

University of Nevada, Reno

**Chinese International Students' Perceptions of Their Intercultural Adaptability**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education

by

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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## Abstract

The number of students studying in a country other than their own has dramatically increased in recent years. In 2010, over 3.7 million students studied abroad; in 2014, the number had grown to over 4.5 million students. Asian countries are the predominant places of origin. When students live and study in a new country, in addition to studying, they must adjust to a culture different than their own. This adjustment is described as intercultural adaptability, conceptualized in terms of efforts to improve satisfaction without stress and enhance well-being of immigrants and sojourners. Chinese international students suffer greater stress and anxiety than other international students due to cultural differences between China and the United States (U.S.). The purpose of this study was to examine Chinese international graduate students' perceptions of their personal intercultural adaptability, as well as effective strategies they have chosen to enhance their intercultural adjustment. This phenomenological study was designed to examine 15 Chinese international graduate students' perceptions about their intercultural adaptability through in-depth interviews about their academic and daily lives. Four themes were found in the data: (1) I'm on an Exciting Adventure; (2) Oops, I Guess I Need to Adjust to the U.S. Environment; (3) I'm Going to Succeed, No Matter What; and (4) Fate. Findings indicated that students encountered stark differences in their perceptions of life in the U.S. compared to China in both their academic life and daily living. The academic challenges they encountered concerned independent learning. They also faced intercultural adaptation to U.S. daily living, such as shopping difficulties and

no transportation. The concepts of fate and friendship had significant impacts on scrambling to cope with their new U.S. academic, social, and daily lives.

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

Overseas study is an increasingly popular way of experiencing diverse cultures. In the academic year 2009-2010, there were over 3.7 million students across the world studying in a country other than their own; China, India, and other Asian countries were the predominant countries of origin (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2011). In 2014, over 4.5 million students studied abroad, an increase of 18% compared to five years prior (Open Doors Data, 2014). The demands for global education are expected to proliferate to an estimated 7.2 million students in 2025, based on The Global Student Mobility 2025 Report (Gu, 2009).

Of the rapidly increasing number of students studying in a country other than their own, the Asian student population has grown in particular. Nilsson, Butler, Shouse, and Joshi (2008) reported that among the 670,000 international students studying on campuses in the U.S., 50% arrived from countries in Asia, with Indians and Chinese representing the two largest groups. Through the academic year 2013-2014, Chinese students successively increased their numbers to 274,439, representing 31% of the total international student population in the U.S. (Institute of International Education, 1981–2014).

When students live and study in a new country, they must adjust to a culture different than their own. The adjustment to a new culture is often described as intercultural adaptability. Intercultural adaptability is conceptualized in terms of efforts by immigrants and sojourners to improve satisfaction without stress and enhance their well-being (Gallagher, 2013). After overcoming scholastic obstacles, international

students may undergo successful intercultural learning experiences and become acculturated to the host culture via a journey of personal growth and development (Furnham, 2004). However, studies about international students' intercultural adaptation experiences reveal transitional and adaptive challenges (Cushner & Karim, 2004; Agar, 1994; Yamazaki, 2005; Minkler & Biller, 1979; Gu, 2005; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). To assist international students in experiencing the successful intercultural learning, higher education leaders have made extraordinary efforts over the last decade in training students in matters related to international relations (Joseph & Baker, 2012).

Both short- and long-term study abroad programs contribute to developing and enhancing a student's intercultural sensitivities and ability to adjust to previously unfamiliar surroundings (Hamad & Lee, 2013). Most of the research found in the literature focuses on short-term programs, trips between one and eight weeks (Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Chieffo & Griffith, 2004; Lindsey, 2005; Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Clarke, Flaherty, Wright, & McMillen, 2009; Savicki, 2010; Chin & Bhandari, 2006; Gammonley, Rotabi, & Rotabi, 2007; Brubaker, 2007; Mapp, 2012). There is very little in the literature regarding long-term programs.

There are three theoretical frameworks of intercultural adaptability that may be applied to international students who study abroad. Kim's (2001) integrative theory of communication and intercultural adaptation provides a theoretical framework for the transition process when sojourners experience and compare their home and host cultures. The theory centers on the how and why individuals become adjusted to host environments, instead of whether or not the individual ultimately adapts to the host culture (Kim, 1995; 2001). Additionally, Berger and his colleagues (Berger & Calabrese,

1975; Berger, 1979; Berger & Bradac, 1982) proposed the uncertainty reduction theory to describe a sojourner's ability to adapt interculturally in foreign countries. This theory applies primarily to situations that involve uncertainty and anxiety (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Finally, Berry's (1997) stress-coping theory suggests that stress is one of the most significant characteristics of the intercultural experience. Stress causes affective, behavioral, and cognitive coping responses.

Intercultural adaptability has been shown to be affected by three factors: psychological adaptation; sociocultural adaptation; and disparity between the home and host cultures. In the context of higher education, psychological adaptation refers to a sense of excitement that international students routinely undergo in new host cultures. However, students also encounter challenges during their time spent overseas, which may result in psychological distress (Matsumoto, LeRoux, Bernhard, & Gray, 2004). Sociocultural adaptation applies to international students when they are confronted with two main challenges. One is learning new academic knowledge and skills in a foreign language; the other is learning the new and unfamiliar host culture (Burkhardt & Bennett, 2015). Lastly, Chinese scholars who study abroad often discover that their highest level of acculturative stress is due in part to the many significant differences in academic and social norms between Chinese and American cultures (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Yeh, 2000; Sue & Zane, 1985; Samovar & Porter, 1991; Yang & Clum, 1994; Klein, Miller, & Alexander, 1981). The degree of cultural contrast between China and the United States (U.S.) has been described by American International Education Foundation (2014). Dissimilarities include: perceptions of self; social relations; friendship; obligations; harmony and truth; and time consciousness.

Joseph and Baker (2012) described international students' intercultural adjustment problems and issues as culture shock. The concept of culture shock was initially developed by Oberg (1960); the term culture shock is widely used to describe the difficulties and challenges that immigrants and sojourners, including businesspersons, students, and travelers, encounter when they try to fit into new and unfamiliar cultures (Oberg, 1960). Sojourners experience different stages in the process of culture shock (Oberg, 1972). The stages can be formulated as "(1) the honeymoon or tourist phase; (2) the crisis or culture shock phase; (3) the adjustment, reorientation and gradual recovery phase; and (4) the adaptation, resolution, and acculturation phase" (Winkelman, 1994, p. 122).

Issues associated with becoming accustomed to a new college environment in general are more prevalent for international students than their American peers (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007). Research indicates that due to cultural differences, Chinese international students, as one of the largest population groups of international students in U.S. higher education, suffer much more stress and anxiety in comparison to their peers of European ethnicities (Hung, Shive, Wang, & Diu, 2005; Smith, Basmadjian, Kirell, & Koziol, 2003; Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Surdam & Collins, 1984; Young & Wehrly, 1990). International students frequently cite challenges resulting from personal concerns about cultural differences, including language barriers (Xu, 2002; Sheh, 1994; Swagler & Ellis, 2003; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Mak & Neil, 2006; Gill, 2007), academic difficulties (Mak & Barker, 2006; Ward, 2006; Ho, Holmes, & Cooper, 2004), financial problems (Lin, 1998; Mak & Neil, 2006; Swagler, & Ellis, 2003), lack of a social support system (Willians & Butler, 2003; Mak & Nesdale, 2001; Ward, 2006; Gill, 2007), and

daily life issues (Ward & Masgoret, 2004; Lin, 1998). These personal anxieties often culminate in depression, homesickness, alienation, and loneliness. As a result, the learning habits and experiences of international students studying abroad were reported to be adversely affected (Joseph & Baker, 2012).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Many researchers have explored the topic of intercultural adjustment of international students who study abroad in the U.S. (Stafford, Marian, & Salter, 1980; Dillard & Chisholm, 1983; Surdam & Collins, 1984; Cadieux & Wehrly, 1986; Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Farley & Mikulecky, 1988; Wehrly, 1986; Swagler & Ellis, 2003; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Joseph & Baker, 2012). In addition to these more general studies, some studies have focused specifically on the intercultural adaptability of Asian students (Kuo & Spees, 1983; Reinicke, 1986; Kitao & Kitao, 1989). Yet other research emphasizes the intercultural adjustment abilities specific to the Chinese learner (Young & Wehrly, 1990; Samovar & Porter, 1991; Yeh, 2000; Zhao, 2005; Hung et al., 2005; Yan & Berliner, 2011; Tong, 2014). The majority of the research involving the population of students and their known adaptabilities has largely centered on stress and stressors. A few studies have ventured into how acculturation experiences can improve the student's mental health by measuring levels of satisfaction when studying overseas in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S. (Gao & Liu, 1998; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2006).

Previous research has suggested that Chinese international students, as the largest group of foreign students on American campuses, often undergo the highest level of acculturative stress among foreign groups (Klein et al., 1981; Sue & Zane, 1985;

Samovar & Porter, 1991; Yeh, 2000; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). This is largely due to the multitude of pointed differences in academic and social norms between Chinese and U.S. cultures (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). Therefore, Chinese international students must be considered different when compared to the broad-spectrum of international students as a whole.

There is no known literature concerning how Chinese international students perceive their own degrees of personal overall intercultural adaptability in the U.S. and the strategies they use to improve their adaptability. Thus, filling this gap in the research can help both academic faculty and administrators in U.S. institutions of higher education gain a better understanding of the population of Chinese international students in their schools. Correspondingly, this new area of examination can further improve student services to help this distinctive group become more effective in all aspects connected to their education.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine Chinese international graduate students' perceptions of their personal intercultural adaptability, as well as effective strategies they have chosen to enhance their intercultural adjustment. The research investigated the participants' life stories with a specific accent on their academic, social, and daily life experiences. With this in mind, this study was designed to answer the following research questions:

- (1) How do Chinese international graduate students perceive their personal intercultural adaptability?
- (2) What strategies do they use to enhance their intercultural adaptability?

## Research Design

Creswell (2003) demonstrated that research methods are the product of explorative questions. This qualitative phenomenological investigation was designed to examine how 15 Chinese international graduate students perceived their intercultural adaptation experiences while studying in the U.S., as well as explore the strategies they used to improve their intercultural adaptability. A qualitative method was chosen because qualitative research is used most often to examine, comprehend, and clarify the meanings of social phenomena (Merriam, 1998). Thus, a qualitative research design provides an approach to examine questions concerning experiences which individuals have undergone, as well as the meanings developed from those experiences (Pitney & Parker, 2009).

It is the responsibility of the researcher to develop not just fitting research design, but also to institute the proper selection of participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Determining the number of participants in qualitative research is challenging because there is no specific formula. According to Sandelowski (1995), ten participants could be regarded as an adequate sample size. For this research study, 15 participants who were enrolled at a Tier 1 university in the western U.S. as Chinese international graduate students were included in the study. A criterion sampling approach applies to recruitment of participants (Lichtman, 2013). The criteria for inclusion in the study were: Chinese international students; graduate level (master's or doctorate) study; gender difference (male or female); temporary residence in the U.S. for at least one year; and a willingness to engage in an in-depth interview. After identifying and selecting the participants, semi-structured interviews provided the data for this study. In this particular case, data were

gathered through interviews with the 15 study participants. The semi-structured interview was chosen as the means for gathering data in this study because it was flexible and more likely to promote prolific, thoughtful responses by the participants (Lichtman, 2013). The interview questions focused on three general categories: academic life; social life; and daily life.

Data were collected under the auspices of the University Institutional Review Board (IRB). A recruitment email was sent to all Chinese international graduate students registered with the Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS). A balance of students whose majors were laboratory and social sciences was sought. Attempts were made to have an equal number of students who majored in a hard science and students who studied a social science. Interviews were conducted in a private location of the participant's choosing, audiotaped, and conducted in Mandarin (i.e., the standard / official form of Chinese based on the Beijing dialect).

All interviews were transcribed and initially coded in Mandarin. The three Cs of data analysis (coding, categorizing, and concepts) was utilized (Lichtman, 2013). Profiles of each participant were created in Mandarin first and translated to English. To ensure information completeness and correction, profiles in Mandarin and English were shared with the respective participant as a form of member checking.

### **Limitations**

There are four limiting conditions inherent in this study. The primary limitation is that the first language of both the participants and the investigator was Mandarin, yet the findings are relayed in English. It is not possible to produce perfect translations between

Mandarin and English. For example, the researcher might frequently be unable to generate English translations for a multitude of various slang words in Mandarin.

The second limitation is that only graduate students studying at one institution were recruited to be part of the study. The findings are not generalizable to all Chinese international students in the U.S. Similarly, qualitative research generally includes small numbers of participants; findings may be different among other groups of students studying at different institutions.

The third limitation is that the investigator is a Chinese international graduate student. Careful attention was made to not introduce bias into the interpretations of the statements made by the research participants. Participant profiles, developed during the initial phase of data analysis, were shared with each graduate student as a means of member checking.

A fourth limitation was the potential reluctance of the participants to be completely honest about their intercultural experience. If the individual had not had a particularly positive experience, he or she may have been reluctant to share complete information. All attempts were made to make the interview as comfortable and nonthreatening to the participants as possible.

### **Delimitations**

There are four delimitations in this research design. All the participants were Chinese international students rather than students from other nationalities. In addition, the Chinese international students were studying at the graduate (master's and doctoral) level. Furthermore, the Chinese international graduate students were enrolled at a single

institute of higher education. Finally, the institute of higher education was a medium-size public research university.

### **Significance of the Study**

There is increasing international cooperation and communication among global companies, communities, and higher education institutions (Williams, 2005).

Understanding intercultural context is becoming significantly important for both individuals and organizations with global concerns in business, entertainment, and education (Gallagher, 2013). Globalization has resulted in the increasing migration of individuals to other parts of the world (Lyons, 2006). As people migrate, they are confronted with adjusting to foreign cultures (Chin & Bhandari, 2006). As a result, there are increasing demands to become knowledgeable about and adapt to new and different cultures (Mapp, 2012). In addition, the fields of international education, business, and public relations in general, have heightened expectations of students and employees. They are expected to not only understand, but also acclimatize to alien cultures (Bodycott, 2012). Compared to the climate of fifteen years ago, increasing skill sets surrounding intercultural knowledge and adaptability are becoming progressively noteworthy (Williams, 2005).

International students enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education benefit from access to some of the finest professors and research laboratories in the world. American students and faculty members profit from international students' diverse perspectives and the cultural knowledge they bring to both instruction and research (Nilsson et al., 2008). In addition to the diverse perspectives and cultural knowledge, international students have a significant positive fiscal impact on the economy of the U.S.

For instance, they contributed more than \$24 billion to the country's financial system in 2013, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce (Biles & Lindley, 2009).

The population of Chinese international students who initially came to the U.S. to study in 1978 was around 30. Through the academic year 2013-2014, Chinese students successively increased their numbers to 274,439, representing 31% of the total international student population in the U.S. In other words, China was the primary country of origin for those choosing an American education (Institute of International Education, 1981–2014). The growth of the Chinese international student population is driven predominantly at the graduate level.

