The Cross Cultural adaptation of Chinese Students in the U.S.

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The adaptation of Chinese students to their study and life in the U.S. A total of 63 Chinese students in three main universities in the Southeastern part of U.S. participated in the study. The study consists a semi-structured questionnaire and open-ended interviews. The study examined some aspects of the cultural adjustment of Chinese students in American colleges by exploring their motivation, frustration, sources of difficulties and the differences of classroom setting between the two different cultures. The findings point out that educators can assist these students by understanding the importance of cultural differences so that they can adjust to their study and life in the U.S. better.

Introduction

In the last two decades, the proportion of non-native English speaking college and university students studying in the U.S. has increased. Much of the change can be attributed to the rising number of Asian students entering university. Of all the countries, China sends the most students to the U.S. In 1999, there were 51,000 students from mainland China enrolled in American colleges and universities, another 30,855 from Taiwan, and 8,735 students from Hong Kong (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). Because of the increasing number of Chinese students in the U.S., understanding the similarities and differences between American culture and Chinese culture, and in particular the similarities and differences between the two cultures of learning, is becoming more and more important. While studies characterizing the cultural adjustment of international students in the U.S. have expanded greatly in the decades, not much research has been conducted on the Chinese students in the U.S. As a result, this study was designed to examine aspects of the cultural adjustment of Chinese students in American colleges by exploring their motivation, source of difficulties, and frustrations about their life and study in U.S.

Review of literature

As Kim (2001) points out, cross cultural adaptation has been studied seriously since the beginning of the 20th century. One type of literature describes models of cross-cultural adaptation (Adler, 1972; Bennett, 1993; Hofstede, 1986; Oberg, 1960; Ward, 1996). Cross-cultural adaptation refers to how a sojourner chooses to cope with cultural changes. Begley (1999) defines adaptation as “an umbrella term that encompasses culture shock, assimilation, adjustment, acculturation, integration, and coping” (p.401). Oberg (1960) initially described a four-stage model of cultural adjustment and coined the term culture shock to refer to the “anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (p.177). Since then, a variety of concepts about cultural shock have been proposed to enrich and expand this definition (Rhinesmith, 1985; Spitzberg, 1999; Taft, 1977; Winkelman, 1994).

Studies concerning what factors influence the adaptation process have been done on different group of sojourners. A wide range of predicator variables are identified to influence the duration and intensity of the adaptation process: communication skills (language skills, nonverbal communication skills, interaction with host members); personality factors (patience, empathy, and flexibility); demographic factors (gender, age, age at the time of resettlement, socioeconomic status, length of residence, and marital status); cultural factors (cultural similarity/distance; host environment receptivity); reason/motivation for transition; the degree of predeparture preparation; social support network (Dee & Henkin 1999; Furham & Bocher, 1886; Hammer, Gudykunst & Wiseman, 1978; Kim, 2001; Lonner,1986; Matsumoto et al, 2001; Tomich, McWhirter & King, 2000; Tsang, 2001; Zapf,1993). It is generally agreed that of all these factors, the host language ability is the most important one for successful international adaptation. Empirical studies indicate that the greater one’s command of the host country’s language, the easier and more stable the adjustment process is.
Other types of literature focus on Chinese students in other countries. Chu’s study on 664 Chinese students in U.S. in 1922 seems to be the earliest one of this type. The conclusion is that sending out only those advanced and mature students and/or those who have training prior to entering American schools can bring many advantages, which echoes the point that predeparture preparation is important. In a later study, Kirby, Woodhouse & Ma (1996) drew the conclusion, based on their research on the experiences of Chinese students in Canada, that Chinese students who are studying in a second language frequently face a triple challenge:

Not only must they master the content and concepts of their discipline, and do so through the medium of a language which they may not fully command, but frequently they must do this within an educational and cultural context quite different from their own. These cognitive, linguistic and cultural challenges interact to restrict, or at least modify, the nature of learning (p.141).

Huang (1997) found out that the Chinese students at American universities did have stress or pressure due to their incompetent language ability. They had to work very hard and tended to spend more time than their American peers on their studies and research.

