, but nobody wanted us.

This participant believed that the U.S. provides more equal opportunities for professional women, which was one of the main reasons that she chose to stay in the U.S. after graduation.

> Hao: But here, I think there are more job opportunities for females, because they have laws that protect racial and gender minorities, and disabled individuals. So this country is a better place, compared to China, when it talks about genders at work. This is very important for me in terms of determining where I want to stay after graduation. I got asked a lot of this question. At first, I really didn’t know the answer. But a few years later now, I felt I could tell people that I want to stay here, because I think female engineers get more respect and opportunities in the United States.

To conclude, in the sixth theme—Being a Woman—participants discussed a variety of gender issues encountered in school and working environments in their host country. Some participants also compared the levels of respect paid to females in China and America.

Thematic Structure of 13 Chinese Female Graduate Students’ Adaptive Experiences in Studying and Living in the United States

The thematic structure of the experience of Chinese female graduate students’ studying and living in the U.S. is composed of six interrelated themes: (a) Coming to America, (b) My English Ability, (c) Things are Different Here, (d) My Study, (e) Relationships, and (f) Being a Woman. In addition, these six figural themes were contextualized within the frame of one ground: Adapt Over Time. All of the elements in

the thematic structure are present throughout the experiences of adapting while studying and living in America; however, the relative significance of each theme varies depending on which aspect of the experience the participants are describing. As a participant focused on a specific of her experience, one or more themes emerged as more relevant while the other themes faded out of focus, but never entirely disappeared. For example, when a participant described communicating with others and learning about the new environment, the theme My English Ability was most figural, but when she described an instance of discrimination against females at school/workplace, the themes My Study and Being a Woman were most figural. The one ground and six themes have been presented in detail in the previous sections of this chapter. The following is a summary of the main features of the thematic structure of Chinese female students' experiences of adapting in studying and living in the U.S. as described by the participants.

The Ground of Adapt Over Time provided the temporal context in which the experience of adapting has occurred for these participants. This context became apparent through the participants' references to change and adjustment made while describing the course of their perceptions of the new environment, resolving self conflicts, connecting with others, and gaining family and social support. The participants also discussed and evaluated their personal growth in the experiences of sojourning.

The first theme, Coming to America, encompasses the participants' descriptions of their decision to leave their home country and move to America. Some of the participants originally came to the States to accompany their student husbands; the others came to the United States to pursue their own graduate studies. Those who came as graduate students discussed their reasons for wanting to study abroad and why they chose

America as the destination of their sojourning. Participants described the process of preparing themselves for moving to the United States, especially the prolonged process of studying for the language exams required by American graduate schools. Many discussed their difficult experiences in applying for American visas. Participants also discussed many pressures in their sojourning process including their loss of self-identity and independence, the financial difficulties, and the emotional trial of separation from their young children or other family members.

The second theme, My English Ability, reflects the participants' awareness of the difficulties related to their English language abilities. Participants spoke of how their limited English language abilities could be a barrier for them to communicate and interact with others in the new environment. They shared their experiences and strategies for improving language skills.

The third theme, Things Are Different Here, encompasses the participants' discussions of different cultural characteristics existing in China and America. They revealed the efforts they made to comprehend and immerse themselves in American culture, their enjoyment in sharing their own culture with their new friends, and their experiences in living in two cultures simultaneously. Many participants also compared the lifestyles in China and the U.S. They discussed in detail the distinct differences in communication, interpersonal style, lifestyle, food, and transportation in the two countries.

The fourth theme, My Study, reflected the participants' experiences in and concerns about their academic endeavors in the host country. Participants contrasted the teaching styles and advising systems in Chinese and American higher education. These

Chinese women discussed the enormous value that their society has placed on education and the various pressures imposed on students as a result of this tradition. Participants evaluated their own academic performance and discussed their interest/disinterest in their current major. Many discussed their personal experiences in selecting an academic major/professional field in the United States. Even though most of them were still progressing in their graduate studies, this group of women was aware of their expectations and the range of legitimate limitations that they would encounter as foreigners entering the occupational arena in the host country.