Comparatively speaking, the overall relative percentage of graduate students, undergraduates, Optional Practical Training (OPT) participants, and non-degree seeking students is 42.2%, 40.3%, 12.2%, and 5.3% respectively (Open Doors Data, 2014). Gill (2007) recommended providing academic staff both opportunities for – and support with – building functionally operative social networks. Doing as much would prove to be an effective strategy towards encouraging and assisting international students in developing the capacity to confidently adapt cross-culturally when introduced to foreign environments. Therefore, findings of this study are useful for improving the intercultural adaptability of Chinese international students from their own perceptions of intercultural adjustment. The results of the research will eventually benefit both U.S. educators and new Chinese international students in terms of developing and enhancing the latter's adeptness for acclimating interculturally.

### **Definitions**

The following terms have been defined for the purpose of this study.

1. Anxiety – the distress of destructive concerns and consequences in new and unfamiliar environments and cultures (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1987).
2. Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUM) – details a sojourner’s intercultural adjustment (Gudykunst, 1988; 2005).
3. Cultural Identity – is gradually created and developed by people when they live with their own cultural group and communicate with other members of that group (Abrams, O’ Connor, & Giles, 2002).
4. Culture Shock – the difficulties and challenges that immigrants and sojourners, including businesspersons, students, and travelers, encounter when they try to fit into new and unfamiliar cultures (Oberg, 1960).
5. Functional Fitness – involves becoming skilled in fulfilling an individual’s general needs within the society (Kim, 1988).
6. Graduate Students – students who already have undergraduate degrees and are studying to earn graduate degrees at the master’s and doctoral levels (Moffett, 2006).
7. Integrative Theory of Communication and Intercultural Adaptation – a theoretical framework for the transition process when sojourners experience and compare their home and host cultures (Kim, 1988; 1995; 2001).
8. Intercultural Adaptability – is conceptualized in terms of efforts to improve satisfaction without stress and enhance well-being of immigrants and sojourners (Gallagher, 2013).
9. Intercultural Adaptation – “the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or

reestablish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments” (Kim, 2001, p. 31).

10. Intercultural Identity – a sense of belonging to multiple cultures instead of only one particular culture (Kim, 1995).
11. Intercultural Learning – includes both the experience of encountering two or more different cultures and the personal adjustments that occur via such encounters (Kim, 1988; 1995; 2001).
12. International Students – students who are authorized to study in the U.S. until they complete their degrees under F1 student visas (Demographics, 2015).
13. Learning Disturbances – the uncomfortable feelings and challenges that students encounter when they are in countries with academic requirements different from their home country (Gu, 2005).
14. Loneliness – the unpleasant feelings when individuals fail to develop social networks (Perlman & Peplau, 1981).
15. Mandarin– the standard / official form of Chinese based on the Beijing dialect (Chang & Heift, 2015).
16. Phenomenology – a study of learning and sharing the meanings of the experiences of individuals (Moustakas, 1994).
17. Psychological Adaptation – consists of sentimental or emotional responses to intercultural adjustment, which may be positive or negative (Sabatier & Berry, 2008; Savicki, 2010).

18. Psychological Health – the satisfactions of needs within the host society and diminished symptoms of distress such as withdraw, rejection, and argumentativeness (Kim, 1988; 1995; 2001).
19. Semi-structured Interviews – an instrument for developing exchanges between interviewer and interviewee. The interviewer provides interview topics for the purpose of obtaining the interviewee’s perceptions (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2003).
20. Snowball sampling – a recruitment method that research participants are asked to support researchers to recognize and identify potential subjects (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).
21. Sociocultural Adaptation – reducing problems associated with the foreignness of a dissimilar culture through knowledge and learning specific skills (Savicki, 2010).
22. Stress – the destructive reaction that occurs when an individual’s competencies are inadequate to the demands of the new environment (Alred, 2003).
23. Stress Coping Theory – describes the affective, behavioral, and cognitive coping responses of intercultural experiences (Berry, 1990; 1997).
24. Tension Reduction – decreasing ones nervousness or anxiety when interacting with someone in an unfamiliar situation (Hamad & Lee, 2013).
25. Uncertainty Reduction Theory – describes a sojourner’s ability to adapt cross-culturally in foreign countries. This theory applies primarily to situations that

involve uncertainty and anxiety (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Berger, 1979; Berger & Bradac, 1982).

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

The purpose of this study was to examine Chinese international graduate students' perceptions of their personal intercultural adaptability, as well as effective strategies they have chosen to enhance their intercultural adjustment. This chapter provides a review of the related literature and includes five sections. In section one, an introduction of intercultural adaptability is presented; the section includes the definition and description of intercultural adaptability, international students as sojourners, and approaches to intercultural adaptability. The approaches are integrative theory of communication and intercultural adaptation, uncertainty reduction theory, and stress coping theory. The second section provides a review of previous research focused on factors that affect intercultural adaptability. The factors include psychological adaptation, sociocultural adaptation, and disparity between home and host cultures. The third section reviews the definition, description, and research concerning culture shock. The fourth section discusses Chinese international students studying in the U.S. Finally, a summary of the chapter is presented.

### **Intercultural Adaptability**

Intercultural adaptation refers to “the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or reestablish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments” (Kim, 2001, p. 31). Intercultural adaptability is conceptualized in terms of efforts by immigrants and sojourners to improve satisfaction without stress and enhance their well-being (Gallagher, 2013). The process of intercultural adaptation is a desired

phase for each sojourner. In the process, sojourners interact with new cultures, whereby they must proceed through a socialization process in order to maximize their fit in the host community or an unfamiliar environment. Adaptation to an unfamiliar and new culture is often a challenging and uncomfortable experience, however. Individuals generally feel confused and initially find it difficult to acclimate themselves when studying and learning, as they try to become seasoned to variances between their home cultures and that of their new host (Hamad & Lee, 2013).

Studies about international students' intercultural adaptation experiences reveal transitional and adaptive challenges. Overseas study experiences bring about stress when foreign students are confronted with unfamiliar physical and psychological conditions (Cushner & Karim, 2004). The stress can result in learning disturbances, including those associated with both cultural and language shock (Agar, 1994), educational shock (Yamazaki, 2005), and distress linked to roles and norms (Minkler & Biller, 1979). Learning disturbances refer to the uncomfortable feelings and challenges that students encounter when they are in countries with academic requirements different from their home country (Gu, 2005). In the process of learning a new culture, international students must overcome many obstacles; psychological and sociocultural adaptations are central to the learning process (Ward & Kennedy, 1993).

After overcoming scholastic obstacles, international students may undergo successful intercultural learning experiences and become acculturated to the host culture via a journey of personal growth and development (Furnham, 2004). The personal growth and development involves increasing ones capability to assimilate into the present world state that is a meshed network of connecting cultures, values, beliefs, religions, and

socioeconomic systems (Joseph & Baker, 2012). Students possessing a background of international experiences are capable of making constructive contributions connected to a greater sense of multicultural awareness and practices (Dao et al., 2007).

Students who have had international experiences can improve their professional backgrounds, such as increasing their global business and trade competencies. To accomplish these improvements, international students may require assistance in preparing themselves to understand and navigate intercultural relationships. Higher education leaders have made extraordinary efforts over the last decade in training students in matters related to international relations (Joseph & Baker, 2012).

### **International Students as Sojourners**

Overseas study is an increasingly popular way of experiencing diverse cultures. In the academic year 2009-2010, there were over 3.7 million students studying abroad across the world; China, India, and other Asian countries were the predominant countries of origin (OECD, 2011). In 2014, over 4.5 million students studied abroad, an increase of 18% compared to five years prior (Open Doors Data, 2014). The demands for global education are expected to proliferate to an estimated 7.2 million students in 2025, based on The Global Student Mobility 2025 Report (Gu, 2009).

Many institutions of higher education include international education as a core component of their mission and vision statements (Nilsson et al., 2008). Study abroad courses and international programs of learning are offered in many U.S. institutions of higher education (Mapp, 2012). In addition to sending students to study in other countries, the U.S., Australia, and Great Britain are three of the most attractive overseas study destinations for international students. International students make significant

financial contributions to the three countries. For instance, economic provisions for the United States (U.S.) in 2005 were \$14.5 billion, up from \$12 billion just one year prior (National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA), 2006; 2007). By the end of 2014, the number of international students attending American universities was 866,052; this group represented 4% of all those who matriculated in U.S. institutions of higher learning (Open Doors Data, 2014). Likewise, the British system of higher education has benefited from approximately £ 12.5 billion per year in tuition, fees, and other revenue generated by an international student population (British Council, 2008), while Australia's revenues have been a staggering \$13.7 billion (National Liaison Committee for International Students in Australia, 2008).

Both short- and long-term study abroad programs contribute to enhancing a student's intercultural sensitivities and ability to adjust to previously unfamiliar surroundings. Results from a study conducted by Hamad and Lee (2013) indicated that the longer the U.S. students studied abroad, the weaker the student's cultural and ethnic identification. Cultural and ethnic identities were measured by 16 and 19 items, respectively. Items regarding cultural identity were: I usually consider from the viewpoint of U.S. culture; U.S culture has a noteworthy influence on answering who I am; I would like to entirely comprehend U.S. culture; and so forth. Items concerning ethnic identity included: I am pleased in my personal ethnic background; I do not frequently have contact with people of other ethnic groups; I would like to join student activities with individuals with dissimilar ethnic backgrounds; and so on. Cultural and ethnic identities were measured by a Likert scale. Participants included 21 males and 57 females. The

racial backgrounds of the participants were White Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans.

Much research found in the literature focuses on short-term programs, usually a trip between one and eight weeks, to develop student's intercultural sensitivity and adaptability (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). Chieffo and Griffith (2004) found that there were significant differences in intercultural awareness and adaptability when comparing two groups of undergraduate students who participated in a global awareness program. One group studied abroad and took a cultural diversity class in the host country; the other group remained on their home campus and took a similar course. In a five-week study, the first group of 1,509 students who completed courses abroad had a better understanding of intercultural awareness and adjustment than the other group of 847 students who completed the similar course on their home campus. Beyond greater intercultural awareness and adaptability, students who enrolled in courses abroad achieved higher grade points average than the ones who took the similar course domestically.

In a qualitative research study that examined a one month study abroad program in Scotland, Lindsey (2005) reported that students not only appreciated cultural differences, they wanted to further develop and enhance their newfound understanding of intercultural awareness, as well as improve their respective levels of adaptability. Anderson et al. (2006) found that 23 senior business administration students improved their intercultural adaptabilities through studying abroad in both England and Ireland for a four-week period. Short-term trips provided students opportunities to gain both confidence and a desire to attend longer-term programs (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). Clarke

et al. (2009) argued that longer-term programs could improve students' personal growth. The personal growth involves increasing intercultural interests, communication skills, awareness, knowledge, and adaptability related to foreign civilizations.

Donnelly-Smith (2009) argued that because intercultural adaptability may be achieved through progressively meaningful courses concerning cultural diversity, it is not necessary to attend expensive overseas study programs. Savicki (2010) countered that students who enroll solely in intercultural classes tend to have less practical learning experiences. This is because there is little to no opportunity to interact with native speakers or the local community in foreign countries. To avoid the limits of traditional multicultural courses, many researchers contend that studying abroad is the preferred option to help students develop their intercultural adaptability. Chin and Bhandari (2006) indicated that overseas study is a method of assisting students in adapting to foreign cultures; to a large extent, overseas study is becoming essential to the students. Similarly, Gammonley et al. (2007) argued that a study abroad experience is an increasingly exclusive way to provide students meaningful opportunities for gaining intercultural knowledge and adaptability.

The benefits of study abroad programs extend beyond the students. The opportunities of overseas study can help countries build and maintain a more competitive future workforce. Graduates with overseas study experiences or degrees from foreign countries have been regarded as the most skilled and academically sound individuals relative to intercultural adaptability (Vietor & Thompson, 2008). Graduates are believed to have achieved valuable abilities and talents with respect to intercultural learning,

global awareness, and intercultural adaptability through foreign study (Hamad & Lee, 2013).

In addition to learning and developing intercultural principles for adaptability while studying abroad, some researchers also indicate that undertaking overseas studies can help students improve their intercultural adjustment experiences in other situations. Brubaker (2007) found that understanding foreign matters was enhanced to the point that students were better able to acclimate themselves to new environments; studying abroad provided real-time opportunities for immersion learning of foreign languages and culture. In particular, the learning process was based in first-hand cultural involvement through interacting with native speakers and the local community. Likewise, Savicki (2010) and Mapp (2012) supported the argument that overseas study is important for enriching intercultural adaptability.

### **Approaches to Intercultural Adaptability**

Theoretical frameworks of intercultural adaptability generally include psychological and sociocultural adaptations as two distinct, but interrelated, components. Three theories are discussed. The theories include integrative theory of communication and intercultural adaptation, uncertainty reduction theory, and stress-coping theory.

#### **Integrative theory of communication and intercultural adaptation.**

Intercultural adaptation occurs when individuals interact with the local populace in host countries. Kim's (2001) integrative theory of communication and intercultural adaptation provides a theoretical framework for the transition process when sojourners experience and compare their home and host cultures. The theory centers on the how and why individuals become adjusted to host environments, instead of whether or not the

individual ultimately adapts to the host culture (Kim, 1995; 2001). In the process of intercultural adaptation, three factors, functional fitness, psychological health, and intercultural identity development, have important impacts on sojourners' intercultural adjustment (Kim, 1988; 1995).

Functional fitness involves becoming skilled in fulfilling an individual's general needs within the society (Kim, 1988). For example, in an educational setting, college students work hard to pursue their degrees in order to find good jobs after graduation. Another educational example is that international students can be actively involved in class discussions, presentations, and social interactions with native students, thereby enhancing their language proficiency. In addition, the students represent themselves as individuals rather than being a nameless member of a particular group. International students develop communication capabilities and learn the process of developing interpersonal interactions (Kim, 1988).

International students from the same country can exhibit distinct approaches to functional fitness. In a study concerning personalities of northern and southern Chinese, a survey was administered to 1,162 college students in six cities in China. The results indicated that there were distinct personalities within the Chinese nation between northerners and southerners. The personalities of northern Chinese students were similar to westerners. They were characterized as individualistic, sociable, and critical thinkers. Compared to the northern Chinese students, southern personalities were similar to Japanese and Korean, characterized as inter-reliant, unsociable, and group thinkers (University Herald, 2015).

Psychological health refers to individuals who can satisfy their needs within the host society and diminish symptoms of distress such as withdrawal, rejection, and argumentativeness (Kim, 1988; 1995; 2001). In particular, individuals need to comprehend and adopt strategies to maintain balance between work, school, and daily life. The methods include keeping an updated schedule, working ahead, getting a good night's sleep, prioritizing work, and making time for oneself (Looksharp, 2015).

Cultural identity is gradually created and developed by people when they live with their own cultural group and communicate with other members of that group (Abrams et al., 2002). Intercultural identity is a sense of belonging to multiple cultures instead of only one particular culture (Kim, 1995). In a multicultural condition, individuals are pleased to maintain their original cultural identity, plus they are able to embrace other, new, and distinctive identities. The distinctive identities contribute to an individual's greater tolerance, acceptance, and the spirit of inclusiveness (Kim, 2001).

