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“Life Is Splendid Here in the U.S.”: Intercultural Learning in Contemporary Chinese Students’ Academic Adjustment

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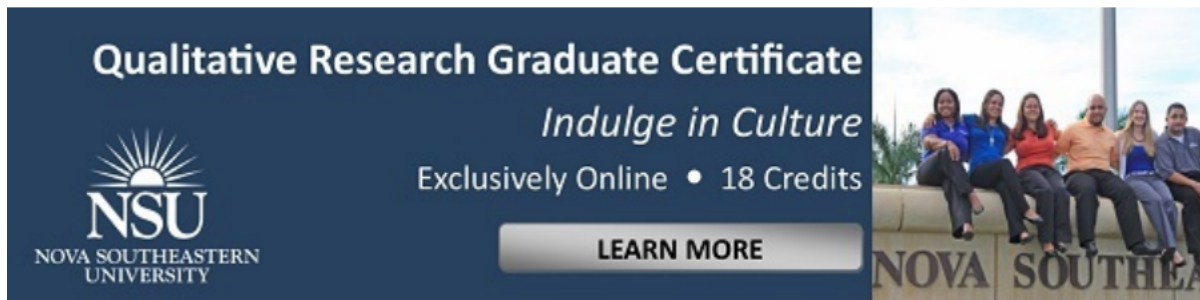
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Abstract

The increasing numbers of Chinese learners studying at American universities and the high mobility across borders have recently challenged prevailing stereotypes of Asians in education. While studies of Chinese students are abundant, there has been scant research on how intercultural learning unfolds in these students’ adjustment to both academic and social settings. To address this research gap, I center my case study around six of my former students from China and examine their progress at different U.S. institutions. Data from their journals were coded and analyzed qualitatively. In tracing my participants’ first semester trajectory and their strategies to adapt to the new environments, I draw on critical approaches to the established models of ICC (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Dervin, 2016). Through investigating my students’ previous exposure to Western education and its role in their adjustment, their intercultural encounters in the U.S., and the learning that emerges from such encounters, this project offers insights into how previous linguistic and educational experiences can be mobilized and optimized to enhance intercultural learning and what frictions can occur in the process of adaptation. I also delineate characteristics of a new type of students from China, namely individuals who move fluidly between cultures in hybridized ways. I conclude by providing pedagogical implications for language educators who work with multicultural learners.

Keywords

intercultural learning, Chinese students abroad, intercultural encounters, ESL, inductive case study

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“Life Is Splendid Here in the U.S.”: Intercultural Learning in Contemporary Chinese Students’ Academic Adjustment

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The increasing numbers of Chinese learners studying at American universities and the high mobility across borders have recently challenged prevailing stereotypes of Asians in education. While studies of Chinese students are abundant, there has been scant research on how intercultural learning unfolds in these students’ adjustment to both academic and social settings. To address this research gap, I center my case study around six of my former students from China and examine their progress at different U.S. institutions. Data from their journals were coded and analyzed qualitatively. In tracing my participants’ first semester trajectory and their strategies to adapt to the new environments, I draw on critical approaches to the established models of ICC (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Dervin, 2016). Through investigating my students’ previous exposure to Western education and its role in their adjustment, their intercultural encounters in the U.S., and the learning that emerges from such encounters, this project offers insights into how previous linguistic and educational experiences can be mobilized and optimized to enhance intercultural learning and what frictions can occur in the process of adaptation. I also delineate characteristics of a new type of students from China, namely individuals who move fluidly between cultures in hybridized ways. I conclude by providing pedagogical implications for language educators who work with multicultural learners.

Keywords: intercultural learning, Chinese students abroad, intercultural encounters, ESL, inductive case study

Introduction

The increasing desire of Chinese students to study at American institutions has raised awareness around their academic adjustment. According to the Institute of International Education (2016), 328,547 students from China pursued higher education in the U.S. in 2015/2016. The Chinese made up 31.5% of all international learners in the United States. This fact alone provides grounds for exploring Chinese learners’ adjustment to the American schooling. In pursuing this exploration, Chinese students are often faced with complex adaptation requirements to the new academic environment, for reasons that are still less understood (e.g., Gu, 2009; Yan & Berliner, 2016). Gu (2009) explored the relationship between maturity and interculturality of Chinese students in the UK and found that interaction with the new environment was a driving force to facilitate change in their intercultural development. Conversely, Yan and Berliner (2016) studied the unique features of Chinese students and their acculturation processes. They portrayed the life of Chinese students abroad as difficult and full of stressors. To date, Chinese learners tend to be misrepresented by Western academic publications. Multiple stereotypes about these learners can be found, for example, as dependent, passive rote learners who need to copy their ideal Western counterparts (e.g.,

Cortazzi & Jin, 2013; Shi, 2006). As these stereotypes have provoked global interest, many scholars have realized the need for a more intercultural focus on language learning and teaching (Jin & Cortazzi, 2017; O'Dwyer, 2017). Jin and Cortazzi (2017) showed tensions between the desire to recruit international students and their intercultural needs in the current internationalization of higher education. They provided a comprehensive list of ideas for institutions (such as faculty and students practicing a variety of cultural approaches) including cultures of learning in their practices, which in turn would advance their intercultural communication strategies. O'Dwyer's (2017) article, on the other hand, critically examined Confucian Heritage Cultures, and used intercultural theories to illustrate assumed contrasting learning habits between Asian and English-speaking students. O'Dwyer also considered social change in Asian societies and the effect it had on understanding Asian students. While proficiency has always been at the heart of language studies, intercultural competence models (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006) and interculturality frameworks (seen as an outcome of internationalization) have been investigated more intensely recently (e.g., Dervin, 2016; Garrett-Rucks, 2016). As more and more Chinese students aspire to study abroad, they are motivated not only to improve their English proficiency but also communicative skills in order to succeed academically (Jackson, 2014; Xiao & Petraki, 2007). Xiao and Petraki (2007) investigated Chinese students at an Australian university and discovered that the multiple challenges they faced in interacting with students from other countries could be ascribed to a lack of command of intercultural communication.

