ACADEMIC ADAPTATION AND CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF CHINESE STUDENTS AT AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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Abstract

Studies on the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students in American higher education institutions have received more attention in the past decade with the dramatic increase of Chinese students enrolling in American colleges and universities. According to the 2012 Open Doors Report, the number of students studying in the United States from China has continued to grow during the 2011/2012 academic year reaching a total number of 194,029. This growth accounts for a significant increase at the undergraduate level of 31% compared to the previous year (Institute of International Education, 2012). With the rapid growth in the number of Chinese students on American university campuses, both American higher education institutions and the students from China face cross-cultural challenges. However, there is sparse literature that explores the academic adaptation of this unique group of students’ cross-cultural learning experience, particularly at the undergraduate level. This qualitative study attempts to fill the research gap by employing a narrative inquiry approach to explore the lived experiences of Chinese undergraduate students from their perspective and understand how they construct the meanings of their experiences during their cross-cultural transition. In light of the relationship between culture and learning, Hofstede’s five cultural dimensions are used as an analytical lens to review the related literature on how culture influences Chinese students’ learning experiences in American colleges and universities. The primary research question in this study focuses on Chinese undergraduate students’ academic adaptation experience during their first year transition on American university campuses. The selected Chinese students’ personal transition stories provided valuable information for American colleges and universities to understand cultural
differences that the students from China brought to American campuses and to help them succeed in a totally different academic setting.

*Key words:* cross-cultural learning, academic adaptation, undergraduate students from China, American universities, Hofstede’s five cultural dimensions
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# Table of Contents

Abstract 2  
Acknowledgement 4  
Table of Contents 5  
Chapter 1: Introduction 7  
  Problem of Practice 7  
  Significance 8  
  Professional and Intellectual Goals 9  
  Research Questions 11  
  Theoretical Framework 11  
  Definition of Terms 28  
  Organization of the Study 30  
Chapter 2: Literature Review 31  
  The Influence of Chinese Culture on Learning 32  
  Differences in Teaching/Learning 39  
  Academic Adaptation 49  
  Student Perception of University Supports 55  
  Conclusion of Literature Review 58  
Chapter 3: Research Design & Methodology 60  
  A Qualitative Narrative Inquiry Study 61  
  Site and Participants 63  
  Data Collection 66
Data Analysis 70

Trustworthiness, Limitations and Delimitations 74

Protection of Human Subjects 76

Chapter 4: Findings 77

Profile of the Participants 78

Themes 81

Summary 135

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion 137

Motivations for Studying Abroad 139

Perceptions on the Different Learning Environment in an American classroom 142

Academic Challenge and Adjustment 146

Coping Strategies 150

Reflections on Cross-cultural Learning Experiences 154

Implications for Educational Practices 155

Limitations of this Study 157

Opportunities for Further Research 158

Conclusion 158

References 162

Appendix A- Interview Protocol 182

Appendix B – IRB approval IRB 185

Appendix C – Recruitment Letter 186

Appendix D – Informed Consent Document 188
Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem of Practice

In the 2011/2012 academic year, the number of Chinese students enrolled in American colleges and universities rose to a total of 194,029 students, up from 157,558 in 2010/2011, according to the Open Doors Report (Institute of International Education, 2012). This means that Chinese students make up over 25 percent of the total international student population and represent the largest group among all international students (Institute of International Education, 2012). With the rapid growth in the number of Chinese students studying at American colleges and universities, the quality of their cross-cultural experience is crucial to their transition into a different learning and living environment in the United States. A better understanding of Chinese students’ positive and negative experiences during their transition from a Chinese educational background to an American higher education environment may lead them to become more successful in their academic studies in the United States.

It is well known that students from different cultures learn in different ways (Nieto, 1999). Chinese students are from a country that is significantly different from the United States in language, culture, educational, social and political systems. In their academic studies at American colleges and universities, Chinese students are confronted with a broad range of cultural conflicts in relocating to the American academic environment and adjusting to American culture and norms. For example, studies on international students’ cross-cultural adaptation have reported that education in China has been influenced by Confucianism, which values collective efforts and bestows unconditional respect to teachers and parents (Holmes, 2004; Li, 2007; Ting, 2000; Upton, 1989). Confucianism is commonly regarded as a Chinese philosophy developed
from a famous Chinese educator and philosopher, Confucius, and has influenced education in China for over 2,000 years (Ting, 2000). Following the principles of Confucius philosophy, Chinese schooling focuses on conveying established knowledge and achieving high grades in exams, while the American educational philosophy promotes individuality and critical thinking abilities (Yang, 2001). In an American classroom setting, instructors perceive students’ involvement, influence, and personal attainment to be more important than do their Chinese counterparts (Li, 2007; Kennedy, 2002). As a result of these considerable cultural distinctions, Chinese students confront great challenges in making the transition from attaining success in China to attaining success in an American academic environment.

**Significance**

Learning is not merely a cognitive process. It must be understood in a broader context of the sociocultural and sociopolitical lives of students, teachers, and schools (Nieto, 1999). To a large degree, the great difficulties and misunderstandings Chinese students encounter in adapting to American universities are related to the cultural differences between the East and the West. For instance, Chinese teachers consider the quiet and passive listener an ideal student in class (Hofstede, 1997; Upton, 1989). In contrast, American instructors view effective learning to be dependent on critical analysis and active interactions between the instructor and their students (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). Since there are fundamental differences in teaching and learning between China and the United States, Chinese students are placed in the awkward and painful position of trying to function comfortably and successfully in an academic environment that is quite different from what they have previously experienced. It may be the case that Chinese students should interact with their American counterparts in order to develop more than a
superficial understanding of the culture and academic norms. On the other hand, Bosher (2003) points out that American instructors also encounter challenges in teaching Chinese students as these instructors lack knowledge about the students’ previous teaching and learning context. Consequently American instructors may have difficulty organizing an effective lesson to meet the needs of their Chinese students.