Kim (2001) also illustrated that long-term sojourners in general have a greater expectation to adapt to the new culture than temporary sojourners. However, no new sojourner can be entirely immune to having to understand, learn, and acculturate into the host culture (Kim, 2001). The expectation to adapt also applies to international scholars who study abroad in foreign countries, regardless of whether they are short-term exchange students or degree seekers enrolled in a course of study that encompasses multiple semesters (Hamad & Lee, 2013).

Intercultural learning includes both the experience of encountering two or more different cultures and the personal adjustments that occur via such encounters. The learning process includes three steps: stress, adaptation, and growth. Stress applies to the

destructive reaction that occurs when an individual's competencies are inadequate to the demands of the new environment. Stress is generally temporary and leads to adaptation, during which struggling individuals attempt to overcome challenges through learning and acting according to the cultural clues of the host environment. Both experiences of stress and adaptation result in growth. Individuals can enhance their stress coping capabilities after undergoing and overcoming several cycles of stress and adaptation (Alred, 2003).

Kim's (2001) integrative theory of communication and intercultural adaptation provides a stress-adaptation-growth dynamic model. The model pertains to how individuals adapt to new host cultures by moving forward, moving backward, and then forward again. Individuals usually choose to move backward when they face stress and depression, while opting to proceed forward upon recognizing success in their progress in actively adjusting to host environments.

**Uncertainty reduction theory.** Berger and his colleagues (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Berger, 1979; Berger & Bradac, 1982) proposed the uncertainty reduction theory to describe a sojourner's ability to adapt cross-culturally in foreign countries. This theory applies primarily to situations that involve uncertainty and anxiety (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Uncertainty reduction is a cognitive process whereby individuals endeavor to comprehend another person's condition in relation to his or her own condition through making active predictions (Hammer, Wiseman, Rasmussen, & Brusckke, 1998). There are strategies that people use to reduce their levels of uncertainty. For example, individuals can dynamically interact with local people instead of only observing others in the host country; Berger (1979) indicated that the process of interacting involves taking

advantage of opportunities for face-to-face communication, enthusiastically asking questions, and accepting help from others.

Gudykunst and Hammer's (1987) anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theory extended the uncertainty reduction theory by involving anxiety reduction processes to facilitate intercultural adaptation. Anxiety/uncertainty management theory was initially advanced to describe effective intercultural interactions (Gudykunst, 1988; 1993; 1995); it was subsequently extended to explain intercultural adaptation (Gudykunst, 1995; 2005). The theory details a sojourner's intercultural adjustment; the sojourner may be an individual experiencing a temporary visit or remain in the foreign culture for an extended period of time (Gudykunst, 1993; 2005).

The AUM theory suggests that reduction of uncertainty and anxiety is necessary to becoming acculturated. Uncertainty reduction refers to the capabilities of individuals to clarify and predict their personal behavior, as well as the behavior of others. Anxiety applies to the distress of destructive concerns and consequences in new and unfamiliar environments and cultures (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1987). Based on AUM theory, individuals put forth certain efforts when they try to adapt to new, intercultural environments. These efforts include tension reduction and information seeking. Tension reduction involves decreasing one's nervousness or anxiety when interacting with someone in an unfamiliar situation (Hamad & Lee, 2013). Information seeking refers to people improving their abilities and skills to describe and predict behaviors (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1987).

Uncertainty and anxiety are the two principal constructs in the AUM theory. Uncertainty results when a person's values and behaviors are different from those of the

host culture; uncertainty defines cognitive difficulties in intercultural communication. After uncertainty is reduced, individuals tend to be confident in predicting the local culture and behaviors of people in host countries (Gudykunst, 2005). Anxiety can stem from having to communicate and interact with local people in host countries and reflects affective challenges. In particular, individuals do not always feel comfortable when conversing and attempting to relate with host nationals (Gudykunst, 2005). Thus, AUM theory indicates that both cognition and affect are related to intercultural adjustment. Individuals eventually acculturate to the host culture after their levels of both uncertainty and anxiety have diminished. In the adaptive process, core intercultural adaptation is achieved when one finds oneself effectively communicating with local residents in host cultures (Rui & Wang, 2015).

Consistent with AUM theory, Ward (2006) suggested an approach to enhance intercultural adaptation. The approach involves actively understanding and learning the host culture. The lack of understanding can cause difficulties and setbacks in intercultural adaption (Rui & Wang, 2015). Thus, adapting interculturally is an involved process in which sojourners put forth active efforts to study new situations and gain skills related to a specific culture in order to fit into a foreign environment. Based on gaining an understanding about a culture, Ward (2006) conceptualized sociocultural adaptation as the abilities and skills exercised in understanding cultures by sojourners. In addition to the abilities and skills, the sojourner's subsequent appropriate behaviors in the host environment are also involved.

**Stress coping theory.** A related approach to intercultural adaptability is stress coping. Stress reduction can be achieved through social support during the process of

intercultural adjustment (Rui & Wang, 2015). Based on the approach chosen for coping with stress, Ward (2006) further suggested that psychological adjustment must be considered in intercultural adaptation. Psychological adjustment applies to the emotional well-being and satisfaction of sojourners.

From the perspective of psychological adaptation, Berry's (1997) stress coping theory suggests that stress is one of the most significant characteristics of the intercultural experience. Stress causes affective, behavioral, and cognitive coping responses. Negative coping responses to stress may include: being the cause or even victim of emotional damage; becoming intentionally or unwittingly involved in moderate to major criminal activity; and suffering adjustment problems and culture shock (Engstrom & Mathiesen, 2012). An extremely high level of acculturative stress increases the chances of depressive suicide for immigrants (Hovey & King, 1996). Hence, students who plan to study abroad should consider not only the benefits of developing and enhancing intercultural adaptability, but the hazards which may be related to overseas educational programs. Understanding and preparing for stressors related to societal adjustment and cultural distress are significant areas of concern for international students (Mapp, 2012).

A series of stressors leads to levels of acculturative stress and many psychological adaptations (Berry, 1990). Acculturative stressors are the struggles and difficulties that result from intercultural interaction (Joiner & Walker, 2002). Berry's (1990) conceptual framework identified certain significant stressors as factors that have important impacts on adapting to foreign cultures during sojourn. The specific characteristics of each society and of each individual influence stress, coping, and adaptation (Berry, 1997). The social, political, and religious conditions of host cultures can create challenges to new

immigrants. Racial discrimination is a typical example of a condition that has a negative influence on both the psychological and social adaptation of migrants (Jasinskaja, Liebkind, Jaakkola, & Reuter, 2006). The following negative examples are stereotypes that sojourners may encounter in the U.S.: African-Americans always commit crimes generally concerning drugs, weapons, and violence; Hispanic and Latinos are equal to illegal immigration; Chinese-Americans are regarded as spies; and Arab and Muslims are representatives of terrorism (Ward, 2006).

As for characteristics of the individual, Berry's (1990) stress coping theory framework suggests two stages of sojourn: prior to and during sojourn. The stage prior to departure applies to sojourners who are still in their home countries, preparing to go to a host country. Factors such as age, gender, education, and personality may be deemed important considerations prior to the sojourn. The stage during sojourn refers to the timeframe when sojourners have left their home countries and have arrived in the host country. Yan and Berliner (2011) conducted a qualitative research study concerning how Chinese international students adapted to U.S. higher education during sojourn. Their findings indicated that individual factors, such as age, gender, study major, and length of training, had important influences on the sojourner's degree of stress. Specifically, older students regularly experienced considerable intercultural challenges and problems; younger students experienced less stress and were not very depressed due to language barrier and culture shock. Gender did not appear to influence academic pressure; however, female Chinese students experienced more frustration in financial aid while male Chinese students expressed more anxiety and stress about their future vocational achievement. The academic or study major played a pivotal role in the students' concerns

of language barriers. English language skills were not as critical for students in majors associated with natural sciences. In contrast, the students studying social sciences needed to have a better understanding of English and the U.S. culture. Finally, newly arrived students suffered more stress related to English language barriers and cultural shock while students who had stayed longer expressed more anxiety about their future plans: working in the U.S. or going back to their home country (Berry, 1997).

### **Factors that Affect Intercultural Adaptability**

Three factors have been identified to affect intercultural adaptability: psychological adaptation; sociocultural adaptation; and disparity between the home and host cultures. Psychological and sociocultural adaptations are the two main intercultural adjustments that international students face during the period they spend studying abroad in foreign countries (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). The disparity between home and host cultures indicates the degree or extent of intercultural adaptability; in essence, the greater the disparity, the more challenges associated with intercultural adaptability.

#### **Psychological Adaptation**

Psychological adaptation consists of sentimental or emotional responses to intercultural adjustment. Sabatier and Berry (2008) described the concept of psychological adaptation as an individual's sense of personal well-being. Savicki (2010) added that psychological adaptation may involve a negative sense of emotional well-being. As for intercultural adaptation related to global higher education, international students routinely undergo a sense of excitement in new host cultures. However, they also encounter challenges during their time spent overseas, which may result in psychological distress (Matsumoto et al., 2004).

Intercultural psychological adaptation has both positive and negative impacts on international students. The positive impacts include personal pride in proficiency in a foreign language, increased cultural consciousness (Kamal & Maruyama, 1990), self-possession, an optimistic mood, and rewarding social relations (Matsumoto, LeRoux, Ratzlaff, Tatani, Uchida, Kim, & Araki, 2001). When an international student experiences negative psychological adjustments, results may include loneliness, an early return to the international students' home country, poor school and work performance, unsuccessful social networks (Straffon, 2003), and stress (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003).

Students may regard their study processes as simultaneously exciting and challenging because each person possesses different personal characteristics and stress-coping mechanisms. For example, some international students who have introverted personalities may feel very lonely compared to extroverts. Loneliness refers to individuals who feel unpleasant when they fail to develop social networks (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Loneliness can be manifested into depression, isolation, and feelings of hopelessness (Perse, 1990). Loneliness in intercultural adaptation may lead to emotional distress within the phases of psychological adjustment (Wang & Sun, 2009).

### **Sociocultural Adaptation**

Sociocultural adaptation consists of reducing problems associated with the foreignness of a dissimilar culture through knowledge and learning specific skills (Savicki, 2010). In essence, sociocultural adaptation reflects how well people can function in terms of their daily life in a social environment (e.g., school, workplace, and local community) (Sabatier & Berry, 2008). Within the content of international higher

education, international students are confronted with two main sociocultural adaptation challenges. One is learning new academic knowledge and skills in a foreign language; the other is learning the new and unfamiliar host culture (Burkhardt & Bennett, 2015). The trials that may contribute to poor adaptation include a series of stressors in international students' daily lives; commonplace events such as transportation, grocery shopping, and loneliness may result in that the students' home cultural expectations cannot always be aligned with those of the host cultures (Ward et al., 2001).

### **Disparity between Home and Host Cultures**

The process of intercultural adaptation is experienced by all international students as they travel abroad to study. The extent of the adaptation is influenced by the extent to which the home and host cultures differ. Perkins (1997) contended that when attempting to adapt to life within the U.S. system of higher education, international students who experience higher degrees of stress usually come from non-European, lesser-developed countries in the Eastern hemisphere. When facing matters of intercultural adaptability, Sue and Zane (1985) added that Chinese international students in particular encounter a great deal of challenges and difficulties. The degree of cultural contrast between China and the U.S. has been described by the American International Education Foundation (2014). Dissimilarities include: perceptions of self; social relations; friendship; obligations; harmony and truth; and time consciousness. At the most fundamental level, Chinese focus on collectivism whereby people value group collaboration and individual modesty. In contrast, American culture is centered on individualism whereby people pursue freedom without limitation. From the perspective of social relations, social relations among Chinese are formal and hierarchical while Americans prefer to develop

informal and equal social relations. As for friendship, Chinese like to provide selfless contributions to help their friends whereas there is no implied promise or obligation to assist friends from the viewpoint of an American. As for obligations, Chinese believe that there is an obligation to support each other within family relationships and friendships. In contrast, Americans do not share the same sense of interdependence. From the aspect of harmony and truth, Chinese are used to saving face and avoiding direct conflicts with other people in public; however, Americans can present their personal opinions, as well as criticize another person in a conflict or a discussion. From the aspect of time consciousness, Chinese prefer to learn from past experiences and plan for future whereas American do not pay much attention to the past (American International Education Foundation, 2014). These distinctions can result in a substantial degree of stress for Chinese international students, especially compared to European peers (Samovar & Porter, 1991).

Yang and Clum (1994) endorsed that there is a positive relationship between social distinctions and intercultural adjustment difficulties. When two nations have significant social distinctions between them, it is expected that visiting international students will experience compounded forms of stress while studying abroad. Chinese international students often face pointedly tense intercultural adjustments in the U.S. This is because of the discernible differences between China and the U.S. in the obvious areas of language, culture, social structure, and political systems (Klein et al., 1981). As such, the Chinese, the largest foreign population enrolled in American colleges, are reported to experience some of the highest levels of anxiety as they navigate intercultural adaptation processes (Yeh, 2000).

Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006) explained how Chinese scholars who study abroad often discover that their highest level of acculturative stress is due in part to the many significant differences in academic and social norms between Chinese and American cultures. For instance, in observing a tradition of collectivistic cultural mannerisms, Chinese students understand the notion of compliance very well. In doing so, it is considered extremely impolite to interrupt instructors during a lecture to express personal thoughts or to ask questions. In contrast, inquiring about a lesson being taught and/or the expression of opinions during the course of a lecture in an American classroom serves as a form of positive participation instead of an ill-mannered exercise in interruption and impolite class behavior (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006).

### **Culture Shock**

The concept of culture shock was initially developed by Oberg (1960), who defined it as “the consequence of strain and anxiety resulting from contact with a new culture, including the feelings of loss, confusion and impotence resulting from loss of accustomed cultural cues and social rules” (p. 49). The term culture shock is widely used to describe the difficulties and challenges that immigrants and sojourners, including businesspersons, students, and travelers, encounter when they try to fit into new and unfamiliar cultures (Oberg 1960). Oberg (1972) continued to explain that culture shock builds up gradually from insignificant happenings or events, which are often difficult to specifically identify. There is a general confusion that does not strike all of a sudden. Winkelman (1994) provided a summary definition of culture shock: a sense of incapability to handle the environment of foreignness with intellectual aspects and playacting skills.

Joseph and Baker (2012) described international students' intercultural adjustment problems and issues as culture shock. Typically, the first few days after arriving in a country with unfamiliar surroundings were the most challenging periods spent in the U.S. Students reported experiencing characteristic psychological concerns due to distress, with symptoms that included anxiety, depression, difficulty sleeping, fatigue, irritability, and feelings of loneliness. These symptoms negatively affected the students' scholastic experiences.