Despite the above, not much has been discovered about the extent to which intercultural learning – if defined as the ability to cope with intercultural experiences (Garrett-Rucks, 2016) – derives from such intercultural experiences (both pre- and during-sojourn). Also, relatively little is understood about how prior educational experiences relate to Chinese learners' adjustment to both academic and social milieus in the U.S. and what skills and ideas they bring to the encounter. By focusing on the abovementioned gaps, in this case study (Friedman, 2012), I follow up on my former students' progress abroad. I underline contemporary Chinese learners' characteristics in the changing socioeconomic and global contexts (O'Dwyer, 2017) in conjunction with shifting language learning and instruction paradigms.

A Rise in Overseas Education in China

Travelling to study in U.S. universities has reached an unprecedented level since the first group of Chinese students was recorded in America in 1847 (Zhu, 2016). Zhu's extensive report on Chinese students overseas, and their academic adjustment in the light of intercultural learning provided not only census information about the history of Chinese students abroad but also explored common struggles these students faced upon entering foreign academia. Nowadays, with a large population of students from China in the U.S., the question of their intercultural learning abroad becomes fundamental. Because China's educational system remains highly competitive, a rising number of parents strive to secure a future place for their children at foreign universities. One of the dimensions of internationalizing Chinese education is the implementation of comprehensive English language programs alongside national curriculum based high schools. For example, Lamberton and Ashton-Hay (2015) conducted a study investigating how well pre-departure curricula can ease the intercultural transition that Chinese international business students undergo in Australia. The study found pre-sojourn curricula to be successful in understanding learning differences between Chinese and Australian institutions which in turn led to a better comprehension of what it means to be prepared interculturally to study abroad. In China, it has become a common practice for educational enterprises that send students abroad to begin cooperation with local public high schools. Top students are invited to enroll in Western curriculum based boarding schools

(Dyson, 2014; O'Dwyer, 2017). Dyson (2014) proved that Chinese students with Western-oriented preparation thrived in a new environment. Currently, the dominant programs in China prepare students for International Baccalaureate (IB), the UK's Cambridge A-levels, and the U.S. College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) examinations.

The abovementioned trend directly influences changes in today's Chinese students' cultures of learning. Cortazzi and Jin (1997) defined cultures of learning as beliefs about teaching and learning, expectations about classroom conduct and the ideal of decent work. In the context of this study, learning across cultures means either assimilating, accommodating, or rejecting the values and practices embedded in the new culture. Imposing American patterns of learning on students might pose a potential threat to their developing identities (Cortazzi & Jin, 2013). Therefore, any intercultural interaction should be done in the spirit that highlights reciprocal learning, viz. with awareness and reflection, on what Yuan and Xie (2013) term "cultural synergy." Both Yuan and Xie (2013) and Jin and Cortazzi (2017) provided a concise description of Chinese cultures of learning. Jin and Cortazzi (2017) described it as "different cultural ways and emphases of learning brought to international contexts by students and teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds" (p. 241). Yuan and Xie (2013) introduced the idea of cultural synergy as systematic interaction of people from different cultures with a common purpose to understand each other without losing their own cultural features. Knowing that English not only defines one's social identities but also classifies learners into the higher social stratum (Jin & Cortazzi, 2017; O'Dwyer, 2017), creates a significant contextual background for this study.

Contemporary Chinese Learners: Defying the Stereotype

Although Chinese cultures of learning have roots in Confucianism, contemporary Chinese students typically do not reflect a traditional image of passive rote-learners (O'Dwyer, 2017; Shi, 2006). Shi's (2006) project found that contemporary Chinese students do not conform to the stereotypes depicted in most studies of international students thus far. The participants in her study showed little difference from their Western counterparts and hence supported the notion of changing cultures of learning both domestically in China as well as internationally. Following this line of thought, many educators and researchers based their conceptions of Chinese students on a false dichotomy between Western and Chinese learners (see Table 1).

Table 1

Western vs. Chinese Academic Values

Western Academic Values	Chinese Academic Values
• Individual orientation	• Collective consciousness
• Horizontal relations	• Hierarchical relations
• Verbal explicitness	• Contextualized communication
• Seeking alternatives	• Single solution
• Creativity, originality	• Mastery, transmission
• Discussion, argument, challenge (adversarial stance)	• Agreement, harmony, face (harmonious stance)
• Critical evaluation	• Assumed acceptance ("follow the master")
• "deep" learners	• "surface"/rote learners
• Independent learners	• Dependence on the teacher
• Student-centered learning	• Teacher-centered learning
• Constructing new knowledge	• Respect for historical texts and the teacher

Note. (Based on Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Ryan, 2010; Shi, 2006)

If Western academic values include individual orientation, horizontal relations, verbal explicitness, creativity, originality, critical evaluation, and student-centered learning, Chinese academia would be described by collectivism, hierarchical relations, communication in context, “following the master,” and teacher-centered learning (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Ryan, 2010; Shi, 2006). The binaries of Western and Chinese students’ learning behaviors show the ideal Western students as models for their Chinese counterparts (Shi, 2006). As Ryan (2010) claimed, if Anglophone scholars formulate ideas about Chinese international students based on observing these students’ struggles to adjust to unfamiliar pedagogical arenas, such academics contribute to the stereotypical belief that specifies the educational superiority of the West. However, as Shi (2006) found in her study, today’s Chinese students bear elements of something old and something new, shifting from traditional Confucian learners to their more modern counterparts. Invoking modelling and memorization as their only representations has both been strongly criticized if not rejected (Jin & Cortazzi, 2017; O’Dwyer, 2017).