The fifth theme, Relationships, encompasses the participants' descriptions of their relationships with others during their sojourn. These Chinese women described their experiences in making friends in the host country. They compared their friendships with people from different ethnic groups. Unmarried women reflected their personal experiences and observations of others, with respect to dating and marriage, in their sojourn. Married women, on the other hand, described issues in their marital and family relationships.

The sixth theme, Being a Women, reflected the participants' discussion of gender equality, or even the advantages of being a woman, in their experiences in adjustment at school and work in their host country. They contrasted the levels of respect and opportunities available to Chinese and American professional women.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Mainland Chinese international students represent the second largest group in the international student population in the United States. These students encounter many challenges in their adjustment to America since they must adapt to a foreign academic system, language, and culture that are very different from those of their home country. In addition, the government of Mainland China has a unique economic, social, political, and diplomatic system that distinguishes itself from other East Asian countries (e.g., Japan, Korea, and Taiwan) and its students thus may encounter more financial and political challenges when they choose America as their destination for sojourning.

The intention of this study was to understand the adjustment experiences of highly-educated females who came from China to study in the United States. A phenomenological psychological methodology was employed in this explorative study and proved to be well suited for the purposes of the study. The unstructured, open-ended interview allowed the participants to reflect, in their own words, on their actual experiences, perceptions, actions, and concerns regarding their adaptation in the United States. The ground that emerged from the interviews was Adapt Over Time. Within the context of this ground, the main themes that emerged were: Coming to America, My English Ability, Things are Different Here, My Study, Relationships, and Being a Woman.

The next section of this chapter will discuss the major findings of the current study in relation to existing research and identify possible implications. The end of the chapter will suggest practical applications for faculty, administrative personnel, advisors,

and counselors at American universities who work with international students, especially women from Mainland China.

Major Findings of the Current Study and Research Implications

The results of this exploratory study are rich. While some of the findings are similar to those of previous research, several findings are inconsistent or new compared to the conclusions of the existing literature. In this section, the major findings of the current study will be described relative to the literature. The major findings are: overall impressions and personal growth, social isolation, coping mechanisms and help-seeking behaviors, cultural comparisons, academic and career needs, difficulties in applying for graduate school and for visas, gender discrimination, marital status, and family separation.

Overall Impressions and Personal Growth

In the current study, most participants described their overall sojourning in America as a valuable lifetime opportunity, which was consistent with Xu's (2002) study on the educational adaptation of Chinese international students. In the current study, Mainland Chinese female international students described both positive and negative experiences in their sojourning. What they found to be satisfying and/or interesting in their host country included the clean and spacious environment, the cultural and ethnic diversity, the sense of personal and interpersonal freedom, the opportunity for increased interaction in the classroom, and a lack of judgment based solely on academic performance. These findings are similar to the experiences of Taiwanese graduate students in the U.S. (Swagler & Ellis, 2003). The participants also shared a range of negative experiences including feelings of loneliness, a sense of uncertainty, significant

academic pressures, financial struggles, language barriers, transportation difficulties, social isolation, and limitations due to their status as foreigners. These findings validated the results of previous studies on the adjustment difficulties of Asian international students (Adler, 1975; Church, 1982; Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Leavell, 2001; Lin & Yi, 1997; Schwartz, 1988; Swagler & Ellis, 2003).

Eight participants made comments about their personal growth during their sojourning in the United States. They felt that they had improved in many areas including a sense of independence and confidence, skills of self-reliance and nurturing, openness toward others and the environment, cultural understanding, English language proficiency, and confidence in speaking English. These findings are generally supported in previous studies (Church, 1982; Li & Stodolska, 2006; Swagler and Ellis, 2003). A few participants also indicated that living in the U.S. had allowed them to adopt a more relaxed attitude toward their lives. They implemented healthier lifestyles that incorporated more social support, leisure-time interests, and physical/outdoor activities.