In addition to conceptualizing culture shock, Oberg (1972) provided an understanding of culture shock at different stages of the process of migration. The first stage is that new immigrants feel excited about a fresh culture. The next stage brings with it the experience of being both uncomfortable and dissatisfied with the host culture, which in effect is a process of psychological transition from home to host cultures. With time, immigrants become familiar with the host culture. This third phase aligns with sociocultural transition when the sojourners experience comfortable learning and living experiences in foreign environments. In the fourth stage, the immigrants objectively view host cultures both positively and negatively, having developed an ability for independent thinking. After returning to their home countries, immigrants often go through the fifth and final stage, reverse culture shock. The immigrants experience a process of psychological transition from the host culture back to home culture. Comfortable and satisfied experiences in the host culture are not found in the home culture. The immigrants may feel a disappointment, but they often adapt to the home culture after a short period of time.

Based on Oberg's five stages of culture shock, Winkelman (1994) subsequently formulated four stages of culture shock. They involve: "(1) the honeymoon or tourist phase; (2) the crisis or culture shock phase; (3) the adjustment, reorientation and gradual recovery phase; and (4) the adaptation, resolution or acculturation phase" (Winkelman, 1994, p. 122). The last stage involves the intercultural adaptation process and eventually becoming adept at managing the new culture. The intercultural adjustment process results from reacting to new and unfamiliar environments, and then overcoming the difficulties associated with the new environment.

### **Chinese International Students Studying in the U.S.**

Toward the end of the 1950s, over 47,000 international students from around the world traveled to study in the U.S.; international students accounted for 1.4% of the overall population of American college students (Zikopoulos, 1986). By the close of the 1980s, there was almost a tenfold increase in comparison to just 30 years earlier (Zikopoulos, 1986). At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the total population of international students in the world increased to 547,867 (Open Doors Data, 2014).

The Asian international student population has grown particularly rapidly. Enrollments of Asian scholars studying in the U.S. increased from 42% of all registered international students in the 1950s, to 64% by the 1990s (Zikoules, 1990). Nilsson et al. (2008) reported that among the 670,000 international students studying on campuses in the U.S., 50% arrived from countries in Asia, with Indians and Chinese representing the two largest groups.

Improved academic relations between China and the U.S. began in 1978 due to the Chinese Reform and Opening-Up Policy. The People's Republic of China strongly

encouraged both global technological exchanges and granted visiting scholars special visa privileges in order to promote modernization (Lampton, Madancy, Williams, & Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China (U.S.), 1986). The population of Chinese international students who came to the U.S. to study rapidly increased from under 30 in 1978, to approximately 20,030 by 1988. The total population of Chinese international students doubled by 1993, then tripled 10 years later in 2003 (Institute of International Education, 1981–2014). During the first year of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, visiting Chinese scholars accounted for 28% of the entire U.S. international student population (Zhao, 2005). Ten years later, in 2010, there were 157,588 Chinese students enrolled in the U.S., accounting for nearly 30% of all international students in the U.S. system of higher education. Indeed, Chinese students comprised the largest ethnic group of foreign students (Institute of International Education, 2011). Through the academic year 2013-2014, Chinese students successively increased their numbers to 274,439, representing 31% of the total international student population in the U.S. In other words, China continued to be the primary country of origin for students choosing an American education (Institute of International Education, 1981–2014).

As one of the largest population groups of international students in U.S. higher education, Chinese students must develop and improve their academic study as well as their intercultural adjustment (Hung et al., 2005). Research has suggested that international students whose home cultures are significantly different from the U.S. culture usually have a difficult time adjusting to campus life (Surdam & Collins, 1984). For instance, students from China, Japan, and South Korea typically felt a high degree of social isolation on American campuses (Young & Wehrly, 1990). Research also has

indicated that Chinese international students suffer much more stress and anxiety in comparison to their peers of European ethnicities (Smith et al., 2003; Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Surdam & Collins, 1984; Young & Wehrly, 1990). Unlike European students, Asians frequently experienced a deeper sense of depression due to cultural differences (Smith et al., 2003). This depression was reported to progress to social isolation (Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986).

Dao et al. (2007) described that issues associated with becoming accustomed to a new college environment in general were more prevalent for international students than their American peers. International students frequently cited challenges resulting from personal concerns about cultural differences, including factors or issues such as language barriers, academic difficulties, financial problems, racial/ethnic discrimination, and lack of a social support system. These factors or issues especially applied to Chinese international scholars when they study abroad (Mak & Nesdale, 2001).

The first barrier concerns language issues, including weak English listening and speaking skills (Xu, 2002), difficulties in understanding English slang and jokes (Sheh, 1994), and a lack of confidence when speaking English in daily life situations (Swagler & Ellis, 2003). Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006) reported that language barriers significantly affected psychological adjustment of Chinese international students. Mak and Neil (2006) concurred, indicating that low English proficiency was a major psychological impediment for students to effectively adapt to the U.S. culture.

Swagler and Ellis (2003) investigated the intercultural adaptation progress of Taiwanese international graduate students in the U.S. using a mixed research method. The qualitative component consisted of interviews with 25 Taiwanese students who

indicated that intercultural adaptation was challenging in terms of language barriers. For instance, the students perceived a low level of confidence when speaking English and developing social interactions with Americans. The quantitative component of this mixed methods study included surveying a separate group of 67 Taiwanese students. The results indicated that an important strategy that the students employed to improve their intercultural adaptability in the U.S. was making efforts to communicate and interact with individuals, including domestic and international students, faculty members, and local residents (Swagler & Ellis, 2003).

Although international students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels customarily face cultural differences in host countries, these can be particularly stressful for students studying at the graduate level. Gill (2007) conducted a one-year case study involving the intercultural adaptation and learning experiences of Chinese graduate students in a British university. The principal finding indicated that speaking English was a major challenge for all participants as they struggled with English communication associated with their daily lives. Limited English proficiency resulted in stress, pressure, and reduced self-confidence. Some participants reported that it was not lack of language skills per se; rather, lacking a sense of overall personal assuredness due to deficient English competencies was the real reason behind experiencing a stressful life in Great Britain (Gill, 2007).

A second stressor involves academic barriers. For example, it can be difficult for international students to actively participate in class discussions (Mak & Barker, 2006). It is particularly difficult for Chinese students to initiate involvement in both personal one-

on-one dialogue and group presentations (Ward, 2006). Students reported feeling uncomfortable and depressed when they spoke English in the class (Ho et al., 2004).

The third stressor involves financial barriers. The majority of Chinese international students are either self-supported or subsidized by their parents and/or a spouse (Lin, 1998; Mak & Neil, 2006). The increasing tuition of U.S. higher education is becoming a heavy financial burden for the students and their families (Swagler & Ellis, 2003).

The fourth stressor concerns social networks barriers. The barriers refer to intercultural communication, ethnic discrimination (Ward, 2006), homesickness (Lu, 1990), and lack of social support networks (Willians & Butler, 2003). Sojourning Chinese often do not experience opportunities to participate in meaningful social interaction with domestic students and local people (Ward, 2006). This is because the students lack understanding and/or proper knowledge of the U.S. society. In particular, the influences of a communist educational system have a significant impact on the students. Chinese students have grown up with negative characterizations of the U.S. In addition, the students are used to cooperative rather than individualized decision making styles. The cooperative decision making focuses on the family unit as a whole rather than the individual (Zimmermann, 1995).

In developing positive intercultural adaptation strategies that will ultimately prove successful, international students need to be encouraged and supported. Two of the most important contributors for providing encouragement are academic staff assistance and social networks. Academic staff assistance, such as tutors, can aid students by reducing cumulative pressures and providing constructive advice concerning academic study.

Academic staff should display genuine empathy about international students' study experiences, in addition to providing a clear set of instructions when delivering academic assignments. The social network, on the other hand, is one that consists of affirmative emotional support from one's immediate family, friends, peers, host families, and other individuals local to the campus that the international student has chosen to befriend (Gill, 2007).

The last stressor is daily life issues. For example, it is not easy for Chinese international students to get information about services and facilities (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). They have many concerns about health, security, food, housing, transportation, and religion. For instance, the majority of the students prefer Chinese or Asian food. However, most Chinese food in the U.S. is American-style. Additionally, it is very convenient for the students to use public transportation, such as bus, taxi, and subway in China. In contrast, after traveling to study in the U.S., the students have to drive in a different driving environment, including the U.S. traffic signs and rules (Lin, 1998).

These personal anxieties often culminate in depression, homesickness, alienation, and loneliness. As a result, the learning habits and experiences of international students studying abroad were reported to be adversely affected (Joseph & Baker, 2012). Students also suffered in the areas of academic performance, psychological and physical health, disparate levels of satisfaction with their intercultural experiences, and off-putting attitudes toward individuals of their host country (Dao et al., 2007).

Stress that is characteristically associated with acculturation typically has an adverse impact on Chinese international students. However, there are some experiences during the process of adjusting to unfamiliar environments which may improve mental

health (Berry, Minde, Kim, & Mok, 1987). Research indicates that many who studied in Australia and New Zealand reported feeling satisfied with their overseas study experiences (Gao & Liu, 1998; Rosenthal et al., 2006). Similarly, students who chose to pursue an education in the U.S. also expressed positive acculturative experiences. For example, the students believed that their capacities of independent thinking and communication skills were improved (Gao & Liu, 1998). In summary, increased attention to international students' educational and mental health issues should be considered as their population in the U.S. continues to grow. It is essential for American institutions of higher learning to begin investigating the various types and levels of stress experienced by Asian international students via whatever associated programs of acculturation already exist within their respective schools.

### **Summary**

Intercultural adaptability is the process by which individuals successfully adapt to new environments. Intercultural adaptability is particularly important for students who leave their home country and travel abroad for study. There are positive and negative aspects to intercultural adaptability. Studying abroad can result in personal and professional growth; likewise, it can result in insurmountable stress. Theories associated with intercultural adaptability include psychological and sociological components which are greatly influenced by the disparity between the home and host cultures. Culture shock is the term often used to describe the challenges associated with international sojourners. Chinese students increasingly comprise a significant percentage of international students studying in the U.S. Because of the disparity between Western and Eastern culture,

Chinese international students often experience the most extensive challenges associated with intercultural adaptability.

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the perceptions that Chinese international students who were enrolled in graduate programs at one United States (U.S.) institution of higher learning had about their intercultural adaptation experiences. Creswell (2003) recommended that developing one or two central questions is appropriate to conduct a study, with queries being centered on the topic under examination. The purpose of this study was to examine Chinese international graduate students' perceptions of their personal intercultural adaptability, as well as effective strategies they have chosen to enhance their intercultural adjustment. The research investigated the participants' life stories with a specific accent on their academic, social, and daily life experiences. With this in mind, this study was designed to answer the following research questions:

- (1) How do Chinese international graduate students perceive their personal intercultural adaptability?
- (2) What strategies do they use to improve their intercultural adaptability?

This chapter describes the research methodology used in the study. The first section focuses on the research design, a qualitative phenomenological investigation. The next section describes the participants recruited for the study. The third section clarifies the data source: semi-structured interviews. The process of data collection follows. The fifth section describes data management and analysis. The sixth section addresses researcher bias. Finally, a summary of the chapter is provided.

## Research Design

Creswell (2003) demonstrated that research methods are the product of explorative questions. This qualitative phenomenological investigation was designed to examine how 15 Chinese international graduate students perceived their intercultural adaptation experiences while studying in the U.S., as well as explore the strategies they used to improve their intercultural adaptability. A qualitative method was chosen because qualitative research is used most often to examine, comprehend, and clarify the meanings of social phenomena (Merriam, 1998). Thus, a qualitative research design provides an approach to examine questions concerning experiences which individuals have undergone, as well as develop meanings from those experiences (Pitney & Parker, 2009).

Phenomenology is one approach within the branch of qualitative research design. Phenomenology was initially proposed by Edmund Husserl in Europe in the early 20th century, and became an accepted approach in obtaining a qualitative understanding of people's lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) described phenomenology as a study of learning and sharing the meanings of the experiences of individuals. Similarly, a phenomenological study seeks to identify individuals' thoughts and experiences relating to a phenomenon. The phenomenon is described by the participants of the research study (Creswell, 2009).

The purpose of phenomenological research is to explore the experiences of human beings as fostered in a particular situation (Moustakas, 1994). According to Lichtman (2013), the goal of phenomenology is to define and recognize the essence of a person's lived experiences. Patton (2001) also supported the idea that understanding the essence of a phenomenon by learning about the lived experiences from the participants is a core task

of phenomenology. Hence, a phenomenological study pursues an understanding of problems in general, instead of attempting to act on them (Van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenology can be regarded as both a philosophy and a research approach in the arena of qualitative study for reasons related to understanding lived experiences (Lichtman, 2013). The phenomenon under study generally reflects a degree of knowledge pertaining to everyday occurrences. It starts with observations made by individuals and is considered to be one of the first approaches in the discipline of knowing (Moustakas, 1994). However, phenomenology is different from other qualitative research approaches. It centers on the views of individuals who have experienced unique circumstances in attempting to understand the essence of lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Phenomenological research provides opportunities for individuals to share their perceptions, which may or may not be widely shared by a larger public. In this phenomenological research, the intent was to understand Chinese international graduate students' lived experiences of intercultural adaptability as they studied abroad in the U.S. The voice associated with intercultural adjustment phenomena was from the perspective of the Chinese international students.

In conclusion, phenomenology is an appropriate methodology for this research because the purpose was to gain knowledge about individuals' experiences and their interpretation of those experiences (Shank, 2002). Furthermore, it allowed an interpretation of individuals' first hand experiences and perceptions from their own recollections (Pitney & Parker, 2009; Silverman, 2001). Phenomenology provided an opportunity to comprehend the essence of the research topic through the participants' lived experiences.

## Participants

It is the responsibility of researchers to develop not just a fitting research design, but also to institute the proper selection of participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Determining the number of participants in qualitative research is challenging because there is no specific formula. Lichtman (2003) argued that there is insufficient contextual literature available to fully address the issue of sample size selection. Many qualitative studies tend to use a small sample size, which is often fewer than ten participants. According to Sandelowski (1995), ten participants could be regarded as an adequate sample size. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) also endorsed an appropriate number of participants in their review of trial size by intensely interviewing 60 female participants from Africa, ultimately concluding that themes were notable from the sixth to the twelfth interview.

For this research study, 15 participants who were enrolled at a Tier 1 university in the western U.S. as Chinese international graduate students were recruited. All of the participants were authorized to study in the U.S. until they completed their degrees under F1 student visas. According to 2015 university records, there were 58 Chinese international graduate students enrolled in the following administrative units: College of Business (13), College of Education (3), College of Engineering (25), College of Liberal Arts (6), College of Science (7), Division of Health Science (3), and School of Journalism (1) (Demographics, 2015). In a broad sense, the Colleges of Engineering and Science include majors that are often categorized as *hard* sciences that include extensive laboratory training and experiences. The Colleges of Business, Education, Liberal Arts, and School of Journalism include social sciences majors. Majors in the Division of

Health Science include both laboratory-based and social sciences. A fundamental difference between laboratory-based and social sciences is the degree to which graduate students must interact with U.S. students. Students who spend a significant amount of time in laboratories tend to have less need for interacting with a diverse set of U.S. students. In contrast, social scientists tend to interact with a larger number and more diverse people. Therefore, a balance of the two types of majors was sought.