A Critical Outlook on Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICCC)

This study focuses on Chinese students’ intercultural experiences that could lead to intercultural learning; hence it is crucial to explore the existing frameworks of intercultural competence. According to Garrett-Rucks (2016), Intercultural Communicative Competence is a learner’s ability to cope with intercultural experiences. I present a critical take on concepts of ICCC developed by Byram (1997), Deardorff (2006), and Dervin (2016).

To begin with, Byram’s (1997, p. 34) ICCC model consists of 5 categories (or as Byram calls them *savoirs*), namely skills to interpret and relate, knowledge of self and other, education (political and critical cultural awareness), attitudes to relativize self and value others, likewise skills to discover and/or interact with others. However, his model lacks clear examples of linguistic development. If ICCC is conceptualized only as a set of skills or abilities, such aspects might pertain to one context but not another. Therefore, the scope of this model is narrow. I claim that ICCC is most easily observed in intercultural education settings, where people infused with different cultures are taught to negotiate cultural and social identifications. What Byram suggested needs to be developed and cultivated rather than transmitted in the classroom. Given the fact that not all teachers want to be responsible for intercultural learning, it seems impractical to assess levels of ICCC. In short, Byram’s (1997) model was multidimensional and stated no pre-defined goals for students in the classroom, making each experience its own goal.

On the other hand, Deardorff’s (2006) process model of ICCC includes features necessary for individual process of ICCC to take place such as attitudes (respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery), knowledge and comprehensions (cultural self-awareness, deep cultural knowledge and sociolinguistic awareness), and skills (to listen, observe, evaluate, analyze, interpret and relate). Also, for successful interaction, Deardorff listed internal and external outcomes, namely adaptability, flexibility, ethnorelative view and empathy (for the former) and effective and appropriate communication and behavior in an intercultural situation (for the latter; Deardorff, 2006, p. 256). Her model underlines the importance of a continual process of working on attitudes, knowledge, internal, and external outcomes related to ICCC. Learners continuously learn, change, evolve, and become transformed with time. Since her idea of ICCC is an open process, one can enter it at any point and move freely between different factors. The degree of ICCC depends on an acquired-through-interaction attitudes, knowledge, comprehension, and skills. Deardorff (2006) argued that educators should take on the task and responsibility of teaching students to think interculturally. This model focused highly on assessing ICCC. Those who maintain that a portfolio makes for the best assessment tool of ICCC include Scarino (2010), who found that portfolios allow students to interpret meaning,

consider judgments and defend linguistic and cultural choices on an individual basis. Jackson's (2014) publication on globalization, internationalization, and study abroad trends stated that functionalist approach can only reinforce stereotypes and homogenize cultures. Yet, Deardorff's process model did not successfully address the issue of reciprocity in acquiring ICCC. It appears one-sided and it mentions students' routes only.

Finally, Dervin (2016) saw interculturality in terms of an encounter, and as a jointly constructed interaction. We adapt our discourse to specific situations and interlocutors. Dervin's (2016) methodological toolbox for ICCC includes such elements necessary for intercultural encounters (IE) as interaction, context, recognition of power relations, simplicity (the inevitable combination of "the simple" and the "complex") and intersectionality (the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion). He also mentioned failure, cultural differentialism (the idea that cultures are clearly bound entities with a specific geographical location), cultural *mélange* (cultural fusion of the West and the East) and proteophilic competences (appreciating the diverse diversities of the Self and the Other). Dervin's approach to ICCC emphasizes the emergent, dynamic, and negotiated nature of intercultural communication, and proposed "interculturality" as the best term for ICCC. Important is Dervin's (2016) conviction that failure in interactions has benefits for future learning and self-criticality. Other established models of ICCC recognize success only. In addition, Dervin (2016) criticized Byram's and Deardorff's models for not matching today's educational goals: fighting against othering, hegemony, hierarchies, and power differentials. He rejected those models' stages, or simple progression, believing that interculturality is composed of contradictions, instabilities, and discontinuities (Dervin, 2016, p. 82). Dervin's concept of intercultural encounters (IE; understood as any experience between people with different cultural backgrounds), resonates with this study's focus. However, his model did not adequately take the pre-sojourn stage into account. By considering experiences in the new environment only, it minimized the impact educational preparation in China could have on the participants' intercultural learning. Nonetheless, Dervin's notion shares the view of Chinese students as heterogenous learners and their academic endeavors as culturally contextualized (Gu, 2009).

Finally, the influence of researcher positionality on this study needs to be acknowledged. Participants were my former high school students in China, a situation that might have affected their reports. They might have depicted their experiences as overly positive in order not to disappoint me. Since we have an established personal relationship, they might have portrayed their sojourns as smooth and problem-free while keeping the problematic frictions to themselves.

There is no doubt that the models critiqued above contributed tremendously to the field of applied linguistics and SLA. Providing gaps for researchers to explore (such as their lack of consideration for pre-sojourn preparation), allowed new understandings to emerge (such as new hybridized portraits of the Chinese learner). To guide this project, I proposed two broad and interrelated research questions:

1. How do contemporary Chinese students' previous educational experiences (attending international high school in China) relate to their academic adjustment in the U.S.?
2. How do intercultural encounters lead to transformation and intercultural learning in these informants?

Methodology

Study Design: An Inductive Case Study

My primary goal in this study was to gain a detailed understanding of academic acclimatization amongst Chinese undergraduate students who had just arrived in the U.S., by focusing on their holistic experiences in terms of academic, social, and cultural life. Thus, I determined that qualitatively oriented inductive case study would be the best method to utilize in this study. To achieve the above-mentioned goal, I relied on their in-depth prompted journal entries (Deardorff, 2006; Scarino, 2010) to collect data. These methods gave them a chance to explain their experiences thoroughly and conveniently. The participants' reports were rich. They provided me with thick description of their experiences (Friedman, 2012). The prompts were broad and open-ended, and I encouraged my informants to answer in a flexible manner. Also, a qualitative study aligns with the purpose of this project. I set out to create emic understanding from the perspective of the observed persons in their own realm. This was important because I approached each participant as an independent individual and a member of a heterogenous population.