Wan’s (2001) case study on a couple of Chinese students in the U.S. indicated that the frustration in cross-cultural experiences mainly comes from communication difficulties, discrimination, and disillusionment. Feng (1991) identified four areas of concern of Chinese students in the U.S.: financial difficulty, cultural differences, academic concerns, and language ability. Situ, Austin & Liu (1995) found out that monetary anxiety and marginal social status presented persistent sources of stress to the Chinese students in the U.S. as well. Studies indicate that the distance of the specialized culture and conventions of the classroom setting is also one potential source of difficulty for Chinese students (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Kirby, Woodhouse & Ma, 1996). Such a culture of learning influences the process of teaching and learning, hence the process of the cultural adjustment.

Given that most difficulties and misunderstandings encountered by international students were traced to cultural distance, it’s not surprising to find that Chinese students experience great difficulties in view of the very different features between Western culture and Chinese culture (Hall, Chia & Wang, 1996; Keats, 2000; Latourette, 1964; Samovar, Porter & Stefani, 2000; Vernon, 1982; Wu & Rubin, 2000). However, even in countries like Japan and Singapore, which are considered to be Confucian-heritage cultures along with China (Chen & Chung, 1999; Ho, 1991 in Biggs, 1996), studies reveal that Chinese students in these two countries also experienced higher stress by being in a foreign country despite the cultural similarity, and that receiving social support improves and promotes their adjustment, and they further suggested that professors are an important source of that support (Jou & Fukada, 1996; Tsang, 2001).

Research questions
1: What motivates for Chinese students to come to the U.S.?
2: What factors seem to influence Chinese students adjustment to college life in the United States?
3: What major difficulties do Chinese students perceive that they face as students in the United States?
4. What are the differences in classroom settings between the American and the Chinese cultures?

Methodology

Participants
A total of 63 Chinese students took part in the study. Participants included both graduate and undergraduate students from the People’s Republic of China. Among the students, 56 (89 %) were graduate students and 7 (11 %) were undergraduate, 36 (57%) were male and 27 (43 %) were female. Participants were recruited by using the strategy of snowball sampling, also called ancestry or recommendation sampling (Wellington, 2000; Whyte, 1984). Each participant interviewed was asked to suggest friends who might be willing to participate in the study. The snowball sampling strategy has been deemed appropriate and effective among Chinese students because Chinese culture puts a lot of trust in friends (Situ, 1995; Zhao, 1996).
Research site
The study was conducted in Atlanta, Georgia, a major city in the southeastern part of the United States. The participants came mainly from three large universities in that city: Georgia State University, Georgia Institute of Technology, and Emory University. The interviews were arranged for the convenience of the participants and were conducted in different locations.

Procedure
The researcher submitted a research proposal to the Institutional Review Board of Georgia State University before carrying out the research. All participants in this research signed a consent form. Participants were informed in advance of the aim and nature of the study, and were assured that their anonymity would be ensured.

A two-stage process was employed to develop the research instrument. First, unstructured interviews were conducted with a focus group of five Chinese students. They were asked to discuss their adjustment to living in the United States with particular attention being directed toward the students’ motivation and frustration. The unstructured approach proved valuable in the initial stage of data collection because the participants can explore in depth issues with the broad research objectives. In the second stage of the process, a questionnaire and the interview protocol were developed, and then pilot tested with six participants. A final draft of the survey was revised on the basis of the feedback acquired in the pilot study.

Based on what has been identified in the related literature and the researcher’s observation and experience in the U.S., the survey contains both semi-structured and open-ended questions. It consists of two parts: part 1 asks for demographic information and part 2 includes 18 questions that probe the participants’ thoughts, values, perceptions, and views about their cultural adjustment in the U.S. (See Appendix A).

After participants filled out the questionnaire, an interview with each participant was conducted. Interviews were semi-structured with opportunities for the participants to add any information they thought relevant to the purpose of the study. Though a tape recorder on the spot would provide the fullest recording (Whyte, 1984), the conversations in the interviews were not taped because the presence of the tape recorder could be disconcerting to the participants and because Chinese people are generally reluctant to have their voice recorded. Therefore, extensive field notes were taken during the interview. The researcher jotted down brief notes and a few key phrases or sentences that suggested particularly telling points of the discourse and reconstructed the interview in greater detail later. Such brief notes have proved to be of inestimable value. Sometimes quotations were used to exemplify and to allow the participants’ voices to be heard and eventually read. The questionnaires and interviews were conducted primarily in English. However, occasionally Chinese was used to ascertain any problems with wording or understanding, and, at the same time, informal conversations were exchanged in Chinese before the interviews began in order to establish rapport with the interviewee and to establish a pleasant and relaxing atmosphere for the interview.