There is no question that the transition from a Chinese educational background to an American education system presents great difficulties for Chinese students. It is important to find out more about Chinese students’ experiences in adjusting to the American cultural context and academic environment so as to increase their awareness of how these differences might be connected to their academic success in an American setting.

**Professional and Intellectual Goals**

The original idea of this study arose out of the researcher’s professional practice as an international program developer and manager at both a Chinese university and an American university. With two decades experience working at a Chinese university, the researcher had been involved in different educational programs to help Chinese students study abroad. Since moving to the United States in 2007, the researcher has been working on programs that recruit international students for an American university. These professional practices allowed the researcher to interact with many Chinese students and learn that they were expected to rapidly fill the cultural gap between their home and host culture when studying abroad. With the growing prevalence of Chinese students enrolling in American colleges and universities, there is an increasing awareness among American faculty and administrators regarding Chinese students’ cultural differences in learning and their struggles in a transition from one educational system to
another, as well as the cultural challenges that American faculty and administrators face to help these students. As a doctoral student originally from China and a practitioner in the international education field, the researcher’s personal and professional experiences stimulated her interest in exploring the Chinese students’ cross cultural experiences.

From the perspective of the scholarly research, the present study was inspired by the educational philosophy that people from different cultures learn differently. The study employs a qualitative narrative inquiry to understand the cross-cultural adaptation of a select group of Chinese undergraduate students through their personal stories. The researcher’s cultural background and personal and professional experiences made it easy to approach these students for a better understanding about their cross-cultural learning experiences.

This study allowed the author to be engaged in the practice of increasing the number of Chinese students on American university campuses while also conducting a scholarly investigation to formulate the solutions to the challenges of American educators who seek to better understand their Chinese students. The practical goal the author intended to achieve was to provide valuable information for American educators to gain an in-depth understanding about Chinese undergraduate students’ cross-cultural adaptation experiences. Intellectually, the results of this study could provide information and inspiration for educators and administrators in American institutions to make effective policies that improve services to international students, not only from Asian countries who share similar cultures and tradition with China, but also from other countries. On the other hand, the results can help incoming Chinese students to develop readiness and awareness about cultural differences between China and the United States to make a smooth transition in their academic adaptation.
Research Questions

The present study explores the cross-cultural academic adaptation of Chinese students in their first year of study at an American university. A qualitative approach is used in this research for the purpose of providing meaningful and in-depth descriptions of selected Chinese undergraduate students’ academic adaptation experiences. The primary research question is as follows: What are the lived experiences of Chinese undergraduate students in their transition from a Chinese educational background to an American learning environment? The two secondary questions are (a) What are the factors that have positively or negatively had an impact on the students’ academic adaptation? (b) What coping strategies have helped students overcome any difficulties in their academic adaptation? These questions focus on the experiences of Chinese undergraduate students, which allow for a better understanding of how each individual student made his/her unique transitional experience a meaningful one.

Theoretical Framework

In reviewing the differences in teaching and learning between Chinese and American cultures, Hofstede’s five cultural dimensions serve as the theoretical framework in this study (Hofstede, 1991). This framework sheds light on the cultural differences that Chinese students tend to experience when crossing a cultural border, and provides an analytical lens to examine the disconnect that Chinese students experience when relocating to American colleges and universities. The five cultural dimensions, derived from Hofstede’s extensive investigations on the national values and cultures, have been applied widely in the cross-cultural studies to assess and differentiate national cultures, and they can be used to better explain how students from different cultures learn differently (Hofstede, 1991).
Culture, according to Hofstede (1991), is defined as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (p. 5). Each culture has its own way of thinking, behaving, learning, and acting (Hofstede, et al., 2010). Cultural differences may account for international students’ difficulties in adjusting from the educational methodologies and practices of their home country to those of their host country (Bennett, 1995). Many researchers (Arthur, 2004; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Pedersen, 1991) found that the greater the distance between home and host cultures, the more difficulties international students tend to experience in their adjustment. In light of a close connection between culture and learning, Hofstede’s five cultural dimensions are considered valuable theoretical framework from which to identify the differences in teaching and learning between students in China versus those in the United States (Hofstede, 1991). These include differences in teaching approaches and student learning styles, as well as the teacher-student relationship.

The basis of Hofstede’s ideas was developed from a cultural survey he conducted using “a large sample comprised of over 100,000 employees of the multinational corporation, IBM, which at the time was operating in 50 countries and three regions” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 24). China was not included in the list of countries of Hofstede’s initial research in 1980, as IBM did not have offices in China at the time. China, however, was later added to his study in 1988 (Fernandez, Carlson, Stepina, & Nicholson, 1997). Hofstede’s initial research found that IBM employees in different countries had common problems such as social inequality, the relationships between individual and group, gender roles, and reactions to uncertainty; however, the solutions to those four problems differed among nations and cultures (Hofstede, 1980). These empirical results matched extremely well with the studies conducted 20 years earlier by two
American sociologists, Inkeles and Levinson in 1969. In their book, *National character: The study of modal personality and sociocultural systems*, Inkeles and Levinson “provide strong support for the theoretical importance of the empirical findings of Hofstede’s cultural studies” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 14). Hofstede (1991) labeled the way different cultures respond to these four basic problems as “cultural dimensions” (p. 14), which include (a) power distance (from small to large), (b) collectivism vs. individualism, (c) masculinity vs. femininity, (d) uncertainty avoidance (from weak to strong). Later, Hofstede, in collaboration with fellow researcher, Michael Bond, added a fifth dimension to the list--long-term orientation vs. short-term orientation, also known as Confucian dynamism-- to analyze the differences in thinking between the East and the West (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Hofstede’s five cultural dimensions, “presented as choices between pairs of alternatives and empirically verifiable” (Dimmock & Walker, 1998, p. 573), have become the benchmark with which to identify the patterns of values, beliefs, and practices within and between cultures. In terms of measurement, each country is assigned an index score from zero to 120 to distinguish the level of the cultural dimension (Hofstede, 1980, 1991, 2001). To understand the differences in the index score among the five cultural dimensions, Hofstede (1991) explains that a high power distance score represents a large distance between people who consider inequality as a norm; a high uncertainty avoidance score shows a strong state of anxiety when confronting an unfamiliar situation. The levels of the other three dimensions are comparatively easier to understand, for example, a high score in individualism means a more individualized society.