Social Isolation

While all of the participants had reported gaining social support from a variety of resources including church friends, host nationals, Chinese friends, other international students, husbands, and family in China, most Chinese female students in the current study still reported experiencing difficulties in forming friendships in their new environment. They attributed this problem primarily to long school hours, language barriers, and the different social cultures of China and America. Many participants reported that it was easier for them to relate to their co-nationals and other international students than it was to develop friendships with American students. These findings were

consistent with the existing literature (Church, 1982; Cross, 1995; Lam, 1997; Leavell, 2001; Swagler & Ellis, 2003).

Coping Mechanisms and Help-Seeking Behaviors

The participants reported on a variety of strategies that they employed to cope with the difficulties of the adjustment process. These strategies included journaling, reappraising/reframing of the stressors, positive self-talk, distracting themselves with other meaningful activities, hard work, and incorporating outdoor leisure activities. Similar strategies have been described in other studies (Li & Stodolska, 2006; Wilson, 1996). Mainland Chinese women in the current study described seeking help from the following resources: other Chinese students, their spouses and parents, American friends at church, faculty members, and campus offices (e.g., career center, health clinic, and counseling center). Most of these resources have been mentioned in other research (Komiya & Eells, 2002; Leong & Sedlacek, 1986; Wilson, 1996). Previous research (Flum, 1998; Pedersen, 1985; Sue & Sue, 1985; Tracey, Leong, & Glidden, 1986) has linked Chinese female international students with tendencies toward somatization, underutilization of counseling services, use of counseling only as crisis relief, and premature termination of counseling. One of the participants of this study, Lan, who was interested in majoring in psychology, attempted to explain why Chinese people are uncomfortable with the concept of counseling. In her interview she revealed that, while the presence and treatment of many psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety have become commonly accepted by Americans today, these mental health problems are still novel concepts for most people in China. It is worthwhile to note that one of the participants in the study did report having sought counseling services after a

referral by her medical doctor. This participant disclosed that even after her physical symptoms were relieved, she remained in counseling until she was able to develop a healthier lifestyle and a more positive self image.

Cultural Comparison

Participants in this study often compared Chinese and American cultures. They noticed cultural differences regarding food, transportation systems, and preferred leisure activities. Other researchers have reported on similar American and Chinese cultural differences (Kim, 2004; Li & Stodolska, 2006). Many of the participants attributed a variety of positive experiences to the emphasis on individualism in American culture. The participants were pleased with increased opportunities for interaction and the expression of personal opinions in American classrooms, the increased freedom in choosing personal lifestyles and interpersonal relationships, and respect and acceptance of individual differences. These findings are consistent with previous research (Kim, 2004; Swagler & Ellis, 2003; Xu, 2002).

Academic and Career Needs

Eight of the research participants reported having applied to graduate schools, changed a major, or changed a program level of study (e.g., from doctoral program to a Master's program) during their sojourning in the United States. Seven participants complained about past experiences of not enjoying their major subject. Several participants mentioned that the lack of information on particular major subjects and career prospects, as well as the inflexibility of the educational system in China had made it difficult for them to explore their career interests. Seven participants discussed the restrictions (e.g., language barriers and immigration regulations) on international students

for obtaining practical work experience in the United States. These findings support the notion that there is a significant unmet need for academic advising (i.e., exploring career interests and choosing a major) and career counseling (i.e., obtaining career information and skills) among Chinese international students.

The significant need for academic and career counseling among international students, especially for those who come from developing countries, have been addressed in only a few previous studies (Lee, Abd-Ella, & Burke, 1981; Leong & Sedlacek, 1986). To fill this gap, Bikos and Furry (1999) designed a special program—a job search club—to assist international students to enhance their skills in gaining internship and job opportunities in the Untied States. In their program, international students were provided with a series of career services focused on planning a job search, utilizing career services on campus, writing a resume and cover letters, handling issues of visa status and work permits, utilizing career resources on-line, drafting job search emails and other communications, networking, researching interested companies, obtaining references, requiring job search etiquette, and utilizing mock interviews. The program was proven to be helpful in assisting international students acquire occupational skills, enhance their confidence, and increase opportunities for obtaining positions in host countries. Clearly, the need for academic advising and career guidance among international students deserves more attention from researchers as well as higher education faculty, academic advisors, and career guidance counselors.