Data Analysis
Data analysis consisted of four stages. In stage 1, all the interviews were transcribed. Grammar errors were transcribed verbatim. In stage 2, every response to the interview questions was listed. In stage 3, key word analysis from the statements made by respondents was conducted to generate categories. In stage 4, the data is condensed and quantified. The protocols of the respondents were then categorized and represented in tables.

Results
Although the Chinese students in this study here experienced numerous successes, this study focuses on those areas where they experienced difficulty because the study attempt to provide insight on helping Chinese students facilitate their cross cultural adjustment.
I. Chinese students’ motivation to study in the United States.

The sole measure of motivation was the question “What’s your motivation for studying in the United States?” As discussed earlier, a more open-ended approach was favored for some areas because it is believed to give the participants more opportunity to voice their interpretations. Data from the study revealed great similarities among the respondents. The motivation entries contributed by the
Chinese students mainly fell into two categories: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The intrinsic motivation include “to update my knowledge and learn the advanced technology of the United States”, “to broaden my horizon”, “to obtain an American degree”, and so on. More extrinsic motivation mentioned included “to follow the trend to go abroad”, “to fulfill my parents’ and friends’ expectations”, and “to live a comfortable life” etc. As indicated in Table 1, one thing in common in the views of the Chinese students was that they all considered learning the most up-to-date knowledge and skills of American technology as the most primary intrinsic reason. Nevertheless, the Chinese students tended to see things more pragmatically. A lot of participants mentioned the importance of obtaining a degree from an American university. Whether they want to stay in the U.S. or go back to China, an American degree will speak volumes and certainly make a difference to their future. In China, an American degree always seems to be superior to a Chinese one. Studying at an American college is a way to enhance their prestige in the eyes of people at home, which is always referred to as “to package oneself in gold”. Apart from this notion, given the collectivistic values and practices in Chinese culture, it’s not surprising to find that Chinese students’ achievement motivation is very socially based. The importance of education is associated with other cultural values such as collectivism and filial piety. “To fulfill parents’ or friends’ expectation back at home” was one of the main extrinsic reasons for studying in the U.S. One female participant claimed that she came to the U.S. because “it just seems to be the choice. Most of my classmates came to the U.S. or planned to do so. If I didn’t do this, I would let my parents down.”

II. Source of Difficulties

When asked if they are studying under pressure, 54 (85.7%) gave affirmative answers. Table 2 shows the source of their pressure.

Communicative difficulty

Communication with the host population involves recognition of verbal and nonverbal codes and interpretation of the hidden assumptions underlying them. Of the various facets of communication competence, language competence is of central importance and plays a primary role in promoting social power and credibility (Kim, 2000; Tomich et al, 2000). Incompetent language ability was reported to be the number one difficulty encountered by Chinese students in the U.S. One direct question and one indirect question were related to language ability. The direct question was: “Do you find your language ability sufficient?” The indirect question was: “What do you think are the weaknesses of Chinese students compared with American students?” To the direct question, 50 (79.3%) answered “No.” With regard to the weaknesses of Chinese students, as shown in table 3, it’s clear that the most common weakness identified by the Chinese students is the language problem. Again, this is entirely in keeping with the open-ended question about the source of difficulty. Language problem is rated the biggest weakness of the Chinese students, followed by: a lack of creativity, a lack of hands-on experience, being too shy and/or passive, and a lack of schema.

Given the teaching approaches used in China, it’s not surprising to find that the Chinese students said that they were strong in reading yet weak at communicating orally and in writing. Grammar-translation teaching methodology still dominates EFL teaching in China. English is learned in an environment of very limited input, involving very little interaction and meaningful exchange of conversation. Although English proficiency is seen as necessary for future success either abroad or in China, in school the students are so sharply focused on passing the tests so that they can go abroad that they only target studying for English tests. Somehow, these students have acquired various strategies that enable them to cope with the test without actually learning to communicate competently. Due to lack of meaningful use of English, and less practical teaching, Chinese students are often unprepared to complete academic tasks in English once they arrive in the U.S. One participant reported that “What we learned (English) in China was book English. Now in the U.S., I’m so weak at speaking English, I can not express myself clearly in English, so sometimes in class, even though I have a better idea than others, I often simply keep silent.” According to the majority of the participants, this insufficient language ability severely hinders their academic performance. Also in the social life, students who are not confident in their use of English typically turn to talk to and socialize with people from their own culture. This tendency may make Americans feel that the Chinese are not
willing to interact with the host country.