After publishing *Culture’s Consequence* in 1984, and *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* in 1991, Hofstede received considerable attention based on his empirical
cross-national studies and research findings (Fang, 2003; Blanton & Barbuto, 2005). As a theoretical framework, Hofstede’s cross-cultural dimensions have been widely applied in the study of marketing, multinational corporations, international management, technological and learning scopes, and the comparative educational administration (Enunurum, 2008; Xin & Tsui, 1996). According to Redding (1994) and Smith (2002), the cultural dimensions outlined by Hofstede in the 1980s have inspired many cross-cultural researchers and played a dominant role in the development of cross-cultural studies. Hofstede’s Culture’s Consequences, published in 1980, is recognized as one of the most cited sources in the Social Science Citation Index (Fang, 2003). Indeed, his five cultural dimensions have become an internationally recognized standard widely applied across many societies and nations in cross-cultural studies, and they have made Hofstede a leading advocate in the comparative research of culture (Dimmock & Walker, 1998; Fang, 2003). Given the relevance of Hofstede’s five cultural dimensions to the study of cross-cultural learning experiences of Chinese students in American colleges and universities, each dimension is discussed in detail below.

**Power distance (PD).** As the first of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, PD refers to each society’s attitude toward human inequality in terms of social status, prestige, wealth, and power (Chang, 2011). Power and inequality, of course, are fundamental factors of any society, but some societies reflect less equality in their populations than others (Hofstede, 1991). Less powerful people, in PD societies with higher scores, are willing to accept power being distributed unequally; while, in PD societies with lower scores, less powerful people do not as readily accept an unequal distribution of power, and the members of their societies tend to be “more equal than others” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 23). According to Hofstede’s index analysis, PD index scores are
higher in East European, Latin America, Asian and African countries and lower in Germanic and English-speaking Western countries (1980).

Some later research findings (Biggs, 1996; Bond, 1996; Cronje, 2011; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010; Machiavelli, 1995; Marcus, 2000) also attempted to lay a theoretical foundation for distinguishing people’s attitudes toward inequality in different cultures. For example, in Italy, Machiavelli (1955) suggested that the fox mode represents a small PD, and the lion mode represents a large PD with the lion characterized as a powerful creature used for scaring other animals.

In Germany, “dictatorship” in Karl Marx’s concept, identifies the ruler’s dominant position in the larger PD countries (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 81). On the other hand, in Asia, where countries are typified by a larger PD, Confucius (551 BC), Asia’s most influential educational philosopher, assures that the hierarchy identified in the five cardinal relationships\(^1\) for social rank and age is essential to maintain social stability (Biggs, 1996; Bond, 1996). In addition, Cronje (2011) and Marcus (2000) find that in the large PD of Arabic speaking countries, individuals are likely to follow social hierarchy with a strong tradition of an authoritarian role for teachers. Conversely, the relationships among people are more egalitarian in the United States which has a lower PD than most Asian or Arabic speaking countries.

When looking into the influence that a society’s approach to equality has on teaching and learning, students from different cultural backgrounds bring different perceptions into their academic classes. Hofstede (1991) outlines the relationship between teacher and students in a higher PD society as one that appears to be more formal and hierarchical. The students treat

\(^{1}\) The five cardinal relationships are 1. ruler and subject 2. father and son 3. husband and wife 4. elder and younger brother 5. between friends (Wang, 2006).
teachers with respect, and the teacher is considered a “guru” who transfers “personal wisdom to
students” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 37). By contrast, in a lower PD society, customarily the teacher
treats students as equals, and student-centered methods are employed in the school (Warren,
1999). It is not surprising then, that Zhang and Xu’s (2007) research shows that the teacher in
China plays a central role in the classroom, whereas the American teacher employs a two-way
communication methodology. Additionally, research by Elenurm (2008) shows hierarchy-based
teaching is perceived as a barrier in students’ adaptations to the western learning environment.
These cross cultural research results are consistent with Hofstede’s PD dimension and
demonstrate how students from varying cultures learn differently.

Since the cultures of China and the United States have dramatically different power
distance scores, it would be expected that Chinese students, in general, would find it difficult to
adapt to such a sharp paradigm shift from the type of teaching and learning that is teacher-
centered to one that is student-centered. Obviously, adapting to a different teaching and learning
style is an extremely challenging process for Chinese students studying in American higher
education institutions.

**Individualism vs. collectivism (IDV).** The dimension of individualism vs. collectivism
represents the degree to which individuals are supposed to look after themselves versus the
degree to which relatively close relationships with groups such as extended family or other
communities prevail (Hofstede, 1991). In individualist societies, the ties between individuals are
not close, and people are expected to look after themselves and immediate family members only
while, in collectivist societies people from birth throughout their lifetime are strongly integrated
and tied into groups in exchange for loyalty (Gudykunst, 2004; Hofstede, 2011).
Hofstede (2007) and Triandis (1995) note that individualism corresponds to a small PD, and collectivism is related to a large PD. Individualism values the “I,” consciousness for personal opinions and individual interests, while collectivism emphasizes the “we,” or consciousness for group opinions, interests and well-being. “I” emphasizes I can do it by myself, while “we” means “I” is a part of “we,” and group opinions appear to be more important than the individual’s. According to Hofstede (1980, 1991, 2001), China and the United States represent two extremes in IDV. The United States is a highly individualized society, and China values collectivism which is influenced by Confucius tradition (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Sun and Chen (1999) further explain that Americans favor an “I” culture of individual achievement, self-expression, and independence; in sharp contrast, Chinese culture values collective efforts, cooperation, and self-control. In China, direct confrontation with another person is not acceptable, and people try to maintain a harmonious relationship with others. “Face” consciousness is a fundamental concept in collectivist societies, particularly in China (Fang, 2003; Ting-Toomey, 1998). The word “face” shows the salient social relationship and represents one’s position in social networks, which is essential to a person and his/her family (Earley, 1997; Graham & Lam, 2003).