Difficulties in Applying for Graduate School and for Visas

Five participants described the enormous efforts they made in the graduate schools application process. It was difficult preparing for the TOEFL and GRE exams.

Three participants reported having difficult experiences when applying for American visas after they were accepted to the graduate schools. Even though these two issues were primarily associated with preparations prior to sojourning in America, rather than directly affecting the adjustment of living and studying in the host country, they were notable because they determined whether Chinese international students could in fact obtain admission to graduate schools and acquire visas to come to the United States. It is also notable that the research participants described these difficulties even though they were only asked to describe subsequent experiences of adjustment in the U.S.

These are findings that have never been addressed in previous research on East Asian international students. One possible explanation could be that, compared to students from other East Asian countries (i.e., Japan, Korea, and Taiwan), the number of Chinese students intending to study in the United States is so large that American universities and American consulates are more rigorous in selecting recipients. While faculty, staff, and counselors at American universities may not be able to directly facilitate these processes, it is important to understand the psychological distress that these obstacles may cause in Chinese international students.

Gender Discrimination

Most participants in the study did not mention any personal experiences of gender discrimination; however, three participants did report having received more respect and freedom in American society. One of these three participants believed that highly-educated women were viewed as “the third gender” and were rejected in the job market in their home country. These observations partially conflict with the study by Matsui (1988), which was conducted almost two decades ago. In Matsui’s study, highly-educated

Mainland Chinese women reported being viewed as genderless intellectuals in their own society, however, those women were critical of the gender inequality and social restrictions imposed on women in American culture. Twenty years later, participants in the current study reported a different view regarding the status of gender equity in China. The researcher's hypothesis regarding this difference in research findings is that the massive economic development that has occurred during the past three decades in China has gradually diminished the influence that Communism had imposed on Chinese society. During the process of capitalization, the emphasis that the Chinese Communist government placed on gender equality has been reversed by a traditional Chinese culture that favors submissiveness over independence in females. This change of societal atmosphere may not only encourage the overt preference for males in the job market, but also lead Chinese males to associate highly-educated women with a feeling of intimidation in romantic or marital relationships. Obviously, how educated women are viewed by men in rapidly changing China deserves much study.

Marital Status

Marital status seemed to be a predictor of the level of social isolation experienced by the participants. Single participants reported having experienced more loneliness; they also discussed a variety of issues related to dating in a foreign country. Married participants in the study were less likely to report feelings of loneliness and isolation; many of them acknowledged the importance of the support of their spouses and families during their process of adaptation in the U.S. In research on international students, how marital status affects the adjustment of Chinese female students has rarely been discussed (Matsui, 1988).

Family Separation

Two out of the thirteen research participants had given birth during their sojourning in the United States and both had sent their babies back to China to be taken care of by other family members. These two participants attributed financial difficulties and the demands of academic work to making this difficult decision. While the women believed that this step was probably the best decision they could have made for both their babies and their families, they both reported missing their children and they were planning to bring the babies back once they themselves had graduated and had become more financially secure. This phenomenon has not been addressed in previous research on Chinese female international students.

Practice Implications

This study is important for a wide range of personnel at American institutions of higher education and research, particularly those who interact with Chinese and other international students and their spouses. Faculty members, academic advisors, and career guidance advisors can use the stories and experiences shared in this study in providing academic and career counseling. Counseling practitioners, international education personnel, and residential assistants can similarly use this information to assist their international students and/or spouses make a smoother adjustment in their own sojourning in the United States. When working with this special population, it is important to always take into account the impact that language barriers, cultural differences, lack of social support and resources, and financial problems can impose on the psychological well being of these individuals. Any resources that faculty and staff

may recommend to help international students better cope with the stressors inherent in an American university environment will be very helpful.