Participants

The participants in this study were six newly arrived Chinese students that were freshmen at six different American institutions at the time of data collection. All of them were 18 years old and came from the same international high school (A-levels program) in the south-east of China, where I (the researcher) had previously taught them English (see Table 2).

Table 2
Biographical Data

Pseudonym /Information	Sol	Emily	Emma	Shay	Wang Yang	Tracy Zhang
Gender	M	F	F	F	F	F
How long in the U.S.	3 months	2 months	2 months	3 months	6 months	3 months
Native language	Mandarin	Mandarin	Mandarin	Mandarin	Mandarin	Mandarin
Other languages spoken	English	English	English	English, Japanese	English	English
Age when started learning English	4	5	7	8	6	10
Years of English-medium schooling	5	12	5	6	3	8
Number of countries visited	6	2	4	3	3	2
GPA (first semester in the U.S.)	3.4	3.5	3.3	3.7	3.7	3.2
GPA (first semester in the U.S.)	3.4	3.5	3.3	3.7	3.7	3.2
Type of institution in the U.S.	Research university	Liberal arts college	Private research university	Liberal arts college	Private research university	Research university

They were selected based on the following criteria: (a) year of study at an American institution (1st year); (b) previous attendance at an international high school in China with exposure to foreign teachers; and (c) voluntary participation in the study.

The respondents' mother tongue was Mandarin Chinese. Some of them knew local dialects spoken in their regions of origin. I made sure that their English level was high enough to obtain valid samples of writing (all participants had reached either IELTS Band 7 or TOEFL 103 or above). I contacted my former students via *WeChat*, a popular Chinese social media application. Because I was their former English teacher at an international high school in China, I had ample insight into the skill levels that were required of them to be able to study abroad.

Materials

The Journal

I created a 10-week journal writing set (Appendix A). Each entry prompted respondents to describe their experiences of studying in the U.S. According to Byram (1997), "learner-generated artifacts" (p. 48) are the most viable tools to depict holistic representations of shifts in learners' views. This instrument allowed for in-depth sharing of participants' schooling practices as well as for verbalizing their experiences (see Friedman, 2012). The journal was also used to collect participants' biographical information (Table 2). The 10-week comprehensive journal focused on academic adaptation and intercultural competence. I administered it in English. To guarantee participants' anonymity, I asked them to choose a pseudonym, which will be used henceforth when discussing findings (see Table 2).

Data Collection

Upon receiving an IRB approval for this study (deemed exempt), I began the process of recruiting participants. After I sent out consent forms to the six participants through *WeChat*, they electronically signed and returned the forms to me within a week. Consecutively, each Sunday night I sent a journal entry for the upcoming week to be completed also on *WeChat*, for their convenience. The informants were given detailed instructions on how long their entry should be and sent it back to me by the following Sunday. They reported no problems completing the weekly entries on time hence providing me with a full dataset. This process lasted for 10 consecutive weeks.

Data Analysis

After I collected all datasets, I examined each journal individually and coded them in *NVivo for Mac* (Version 11), using an inductive approach in which the themes emerged from the data. I later categorized the themes into claims and built my Findings section based on the most relevant ones. Because the sample size was relatively small, I also implemented a paper-and-pen method to group the information and to make sure emerging themes were interpreted well. All journal entries, along with my analytic memos, were scrutinized repeatedly (at least three times) to help me identify recurring categories and to highlight most relevant excerpts. Next, I grouped passages related to the same theme in *NVivo* and placed them into one broad category. Finally, I sorted the organizational categories based on themes within the scope of the research questions. I read all data sources carefully and coded them by inductive analysis procedures (Taylor, 2017) for accurate interpretation of emergent patterns and themes. The inductive approach also assisted with finding participants' voices, making them clear and concise. I eliminated themes that did not match my research question and focused on those that

did which I then grouped into broader categories. Participants' descriptions were rich (Duff, 2014), providing me with thick description of their experiences (Friedman, 2012).

Having chosen these participants from different types of institutions in the United States, as different as they might seem, was a strategic move. Tracy (2010) defines transferability in qualitative research as the study's power to create reliability for its readers. I wanted to make sure that different settings are represented in my data sources, which could allow for a broader transferability of findings and possibly assist in creating interdisciplinary links.

Findings and Discussion

To answer my research questions, namely (1) How do contemporary Chinese students' previous educational experiences (attending international high school in China) relate to their academic adjustment in the U.S., and (2) How do intercultural encounters lead to transformation and intercultural learning in these informants, I classified this study's findings into four major claims based on the themes that were the most substantiated by data. I took participants' types of institutions (attended at the time of data collection) into consideration, to illustrate how different schools in the U.S. might be approaching similar issues involving international students.

Contemporary Chinese Learners as Hybrids of Cultures of Learning

Dyson (2014) found that students with prior EAP (English for Academic Purposes) instruction felt confident about their academic skills preparation. However, according to Jin and Cortazzi (2017) it should not be assumed that because international students have achieved a certain level of competence in English, they would be using the same cultural ways of speaking. In fact, "the greater the diversity in internationalizing contexts the more likely it is that participants are using a wide and diverse range of ways of expressing themselves" (p. 246). All informants in this study had previously attended the same international high school in China but moved to the U.S. to pursue higher education at different types of institutions (see Table 2). In China, they participated in academic courses and learned ways to adjust to the new academic realm from Western teachers. Exemplifying participants' experiences, Emily declared (Excerpt 1):

Excerpt 1

Thanks to my experience in high school, I am much better prepared for college. I participated in English debate contest when I was in high school. For my history class now, we have two debates through the semester. If it were not my experience in high school, I would know nothing about debate and have no idea where to start. My high school schooling taught me how to take notes when reading a book and how to express my own opinions in class.