In applying Hofstede’s cultural dimensions to a school setting, the main conflict appears to be the manner in which Chinese students’ learning approaches and American teachers’ pedagogies play out through their greatly differing approaches in terms of collectivism vs. individualism. Elkins’s study of Chinese and American cultures finds that Chinese students, representing collectivism, are praised for collective behavior and group thinking, while the American system represents and values individualism and emphasizes self-reliance and self-confidence (Elkin, 1994). Triandis (1995) points out that an individualistic classroom promotes
open discussions, confrontation, and debates. Controversy and argument can help students
distinguish their creativity from others, rather than a carefully planned speech and a conventional
verbal exchange agreed to by a group of students in a collectivist culture (Marcus, 2000).
Particularly, students from a collective culture hesitate to speak up in front of a larger group in
order to maintain harmony and avoid confrontation and embarrassment (Hofstede, 1991).

Additionally, there is a difference in the purpose of education between collectivist and
individualist cultures. Wang (2006) explains that education is viewed as a national effort in the
collectivist culture; in contrast, the individualist culture considers education a tool of individual
development. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory shows that students are expected to know
“How to do” in the individualist societies; whilst, in the collectivist societies, students are
expected to know “how to learn” (Hofstede, 1986, p. 313). The impetus for how to do versus
how to learn summarizes the key differences in education philosophies between individualist and
collectivist societies. “How to do” encourages students to apply the knowledge they learned to
solve practical problems; in contrast, “how to learn” emphasizes how students can learn from
teachers and established knowledge by using systematic approaches. The discrepancies in
learning certainly exist between individualist and collectivist cultures, and these discrepancies
function as a source of conflict that affect the academic adaptation of Chinese students from an
ideology of collectivism in China to one of individualism in the United States.

**Masculinity vs. femininity (MAS).** This dimension refers to the roles of gender, which
is considered another fundamental issue for any society. The IBM study (Hofstede, 1991) reveals
that masculinity stands for a society in which “men are supposed to be assertive and tough,
focused on material success” (p. 81), whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender
and concerned with quality of life. Femininity represents a society in which both men and women are equal and share the same roles in the society (Hofstede, 2001).

Dimmock & Walker (1998) posit that achievements and competitions are placed in a prominent position in more masculine societies. People in masculine countries are inclined to work hard to stand out and be the best, while feminine countries accept an average person (Hofstede, 1997). Hofstede (1980) suggests that, in schools, the MAS dimension is related to the level of competitiveness among students in terms of academic achievement rather than the role of gender. In masculine cultures, the academic achievement of students is the essence of learning, and failure at school is unacceptable (Hofstede, 1991). In his book, *The Gospel According to the Harvard Business School: The Education of America’s Managerial Elite*, Cohen (1973) writes that there are several cases of student suicides every year after failing an examination in countries that are highly masculine like Japan and Germany (as cited in Hofstede, et al., 2010).

According to Hofstede (2001), Chinese culture is a masculine society, and Chinese students care a lot about their exam scores and ranking in class, which are considered to be the main criteria for achieving success in school (Abubaker, 2008; Gao & Waktins, 2002). Whereas, in a more feminine society like the United States, people emphasize relationships, solidarity, and negotiation (Hofstede, 1997). In American schools, average students are perceived as a norm, and a student’s overall achievement is measured by his/her social skills and adaptations. This academic culture advocates for the learning of critical thinking and problem solving skills. A student’s academic achievement is not solely based on grades but on a holistic review of academic performance and social involvement (Holmes, 2004). For example, in China, the test score of the annual National University Entrance Exam (the *GaoKao*) is the sole determinant for
a Chinese student’s enrollment in college, whereas American college entrance eligibility considers a student’s overall performance such as high school transcripts, personal essays, and recommendations from teachers, coaches or others who are knowledgeable of the student’s character and competence.

Driven by an emphasis on performance in exams, a Chinese student’s high scores mean academic success in China and are also regarded as an indicator of the quality of teaching, that eventually leads to high expectation from the teachers (Abubaker, 2008; Gao & Waktins, 2002). Many researchers comment that this exam culture makes Chinese students study for exams in a way that promotes surface and rote learning (Biggs, 1996; Kennedy, 2002). Unavoidably, Chinese students’ creativeness is hindered by such exam-oriented teaching and learning approaches. Chinese students link their academic success with the ability to prepare for exams in a way that turns authorized knowledge into high test scores. Upton (1989) suggests that Chinese students do not experience teaching methods such as brainstorming, student presentations, and classroom discussions in the Chinese school setting, while these methods are very common in American classrooms. It can be seen that the different teaching and learning styles in China and the United States are derived from their own cultures and educational traditions. When Chinese students come to the United States, they are placed in an awkward position in an academic environment that is quite different from what they have previously experienced.

Uncertainty avoidance (UA). Hofstede (2011) explains that UA represents a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, and he further stresses that “the essence of uncertainty is a subjective experience, a feeling” (p. 189). Each culture has its way to cope with uncertainty and ambiguity. In a stronger UA culture, as Chang (2011) describes, people are nervous about
new situations, fear failure and resist taking risks. Hofstede (1991) describes that a strong UA society believes “difference can be dangerous” (p. 125), and it, therefore, develops its own laws, rules, and secured measures, as well as religions to release unbearable anxiety, tension, and stress. The opposite type, a weaker UA culture, reflects a society where people tend to be more tolerant of novel and unknown situations that are different from what they are used to; they prefer fewer rules, and treat difference with curiosity (Hofstede, 2011).