In the current study, one among the thirteen participants reported having sought counseling service for treatment of academic anxiety and panic attacks, after being referred by her medical doctor. This appeared to be consistent with the conclusions of existing literature that international students tend to somatize psychological distress and underutilize mental health services. Four participants complained of communication problems with their intimate partners (husbands or boyfriends) and/or the difficulties of balancing family obligations and academic needs. This situation indicates a need for couple counseling for Chinese international students and their spouses. The researcher's personal experiences in conducting individual counseling and yearly orientations for international students at the University of Tennessee have demonstrated that international students, especially those from developing countries, are usually unaware of the existence of campus counseling services. Many of them expressed surprise when they learned that the counseling services were free to all students on campus. Therefore, in order to assist this group of students to better adjust to their new academic and living environment in America, it is important to make special efforts to inform international students of the availability of campus resources such as counseling centers, career guidance services, writing centers, academic advising offices, and health clinics. The international student offices on campus are especially crucial in the process of making campus resources visible and accessible for international students. It would also be helpful to have representatives from major campus and related community resources promote their services at the orientation seminars specifically designed for international students.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Life Experiences of Chinese International Female Students:
How They Perceive and Cope With Their Study Lives in the United States

I am invited to participate in a research study about my overseas study experiences as a Chinese international female student in the United States. I will be asked to participate in an audio-taped interview that will last approximately 30-40 minutes which will be conducted at a mutually agreement upon location. The audio-tapes will be numerically coded before they are transcribed in order to maintain my confidentiality.

I understand that any information identifying me will be deleted from transcripts and written reports. I understand that I will be offered the opportunity to review the transcript that is prepared from the audio-taped interview. I understand that portions of what I say in the interview may be reproduced in written reports. All original tapes will be erased after they have been transcribed. Signed consent forms will be kept for three years after completion of the study. The forms will be stored in a locked file box at a University of Tennessee facility. Tapes and any other identifying information will also be stored at the same location until they are erased at the completion of the study. Upon completion of this study, the researcher will provide me with an explanation of the findings, if I so desire.

Any questions I may have about this study may be answered by contacting the principal researcher, I-Wen Chan (phone:865-974-2196; email:ichan@utk.edu; Address:900 Volunteer Blvd., Student Counseling Services Center, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37916), or the faculty advisor, Dr. Mark A. Hector (phone: 865-974-1984). If, as a result of participating in this study, I want to discuss personal issues, I will contact I-Wen Chan or Dr. Mark Hector.

_____ _____

Name **Date**

_____

Signature

_____

Address

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE TRANSCRIPT

I: As a female originally from China, could you talk about, in as much details as possible,

your process of adapting to your living and studying in the US?

P: I guess it will be helpful for me to tell you a little bit of my background before I talk about this topic. I am originally from Shanghai, China. I graduated in 1998, from a foreign language institute. I learned English and Korean there. When I came to the United States, I found I didn't have so many language barriers as the other Chinese students. It helped a little bit by majoring in English. Before coming to my graduate study, I had years of working experiences back in Shanghai. I had worked in government and commercial banks. When I came here, I really felt that, "Maybe I am a little different from the other students," because they were just fresh graduates from college. But I was from a working place, so I was more experienced, and I thought maybe it could make me more competitive in career search after graduation. That's why when I first came to the states, I felt very comfortable and very confident on myself. I started my study here with all those confidence. Actually my first semester gave me some surprise. Maybe it was still related to the language. I found I couldn't understand everybody's English, especially the international people from other countries in the world. Although they speak in English, they are not speaking the standard English like I learned in school. So it was hard for me to understand their accents at the very beginning. For example, we had some faculty from India, and other countries. Sometimes I wondered if they were talking in English because I really had a hard time understanding them, because of their accents. On the other hand, I spent some time adapting to life here. In my spare time, I tried to socialize and make friends here. I joined the Chinese student association here at [name of her university], and I found it a good place to make Chinese friends…. We organized shows and gathering programs for everybody to join and enjoy. That helped me to relieve my loneliness living in the United States.

I: Could you say more about your experiences of serving in the student association as a public relations officer?