Emily underlined the role her education in the international high school in China played in the first months at an American liberal arts college. The practices she learned before coming to the U.S. (i.e., debating, note taking, expressing her opinions in class) made her more self-confident in the new classroom environment as well as eased her path into the world of Western education. She recognized her high school as a solid foundational factor in facilitating her transition, giving her an advantage of handling certain academic practices. The learning training obtained back in China made her similar to American students in terms of academic

behavior and placed her in the middle of the spectrum when academic contrasts between Asian and Western students are made (see Table 1).

Similarly, in their study of Chinese business students preparing for the transition to study in Australia Lambertson and Ashton-Hay (2015), observed the benefits of pre-departure curriculum, communicative workshops, and demanding assignments. Another participant, Tracy Zhang reported (Excerpt 2):

Excerpt 2

The international education I received in high school definitely helped me adapting to the American college life. My speaking skills really improved. First, I am brave to talk with Americans. Many of my friends who used to take the traditional Chinese high school courses are so scared to talk with people who speak English. They are terrified every time Americans ask them: “Pardon? What did you say?” Instead of responding louder and clearer, my Chinese friends simply stop talking at all. Second, I do not have any problems with understanding the courses taught in English. I can highlight the core concepts as I’m listening to the lectures. I know how to take notes well. That’s what my international high school taught me. I made the right decision attending it.

Tracy Zhang listed skills she obtained before coming to the research university in the U.S., namely being brave enough to speak with native speakers (her willingness to communicate), being able to understand courses in English and highlighting main ideas from listening in class. She favorably compared herself to those Chinese students who attended traditional Chinese high schools. By contrasting the two types of students, she pictured herself as the one without significant English problems, which she exemplified by mentioning understanding courses well, being able to highlight core concepts during listening and taking notes. These skills are fundamental academic abilities every student needs to possess when starting college, but for international students they often prove to be more challenging (O’Dwyer, 2017). Finally, she appreciated what she had learned in high school and recognized how useful studying with foreign teachers was for her linguistic development. She attributed her successful adjustment to the new academic milieu to her international high school experience.

Furthermore, another participant who was attending a private research university at the time of data collection, Emma, stated (Excerpt 3):

Excerpt 3

I think attending international high school definitely helped me in my studies in the U.S. I can really see the difference between me and those Chinese students who didn’t go to international high in terms of accent, English fluency, confidence and critical thinking. But I’m not saying this is always the case, because not everyone who went to international high school has the same behavior or way of thinking with me. I learned to study alone and discuss topics in class. I can’t imagine going abroad without a solid English base.

Emma appreciated her solid English foundation which she obtained from the international high school in China. She listed fluency, confidence, and critical thinking as skills that distinguished her from other Chinese students (without international high school experience). O’Dwyer (2017) talked about the features that contemporary Chinese learners embody which make them “diverse” rather than traditional (p. 200). One of these characteristics is critical thinking which

seems to be lacking in Asian students. O'Dwyer disagreed with this stereotype and explained that due to Chinese learners' Confucian heritage, they are often mistakenly described as avoiding expressing individual opinions as it might clash with the collective harmony of Confucius' philosophy. Today's students from China should rather be perceived as those with "a syncretic blend of doctrines" as they evince a "shallow attachment" to Confucian tradition (O'Dwyer, 2017, pp. 200-202). Interestingly, Emma pointed out that having studied in an international high school does not automatically make one successful in the U.S. nor does it mean one's transition to the new environment will be smooth. She learned to study independently and participate in discussions, but it does not mean everyone else did too. She implied that personal motivation (studying alone) might be a more crucial factor in adapting to the new academic scene. Interculturality is clearly visible in this excerpt. Emma was able to compare two types of students. This positioned her as an aware and interculturally sensitive learner.

Despite their broad linguistic training and high proficiency tests scores (for specific scores, see Table 2), participants still doubted their English and wished to improve it. Emily said: "I have many grammar mistakes in my papers and I still have Chinese accent when speaking English. I always go to Writing Centre to ask for help." "I don't know many words my professor uses in World History class," complained Sol. Wang Yang also mentioned: "My professors' accents are hard to understand, and they often speak too fast for me to follow. Sometimes I feel I can't keep up." They reported various language-related problems, namely unfamiliar technical vocabulary in History class (which they had not previously taken in China), professors' speech pace and accent, consistent grammatical errors in their academic essays (which they strive to eradicate) and a Chinese accent when they speak English. Dervin (2016) highlighted that failures in the process of learning in intercultural environment are an important part of the learning course. Even though informants did not mention instances of failures per se, they listed their challenges which according to Dervin can also facilitate the intercultural learning process. In a word, the participants had undergone preparation to study abroad, but there were still areas in which they did not feel entirely comfortable, and which needed improvement, such as grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension.

To recapitulate, intercultural learning in the case of international students cannot be discussed without taking prior educational preparation in their home countries into account. This is especially true for China, where the mass education system is slowly undergoing reform to enable students' creativity and autonomy in learning and performance (O'Dwyer, 2017). In keeping with recent calls by Garrett-Rucks (2016) to approach ICCC with conceptual clarity, I see the need to consider more updated frameworks for contemporary Chinese students' intercultural learning in the process of academic adjustment. Drawing on Byram's (1997), Deardorff's (2006) and Dervin's (2016) work and my informants' experiences, it became clear that established models fail to acknowledge the importance of exposure to Western teaching that creates open and curious individuals. My study's participants can be portrayed as syncretic outcomes of Eastern and Western academic cultures (for characteristics, see Table 1) due to their awareness of necessary learning that needs to take place to adapt to the new environment. Such learning can be attributed not only to the preparation in international high school but equally, as mentioned by Emma, personal motivation. The reported experiences challenge the false stereotyping of Asian and Western students as dichotomous (Ryan, 2010) and underline the need to address the diversity and complexity of Mainland Chinese students as hybrids to various degrees of the East and the West.