In viewing the UA dimension in schools, students from different cultural backgrounds have different views and reactions when encountering uncertainty and ambiguity. Hofstede (1991) presented at the International Teacher Program in the summer of 1980 and compared teaching and learning differences between German and British students. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions portrayed Germany as belonging to a stronger UA culture with an index score of 65; while the UK was assigned a comparatively weaker UA with a score of 35 (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p. 192-194). The results of this research indicate that German students feel more comfortable with a structured learning situation that has a precise objective, detailed assignments, and strict timetables; teachers are expected to have all the answers (Hofstede, 1991). However, British students are comfortable with an unstructured learning situation that has vague objectives, broad assignments, and flexible timetables; teachers can admit that they do not know the answers. It is intriguing that Britain and Germany are common in cultural heritage, PD, IDV, and MAS; however, British and Germans present a totally different attitude toward uncertainty and ambiguity (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Lawrence, 1980).

According to Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010), Chinese culture represents a relatively weak UA with a score of 30 as compared to the American UA score of 46. It indicates
that Chinese people feel less stress in risk taking activities than their American counterparts. According to Emery & Tian (2010), the UA scores of China and America presents a cultural value shift and an indicator that China has experienced a remarkable transformation from a socialism system to a market economy. Chinese people have become more curious of new ideas and are more willing to take risks for new opportunities than their American counterparts. However, Americans may be growing more cautious for risk taking with increasing uncertainty over its economic power which is consistent with Hofstede’s study (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005).

When applying the UA index towards the cross-cultural transition of Chinese student on American colleges and universities, the result is different from Hofstede’s study in terms of economic power change (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Although the Chinese UA index is comparably weaker than Germany, Chinese students are more likely to favor a structured learning environment like German students based on Hofstede’s (1980) findings. Chinese students tend to expect clear criteria for assignments, and they have high expectations for teaching and the teachers’ guidance. To the contrary, American students enjoy an unstructured learning context that is engaged in two-way interactions and discussions between the teacher and the students in class (Gu, 2009; Zhang & Xu, 2007). Moreover, the most challenging uncertainty confronting Chinese students in their transition is the language barrier. This causes high stress and tension and blocks them from functioning properly on American university campuses because they are afraid of making mistakes in front of American teachers and students (Xiao, 2009).

**Long vs. short-term orientation (LTO).** Long- vs. short-term orientation, also known as Confucian dynamism, was added to Hofstede’s original work in 1987 and is based on research
on the Far East, but it is less valid than Hofstede’s first four dimensions (Dimmock & Walker, 1998; Fang, 2003; Hofstede, 1980). The long-term vs. short-term orientation dimension was derived from a study conducted by researcher, Michael Bond, of students in 23 countries around the world, using a questionnaire designed by Chinese scholars called the Chinese Value Survey (Hofstede, 1991). According to Hofstede, long-term orientation focuses on future consideration with a dynamic view, and it pays attention to saving, thrift and reserves which reflect the concepts of will power, persistent efforts, and diligence in the Confucius tradition (Hofstede, 1986). Hofstede (2001) concludes that the values associated with a long-term orientation are persistence, future rewards, thrift, and a sense of shame. Conversely, values related to short-term orientation are personal stability, respect for tradition, preservation of “face”, and social fulfillment (Hofstede, 1986). Both the positive and the negative values of this dimension are found in the teachings of Confucius (Hofstede, 1991).

Confucian tradition illuminates the manner in which Chinese students and their parents view education and why self-determination and effort are considered vital to academic success (Ting, 2000). Motivated by long-term goals, Chinese parents have a strong influence on their children’s education and learning process (Dimmock & Walker, 1998). Continuous effort and persistent hard work in learning are valued in a culture oriented towards the long-term, and this orientation can lead to academic success (Wang, 2007). Chinese students are often characterized as hardworking and diligent; they are willing to sacrifice short-term interests for long-term benefits. In contrast, American culture, which is more oriented towards the short-term, concerns itself with immediate interests, respect for tradition, and regard to social responsibility. It values
innovative ideas, creative thinking, and learning by doing, as evidenced in an American learning environment (Xiao, 2009, p. 127-128).

Truly, long-term and short-term orientations are personified through different cultural values in teaching and learning. According to Egri and Ralson (2004), “Culture is an evolving set of shared beliefs, values, attitudes, and logical process which provides a cognitive map for people within a given society group” (p. 200). According to Hofstede (1991), “culture is learned”, (p.5). On the cross-cultural learning transition of Chinese students, Gu (2009) writes that Chinese students’ efforts, aspiration, motivation for learning, the U.S. academic setting’s influence, and the nature of the relationship between teacher and student all contribute to the Chinese students’ adaptation, improvement, and rebirth in American academic culture. The evidence indicates that the challenges of adapting to a different academic culture can be very stressful and frustrating, however, the cross-cultural adaptation from the Chinese to American academic setting is a learning journey in which Chinese students absorb, integrate, and excel by individual efforts driven by long-term orientation (Hofstede, 1986).

To summarize, culture is full of conflicts, complexity, diversity, and paradox. It also acts as a key determinant of teaching and learning practices and preferences. Hofstede’s five cultural dimensions offer valuable insights in the comparison of the teaching and learning environments between Chinese and American cultures (Hofstede, 1980, 1991, 2001). This comparison is presented in Figure 1, based on Hofstede’s research findings (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005).

The scope of Hofstede’s survey has been extended to 74 countries and regions for his first four cultural dimensions and 39 countries for the LTO survey in his latest study (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). As a country influenced by Confucianism, China has the highest score of 118 in LTO and is ranked first, compared to a score of 29 in the United States which represents a ranking of 31st among these 39 countries. In contrast, Out of the 74 countries surveyed for the remaining four cultural dimensions, the United States ranks first in IDV with a score of 91, while China with the relatively low score of 20, ranked 55-61. China has a comparatively high score of 80 in PD and ranks 12-14, and the United States has a score of 40 with a rank of 57-59. In terms of MAS, China and the United States are pretty close with scores of 66 and 62 respectively. China is ranked 11-13, and the United States is ranked 19th in the survey of these 74 countries. In comparing UA China appears to have weaker UA with the score of 30 ranked 68-69 than the United States’ score of 46 with the rank of 62.
A strong correlation is also found between these five dimensions and people’s thinking, behaving, learning and acting as a whole. According to the above comparisons in culture, China and the United States have greater differences in PD, IDV, LTO, but are similar in MAS and UA. China, with a tradition of Confucian value, is a society that accepts inequalities among people, and values group interests, persistence and perseverance. Chinese people are comfortable with ambiguity, and willing to make persistent effort for success (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997). By contrast, the United States tends to be a society that emphasizes equality of personal opportunities and rights, and encourages independent behaviors, individual achievements and personal opinions. The American people are willing to display their successes and achievements, and more tolerant of different ideas and opinions (Gao & Watkins, 2002; Upton, 1989; Wang, 2007).