P: It was a very good experience. By doing the public relations, I had the chance of contacting a lot of people, faculty and students. I organized activities for them. Every year, we have at least two big events. One is the Chinese New Year Festival. The other is the Moon Festival. We organized shows and gathering programs for everybody to join and enjoy. That helped me to relieve my loneliness living in the United States.

I: Could you say more about the sense of loneliness?

P: Yo: Of course everybody would experience some loneliness, after moving to a new country. I remember when I first came to [name of her complex] in an afternoon. I moved all the stuff into my room, without a bed. So the first night, I slept on the floor. I didn't

have a standing lamp but a small desk lamp. That's the only lamb I had for the first night. I felt really bad that night. I cried. I asked myself, "Why would I come all the way to this far-away place and stay in this shabby little room to do the study?"
But as time went on, I started to make friends and get used to the study life here. I really enjoyed it, especially the first year of my study. I was not taking a lot of courses in my first year. Every semester, I would take three courses. Some of them were undergraduate levels, not very difficult, just needed some time to do the reading and homework and I would guarantee to get an A. So I had some spare time. I went to the gym. I went shopping. I went to some places by myself, by taking Marta. I really enjoyed my first year. I also made friends from all over the world, not just from China, but also…. Considering I speak some Korean, I made Korean friends here. We know each other's concerns and life experiences here, so it was easier to communicate with them. In the department that I am working, there are some international students as well. So I made friends from Russia, India, and several other countries. They are international students as well, and they know each other's concerns and life experiences here, so it was easier to communicate with them. The American students are more settled down. They have their own career goals to reach. They don't have so many concerns in their lives. So making friends with other international students helped me to feel good, to adjust to my life here.

I: So, you were aware of the differences between your friendship with Americans, compared to that with other international students.

P: Yeah. Also, in my business school, all the courses start very late in the afternoons to accommodate the part-time MBA students. Most of the American students in my program would just come in for the class and leave after the class. You don't have a chance to really talk to them. They have different concerns in their lives. There is no chance that you will have a lot of conversations with them in depth. But I do a research assistant job. When I work, I can meet some of the other international students who also work there, and make friends to them. So generally speaking, my first year was quite pleasant. I visited places in Georgia and Tennessee. When the first year was about to end, I went to California and relaxed myself. At that time, I felt that, "Umm, I have started to enjoy staying here. It's a good choice that I have come to American." If I were still in Shanghai, maybe I would just be a boring working female. But here, I could make friends, I could do study which is what I have always wanted to do. In my second year, things changed. According to the statistics then, the economics in the U.S. was booming up. So I thought, "I really should graduate earlier." So I started to take more classes. On the average, I took four courses every semester. All of them were of graduate level. That was really killing me, especially when the finals came. I became very busy. I had very little time to go out and to hand out with friends. I started to do just boring work for my study. But I did learn something from all the courses. So I don't have regrets about spending so much time on the study.

I: So you had more spare time in your first year of study. You had more time to do entertainments. But you got busy with your school work, in your second year, because you wanted to graduate earlier.

P: I was urging myself to graduate earlier. I was pushing myself. But actually, now, when I look back, I really shouldn't have rushed it. I should have slowed it down. In my last year, I should have allowed myself more time on job search, instead of taking four courses. I also think I should have spent more time at the beginning of my study to make connections with possible opportunities like doing internship or part-time jobs. These might make it easier for me to get a job now.

I: Could you say more about it?

P: Job searching can take a lot of time. It is not only that you have to do research on the internet, you also need to make phone calls to your friends to learn more about the culture of a particular company, to see if you could match that company's culture. For international students, it is especially hard, because you don't know if that company can hire you or not because of your status.

I: Could you say more about this?

P: Some companies make it clear that you need to be a U.S. citizen to be hired. But some companies didn't say it upfront, so you have to find it out yourself. Some companies didn't tell me whether or not they could hire international students, so I went to their interviews, did their assessments, and successfully passed. But later on, I found out that they actually couldn't give me an offer because of my status. That was very frustrating, because you have spent the time and efforts to prepare and attend those interviews. The interview location was far from where I live, so I had to drive for one hour to do the interviews. It was very time consuming. Also, at that time, I didn't have my driver's license, so I had to ask favors from my friends to drive me to the interviews. That's even more inconvenient. So later, I tried to find out the company policy first, and then I would decide whether I should apply for that position or not.