Intercultural Learning Involves Dynamic Creation of New Understandings

I collected my data during the 2016 presidential elections in the U.S., and Shay, who was a student at a liberal arts college, commented on how concerned American people are with politics (Excerpt 4):

Excerpt 4

Right after Election Day, my professors came to class with depression. My Calculus professor cancelled the quiz, my Economics professor shared her opinions and feeling with us, and my tutorial professor spent the entire class on reflection of the election. He tried to make us understand why people voted for Trump and the whole phenomenon behind the presidential elections. He also criticized the school for not preparing the students for this outcome. People talk about politics openly and enthusiastically here. It was new to me because in China we cannot talk about politics in public.

Shay said she had never experienced anything of the kind in China (“in China we cannot talk about politics in public”) and she interpreted it as a professors’ attempt to educate international students on the phenomenon behind the American elections. She noted professors’ emotional reactions to the results of the elections such as cancelling the quiz, sharing feelings, reflecting, and criticizing the school. She discovered something she was not aware of regarding her new environment, namely how emotional and expressive Americans were about politics. This experience could facilitate her intercultural transformation, but it cannot be proven based on Shay’s words alone. Presidential elections being such an important part of the American culture are an example of a topic that can ignite discussions between native students and international ones. According to Garrett-Rucks (2016), communicating with people across cultures helps construct new knowledge. Observing the exercise of freedom of speech in the United States has a potential to help international students understand American society and pluralism better. Per Byram (1997), the students would be developing skills of interpreting, relating, and critical cultural awareness.

Moreover, Tracy Zhang’s words align with the idea that acculturation to the U.S. is not always a smooth process and might be resisted by the hosts, too (Excerpt 5):

Excerpt 5

Speaking of the thing I hate most about Americans is their lack of recognition of China. I feel that neither professors nor students know basic things about China. One of my American friends even asked me if Chinese people would have traditional Chinese dance in bars.

Tracy Zhang was a student at a large research university in the U.S. She expressed strong feelings about Americans’ ignorance towards Chinese culture. For example, she found it odd (which her usage of “even” implies) that someone would ask if the Chinese performed traditional dances in bars. Her words echo understanding of intercultural learning as a two-way process, which supports the idea of cultural synergy where learning needs to be reciprocal (Yuan & Xie, 2013). To achieve such mutual exchange, Jackson (2014) suggested increased contact between different cultural groups that would lead to reciprocal acceptance and reduced levels of tension. However, contact itself will not facilitate mutual understanding. It requires

willingness to understand the experiences of international students from their own perspective (Jin & Cortazzi, 2017).

In addition, knowledge can only be produced through a dynamic relationship, which often results in intercultural learning. Therefore, the assumption that such learning is a sum of two opposing cultures rather than a creation of a new one, weakens one's willingness to transcend the monocultural Self and thus engage in a dialogue with the Other (Dervin, 2016). Shay saw partying with American friends as a barrier to adjustment (Excerpt 6):

Excerpt 6

On weekends, I go to the party, if it interests me. American student really like to get lit and go to party to dance or play games, which I find extremely boring; and I don't like to get drunk. Also, the hook up culture here is gross. I could never do that.

For Shay, parties were "extremely boring" and only served as a chance to "get drunk." Instead of seeing them as opportunities to socialize with Americans, she deemed them as an unacceptable form of entertainment and events deserving condemnation ("the hook up culture"). Zhu (2016) collaborated this participant's observations by stating that to the Chinese, having to engage in games seemed boring and appeared to encourage drunkenness. According to Zhu (2016), to be forced to do things socially daring (such as drinking alcohol, getting involved in sexual activities or doing drugs), which most Chinese perceive as American egocentrism, stands at odds with Chinese humility.

To sum up, for intercultural learning to occur, participants in designed encounters need to be open to create understanding that would accommodate elements and experiences of both cultures involved. The process is dynamic (Dervin, 2016) and can happen only if it is reciprocal. Openness to learning from each other is a necessary component of intercultural learning (Jin & Cortazzi, 2017). Bringing together two separate cultures without the space for new cultural experiences to emerge might impede the process of intercultural transformation and, hence learning. Informants' excerpts described experiences they went through that underscored the differences between Chinese and American cultures, but these differences did not seem to hinder their understanding of the new society they were trying to adapt to. Of course, having to adjust to the host culture does not mean abandoning one's own. Rather, there is a larger, reconstituted Self at the end of crossing cultural boundaries. As Zhu (2016) observed, the core of academic adjustment lies in understanding the rules that govern interpersonal relationships. However, this can only be achieved via eclectic fusion of resources from both cultures, which contribute to cultural synthesis (hybridity; Ryan, 2010).

Friction Between Individuals in New Intercultural Encounters

Transformation happens over time and with rich experiences supporting it. What international students imagine and what happens might be two different things. Shay's impressions of the American society exemplify the friction between what "I think" and what "is," leading to change (Excerpt 7):

Excerpt 7

My impressions of American society gradually changed overtime. At first, I believed that American society respects equality and was dynamic. I don't mean that American society is so bad. I am just being exposed to various problems

and start to understand there is no perfect nation on Earth. [...] The truth is capitalism dominates here. Rich people have more access to resources including education and other opportunities. There is hatred and violence towards minorities. I feel like Rabbit Judy, a character in Zootopia, who thought all animals are equal, but it is not the reality.