A criterion sampling approach applies to recruitment of participants (Lichtman, 2013). The criteria for inclusion in the study was: Chinese international students; graduate level (master's or doctorate) study; gender difference (male or female); willingness to engage in an interview for approximately one hour; and at least have been one year of temporary residence in the U.S. The last criteria is because completing a Master's degree in two years is common. With comparison to new students who attend graduate school, students who stay in the U.S. for a longer time were believed to contribute more to this study in relation to intercultural adaptability. The participants included seven master's and eight doctoral students; seven males and eight females; and seven students who were studying social science majors and eight students who majored in a hard science. In particular, there were three males who were studying social science majors and four males who majored in a hard science; four females who were studying social science and four females who majored in a hard science.

### **Data Source**

Semi-structured interviews provided the data for this study. In this particular case, data were gathered through interviews with the 15 study participants. The purpose of an interview is to ascertain each individual's personal experiences related to the purpose of

the study, as well as the meaning that each examinee ascribes to such (Paige, 1990). Relevant, first-hand information, including participants' perspectives, opinions, thoughts, and a general sense of awareness were sought (Tuckman, 1972). Thus, directed dialogue was an effective method for exploring personal life stories (Paige, 1990).

A semi-structured interview is an instrument for developing exchanges between interviewer and interviewee. The interviewer provides interview topics for the purpose of obtaining the interviewee's perceptions (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2003). It includes both open interviews and those with a concluding point, in order for the interviewer to obtain a better understanding of respondents' viewpoints as they relate to the topic being discussed (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1986). Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewee to freely express opinions during a directed conversation (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2003).

The semi-structured interview was chosen as the means for gathering data in this study because it was flexible and more likely to promote prolific, thoughtful responses by the participants (Lichtman, 2013). These conversations provided in-depth understanding about the two main research questions: (1) How do Chinese international graduate students perceive their personal intercultural adaptability? and (2) What strategies do they use to enhance their intercultural adaptability? Personal reflections and life stories as they concern this area were explored with each student.

The interview questions focused on three general categories: academic life; social life; and daily life. In the category of academic life, interview questions centered on the students' overall study experiences in the U.S., benefits and challenges in studying in the U.S., comparisons of attending graduate school in the U.S. and China, and required

academic assistance in the U.S. This was followed by the category of social life. Questions included characteristics of a friend, the definition of a friend comparing Chinese to U.S. culture, friendship with American colleagues and local residents, and strategies to improve social connections in the local community. Finally, questions in the category of daily life included the students' accommodation conditions, shopping experiences, daily transportation, and strategies to cope with daily life in the U.S. The interview guide is found in Appendix A. The questions themselves were expected to provide a basic structure for the interview, but probes were used for clarification.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected under the auspices of the University Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix B). A recruitment email was sent to all Chinese international graduate students registered with the Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS) of the university under study. The Director of OISS facilitated sending the recruitment email. Potential participants were instructed to contact the researcher either through email or by phone if they were interested (see the recruitment email in Appendix C). Participants were selected in the order in which they responded. There was one caveat, however; a balance of male and female as well as hard and social science students was sought.

As a result of the initial email sent out by the OISS director, an insufficient number of students (12) responded, consequently, a snowball sampling recruitment was conducted. Snowball sampling is a recruitment method that research participants are asked to support researchers to recognize and identify potential subjects (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Research studies can still take place by using the method of snowball

sampling where otherwise it may be impossible to conduct due to a lack of participants (Patton, 2002). In this study, each of the students who agreed to participate was asked to identify another student who met the inclusion criteria. The researcher contacted the individual and personally invited the student to participate. Three qualified participants were recruited by using the snowball sampling.

When participants agreed to be part of the study, a time and place of mutual agreement was established to conduct the interview. A follow-up email was sent to confirm the time and place. An information sheet describing the study was attached to the email (see Appendix D).

Interviews were conducted in a private location of the participant's choosing. Many of the interviews were conducted in a private area in the university library. Prior to the interview, the information sheet was reviewed; participants were allowed to ask questions about the study.

Interviews were audiotaped and conducted in Mandarin that is the standard/official form of Chinese based on the Beijing dialect (Chang & Heift, 2015). Mandarin and English are the first and second languages, respectively, of the Chinese international students studying at the graduate level. There are language nuances in both Mandarin and English. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin so participants could accurately express their views and perspectives. Additionally, the students could contribute much more personal perceptions in their first language, which avoided any language translations and barriers compared to using English. In addition to conducting the interviews in Mandarin, the agenda itself progressed from general-to-specific

questions, with the assumption that valid data expressed in each student's own words were obtained.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

Qualitative data involves words instead of numbers and statistics that are used in quantitative analysis. It is easy to understand communicable words; however, words can be unclear and challenging to compare objectively (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Thus, data management and analysis were developed by the following three steps in this research study.

#### **Step One: Interview Files**

Establishing a clear interview file naming system is a significant part of good data management. To maintain data consistency, each participant was assigned a three part participant code. The code included a specific two digit number for each participant, whether the participant was a master's or doctoral student, whether the participant was studying a social or hard science, and whether the participant was a male or female. The master's and doctoral students were coded M and D, respectively. The participants who study a social and hard science were coded S and H, respectively. The male and female students were coded M and F, respectively. For instance, a male doctoral student studying engineering was coded 11 (participant code), D (doctoral student), H (hard science), M (male).

Each interview was audio recorded with a digital recorder. Audiotapes were downloaded to a password protected file, appropriately coded, and reviewed for completeness.

### **Step Two: Transcripts**

Transcription and translation are significantly important to generate data quality control. All interviews were transcribed and initially coded in Mandarin. The three Cs of data analysis (coding, categorizing, and concepts) was utilized as a supportive methodology (Lichtman, 2013). Following this approach, Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) described how coding is a process of classifying different sets of content according to a particular theme, and then organizing each theme through labeling. For the current study, specific themes and subthemes from the coded data were developed by applying terms from original language (as spoken by the participants), and as culled from transcripts. Following the coding process, links between the themes and subthemes were sought, and then merged into categories. Thereafter, the data could be reviewed systematically while remaining open to emerging themes and categories.

In the process of completing the three Cs, data reduction is a challenge because all information seems significant at the beginning of data analysis. However, large amounts of data eventually have to be reduced to a manageable form (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Counting frequency of codes and themes was used to tag something as significant. The number of times something was mentioned reflected the relative strength of the themes; the more an idea was mentioned, the more significant it was considered (Moffett, 2006). A form was used to record the themes (see Appendix E).

### **Step Three: Profiles**

Once the themes and subthemes were identified, how each theme was revealed in each participant was examined. For instance, themes that reflected friendships,

independent learning, and various aspects of daily life were quickly identified. Profiles that reflected the major themes were created for each participant.

Profiles of all participants were created in Mandarin first and translated to English. To ensure information completeness and correction, profiles in Mandarin and English were shared with the respective participant as a form of member checking as described by Creswell (2009). All participants were current graduate students and understood English. When transcript information and translations were different from the participants' perceptions and actual sayings, the transcript information and translations were corrected and revised based on the participant's suggestions and feedback.

Further analysis of the profiles and transcriptions were conducted. Commonalities and differences among the profiles were compared. Profiles were filtered through the two research questions and the students' characteristics (e.g. major, master's/doctoral, and gender).

### **Bias**

It is relevant to note that trying to avoid the researcher's bias is significant. The researcher's own life stories and experiences were not included in the process of data management and analysis. This is because understanding contemporary Chinese international graduate students' perceptions of intercultural adjustment, especially those not affected by the researcher's personal experiences, was significant. To avoid interjecting personal understandings and experiences, two methods were employed. The first was very heavy reliance on full quotations during the analysis. This ensured that the participants' words were the focus of the analysis and not the investigator's personal experiences. The second method was to include another researcher in the analytic

process. The second, non-Chinese researcher, served as an external reviewer as the data were interpreted. As a result, the researcher was able to divest her private presuppositions and only examine the study participants' descriptions of their experiences. This was consistent with the process of *epoché* as described by Moustakas (1994); the focus was to avoid prejudgments and biases pertaining to the researcher's personal experiences. Careful attention was made to be single-mindedly engrossed in the participants' perceptions and leave all personal biases behind (Sallis, 1982).

### **Summary**

This chapter has described seven sections. The sections include research design that was a qualitative phenomenological study, depiction of the study's participants, data source, data collection, data management and analysis, bias, and a summary. In Chapter IV, research results or findings are provided.

## **Chapter IV: Results**

The ability of Chinese international graduate students to adapt to new surroundings and environments on an intercultural level was explored in terms of their pre-departure, academic, social, and daily life experiences. Grouping of the data obtained from interviews revealed four broad themes: (1) I'm on an exciting adventure; (2) Oops, I guess I need to adjust to the U.S. environment; (3) I'm going to succeed, no matter what; and (4) Fate. Data are presented under each of the broad themes, and are further grouped by subthemes. Quotes from participants are presented in order to illustrate each theme and subtheme. The themes were also examined by the students' study level (master's or doctoral student), study major (social science or hard science majors), and gender (male or female).

### **Preparation and Adjustment**

To answer the first research question, how do Chinese international graduate students perceive their personal intercultural adaptability, the students' perceptions fell into two distinct phases. Specifically, statements related to the pre-departure timeframe differed from statements describing their life in the U.S. In the pre-departure phase, statements suggested that the students believed that they would be on an exciting adventure in the U.S.; everything would be fine and life would be great. However, upon their arrival, the students suddenly realized that they needed to scramble to cope with their new academic, social, and daily lives. Thus, the first two themes were created based on interview data: (1) I'm on an exciting adventure; and (2) Oops, I guess I need to adjust to the U.S. environment.

### **I'm on an Exciting Adventure**

Statements made by all but one of the Chinese international graduate students about their pre-departure expectations of studying in the U.S. reflected the assumption of a new adventure. Four students specifically claimed that they had always been curious about the world and personally wanted to get to know diverse people, as well as experience for themselves different living environments. Many statements went beyond simple curiosity, however; statements evoked an image of following the yellow brick road to the Emerald City in the Wizard of Oz™. Indeed, several students described their pre-departure vision of the U.S. from what they knew from watching American movies:

I expected that normal life for most Americans would be nearly the same as what I saw on-screen whenever I watched a movie that was based in the U.S. It was being an exceptionally free and open country. Life in the U.S. was very cool; everyone was either a tanned, athletic, good-looking boy, or a very pretty girl, and that despite occasional little 'hiccups', daily life was perfect. (doctoral, hard science, and male)

Some students did not go so far as to equate life in the U.S. with the movies, but they still anticipated that life and studying in the U.S. would be very easy. A female, master's student who majored in a social science said this best:

I thought being a graduate student in the U.S would not be all that hard compared to attending the same level of schooling in China. My understanding was that daily college life would be very relaxed and that I would have a lot of personal time to apply towards my hobbies.

The belief that the U.S. is a highly developed country seemed to affect their thinking. The concept of being a highly developed country was found in statements about the perceived abundance and availability of material goods in the U.S. In general, almost all of the statements about their pre-departure expectations were that their new adventure would be GREAT.

There was one exception to the idea that their studies in the U.S. would be an adventure. One participant indicated that she wanted to start a new life in the U.S. in order to escape some bad experiences she had in China. In some ways this was consistent with going on a new adventure, but included the added dimension of wanting to leave her previous life.

What was particularly noteworthy was the lack of preparation concerning intercultural adaptation the students described before leaving their homes in China. Two students shared their reasons for making no preparations as follows: one explained the lack of time; the other claimed that it simply was not necessary to prepare. Indeed, most (nine) students made only superficial preparations, primarily through gathering personal stories and general information from someone who had U.S. living experiences. For instance, one student contacted her aunt who emigrated to the U.S. many years before. Another student contacted some colleagues who had studied and worked in the U.S. In all instances, the students found the information from their contacts with U.S. experiences helpful, but the information was described as mostly superficial and not particularly actionable.

When attempting to secure housing, many (eight) of the students, particularly those who had no relatives in the U.S., described "I just need a place to stay". Many used

QQ, a popular social media venue in China, to contact other Chinese students who were already studying at the U.S. university. The following is an example of how many of the students approached securing housing.

I joined a QQ group geared towards Chinese international students at [university name]. Some students in the discussion shared information about the rental situation in the general area surrounding campus. I ended up choosing an apartment that didn't have the restriction of having to sign a one-year lease agreement. (doctoral, hard science, and male)

Although most attempted to secure off-campus housing, three students applied to live in residence halls on campus. They searched the university website, recalling that searching dorm living on the university's website prior to arriving in the U.S. "was easy". The easiest living situation of all was when the student had a relative with whom he or she could stay. One master's and female student explained her situation:

I resided in my aunt's house at first because she lived in [city name] when I initially arrived from China and it was just convenient for me until I could get settled somewhat. It was comfortable staying at her place; we always spoke Mandarin around one another.

In summary, the attitudes toward intercultural adaptability found in the interviews revealed a general sense of optimism. There was a perception that daily life would be fairly comfortable because the U.S. was considered a highly developed country and studying would be relatively easy. In other words, statements suggested that they were going on a grand adventure.

### **Ooops, I Guess I Need to Adjust to the U.S. Environment**

The second theme reflected the students' actual reactions to living and studying in the U.S. Although the students described rather *laissez faire* attitudes toward their preparations to study in the U.S., those feelings appeared to have rather abruptly changed soon after their arrivals. Participants encountered stark differences in their pre-departure perceptions compared to their actual life in the U.S. in two ways: their academic life and daily living. Whereas several students stated that they anticipated graduate studies in the U.S. would be easy compared to studying in China, to quote one participant, "so much wishful thinking, I suppose." The primary academic challenge they encountered was the requirement for independent learning.

**Independent learning.** The statements related to independent learning revealed that the participants perceived that there were clearly discernible differences between studying in the U.S. and studying in China. Upon attending classes in the U.S., they quickly discovered that they were expected to engage in independent learning, which was perceived as both challenging and beneficial. The challenge was that study in China was described as passive: pay attention and listen to lectures, as well as take notes in class. In contrast, in the U.S., students were expected to arrive at their own conclusions based upon their own research and their own thinking. One doctoral and female participant who was studying a hard science summed this challenge up quite succinctly:

Challenges and independent thinking complement one another. This is because I need to do everything by myself now that my parents are not around to serve as a support system.

Regarding independent thinking, I was educated in the Chinese educational system for my entire academic career and I can readily list many of the extensive differences which I have observed between being schooled in China and the U.S. Thus, I now often strive to reason out solutions to even difficult matters myself, instead of depending on others.

It appeared that because of the very different expectation of independent versus passive learning, many of the students in this study quickly had to adjust their pre-departure assumptions that their classes would be relatively easy. Instead, they realized that they had to spend a great deal of time readjusting to an independent learning style:

Aside from minor bouts of rest and quick meal breaks, all of my day is geared towards studying. Come bedtime, my eyes are often glazed over from focusing on text in a book and/or a computer screen for many hours (Followed by laughter).

There was a clear distinction between hard and social science majors related to this readjustment in thinking. In general, the social science majors felt the need to spend more time on campus compared to their hard science counterparts. One of the reasons expressed was because of the higher expectation of communicating (written and verbal) in English for the social science majors.

Although challenging, students also described the benefits of independent learning. They described gaining confidence as a result of developing new ideas and approaches to problems.