**Financial pressure**

Since most Chinese students rely on a Graduate Assistantship for financial support, their financial situation is strongly connected to their academic performance. The Chinese students have to work hard to maximize their likelihood of academic success. As one participant said, “I’m pushing my limits”. Some Chinese students choose their major based on the probability of finding jobs as a result of studying this major rather than on their interest, so they may end up working on something for which they have no passion. The strong sense of fiscal responsibility among the Chinese students will definitely influence their choice of major. One male student talked about the difficulty he faced in this way:

I have to get ‘A’s for my grades. This is very important because I depend on it to get my Graduate Assistantship, which is the only way I can study here. At the same time, I have to watch the job market. I’m thinking of transferring to another major because it’s not easy to find a job in my current field.

**Psychological isolation/loss**

Another major pressure comes from their fear of failing to fulfill the expectation from others and themselves. They want to demonstrate their achievement to their family back home. At the same time, quite a few students reported that they often felt lonely. Some respondents claimed that it was very hard to make friends in the U.S. Being homesick but at the same time worrying about their inadequacy to satisfy their family’s expectations can be really frustrating to the Chinese students. With the physical and psychological distance from familiar milieus, the Chinese students often find themselves experiencing emotional and social isolation in the new environment.

III. Difference in classroom setting

Language and social adaptation aside, one potential source of difficulties arises from Chinese students’ lack of support structures from the specialized academic culture within which they are studying. Chinese students may find that some beliefs about the culture of learning may not travel with them. With regard to the differences between classroom cultures, two direct questions and two indirect questions were asked. The two direct questions were: “What kinds of classroom activities seem most beneficial to you?” and “What kinds of classroom activities do you consider a waste of time?” The two indirect questions were: “What do you think are the characteristics of a good student in China?” and “What do you think are the characteristics of a good student in the U.S.?” As to the most beneficial classroom activities, 38 (60%) of the participants rated the professors’ lectures as the most useful and helpful part. 21 (33.3%) of the participants prefer the hands-on experience in field work. Interestingly, 13 (20.6%) participants rated making presentations as the most beneficial one, and they believe they can learn a lot from the experience of preparing and making presentations in front of the whole class. In contrast to this, still 10 (15.8 %) of the participants did not like presentations, considering them a waste of time. They believed that they did not learn as much from the fellow classmates as from the professor. They admitted that whereas making presentations is a challenging and rewarding experience, it can be a “disaster” and “a waste of time” if the presenters were not well-prepared. This may be due to the traditional Chinese notion that the central aim of teaching is to provide knowledge for students so Chinese students trust and feel more comfortable in what is basically a transmission model of learning: knowledge comes from the teacher and is retained by the student. They expect more instruction from the teacher, who is always considered to be the authority.

**Discussion**

This paper focused on the perceived difficulties and pressures Chinese students think they face and experience in adjusting to American colleges. Consistent with the related work on overseas Chinese students, this study found out that the linguistic, cultural, and social differences of the U.S. can be problematic for Chinese students. The gap between the familiar and comfortable surroundings of the home and the unfamiliarity of American college life limits the Chinese students’ ability to function effectively. Due to the current EFL teaching situation in China, most Chinese students are not competent in their communication in English, which interferes with their academic performance and
interaction with members of the host country. They came to the U.S. with a good command of English grammar, assuming a sudden mastering of speaking English in the real language environment. When they found out that’s far from true, they tended to be really frustrated. So the priority of the Chinese students is to improve their language competence and be linguistically prepared before departure. It’s worth noting that most students seem to have no clear ideas on how to improve their English. Linguistic inefficiency aside, the cultural and social differences can be very challenging; even daily living can be a big challenge. Everything is reduced to a matter of survival. The EFL program offered by the university can be helpful, but may not be sufficient. A one-to-one interactive tutoring and partnership might meet the needs of the students, especially for the new arrivals in the course of their transition to life in the U.S.