Shay attended a liberal arts college in the U.S. In the above excerpt, she showed her “change of heart” from believing in American society as dynamic and respecting equality (prior to her exposure to it) to realizing real life in the U.S. is driven by capitalist practices. She saw this as creating instability and power imbalance. She said that every new encounter would gradually change her idea of America. She called those encounters “problems” and enumerated capitalism, inequality due to material status, hatred, and violence targeting minorities. Her transformation is visible in comparing herself to a cartoon character who lived in conviction that turned out to be false. The unstable perception and dynamic nature of interculturality proposed by Dervin (2016) is reflected in her change of opinion. At the same time, that realization may help Shay adapt to the new intercultural and liberal surroundings in the future, it also indicates a rather turbulent process.

There were also instances of resistance towards negative transformation among informants that stood at odds with their cultural values. Since Confucian tradition views teachers on the one hand as educators and on the other hand as nurturers, Chinese students tend to respect teachers and treat them as role models (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997). Sol pointed out the cracks in the American education system (Excerpt 8):

Excerpt 8

As for American students, I do not like it when lectures are about to end but they haven't yet, and many students start to pack their things and talk. They make a loud noise and people who are interested in what professors are explaining are affected. It's so rude. I can't get over it.

Sol, who studied at a research university, interpreted his classmates' behavior as disrespectful, which paralleled Cortazzi and Jin's (2013) conclusion that the role of a teacher in Western education had been steadily downgrading. Sol's reaction shows a resistance on his part to transformation that he considers negative. He resisted the system that denigrates the teacher. Xiao and Petraki (2007) claimed that to effectively communicate across cultures, one needs to understand and accept differences. However, without opportunities to discuss Sol's experience, it would be difficult for him to realize the dilemma between egalitarianism and apparent chaos in the US culture as opposed to the Chinese.

Similarly, another participant, Emma, who attended a private research university, provided a description of her initial reaction to the new academic environment. The type of institution she studied at allowed for frequent contact with professors (Excerpt 9):

Excerpt 9

What I like best about American students and teachers is the equality between them. There is no authority or inferiority. We talk to our teachers just like normal friends, but it doesn't mean we don't respect them. I love all my professors. They are genuine, encouraging, funny and willing to help. They don't treat students differently according to their grades, which happened to me

in China. I have the freedom to speak up in classes. I like it this way. It helps me become more outgoing and mature.

Emma mentioned American teachers' genuineness and sense of humor, but most importantly, fairness in comparison to her experiences with Chinese teachers. She appreciated the freedom to express herself in classroom encounters. This gave her a chance to make changes in her personality (for comparison, see Shi, 2006). First impressions can lead to intercultural understanding, provided multiple encounters underpinning personal freedoms and social equalities take place. Cortazzi and Jin (1997) found that learners often use specific frameworks of their cultures to interpret others' words and behaviors. Emma compared her educational experiences to familiar encounters from China and favored them over the authoritarian system in Chinese schools. She also pointed out the lack of inferiority as one of the factors that could potentially facilitate her transformation (becoming "mature"). As she remained open to notice the binaries between Asian and American teaching styles, she stayed prone to intercultural learning. However, to determine if such learning indeed occurred more longitudinal data would need to be collected.

On a societal note, knowledge of different meanings of friendship could also promote intercultural transformation. Wang Yang, who went to a private research university, experienced friendship in its new form in the U.S. (Excerpt 10):

Excerpt 10

My impression of America is really mixed. Everyone around me is very independent. Also, most students seem to be in small groups. This is very different from the general pattern in China. The relationships seem close but are in fact distant. Being friendly and caring is just the way they talk. They see you as an acquaintance, but not a friend for life. If you ask too much of them, they will be clearly offended. I must change my thinking about friendship if I wanna survive here. I see now that I should be more open.

Wang Yang did not perceive Americans as potential "friends for life." Instead, she saw them as independent and distant in relations with others. Zhu (2016) named this phenomenon "Hi-bye friends," where only greetings are exchanged but no deeper connection is made among contemporary Chinese youth. Traditionally, Chinese culture perceives friendship as based on mutual obligations and loyalty (in Chinese: *guanxi*). Thus, making friends spontaneously, for Chinese students, goes against the abovementioned understanding of relations as loyalty oriented. Hence, it might prove difficult for Wang Yang to form casual relationships with Americans, who approach friendship more lightly. Excerpt 10 shows that Wang Yang was aware of her perceptions of friendship and was able to analyze her initial societal encounters. She claimed to be open to transformation, but only because she saw such transformation as a necessity for survival.

To summarize, data from this study delineated three types of intercultural learning: (1) transformation, (2) resistance, and (3) accommodation. Friction in intercultural encounters is inevitable and oftentimes (but not always) leads to transformation, creating deeper respect for both cultures. Yet, effortful intercultural practices are paramount for intercultural learning to result in adaptation. In some cases, however, transformation might be inhibited by personal limitations or a lack of willingness to adapt to the new environment. It might also be resisted, in the instance where the host country's cultural practices are seen as denigrating. When participants faced intercultural encounters, they attempted to cross boundaries and learn to think beyond them, at times more successfully than at others. Some participants stayed open to

new experiences that had the power to transform them and accepted that it was not realistic to keep their original Self and synchronously adapt to the new intercultural milieu.