I: You learned in the process.

P: Yeah, that's right. Unlike American students who can look for jobs and see if they like it or not, I have fewer choices. I am actually looking for a company that would accept me. I can't put so much emphasis on whether I like it or not. My thinking right now is, if the company can accept me, I will work for it no matter what. Whether it would be a good fit for me? I can't guarantee. I am getting more and more realistic. I have really become less optimistic.

I: Could you say more about your becoming less optimistic?

P: When I just came, I thought my English is ok. I can communicate with people with no problems. I had years of working experiences in China. I thought it wouldn't be so hard for me to get a job here. Even though it might take others a lot of time, I thought it would

be easier for me. But in my second year, I found my previous thought was just totally wrong.

I: What happened?

P: I started my job search around the end of 2004. Now it's already July of 2005. I still haven't found a job yet. In the second year, I started to think I was too optimistic. I should have spent more time at the beginning, like try to connect with possible opportunities, try to do internship, try to find a part-time job first, etc. These might make it easier for me to get a job.

I: So you are saying that had you slowed down your speed of study, and taken more time to explore different alternatives, it might be easier for you to find a job now.

P: Yeah. I think local experience is more important. My years of working experiences in China cannot compete with a one-month working experience here. I had working experiences at commercial banks in China. I have applied for banking positions here. But I found what they are doing here is quite different from what I was doing in China. Just banking business can be quite different in these two countries. In China, we focused more on retails. But here, they focus on investments and personal, financial processing, which I am not familiar with.

I: So your previous working experiences are not very transformable in the process of your job searching here.

P: On the job descriptions, they often require that you should have at least one to three years of related job experiences. If you were not on that particular position before, then your experience is not relative. But I can't say that I should focus on those entry-level jobs, because entry-level jobs ask you to be a fresh graduate with no experiences, but I am not completely inexperienced. The companies won't hire me, because they see me as overqualified for those positions. So, I am in a quite embarrassing situation. I can't apply for entry-level jobs, and I can't apply for those experienced jobs.

I: It sounds like you are trapped in between.

P: Right.

I: OK. Anything else you would like to talk about our topic today?

P: I didn't realize job searching could be so hard for me when I first came here. But now, I just pray that before my OPT expires, some company would accept me, no matter what job it is. I really want to have some local experiences, even though I am not sure whether I would go back to China after working here. But American market is quite different from Chinese market, I would learn some more here. Yeah. I am not afraid of going back, because my home city is quite prosperous. There will be a lot of chances for me there.

But I don't want to go back right after I graduate, because Shanghai has become a quite competitive place as well. A lot of students who got their doctoral or Master's degrees will go back there to look for jobs. So the companies there are not just looking for high-degree manpower, they are looking for someone with both degrees and international working experiences. That's why I prefer to get some experiences in America before I go back.

I: OK, so if you could some working experiences in the US, that will help you to get jobs when you go back.

P: Yeah, especially in terms of finance, America is quite advanced, but China is still in its infant phase. There is still a lot to be done in that field in China, a lot of regulations to be made.

I: Could you talk a little more about your experiences of job search so far? Like how do you do it here?

P: I don't have relatives here, or close friends who have connections with companies, so I have to do everything by myself. I am looking for jobs in the U.S. I basically depend on the internet. I posted my resume on the monster.com and refresh it as often as possible. I also applied for jobs on other job search engines to look for anything related to finance. I have found one thing interesting. Many companies are asking for financial analysts, but they are not actually recruiting finance majors, instead, they recruit accounting majors. They are looking for someone on the CPA tract, but I was working on CFA, those are two different tracts. I don't think all finance majors should go to banking and investment companies. I don't know why they are not recruiting finance majors. I found that American society is divided into to very details. Each person is just responsible for his own part, and he or she will have to have that very specific skill. Financial analysts happen to need more accounting skills, so now I have to quit looking for financial analyst jobs, and look for something else. On the other hand, I sought help from Career Services on our campus, to get their advices. I remember that somebody at the career center talked about how important network is. But my problem is: I haven't found a very efficient channel to network for jobs. At the business school at [her current university], they have an organization called, "Graduate Business Association," and they have regular gathering routines. But most of the students there either already have a job, or they are not actively looking for a job. I went to some of their gatherings, but I didn't really get interviews or helpful networks from that group. I just got to do some social chatting with people there. I didn't get to establish a solid relation with people there. Maybe that is one thing I should work on more.