Given the distinctive differences between Chinese and American cultures, the five cultural dimensions of Hofstede’s framework provide an appropriate theoretical lens to explain the differences between Chinese and American culture, and their reflections on teaching and learning especially in terms of people’s perspective on power distance, collectivism vs. individualism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance and long- vs. short-term orientation. These cultural factors inform the way in which Chinese students confront the immense challenges involved in a transition from the Chinese academic setting to a totally different learning environment in the United States.

The conceptual framework in Figure 2 presents a roadmap to locating the literature of this study and navigating the way that the major research questions will be examined through the lens of Hofstede’s five cultural dimensions.
Following Hoftstede’s five cultural dimensions, the literature review in the next session focuses on how cultural difference affects Chinese students’ adaptation to an American academic environment. The literature review is centered around four perspectives: (a) the influence of culture on learning, (b) differences in teaching and learning as they affect the transition from China to the United States, (c) the academic adaptation challenges Chinese students face in American universities and colleges, and (d) Chinese students’ help-seeking behaviors when they meet any social and academic problems.
Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined to assist readers with a precise understanding of meaning in the particular context of this study.

**British A Level course.** This is a class that has gained popularity in China since 2006. It is imported from the UK to prepare Chinese students for a British public examination in a subject taken for the General Certificate of Education (GCE) in order to gain acceptance in British universities. Some international divisions of the top Chinese public high schools operate an A-level center. More and more American universities are accepting A level courses as transfer credits.

**Cross-cultural adaptation.** Cross-cultural adaptation reflects the way in which Chinese students adjust to American culture and society including changing their attitude and behavior, and finally, become accustomed to their new academic and cultural environment.

**Culture.** Hofstede (1991) defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another (p. 5). Culture is the sum of people’s learned behavior that affects everything people do in their society because of their ideas, values, attitudes, patterns and norms (Hall, 1976).

**First year transition.** Transition in this study, indicates a process of change in how Chinese students feel, and behave in their lives and studies as they adapt from their home social and cultural environment to a new American one during their freshman year.

**GPA.** GPA, an abbreviation of Grade Point Average, is used as a measurement of a student’s academic achievement at a college or university, calculated by dividing the total number of grade points received by the total number attempted.
**GRE.** The GRE, an abbreviation for the Graduate Record Examination, is a standardized test commonly used as an admissions requirement for many graduate schools in the United States.

**National University Entrance Exam in China.** This exam plays a pivotal role in Chinese society. Commonly known as *GaoKao*, the exam is extremely competitive (Yao, 2004). It is an academic examination held once annually in China under the administration of the Ministry of Education in China, and the test results determine high school graduates’ entrance into the undergraduate programs at almost all higher education institutions (Davey, Lian, & Higgins, 2007; Zhang, 1995). Every year, millions of high school students take the *GaoKao* to compete for limited university seats, particularly in the top 100 universities in China. In 2012, there were over 9.15 million students taking the *GaoKao* (Sudworth, 2012). One Chinese saying describes the *GaoKao* as “thousands of soldiers and tens of thousands of horses across a single log bridge” (LaFraniere, 2009).

**One-Child Policy.** This policy has been implemented by the Chinese government as a method of controlling the population since 1979. The policy mandates that a couple in an urban area has only one child.

**Key point schools.** Key point schools refer to China’s elite schools at the primary or secondary level in the district, city and provincial levels as determined by teaching quality and students’ outstanding performance. These key point schools gain prominence as exemplars, serve gifted students, and are better funded than the other schools by the government. Admissions to key point schools are very competitive.
TOEFL. The TOEFL, an abbreviation for the Test of English as a Foreign Language, is a test that has become an admission requirement for non-English speakers’ who seek to study at American colleges and universities.

Organization of the Study

This doctoral thesis is composed of five major chapters. Chapter 1 provides the general background information about the study including the problem of practice, the significance of the study, the practical and intellectual goals of the researcher, and the research questions.

Chapter 1 also describes Hofstede’s five cultural dimensions that serve as a theoretical framework to explain how students from different cultures learn differently depending upon their society’s perspectives on power distance, collectivism vs. individualism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long- vs. short-term orientation. These cultural considerations inform the immense challenges that Chinese students confront in their cross-cultural studies in the United States.

Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature through four perspectives: (a) Chinese culture and learning; (b) differences in teaching and learning between China and the United States; (c) the academic adaptation concerns of Chinese students in American universities and colleges: (d) the students’ perception on university support in their adaptation process. With the rapid growth in the number of Chinese undergraduate students enrolling in American colleges and universities, this study particularly emphasizes experiences of the Chinese students’ at the undergraduate level, especially as they make their transition in their first year of study. Because this particular group of students is less mature than their graduate counterparts, they may have more stressful experiences and need more attention from American educators than graduate students.
Following the literature review, Chapter 3 presents an overview of the research questions and includes the background and rationale for the narrative inquiry methodology. Specifically, the three-interview approach suggested by Siedman (1998) is adopted for the data collection in this study. A qualitative data analysis is performed by employing a thematic analysis guided by the steps recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). Moreover, the chapter also addresses the topic of how to avoid validity threat and ensure trustworthiness, as well as possible delimitation and limitation. Finally, the measures to protect human factors in this qualitative study are presented.