Adaptation Depends on Sojourners' Understanding of Intercultural Learning

In terms of international learners, context, and frequency of using English abroad may indicate degrees of adaptation to the host country. To link participants' strong English background with successful transitions to the U.S. schooling system, I asked the informants to provide examples of situations in which they used English in the U.S. They reported instances of communicating with their American roommates, professors, or waiters. Sol said: "When I am not with my Chinese friends, I use English all the time, with my roommates, my professors, waiters in restaurants, etc." Emily used her proficient English to tutor her classmates on her forte subjects, which she had previously learned in the international high school in China (Emily: "I often tutor my classmates on Econ or Calculus, which I'm good at from high school, so my free time is taken by time teaching them. I must do it in English."). This high intensity of English usage in IEs can be attributed to their previous training in EAP courses in high school as well as their outstanding TOEFL and IELTS scores (for individual scores, see Table 2).

The participants' high school in China always stressed the necessity to perfect English before going abroad, but as Cortazzi and Jin (2013) stated, a high language proficiency does not guarantee a similar level of intercultural sensitivity. As Shay reported: "Sometimes I will use Chinese in my heart to secretly translate sentences that I heard from others. When I can't find the right word, I will even use Google Translate to help me." Shay's example of translating between Chinese and English pointed out that intercultural sensitivity can be a matter of already established learning practices from high school and may also hinder adaptation.

Furthermore, a closer look at international students' realizations might bring new academic characteristics to light. Tracy Zhang recognized the educational responsibilities that fall on students' shoulders in the U.S. (Excerpt 11):

Excerpt 11

In America, I am responsible for my studies. If I can't understand something, I must email the professor and ask for help. Not like in China where we ace tests to make teacher and parents happy. Here, everything I do prepares me for my future. I'm learning to be self-responsible for my own education. If I fail, I should blame only myself.

She juxtaposed the responsibility for one's studies with China and pictured it as a force that pushes one to become more independent in schooling practices. She also saw it as a tool that helped her prepare for the future. This outlook on learning power differentials echoes with certain characteristics of both academic cultures, the U.S. and China (for specifics, see Table 1). The realization that one is being held accountable for academic successes or failures in the U.S., positioned Tracy Zhang as a conscious and mature student, who displayed characteristics both from the West and the East. Her understanding of intercultural learning also aligns with O'Dwyer's (2017) claim that contemporary Chinese learners are indeed complex, instead of one-dimensional and unchanging, as previously portrayed.

To conclude, international students comprise a diverse group of individuals, and their personal experiences and understanding of intercultural encounters must be acknowledged. Chinese students are no exception. Some might try to excel in their host societies by using English most of the time, while others might resort to translanguaging. They are learning by

undergoing intercultural situations and handling new classroom encounters. Linguistically strong students might continue to shine in American schools but might also choose not to and instead focus on their friendships and social life. Also, characteristics traditionally associated with Western students (such as academic independence) can be found in contemporary Chinese students upon close examination (Jin & Cortazzi, 2017). Chinese learners could be seen as a heterogeneous group with different appreciations and understandings of cross-cultural differences.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, in this study I followed my six former Chinese students' processes of adjustment to U.S. academic environments during their first semester abroad. I considered those students' previous international high school preparation as a catalyst for their fluid (but not always smooth) movement between cultures in hybridized ways. I focused on the individual intercultural encounters they faced (in different forms and to various degrees) that might or might not have led to intercultural learning. Specifically, I was interested in the societal and personal encounters they experienced that affected their academic adjustment. In addition to contributing to the body of intercultural competence research, my case study problematizes the stereotype of the Chinese learner. This project also underscores research on international students' adjustment abroad in terms of intercultural learning, to wit: preparation, intercultural encounters, transformation that leads to adaptation, and resistance to values and practices that are not reflected in their home cultures.

Based on my participants' reports, I claim that intercultural encounters allow for reflections on Self, society of origin and host society, all of which change in a dynamic and fluid way as one moves from context to context. However, in some instances transformation was mentioned but could not be empirically proven. Some informants fit into the notion of a competent intercultural communicator who holds knowledge and perceptions that people have about one another, motivations to engage in meaningful interactions and the ability to communicate in appropriate and effective ways (Garrett-Rucks, 2016). Conversely, others did not experience successful intercultural transformations due to situational or individual deterrents. Therefore, it is crucial not to systematize participants with similar demographic background as a homogenous group.

There were a few limitations to this study. There was not enough evidence to claim the encountered American informants experienced intercultural transformations in their encounters with the Chinese students, only that they were different from the participants in a variety of ways. Data would equally need to be collected from informants' American counterparts to get their own views regarding intercultural learning. Also, the scope of this project was confined to the first semester experiences in the U.S. Hence, participants did not have full exposure to all aspects of teaching and learning processes at different American institutions yet. In addition, it was impossible to find discrepancies between what the informants experienced and what they recalled in their subjectively written journals. I assert a useful extension to this work, for future research purposes, would be to replicate this study with a cohort of students from countries other than China.

In terms of pedagogical implications, Western style high schools seem to play a positive role in preparing Chinese students for study abroad. Therefore, more international programs should be available to students in China. Such programs equip them with educational practices typical for American schooling. These practices, in turn, are likely to facilitate intercultural learning. What is more, international programs in China provide an opportunity for students to gain sufficient linguistic proficiency to successfully function at a foreign institution. Thus, foreign institutions should distinguish between those Chinese students who come from

international and traditional high schools in China and have appropriate programs in place for those who need assistance with learning in intercultural environments and overcoming linguistic challenges. Still, educational staff should be encouraged to gain awareness of different value systems and expectations international students bear. Constant advisory support would make a good start to promote intercultural transformations. Bridging two cultures through reciprocal mediation will lead to socio-cultural transformation, and hence intercultural learning. Therefore, Chinese students should also strive to obtain more comprehensive pre-departure information about life in the U.S., through regular meetings with American students in China (Yan & Berliner, 2016) or befriending American families that live in China. Drawing on Yuan and Xie's (2013) notion of cultural synergy, learning and teaching Asian students should happen reciprocally as understanding the breadth and depth of Chinese students' experiences offers an advantage for institutions to become culturally responsive stakeholders.

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