I: So internet, career services on your campus, and professional and personal networks are those you have used to help you get more job interview opportunities. Anything else you would like to share regard being a female originally from China, your process of adapting to your living and studying in the US?

P: I think, uh, as a female studying in the US, it is less likely to feel lonely than a male student. As I noticed, Asian females, not only Chinese females, but Asian females tend to have more opportunities to communicate and make friends with others, than the Asian male students. For example, when I was in the gym, there were chances that some American students would come to me and talk to me. But when I talked to my friends, I found that this never happened to male students. My Korean girlfriend also has this kind of experiences. One of my Korean girlfriends is dating an American guy. I don't know if it is because females are less aggressive, or they are more attractive, but it is true that it is easier for females to make friends here than the males. At the apartment where I am staying, all of the girls are enjoying their social lives here. They all have a lot of friends.

I: Friends from which group, for example?

P: From Chinese groups, and other groups. Like one of my roommates, she has lab partners who are Americans and from other countries. Like my roommate just had her haircut by the hairdresser of her lab partner's girlfriend. They have good friendship.

I: So, you have noticed that female students tend to have this advantage of making friends easier here, comparing to male students. Alright, anything else you would like to share regarding being a female, your process of adapting to living and studying in the US?

P: Maybe I could talk a little bit about my girlfriends. One of my close friends here is also from Shanghai. She has actually settled down in this city because she married a guy from Dutch. They met here and married here. I have another two girlfriends who married Chinese guys. I got a feeling that, as a female, if you keep your options open, you could not only meet Chinese guys, you can also meet guys from other countries.
But I haven't found any Chinese male friends who are married with girls from other countries. So I have found this interesting. Yeah, Dating and marriage are quite important for people of my age.

I: Yeah, so you found that there is an advantage for Asian female students, that it is easier for them to meet new people, and they have more options when they consider who they want to date and marry, which is different for Asian male students because who seem to have less options. That's very interesting. OK. Anything else you would like to add to our topic today?

P: I think nowadays the society is not so biased against women. If you want to do something, you can go and pursue it even if you are a female. But, on the other hand, you won't be given advantages in competitions simply because you are a female. Also, I found that American girls are very strong, both mentally and physically, so they can compete with their male counterparts. That's something I am impressed. Males and females here compete with each other at the same starting point, or at least very close. While you are doing a report or test, your professors won't give you extra time because you are a female or an international student. I heard that some universities in the US like Darton University [?], their professors would give international students extra time in

exams. Darton is a quite good school, but I don't understand why their professors are doing this, because when international students graduate and enter this society, they have to compete with their American counterparts. I don't think professors should do this favor to international students, because it is not actually helping them.

I: OK. So in your experiences, professors wouldn't give you extra time or favors simply because you are an international student or a female student. And you think equal opportunities in school will help international students to adjust better when they graduate and work in their jobs. Anything else you would like to add regarding your adapting process to living and studying in the US?

P: I don't know. I guess that's it for now.

I: Thank you very much for your sharing today.

VITA

I-Wen Chan was born in Taipei, Taiwan on May 3, 1975. Majoring in English with a minor in Education, she graduated with a Bachelor's degree from National Cheng-Chi University in May 1997. In August of 1999, she came as an international student to Knoxville, Tennessee where she received a Master's degree in Mental Health Counseling in May 2002. She entered the doctoral program in counseling psychology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in August 2001. She completed her pre-doctoral internship at the University of Tennessee Student Counseling Services Center. She received her Doctor of Philosophy degree in December 2006.