There is no doubt in my mind that my ability to think independently has been enhanced since matriculating at the American university. Such is a result of professors encouraging me to reason autonomously and address queries

empirically rather than simply complete rote curriculum tasks assigned by the instructor of a required class. In the process of completing daily academic tasks, I am required to deal with many difficulties which I learn to overcome primarily on my own and in order to consequently achieve success in whatever presents itself as an obstacle. (doctoral, social science, and female)

It was noteworthy that more doctoral students than students studying at the master's level and more social science majors than hard science majors declared that they had become more independent while studying in the U.S. Three doctoral and one master's level social science students made statements best summed up by one of them: "I became increasingly independent in terms of both my study and personal life". Furthermore, more master's and social science students commented that they had gained much broader outlooks on life after studying and living in the U.S. This expression of the benefits of independent learning was captured well in the following quote:

My perspective is definitely different now from what it once was (while in China). It is more important for me to learn about what I feel are the 'pros' of the U.S., such as open-minded educational missions and ideas. Thus, the best part of studying in the U.S. is that I can meet and communicate with so many diverse people groups; doing so helps me to broaden my mind. (master's, social science, and male)

Beyond independent learning, there were other aspects of the U.S. higher education that differed from education in China: engaging in discussions and making presentations. In addition to being different, these expectations were complicated by English language barriers. Students at both levels of graduate study declared that they

experienced embarrassments associated with English language barriers, with master's students suffering the most. Although both social and hard science majors described facing impediments related to language, the social science students endured more challenging instances. One social science Ph.D. aspirant described his initial frustrations in adjusting to studying in the U.S.:

I think language is a chief stumbling block when it comes to studying in the U.S. I simply could not follow even a brief class lecture upon first arriving in the U.S. It takes longer to read whatever is assigned, plus any supplemental reading materials. Many times, I have no idea how to explain myself in authentic American English.

All students described their initial reaction to speaking up in class in the same way: "I don't want to do it; I'm afraid to speak English." For instance, one social science major stated:

One of my greatest fears is speaking in class. Oftentimes many open debates transpire in the courses that I am enrolled in and these occurrences are mentally taxing for me as I did not have too many previous debate experiences attending university in China.

Their reactions to speaking up in class changed with time, but there was a critical nuance. Students reported feeling comfortable responding to questions or voicing their opinions at a fairly superficial level, such as "I agree with your point" or answering a question with a specific response, such as "the equation is ...." The situation became more complicated when students were asked to explain their answers or defend the position they took. It appeared that the requirement to simultaneously think, translate

between two languages, and speak about a topic in class was particularly challenging. This was particularly difficult for the social science majors.

**Daily living.** Students not only needed to adjust to the differences in their perceptions of academic life in the U.S. compared to China, but also were confronted with adapting to U.S. daily living, specifically shopping and transportation. Three distinct areas of shopping were described as challenging: English language barriers; unfamiliar common items; and U.S. standards for apparel sizing. All students described that when they first arrived in the U.S., they had difficulty speaking English, not only in their classes, but when they tried to shop for their basic needs. One participant revealed that when she wanted to purchase a bottle of shampoo, she selected conditioner because she could not tell the difference between the two words, shampoo and conditioner; furthermore, the bottles looked the same. Another stated:

At first, my English vocabulary was so very limited when I arrived in the U.S., that I had no idea how to accurately express myself when there was something specific that I wished to buy yet could not find in a store on my own. (master's, social science, and female)

Common, everyday items were another challenge. Several of the students, but particularly the doctoral students expressed that it was not easy to find clothing in their favorite designs and styles. For example, two students claimed that it was hard to find their favorite designs and style of clothes and shoes. They also made note of not being able to find their favorite pens. Standards for apparel sizing in the U.S. compounded shopping for clothes. Students took issue with U.S. standards for apparel sizing: "I was

not sure what size of shirt, pants, undergarments, and shoes would work for me because the standard is different between what is available in China.”

In addition to the shopping difficulties, the majority of the participants in this study described transportation inconveniences because they did not have automobiles. Indeed, almost all of the students lived either on or close to campus and walked to school all the time. They typically relied on friends who had automobiles to give them rides to the store if they needed to go shopping or somewhere other than campus.

In summary, the Chinese international graduate students in this study experienced their actual academic and daily lives very differently from what they anticipated when they were still in China. Academic expectations of independent learning and class participation were fundamentally different from the more passive Chinese educational system. These expectations were compounded by language barriers, particularly for the social science majors. Daily life, particularly shopping, was challenging and complicated by lack of transportation. All of the participants indicated that their lives improved with time, but at the beginning, they had to adjust quickly.

### **Strategies**

To answer the second research question, what strategies do Chinese international graduate students use to improve their intercultural adaptability, two different themes were found in the statements made by the students. The first theme was that all students expressed a drive to succeed in their academic, social, and daily lives by jointly working hard and escaping pressure. The second theme was that their fallback position was to just let things go because everything would be arranged by fate. Therefore, two themes were developed: (1) I'm going to succeed, no matter what and (2) Fate.

### **I'm Going to Succeed, No Matter What**

Although the students in this study encountered challenges when they arrived in the U.S., they all fairly quickly realized the necessity of adapting to the new U.S. environment because all of the students expressed a strong desire to study and be successful in the U.S. They articulated that the U.S. college and university system had an excellent reputation that was famous across the world. Three business students reflected the following: “my major was business as an undergraduate in China and I had heard that this was an admirable major to pursue at the graduate level in the U.S.”

To be successful in the U.S., students adopted different strategies to cope with the specific challenges they found in their new academic and daily lives. In addition, the students described their approach to reduce the accumulated pressures from their intense strategies to succeed.

**Academic success.** Academic study was the priority for the all of the participants in this study. Two specific strategies were found to improve their academic study: maintaining a positive study attitude and seeking tutoring assistance.

Despite finding independent learning challenging, the majority of students at both the master's and doctoral levels declared that they possessed positive attitudes towards studying in the U.S. compared to studying in China. Students at the master's level expressed satisfaction that they could learn more “efficiently” because they had to concentrate on the course content that they were learning in English. In other words, they did not have the same level of distractions compared to when they studied in China. As a result, they felt that they were learning more information and learning it more quickly than they would have in China.

Doctoral students conveyed their appreciation for the relative freedom of being able to actively design their courses of study. In comparison with the hard science majors, social science majors were particularly happy to devise their doctoral curricula. For instance:

I have become a much more positive individual after arriving at the U.S. to pursue my educational goals. For example, it did not take long to feel empowered after being required to develop my own set of schedules and in addressing many course-related challenges by myself.

Keeping a positive study attitude was a good start, but not enough to achieve academic success. Students stated that they also pursued tutoring assistance related to both English and the coursework associated with their majors. In particular, more doctoral students sought English tutoring and related writing help compared to students at the master's level. Additionally, social science students typically required more English coaching than their counterparts in the hard sciences. The comments of five students is summed up in the following statement:

I had strong need of English tutoring in my first semester. It was very hard for me to follow along in many classes. I thought that maybe I needed to get involved in some form of extra-curricular assistance where English is concerned. (doctoral, social science, and male)

It was particularly noteworthy that more master's students than those engaged in doctoral programs required supplementary academic assistance pertaining to their respective majors. The statements related to seeking tutoring assistance suggested that

hard science majors had greater needs for academic assistance than those involved in the social sciences. For example:

In fact, I hope there will be enhanced opportunities for this offered soon for my major area of study. Whereas English skills can be improved through self-learning, I could still save a lot of time if I had a professional (on-call) tutor to address all of my questions outside of class. (master's, hard science, and male)

**Daily living.** In addition to having positive attitudes toward their studies and seeking help in English, writing, and course content, many of the students reported that they needed to take active steps to adapt to U.S. daily life. The statements revealed that students adopted the following three main strategies to adapt culturally in their daily living: opening one's heart, improving their English, and making friends with local people. The first strategy was learning the U.S. social culture by opening one's heart, which involved being open minded in learning and understanding the social culture in the U.S. Three students, one Ph.D. candidate and two master's students related this singular account:

Personally, I'm not used to many of the customs in the U.S. – local or national. For example, open social drinking among men in China is common, but just hanging out in a bar with (predominantly) strangers seems weird to me. However, I needed to learn to open my heart in order to attempt to understand the social behaviors of Americans. (doctoral, social science, and female)

With opening one's heart to learn the U.S. culture, the second strategy was improving English proficiency. Most of the doctoral students studying the hard sciences claimed an interest in enhancing their personal level of English proficiency. Their

explanation was that they basically lived in “Chinatown” everywhere. They worked in a laboratory with other Chinese students; many of the faculty with whom they worked were Chinese; they lived with other Chinese students. Indeed, most of the doctoral students in the hard sciences had studied in China for their master’s degree. They came to the U.S. through introductions between their Chinese advisors and their ultimate U.S. advisors. Two doctoral students who studied hard sciences, as well as one master’s student majoring in social science, were quite open in expressing their desire to improve their English to adapt to the U.S. culture:

It is much easier to communicate with U.S. citizens as my English improves; my comfort level in conversing with most of the people with whom I come into contact on a daily basis is now more relaxed as my competency with the language increases. (doctoral, hard science, and female)

As the students’ English improved, they were able to adopt a third strategy: making friends with Americans and local people (i.e., in the same community). Almost all of students interviewed claimed that meeting Americans and local people was important for them personally. Each student who talked about friends provided rich detail about how their social interactions with local people greatly influenced their sense of well-being and ability to adapt interculturally. Indeed, the participants spent more time during the interviews talking about their friends than they did about their academic life, despite the fact that their academic life was clearly important to them.

I think it is significant to know those local to your community because as a foreigner, I am not familiar with many aspects of daily life in the U.S. I do wish to

be better acquainted with those surroundings by meeting and getting to know the Americans and locals. (doctoral, hard science, and female)

Thirteen of the fifteen students in the study expressed the following sentiment:

At the point in time where I began to overcome my anxieties and attempted to communicate more often with different Americans, adapting to the U.S.

environment was usually becoming easier. No matter whether the exchange was successful or not, at least I made the effort. (master's, social science, and male)

It was particularly noteworthy that the majority of students stated that ultimately it was not difficult to meet and know Americans. However that had not always been the case. At the beginning of their stay, many of the students indicated that making friends with Americans was difficult: "I do not think it challenging to meet local people. But I suppose that initial introductions can be difficult without a platform." They then described four main ways to connect with American and locals: attending social events; attending classes; being friends with their housemates; and introductions by the landlord.

Most of the doctoral students majoring in social sciences stated that they knew Americans and local people through attending social events or activities. Some of these events were sponsored by local churches as well as university student services. Five students studying social sciences shared their experiences as follows:

Sometimes, I did attend parties, mixers, and sporting events; it was certainly one convenient way to meet others. For example, I went to a social event organized by the Office of International Students and Scholars and met up with American friends there.

In contrast, most of the master's students majoring in the hard sciences had virtually no connections with people outside of school-related circles. For example, "I did not really connect with any of the locals around town since I pretty much stick close to campus."

In addition to attending social events, the statements also showed that some students met their American friends when they attended class together; this applied particularly to those majoring in one of the social sciences. After the initial self-introductions, the students interviewed claimed that they grew closer when they spent time together both in class and working on group projects: "I had good American friends in my class. We became good friends after mutually working on a group project, as well as studying and hanging together out after class."

Another means of making friends was through their living arrangements. Through QQ, many of the students found housing options near campus. Once they decided upon the apartment complex, they completed a questionnaire. Based on the responses to the questionnaire, the apartment manager matched the Chinese international students with other people, not necessarily students. After living together for a period of time, some of the students in this study became friends with their housemates. The following sums up their statements: "My first American friend was one that I met while renting a house and sharing expenses with in order to save on college costs."

In addition to making friends with housemates, there was a unique situation that involved landlords who played a role in helping the students meet new people and make friends locally. There were international houses for both men and women connected to a local church. The church is considered a missionary church and reaches out to

international students. Some of the students in this study lived in the international houses. Their landlords, who were all affiliated with the church, helped the students meet new people.

It was through their American friends that the students in this study learned about everyday life in the U.S. In particular, cooking and dining together for evening meals with their American friends was cited as very important. Even if they could not eat together, simply “hanging out” in each other’s company was portrayed as significant:

We went bowling, hiking, or simply walk around one of the local lakes. We always had a lot of different things to do whenever we hanged out doing something that’s non-school related; but rarely anything too ‘planned’ or definite. (master’s, social science, and male)

Shopping was another way that the students were able to spend time with friends and learn about American products and clothing. Finally, the statements indicated that master’s level students in particular enjoyed studying with their American friends. This was particularly true when class projects or group discussions were assigned.

During the process of interacting with the American and local friends, students held different perceptions of cultural differences. Most of masters’ students who were majoring in a social science expressed that they saw no cultural differences when they interacted with their American friends. Their reasoning is described:

There are almost no differences between us cultural-wise. If individually we are having problems with a specific portion of an assignment, we always talk directly with one another in order to attempt to figure out the problem(s) between ourselves. (master’s, social science, and female)

Eating habits were a different matter. A few of the students shared some of the cultural differences they experiences related to eating habits. One Ph.D. hard science major recalled:

Americans prefer to eat using their own plates and it seems weird for them to share food from a ‘community’ dish from which everyone can pick food. But the Chinese prefer to eat together with their family and friends, and most all of the food is put in the middle of a table where each person basically serves themselves from those central platters.

Although the overwhelming majority of the students in this study sought friendships with Americans, some did not share this need. Three students studying both social and hard sciences stated that it was not significant to meet and know other people outside of the college bubble. The following statement describes the feeling of the small number of students who felt this way:

Local residents or others not connected to me and my work, not important. I did interact with many individuals local to this city at the church which I sometimes attended, but I was not all that interested right now in going there every Sunday.  
(doctoral, hard science, and male)

**Escape pressure.** Although students adopted strategies to adjust to the U.S. academic life and daily living, most of the students declared that they faced a great deal of pressure in the process of their adaptation. The pressures included learning English, adjusting to independent learning, shopping difficulties, and no transportation. To keep their hearts open and escape the pressures, the statements revealed that students adopted strategies in terms of friends, food, and shopping.