Researches indicate that older students have more difficulties when encountering the overseas experience. Whereas reentering colleges is a big challenge on its own, studying in an American university can bring more frustration. This particular group of students may need more counseling help on status change and role adjustment.

Though the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all groups of Chinese students studying at U.S. colleges and universities, the researcher ventures to argue that the small sample in this study is representative of Chinese students in the U.S. in general. This study may provide information to the teachers and administrators of the colleges and those who interact with Chinese students as well.
Reference


Education Research Center.


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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivations to study in the U.S.</th>
<th>Number of times mentioned</th>
<th>% of respondents mentioning this reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To learn up-to-date technology in the U.S.</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>76 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To obtain an American degree</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To broaden my horizon</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>58.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To fulfill my parents and friend’s expectation</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To live a comfortable life</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>39.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To follow the trend of studying overseas</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To experience another approach to teaching and learning</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To improve my English</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To join my family</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s easier than getting into a Chinese college</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Participants can give as many answers as they like so the total percentage is not 100%.
### Table 2
Source of pressure and difficulty (N=63)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of pressure and difficulty</th>
<th>Number of times mentioned</th>
<th>% of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>inefficient language ability</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>76.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>afraid can not find job after graduation</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>50.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>financial problems</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>worrying about getting good grades</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>afraid cannot meet the expectation</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>loneliness</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Participants can give as many answers as they like so the total percentage is not 100%.

### Table 3
The weaknesses of Chinese students compared to American students (N=63)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
<th>No. of times mentioned</th>
<th>% of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language problems</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>87.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of creativity</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of hands-on experience</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being too shy or passive</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of schema</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Participants can give as many answers as they like so the total percentage is not 100%.
Appendix I
Questionnaire
Directions: Please read the questions carefully and select the most appropriate response.

Background information: Please choose one

Where do you come from
____mainland China;____ Hong Kong ____Taiwan
gender ____ male; _____ female

How many years have you worked in China before you come to the USA _____
How many years have you been in the United States:
____1. less than 6 months
____2. 6 months to 1 year
____3. 1-2 years
____4. more than 2 years

You are a(n) ____ undergraduate; ____ postgraduate
What’s your major: ____________

Questions:
1) What's your approach to study? Choose one and state the reason.
____ collaborative
____ self-study

2) What strategies do you use in preparing the exam? Choose one or more from the following list.
____ memorize ____ rote learn
____ recall ____ repeated studying
____ reproduce ____ study from cover to cover
____ apply ____ compare
____ get general idea ____ reasoning
____ relate ____ visualize
____ organize time ____ rewrite points
____ summarize ____ talk to oneself
____ underline points
____ follow sequence of learning material

3) What words would you use to describe the Chinese students in the USA?

4) Which of the following do you find the most difficult to handle? Choose more if necessary.
____ a. generating utterances that are grammatical but not situationally acceptable
____ b. making improper starts in the first few minutes
____ c. taking turns at the wrong time
____ d. the sad fate of good intentions: being pushy, inquisitive and nosy
____ e. inappropriate length and frequency of silences
____ f. politeness

5) What groups of people do you find comfortable to work with? Please choose one.
____ Chinese students
____ Americans
____ the other international students

6) Do you like America? Please choose one.
____ very much _______ liking _______ not liking
Interview Questions

1) What is your motivation to study in the United States?
2) What are your frustrations related to studying in the USA?
3) What are some areas of satisfaction in studying in the USA?
4) Do you find your language ability inefficient? How do you cope with it?
5) What kinds of classroom activities that seem most beneficial to you? Which ones do you consider a waste of time?
6) What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of Chinese students compared with Americans students?
7) What do you think are the disadvantages and disadvantages of Chinese students compared with Americans students?
8) Are you studying under great pressure? Where does the pressure come from?
9) What do you think are the characteristics of a good student in China?
10) What do you think are the characteristics of a good student in the USA?
11) Do you think it appropriate to negotiate with your instructors or supervisors?
12) How would you describe a good teacher in Chinese context?
13) Do you want to live in a Chinese community or American community? Why?
14) Who do you refer to if you want to seek assistance?
15) What is most attractive about USA?
16) What is the hardest thing for you to get used to in USA?
17) What do you like most about China?
18) Describe any misunderstanding that arise between you and an American.