Chapter 4 reports the results of the study. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses and analyzes the findings and results, along with the practical implications, conclusions and recommendations for practice and further research about international students’ adaptation experiences.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

As mentioned in the introduction, this research seeks to understand Chinese students’ academic adaptation and cross-cultural learning experiences in American colleges and universities. In the previous chapter, Hofstede’s (1991) five cultural dimensions were identified as a means of explaining how Chinese students learn differently from their American counterparts, and they were offered as a theoretical framework to guide the researcher to think about the problem of practice. This chapter mainly focuses on existing literature related to the factors that affect Chinese students’ adaptation in American higher education institutions.

Over the past decade, there has been a steady increase in the number of the students from China studying in the United States. Remarkably, 2011 was the seventh consecutive year in which Chinese applications had accounted for double-digit growth (Fischer, 2012). According to
the Open Doors Report, the number of international students enrolling in American colleges and universities increased 6% to a record high of 764,495 in the 2011/2012 academic year, however, a significant amount of growth came largely from China, particularly at the undergraduate level, which had an increase of 23% among all international students and represented a 31% increase at the undergraduate level (Institute of International Education, 2012).

With the growing presence of Chinese students on American campuses, it becomes clear that these students who come to the United States from different cultural and social backgrounds may have different learning experiences related to discrepancies in language, teaching and learning styles, and cultural values and traditions (Sun & Chen, 1999; Upton, 1989; Zhong, 1996). Yet, the literature on the students’ perceptions of their academic adaptation at American colleges and universities is sparse, particularly at the undergraduate level.

In examining the literature related to cross-cultural academic adaptation, this review begins with a discussion of how Chinese culture influences learning. It then explores how Chinese students perceive the differences in teaching and learning between China and the United States. Next, it examines Chinese students’ adaptive challenges in adjusting to a new cultural and social environment, and finally it examines literature pertaining to the Chinese student’s attitudes and behaviors related to help-seeking from American colleges and universities. The purpose of this review is to investigate the related studies and important variables relevant to Chinese students’ academic adaptation in American higher education institutions, synthesize the previous research findings, and identify what has been studied and what needs to be done.

The Influence of Chinese Culture on Learning
Culture is regarded as an integral part of the shared beliefs, values and practices of a group of people in a society (Hofstede, 1991), and it becomes an invisible script that directs people’s ways of thinking and their behaviors (Dimmock & Walker, 1998). Culture and learning have a close connection. In educational institutions, culture has an impact on the rules, roles and shared assumptions on how to teach, how to learn and what is worth learning (Hofstede, 1991). Learning is correlated to the cultural context in which it occurs (Charlesworth, 2008). Watkins (2000) points out that the major western educational philosophies such as Kohlerg’s theory of moral development, Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, and Maslow’s theory of self-actualization are based on the values of Western culture, emphasizing a particularly individualistic and independent conception that might not be appropriate for explaining the learning strategies in Eastern culture that is deeply rooted in the Confucian tradition. Different educational theories arise from different cultures. These are used to educate students in a certain cultural context. Students from different cultural backgrounds, therefore, have different learning behaviors, particularly between countries that have larger cultural distances (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005).

Chinese students grow up in a country that has a largely different social and cultural context from that of the United States (Hofstede, 1991). China is a socialist republic ruled by the Community Party of China under a single party system with a glorious history and cultural traditions influenced by Confucius (Upton, 1989). Confucius (551-479 BC), a great thinker and educator in ancient China, devoted his lifetime to promoting optimistic humanism that has had a monumental impact on education, life, ethics, social structure, and political ideology of China,
East Asia, and the rest of the world from as far back as 2500 years ago until today (McDowell & Stewart, 2002).

Apparently, Confucianism has a great influence on Chinese society and education. In 2006, Wang conducted a study on Chinese culture which showed that Confucian ideology has served as the basis of Chinese culture in general, as well as for its educational system for centuries (Wang, 2006). Its impact on the contemporary education system in China is still immense (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998). Hence, an investigation into Confucian ideology contributes to a better understanding of the Chinese way of learning and Chinese learners.

**Confucianism and Chinese education.** In ancient and contemporary China, education has been regarded as being above all influenced by Confucian ideology as a route to fame and success (Wang, 2006; Zhang & Carrasquillo, 1995). Generally speaking, the core concepts of Confucianism value harmony, collectivism, academic success, and diligence rather than intelligence.

In Confucian times, the purpose of education was to cultivate “Junzi” (literally "lord's child"), a knowledgeable individual, who should apply himself to be a moral guide and a good officer to lead a harmonized society (Lee, 1996; Wang, 2006). Harmony, a key aspect of Chinese culture, means obedience and respect to the authority and the elder, which results in an autocratic system (Hofstede, 1991; Özturgut, 2008; Wang, 2006; Zhang & Carrasquillo, 1995).

To reflect this autocratic system in education, the teachers are considered as the models for both knowledge and morality, and they connect their students’ intellectual growth to moral and personal developments (Wang, 2006). At the same time, learning is perceived as a process of transmission of information and skills from the teacher to the learners following well-designed
textbooks, and the teacher's authority should be respected and cannot be challenged in keeping with Confucian tradition (Guo, 1996). Chinese students display an almost unquestioning acceptance of the knowledge of their teachers; this is coupled with an emphasis on the Confucian ethic of “filial piety” (Cheng, Andrade, & Yan, 2011, p. 862). Consequently, the inequality of teacher-student relations and the need for dependence on teachers are deeply embedded in the minds of Chinese students (Hosfstede & Hosftede, 2005).

**Learning and efforts.** Rooted deeply in Confucius heritage, Chinese people value learning as a moral duty and strive for resilience with persistent effort (Watkins, 2000). Confucianism equates effective learning with hard work (Turner, 2006). To examine the importance of effort in learning, Li (2001) employed prototypical methods to collect Chinese learning-related terms among 100 Chinese college seniors (50 male and 50 female) at a university in Eastern China. The cluster analysis on 250 learning-related items generated a hierarchical structure showing a high desire and respect for learning as a lifelong endeavor among those students, and a greater degree of "teacher-in-charge" that is the essence of Confucius heritage and Chinese culture. The research also found that very "authoritarian" teachers also had high expectations of their students' diligence, perseverance, endurance of hardship, concentration, and self-cultivation that were supposed to produce high academic achievement.