The first strategy was maintaining connections with other Chinese international students. Whereas American friends allowed the students to learn about the U.S., their Chinese friends provided a sense of security:

Friends are important to me. I value them as the most important individuals in my life. I do not feel that anyone can live a normal life without at least one friend. For me, I need to rely on them during periods in my life when I am far away from home. (doctoral, hard science, and female)

Chinese friends provided familiarity, particularly because they shared a common definition of friendship. Several of the students interviewed made clear distinctions between the concept of friendship in American and Chinese cultures:

There is definitely a difference. I do not see it as being common for Americans to show sincere consideration for their friends. Although externally Americans may act mindful of those whom they call their friends, I see them as being too focused on self. In my experience, Chinese are extremely respectful of their friends; we have our 'heads together', complete with similar nationalistic values. (master's, social science, and male)

Another master's and female student who majored in a social science connected her perception of friendship back to cultural influence of Confucius:

I feel that Chinese people are very enthusiastic and warm-hearted. The philosophy of the influential teacher Confucius has had a huge impact on the Chinese people for the past 2,500 years; for example, Confucius taught that it is always a great pleasure to "greet a friend from afar". One of my favorite Chinese sayings describes unadulterated friendship; loosely translated, it goes – 'a hedge cannot be

affected by interest and lucre' (i.e., money, especially when gained in a dishonest or dishonorable way). In China, it takes a long time to become dedicated friends with someone because it is just expected that friendships are to last a lifetime, all the while being slowly developed over decades. However, I feel that this is in direct contrast to the U.S., where people seem to really treasure their privacy; I have noticed little interest in those whom I have everyday dealings, being able to speak candidly about their lives. I have also observed that it is very easy for many in the U.S. to make friends. Around campus I routinely see individuals who appear to be very close to one another regularly engaged in often lengthy conversations. Compared to attempting to cultivate a long-term connection with someone in China, the pace in the U.S. seems relatively hasty. Which is why I am of the opinion that friendships among Americans very easily disintegrate because there is no solid foundation upon which they should have been built, as well as too many individuals being overly independent and busying themselves all the time with less meaningful things.

Although it was apparent that some of the participants made a distinction between friendship in China and friendship in the U.S., not all of the participants agreed. Some students declared that the definition of what constitutes a friend in Chinese and American culture was similar. Five students reflected the following rather scientific definition of friendship:

I believe that friendship is a comprehensive topic. Based on DNA findings from the Human Genome Project, there is only one race in the world, i.e., human beings. No matter what a person's nationality or ethnicity is, logically speaking –

have not we all evolved via just two individuals from the very beginning. Thus, I feel that in the same way in which certain traits have been carried down through untold generations, that people inherently possess a somewhat related definition of what a friend is. (doctoral, social science, and female)

Surprisingly, declarations made by a few doctoral students representing the social sciences expressed that they had “no idea” as to whether the definition of a friend in Chinese culture was any different than that of those living in the U.S.

It was clear that most of the students valued their Chinese friends as a means of escaping the pressures associated with their new lives. The interviewees explained how their friendships with other Chinese students were able to provide safety and security as well. Trust, stability, safety, and reciprocal helpfulness were all mentioned, often interchangeably. For three students, trust tended to be related to sharing feelings in a safe environment:

In my eyes, trust is the most significant characteristic which binds friends. It does not matter if they are pleasant or lean towards occasionally being disagreeable, friends can share their true feelings with each other when there is a bond of trust. (master's, hard science, and female)

Stability included the importance of time to develop and nurture a friendship. Safety came from smooth communication with friends that flowed effortlessly, a sincere attitude of being friends, and the same or similar hobbies. The following quote summarizes the feeling expressed by many of the students:

Being genuine was one of the most essential characteristics that I looked for when choosing friends. I would not expect a friend to be deceitful to others people in order to benefit him- or herself. (doctoral, hard science, and female)

Finally, the statements revealed that most of the students believed that friends should be helpful. Based on the statements, the helpful friends could provide suggestions, reduce pressure, and help each other. In particular, students described that a friend should be able to openly provide – and receive – constructive criticism:

During instances when I might feel confusion over what is happening with my studies and in my life, I am pretty comfortable when close friends who know me well offer up unsolicited suggestions and strategies to help me resolve these periods of disorder. (master's, hard science, and male)

One doctoral and female student who was studying a hard science major clearly differentiated between receiving help from his Chinese and his American friends:

The majority of my friends are – like myself – from China for the expressed purpose of taking advantage of an invitation to study at a U.S.-based university. While I am friends with both Americans and other transnational students, I feel much closer to my Chinese buds. For instance, whenever I contact them for assistance with just about anything, they routinely show up in droves and within a short period of time. But friends from the U.S., as well as those from abroad, I usually have to schedule an appointment with if I need their help. The connections are definitely more sound and deeper between my Chinese friends.

Beyond having friends, another strategy employed to escape the inevitable pressures of adjusting to academic and daily life in the U.S. was eating Chinese food.

Some extended their culinary desires to Asian food in general, but all agreed that U.S.-Chinese food did not qualify as “comfort” food.

Likewise, shopping with friends provided an outlet for the students in this study. Grocery shopping was mostly described as a necessity; general shopping provided the respite that many of the students desired:

Shopping in malls is a comforting way for me to unwind. I study very hard in school throughout the week so a good way for me to relax is going shopping with my friends. We can hang out and have lunch or dinner together at the Food Court, whatever, in order to reduce the ever mounting pressures in our daily academic lives. In addition, visiting a shopping mall together is a good opportunity to spend time with those who I do not otherwise see during the week. (doctoral, social science, and female)

In summary, the Chinese international graduate students in this study adopted specific strategies to improve their chances of succeeding in their new lives. Academically, their mental attitude toward the challenges they faced was critical; a positive attitude toward their studies was adopted by all. However, a positive attitude was insufficient; they also took advantage of tutoring and other academic assistance. Adopting a positive attitude was also key to adapting to their daily challenges; they opened their hearts to new experiences. They also improved their English, often by making American friends. Friendship was important not only in learning English; maintaining Chinese friends provided a means of escaping the pressures they were experiencing as they adapted interculturally.

## **Fate**

All of the participants in this study made clear statements about their determination to be successful in their academic pursuits in the U.S. Most of the participants described very specific strategies to adjust to living in the U.S. and interacting with Americans. Despite these efforts, another overarching theme was found in their statements: the concept of fate. The same participant who referenced Confucius in her statements about friendship specifically described the significance of fate in Chinese culture.

A sense of fate was significant in Chinese culture. Fate applied to a belief that everything has already been arranged, and no matter something happened in a positive or negative way. It was not necessary for individuals to strongly worry about their life and future.

Indeed, three students explicitly stated that they had not adopted any strategies to improve their intercultural skills. Although there were no significant patterns found between students who studied at either the master's or doctoral level nor in the social or hard sciences, a particular subtlety was found. Students who studied in the hard sciences indicated that they had less on-going contact with Americans and therefore were more comfortable adopting a "no strategy" approach in intercultural adaptability. This was a more typical response from a student studying in one of the hard sciences:

I am always really busy in the lab. It is rare for me to have and enjoy any personal time so I never actively try to put any strategies in place in order to improve my social connections in the local community. So I just leave things as they are and try to keep focused on my studies and related work.

In contrast, the following statement was more consistent with students in the social sciences: Strategies? None that I can think of. I am normally an easy-going person and do not feel that it's necessary to change myself in order to become social. I believe that people become friends as a result of fate and when those kinds of connections happen that it's a wonderful thing.

The other twelve students described proactive strategies to ensure their success; however, the concept of fate was found in their responses as well. It appeared that these students were actively engaged in strategies to adapt interculturally, but interwoven in their statements was the idea that they would ultimately just "roll with it" or "let it go" as they adjusted to their new lives. Of note, one doctoral and female student who majored in a social science reported adjusting successfully:

Never given this much thought. From the time that I first de-planed I have not realized any major difficulties pertaining to adapting to daily life here. Living in the U.S. has been a relatively easy and comfortable transition for me. As a result, I have no need to strategize anything with respect to 'adjusting'.

Another master's and hard science student reported being somewhat unsuccessful in his intercultural adaptability:

I do not think that I have been all that successful in adapting to life here in the U.S. But it matters not whether I'm back in China or remain here as I will press forward with my personal best. I enjoy listening to other people's perspectives in conjunction with considering how I'd like my life to play out. I do not feel that my efforts up to this point have necessarily been overtly prosperous and I have yet to come up with any successful strategies towards that end. But after studying and

living in the U.S. for the past three years, I am relatively content with the way things have worked out so far. Achieving happiness and good fortune is most every citizen's priority in China and I believe that someday I too will realize this precedence. I just need to continue to work diligently at such.

Regardless of success, students generally expressed that they simply take it easy and allow things to take their natural course. Based on the declarations, this in itself served as an effective strategy for adapting to social interactions in the U.S.

### **Summary**

The findings from the qualitative analysis were reported in this chapter. Four separate themes were found in two distinct phases of the students' transition from China to the U.S. During their pre-departure and adjustment phases, two themes were revealed. During their pre-departure phase, they described being on an exciting adventure. Upon arriving in the U.S., there was immediate recognition that they needed to adjust to the U.S. environment both academically and in their daily lives. To adjust to their new lives, two additional themes were revealed. The first was a determination to succeed. All students were determined to adopt strategies to adjust academically and socially. Most of the students described in great detail two roles of friendship. The first was to make American friends to learn the American culture; the second was to maintain Chinese friends to reduce the pressures they were experiencing in their adjustment. Finally, fate was identified both through a "no strategy" approach and as a means of just "letting things go". In Chapter V, a discussion of the results and related literature will be presented.

## **Chapter V: Discussion and Conclusions**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the perceptions that Chinese international students, enrolled in graduate programs at one United States (U.S.) institution of higher learning, had about their intercultural adaptation experiences. Two research questions guided the study: (1) How do Chinese international graduate students perceive their personal intercultural adaptability? and (2) What strategies do they use to improve their intercultural adaptability? Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants to explore their life stories with a specific accent on their pre-departure, academic, social, and daily life experiences in the U.S. The participants included seven master's and eight doctoral students; seven social science majors and eight majoring in a hard science; and seven males and eight females. Four themes emerged from the statements made by the participants: (1) I'm on an exciting adventure; (2) Oops, I guess I need to adjust to the U.S. environment; (3) I'm going to succeed, no matter what; and (4) Fate.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first is a discussion of the findings presented in Chapter IV in relation to previous literature. The following two sections are implications for practice and recommendations for the future research. Finally, a conclusion of the research study is presented.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

The general findings from the qualitative analysis revealed that there were two distinct phases of the students' transition from China to the U.S.: pre-departure and adjustment phases. During the pre-departure phase, participants described being on an exciting adventure. Upon arriving in the U.S., there was immediate recognition that they

needed to adjust to the U.S. environment both academically and in their daily lives. To adjust to their new lives, most students were determined to adopt strategies to adjust academically and socially, although some students chose no strategy to adjust socially. Most of the students described in great detail two roles of friendship. The first was to make American friends to learn the American culture; the second was to maintain Chinese friends to reduce the pressures they were experiencing in their adjustment. Finally, fate was identified both through a “no strategy” approach and as a means of just “letting things go”.

The findings were also examined by the students’ study level (master’s or doctoral student), study major (social science or hard science majors), and gender (male or female). There were no significant patterns found between male and female students; however, some differences were found between master’s and doctoral students, as well as students who studied social and hard science majors in the adjustment phase. Specifically, in the process of adapting to academic life in the U.S., master’s students declared that they experienced much more embarrassments associated with English language barriers compared to doctoral students; whereas, more doctoral students sought English tutoring and related writing help compared to students at the master’s level. Students at the master’s level expressed satisfaction that they could learn more “efficiently” because they had to concentrate on the course content that they were learning in English. Perhaps most significantly, more doctoral students declared that they had become more independent while more master’s students commented that they had gained much broader outlooks on life through independent learning in the U.S.

There was a clear distinction between hard and social science majors related to independent learning. In general, the social science majors felt the need to spend more time on campus compared to their hard science counterparts. One of the reasons expressed was because of the higher expectation of communicating (written and verbal) in English for the social science majors. It appeared that the requirement to simultaneously think, translate between two languages, and speak about a topic in class was especially challenging, particularly for the social science majors. Most of the students majoring in the hard sciences indicated that they less on-going contact with Americans and therefore were less compelled to improve their English and more comfortable adopting a “no strategy” approach in intercultural adaptability.

The findings of this study generally supported Kim’s (2001) theory of communication and intercultural adaptation. Students in this study demonstrated functional fitness through positive study attitudes as they adjusted to the expectation of independent learning. Psychological health was also maintained through positive outlooks. Intercultural identity development was revealed when students described actively engaging with the local population.

Findings also add to an understanding of cultural disparity between China and the U.S. The most notable finding of this study was the juxtaposition of the concept of fate and the determination to succeed held by the Chinese international students represented in this study. Twelve of the students portrayed a conviction that they would do whatever they needed to succeed; all 15 students either relied upon or ultimately resorted to fate that things would “work out”. Interviews revealed that fate had a significant impact on the students’ perceptions of intercultural adaptability.

Fate was revealed, perhaps most strongly, in the pre-departure phase of their journeys. The students anticipated that their new adventure would be great. For example, attending U.S. graduate school would be easy; there would be an interesting life similar to that as portrayed in American movies; and the students would experience different ways of life in a highly developed country. The lack of preparation concerning intercultural adaptation the students described before leaving their homes in China was particularly noteworthy.

However, upon arrival in the U.S., the students suddenly realized that they needed to scramble to cope with their new academic, social, and daily lives. They encountered stark differences in their perceptions of life in the U.S. compared to China in both academic life and daily living. The academic challenges they encountered concerned independent learning, combined with English language barriers and participation of class discussions and presentations. Facing the reality of life in the U.S., determination to succeed assumed a more prominent role in their thinking. To succeed in the U.S., students adopted specific strategies to adjust. In particular, maintaining a positive study attitude and seeking tutoring assistance were strategies to achieve their academic success. In addition to coping with their academic study on campus, most of the students stated that taking active actions to adapt to the U.S. environment in daily life was significant outside the campus, including learning the U.S. social culture by opening one's heart, improving English proficiency, and making friends with American locals. Nevertheless, all students indicated that no matter what they did, things would "work out" if they "just let it go".

The notion of fate is a conceptualization of the world from the perspectives of cultures and religions in both traditional and modern societies (Giddens, 1990). The definition of fate is culturally determined; fate refers to an acknowledgement of losing control (Giddens, 1994). Although life is interpreted through an individual's knowledge (Giddens, 1992), it is not easy to comprehend life as a series of random occurrences. Life occurrences are perceived to be beyond the individual's control (Giddens & Pierson, 1998). Control is not professed to be entirely understood by the individual; thus, the relinquishing control is regarded as fate (Hay, O'Brien, & Penna, 1994).

In traditional society, the individual's life is pre-ordained; therefore, both the direction and outcome of life are identified by fate (Giddens, 1991). There are two main ideas in the concept of fate in traditional society. The first is a partially established future. Specifically, the individual cannot control what happens in his or her life. This is because the happenings are beyond the understandings of the individual's knowledge and control (Giddens, 1994). The second is that the established future is based on moral or religious frameworks. The frameworks are beyond the individual's comprehension (Giddens, 1992).

Giddens (1991) further explained the concept of fate in modern society. Fundamental to modern thought, individuals are able to recognize significant moments that may be extremely consequential for their destiny. In contrast to the traditional society belief that fate is settled decisively in a higher power, the notion of fate in modern society is open to the individuals' control and actions (Henderson, 2003). The significant moments play pivotal roles in an individual's life, but the moments cannot completely determine the destiny of the individual (Giddens, 1994).

*Ming* is the Chinese word most commonly translated as command, destiny, and fate. Fate is an important concept in traditional Chinese folk culture (Harrell, 1987). Lin (1935) indicated that “fatalism is not only a Chinese mental habit, it is part of the conscious Confucian tradition.” (p. 92). Confucius claimed that “in the stages of life at fifty, one understands the command of heaven” (Lupke, 2005, p. 1). Fate was important to Confucius and is a common feature of Chinese literature, politics, religion, and society (Adams, 2004).

It appears that the students represented in this study were relying upon fate in both the traditional and modern senses. They displayed a foundational belief that things would work out in the traditional sense during their graduate studies in the U.S.; at the same time, twelve of the 15 students adopted a more modern notion of fate as they actively adopted strategies to determine the outcome of their lives in the U.S. It is notable that three of the students did not adopt the modern idea of fate in their thinking.

Another notable finding of the study was the dual reliance upon friendship. Friendships with local Americans allowed for intercultural adaptation; friendships with other Chinese international students were essential to escape the pressure of intercultural adaptation. The findings of this research indicated that maintaining close connections with other Chinese international students was a main strategy to open hearts and escape pressures when they faced the stresses of adjusting to new U.S. environment. The findings are in accord with previously published literature (e.g., Dao et al., 2007; Mak & Nesdale, 2001) that international students frequently cite challenges and stress resulting from personal concerns about cultural differences. For example, Ward and Masgoret (2004) reported that it is not easy for Chinese international students to get information

about services and facilities. They have many concerns about health, security, food, housing, transportation, and religion. Likewise, the majority of the students prefer Chinese or Asian food. However, most Chinese food in the U.S. is an unfamiliar American-style.

Although staying with other Chinese international students was reported to be comfortable and relaxing, most students in this study declared that making friends and communicating with American locals helped them to improve their intercultural adaptability in the U.S. Four strategies were used to connect with the American locals: attending social events, attending classes, having American housemates, and meeting locals by introductions of landlords. The findings are consistent with previous literature. Interacting with local people is very important for international students to improve their intercultural adaptability because the social conditions of host cultures can create challenges to new immigrants (Jasinskaja et al., 2006). Ward (2006) suggested actively understanding and learning the host culture is significant to enhance intercultural adaptation. The lack of understanding can cause difficulties and setbacks in intercultural adaption (Rui & Wang, 2015). Adapting interculturality is an involved process in which sojourners put forth active efforts to study new situations and gain skills related to a specific culture in order to fit into a foreign environment.

Berger and his colleagues (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Berger, 1979; Berger & Bradac, 1982) proposed the uncertainty reduction theory (URT) to describe a sojourner's ability to adapt cross-culturally in foreign countries. There are strategies that people use to reduce their levels of uncertainty. For example, the theory suggested that sojourners need to dynamically interact with local people instead of only observing others in host

countries to reduce uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Berger, 1979; Berger & Bradac, 1982; Gudykunst, 2005). Students in this study described engaging in behaviors consistent with URT.

Ward (2006) reported that sojourning Chinese often do not experience opportunities to participate in meaningful social interaction with domestic students and local people because the students lack understanding and/or proper knowledge of the U.S. society. In particular, due to the influences of a communist educational system, Chinese students have grown up with negative characterizations of the U.S. In addition, the students are used to cooperative rather than individualized decision making styles. The cooperative decision making focuses on the family unit as a whole rather than the individual (Zimmermann, 1995). In contrast, the findings of this study revealed that it was not hard for most participants to make friends and interact with local people. This appeared to be because from the perceptions of the students, they wished to succeed in the U.S. Therefore, the students stated they actively put effort into learning the U.S. social culture by opening their heart, improving their English proficiency, and making friends with locals through attending social events and classes, having American housemates, and meeting locals by introductions of landlords.

### **Implication for Practice**

The findings of this study support U.S. higher education leaders to understand and identify the demands of international students through hearing their perceptions of intercultural adaptability in terms of academic, social, and daily life. It is specifically suggested to help upcoming international students develop social connections with current international students through social media. Students in this study identified QQ,

a Chinese social media outlet, as a means of securing housing. This media could be used for many issues that international students encounter.

Findings from this study also suggest that pre-departure workshops may have limited value in fostering intercultural adaptability. A traditional definition of fate was strongly portrayed during the pre-departure phase of their sojourns. A more suitable approach to supporting intercultural adaptability may be to facilitate communication between Chinese international students already studying in the U.S. and new arrivals. Again, using social media may be an appropriate vehicle for current students to share their real intercultural adaptation experiences, which could be beneficial to the newly arrived students. As a result, the new students may develop more realistic perceptions of life in the U.S., as well as strategies to cope. Finally, faculty members and staff in the U.S. higher education are encouraged to introduce available student services on campus, such as the writing center and tutoring center, to the students after they arrive at the U.S.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this study was to examine Chinese international graduate students' perceptions of their personal intercultural adaptability, as well as effective strategies they chose to enhance their intercultural adjustment. There are five recommendations for future research. The first recommendation is that each interview can be conducted twice, once in Mandarin and another in English in the future study. On the one hand, the participants can freely express their perceptions in Mandarin; on the other hand, the English version of the interview can reflect a translation option for the researcher who may not be bilingual and bicultural. The second recommendation is that this study can be conducted in different U.S. graduate schools to understand the role of institutional

context in intercultural adaptability. The third recommendation is that to make the interview as comfortable and nonthreatening to the participants as possible, both individual and focus groups might be conducted in future research. An individual interview provides a sense of safety to the participants. A group interview makes the participants feel that they have the same or similar intercultural adaptation experiences as their peers. The intercultural adaptation is a normal learning process for international students; conducting focus groups rather than individual interviews may provide additional perspectives. The fourth recommendation is that conducting a similar research study with undergraduate participants in the future, which may contribute different and new findings. Lastly, it is recommended to replicate this study with students from other Asian countries.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study expand research related to international students' intercultural adaptability. Previous research affecting the population of international students and their known adaptabilities has largely centered on stress and stressors. There is limited data describing how Chinese international students perceive their own degrees of personal overall intercultural adaptability in the U.S. and what strategies the students use to improve their intercultural adaptability.

This research study's findings indicated that students encountered stark differences in their perceptions of life in the U.S. compared to China in both their academic life and daily living. The academic challenges they encountered concerned independent learning while they also faced intercultural adaptation of the U.S. daily living, such as shopping difficulties and no transportation. The concept of fate and

friendship had significant impacts on attempting to cope with the new U.S. academic, social, and daily lives. In particular, there were the juxtaposition of the concept of fate and the determination to succeed held by the students: maintaining close friendship with other Chinese international students to escape daily pressures and making friends with American locals to adapt to the U.S. environment were found. It was particularly significant that the concept of fate and friendship resulted in different strategies adopted by the students.

International students have many difficulties in their academic life and daily living when they are confronted with intercultural adaptation experiences in the U.S. Thus, U.S. colleges and universities should consider investing in more preparation concerning improving intercultural adaptability for upcoming international students, like developing social connections between upcoming and current international students by using social media. This research supports that adopting different strategies to improve the students' intercultural adaptability results from their perception of fate and friendship. Thus, understanding the students' perceptions of intercultural adaptability is significant for the U.S. higher education educators and the upcoming international students who plan to study abroad in the U.S.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

Thank you for agreeing to be part of my study. Before I ask you specific questions about your studies and life in the U.S., I want to get a sense about how you mentally prepared to study here.

1. Why did you decide to study in the U.S.?
2. I would like for you to remember back to the time you were preparing to come to the U.S.; what did you think it would be like?
3. Did you do anything, for instance watching movies, talking with others to prepare yourself for your new life?

### **Category 1: Academic Life**

1. If you were at a party and someone asked you about being a graduate student in the USA, what would you tell them?
2. How do you think attending graduate school here compares to studying in China?
3. I'd like to know a little bit about how much time you spend in your academic life. For instance, how many hours do you spend on school activities each day, including preparing and going to classes, completing assignments, and working (if you do)? Is that different on weekends?
4. What's the best part of studying in the U.S.?
5. What is your greatest challenge in studying in the U.S.?

6. Do you need extra academic assistance and support for your graduate school study here?
7. If so, what kinds of the assistance and support do you need? How do you get assistance?

### **Category 2: Social Life**

Now I'd like to change topics to your social life. Let's begin with a very basic question: how important are friends to you?

1. What are the most important characteristics of a friend?
2. Comparing Chinese to U.S. culture, is the definition of a friend the same or different?
3. Now let's move to how you make friends. When you first arrived in the U.S., who was your first acquaintance? Tell me about how you met that person? Did that person become a friend?
4. When you think about your acquaintances and friends, do they tend to be Chinese, American or other international individuals? Are they other students or local people?
5. Do you have different school friends and weekend friends?
6. Now I'd like for you to focus on your closest American friend (assuming you have one). How do you know each other? What would you like to do when you get together?
7. Have you ever experienced culture shock? If so, what happened?
8. Now I want you to think about local people in general. How do you get to know local people? Is it hard? Is it important to you?

9. What strategies have you tried to improve your social connections in the local community?

### **Category 3: Daily Life**

Changing topics again, I'd like to ask you about daily life in the U.S.

1. First, do you mind telling me whether you live in a dorm, homestay, apartment, or shared accommodation.
2. How to find a place to stay when you just arrive at USA?
3. Daily living involves two really important things, eating and shopping. What kinds of food do you like and where you generally eat?
4. Now let's turn to shopping. Where do you go grocery shopping? Do you go by yourself or with others? If others, who?
5. How do you buy clothes, shoes, and pens, going to shopping malls or doing on-line shopping? Do you have any difficulties when you go shopping? If so could you provide me an example?
6. What kinds of transportation do you use?
7. Tell me a story about your worst or most embarrassing experience in daily life in the USA? How do you get through it?
8. What has been your most successful strategy to cope with daily life in the USA?
9. Do you have anything to add about adjusting to live at a U.S. university?

Thank you.

**Appendix B: University Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

775.327.2368 / 775.327.2369 fax www.unr.edu/research-integrity

**Research Integrity Office**

218 Ross Hall / 331,  
Reno, Nevada 89557

University of Nevada, Reno

DATE: December 2, 2015  
 TO: Janet Usinger, Ph.D.  
 FROM: University of Nevada, Reno Institutional Review Board (IRB)

PROJECT TITLE: [836528-1] Perceptions Held by Chinese International Graduate Students about their Intercultural Adadaptation Experiences

REFERENCE #:  
 SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project  
 ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS  
 DECISION DATE: December 2, 2015  
 EXPIRATION DATE: N/A no expiration date

NEXT STATUS REPORT *None- no expiration date*

DATE:

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited category

# 2

The UNR IRB reviewed this project and has determined it is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations. Please note, the federal government has identified certain categories of research involving human subjects that qualify for exemption from federal regulations. The IRB is authorized by the federal government to determine whether studies determined by the principal investigator (PI) to be exempt from federal regulations actually qualify for exemption criteria.

Only the IRB has been designated authority through the University to make a determination that a study is exempt from federal regulations. The above-referenced protocol was reviewed and the research deemed eligible to proceed in accordance with the requirements of the Code of Federal Regulations on the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46.101 paragraph [b]).

If you have any questions, please contact Nancy Moody at 775.327.2367 or at nmoody@unr.edu.

**NOTE for VA Researchers: You are not approved to begin this research until you receive an approval letter from the VASNHCS Associate Chief of Staff for Research stating that your research has been approved by the Research and Development Committee.**

Sincerely,

Richard Bjur, PhD  
 Co-Chair, UNR IRB  
 University of Nevada Reno

Janet Usinger, PhD  
 Co-Chair, UNR IRB  
 University of Nevada Reno

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Nevada, Reno IRB's record.

Generated on IRBNet

### **Appendix C: Recruitment Email**

Dear Chinese International Graduate Students,

I am Wei Gu, a doctoral student studying in the Educational Leadership Program. Currently, I am actively looking for Chinese international graduate students to participate a study of dissertation. The focus of this research is to examine in rich detail how Chinese international university students at the graduate level reflect on their life experiences with a primary focus on intercultural adaptability in the U.S. Additionally, their respective positions as learners in the U.S. and how they improve their intercultural adjustment from their personal perspective is explored.

If you are qualified with the following criteria: Chinese international students; graduate level (master's and Ph.D.) study; willingness to engage in an interview for approximately one hour; and at least have been one year of temporary residence in the U.S., I would like to invite you to participate the study. You will participate a one hour-long interview to share personal perceptions and experiences of intercultural adaptation in the U.S. All interview questions will focus on three general categories: academic life; social life; and daily life. The perceptions and experiences may contribute to both academic faculty and administrators in U.S. institutions of higher education, 1) gain a better understanding of Chinese international students in their schools. 2) improve student services to help the students become more effective in all aspects connected to their education.

I appreciate your time, consideration, and look forward to your participation. If you would like to participate, please contact me through e-mail: weig@unr.edu.

Wei

**Appendix D: Information Sheet**  
**University of Nevada, Reno**  
**Social Behavioral or Educational Research Information Sheet**

**Title of Study:** Perceptions Held by Chinese International Graduate Students about their Intercultural Adaptation Experiences

**Principal Investigator:** Janet Usinger, Ph.D., 775-682-9083

**Co-Investigator:** Wei Gu, M.A., 775- 682-9076

**Study ID Number:**

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you agree to be in the study, read this form carefully. It explains why we are doing the study; and the procedures, risks, discomforts, benefits and precautions involved.

The purpose of the study is to explore how Chinese international graduate students reflect on their life experiences as learners in the United States with a primary focus on intercultural adaptability. We are asking you to be in this study because you are a Chinese International Graduate Student studying at the University of Nevada, Reno.

If you agree to be in this study you will be asked to participate an interview that will last approximately one hour. The interview will be conducted at a time and place convenient to your schedule. The interview questions will focus on three general categories: academic life; social life; and daily life. You will also be asked review your profile that will be created during data analysis. This will take approximately 30 minutes.

This study is considered minimal risk. The questions are about studying and daily life and are not sensitive in nature. However, if you do not want to answer some of the questions, just say so. There are no penalties for not answering questions.

We cannot promise that participating in the study will benefit you, but we hope to gain a better understanding of Chinese international students as they study in the United States.

We will treat your identity with professional standards of confidentiality and protect your private information to the extent allowed by law. We will do this by assigning a participant code, including a specific two digit number to each participant. In addition, codes in terms of your study area (social science or hard science) and study level (master's or doctoral student) will be assigned.

We will not use your name or other information that could identify you in any reports or publications that result from this study unless you agree with that. The researchers, the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and the University of Nevada, Reno Social Behavioral Institutional Review Board will have access to your study records.

At any time, if you have questions about this study or wish to report an injury that may be related to your participation in this study, contact Janet Usinger, 775-682-9083 or Wei Gu, 775- 682-9076. You may discuss a problem or complaint or ask about your rights as a research participant by calling the University of Nevada, Reno Research Integrity Office at (775) 327-2368. You may also use the online Contact the Research Integrity Office form available from the Contact Us page of the University's Research Integrity Office website.

**Appendix E: Form 1**

<b>Academic Life</b>		<b>Strength</b>
<b>Theme</b>		
<b>Codes</b>		

**Appendix E: Form 2**

<b>Social Life</b>		<b>Strength</b>
Theme		
Codes		

**Appendix E: Form 3**

<b>Daily Life</b>		<b>Strength</b>
<b>Theme</b>		
<b>Codes</b>		