It is surmised that Chinese learners in Confucian tradition have a strong faith in acquisition of essential knowledge and respectful learning, and they are highly motivated to achieve academic success (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1995). Chinese people believe that
academic success is always associated with hard work that as opposed to the Western belief in ability (Li, 2001).

Nevertheless, much of the literature finds that a major measurement for academic success in China is the result of exam-based learning during the school years (Davey et al., 2007; Turner & Acker, 2002; Yao, 2004, Zheng, 2008). The long history of the Imperial Examination from Confucian time has cultivated the exam-driven education system which, in turn, has shaped the pedagogical practice of contemporary China (Tait, 2010).

**Exam-driven education in China.** The Chinese National University Entrance Exam, also called the *GaoKao*, is a very stressful examination in China, employed since 1977. It remains the sole means of determining a student’s entry into a university (Yao, 2004). This exam is also viewed as the way to attain a good job and high social status (Zheng, 2008). The competitiveness of the exam means that teachers and parents place considerable pressure on their children to succeed in school, and exam preparation begins at an early age (Davey et al., 2007, p. 385). Some scholars criticize that the *GaoKao* is treated as the most important indicator of the quality of schools in Chinese society and that it becomes the deciding factor for the honor or shame of a family (Gu & Meng, 2001; Yao, 2004). The strong focus on exams, according to Wang (2006), leads the teaching to be didactic and text-bound which may produce an imbalance in overall development of the students.

On the other hand, Chinese scholars argue that this rigid exam could help China produce highly knowledgeable, skillful, and talented individuals, given that it has the world’s largest population and limited educational resources (Huang, 1997; Zhang & Carrasquillo, 1995). No doubt, Chinese exam culture is unique and rooted in Chinese cultural, historical, political, and
socioeconomic circumstances. Chinese students are from a cultural context and educational background deeply influenced by Confucian tradition, and their learning experiences are unique.

**Impact of Confucianism on communicative behaviors in the classroom.** The unique Chinese culture also has its own characteristics in communication among people. In general, Chinese students’ communication style has been influenced by Confucian ideology that makes their classroom communicative norm different from other cultural identities (Shi, 2011). The long-established Confucian heritage on ‘face’ consciousness, one of its most common salient phenomena in Chinese culture, has a very strong impact on Chinese classroom interaction (Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Kennedy, 2002; Wu, 2009). With a strong sense of face protection, Chinese students’ verbal expression becomes an extension of their public image rather than words and ideas (Shi, 2011). Due to “face” consciousness, making mistakes in class is shameful and humiliating.

In addition, Chinese students believe that not only their own self-respect is important, but also the “face” of their teachers and classmates (Sun, 2008; Wu, 2009). They never publicly question or challenge their teacher nor argue with other classmates. This is also the major reason why Chinese students are not considered active in class compared to their American classmates. However, excessive concern about face likely causes miscommunication between people from the East and the West. For example, Chinese people seldom say “no” to their friends or others in order to maintain courtesy (Fang, 2003, p. 357). This can be extremely confusing for people from non-Confucian cultures in their communications with Chinese.

In association with face culture, modesty and humility are other key cultural components in Confucian cultural heritage. Kennedy (2002) describes how modesty affected learning culture
among a group of adult students in Hong Kong, China. He finds that Hong Kong teachers and parents seldom encourage their students and children by complimenting their performances. This is in sharp contrast with the encouragement in Western culture. Chinese children are educated to be modest and humble when they are young (Dodd, 1991). This cultural virtue is also reflected in teaching and learning styles. According to Zhang & Xu (2007), Chinese students often know the answers to questions, but they prefer to be modest by not telling their classmates or teacher they know it. In China, most often, the teachers do not give student high grades in order to make students feel they need further hard work toward academic excellence. Whereas, it is comparatively easier to get high grades in American schools. This is to say, the Chinese education system always reminds students that they are a step away from excellence. They must work hard persistently to pursue academic excellence. By contrast, the American education system encourages students, and empowers students’ engagement and self-initiatives.

The aforementioned literature claims that the Chinese educational system has developed under its unique cultural heritage and history. The teacher-centered approach, with a concentration on effort, and exam culture may lead to a way of “passive and rote learning, memorization and repetition” (Charlesworth, 2008, p. 117). “Face” consciousness and a tradition of humility may cause misunderstandings in the communications between the East and the West. All these cultural components contribute to the discrepancies in Chinese student’s learning behaviors compared to those of western academic culture (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Biggs, 1996; Tait, 2010; Turner, 2002; Watkins & Biggs, 2001).

In short, Chinese culture is extremely complex, and it has many layers different from those in western cultures (Hofstede, 1991). This part of the literature purports that Chinese
students grow up in Chinese culture and are educated in an education system with great influences by Confucianism. It stands to reason then, that Chinese students, who originate from a very different cultural context and the educational system, must surely encounter considerable challenges in their transition to the American higher education system (Huang, 2009; Sun & Chen, 1999; Upton, 1989).

**Differences in Teaching/Learning**

As summarized by the aforementioned literature, “cultural beliefs, values and attitudes, along with personal experience and prior educational background can create a challenge for a student from one culture to another culture” (O’Connor, 2000, p. 205). Hofstede’s findings indicate that students from different cultures have experienced different teaching/learning systems in their home countries (Hofstede, 1991). The fact is that China and the United States have different social and cultural contexts. As a result, people in these two countries treat and educate their children in different ways.

**Confucianism vs. American ideology.** According to the previous literature review, “Chinese education and learning traditions have been tremendously influenced by Confucianism” (Wang, 2006, p. 1). Confucianism places the teacher at the center of the learning process (Watkins, 2000; Kennedy, 2002). In contrast, the United States is a federal constitutional republic, and holds dear the values of equality and social justices that are intrinsic to democracy (Upton, 1999). American education takes pride in developing individual talents, personal values, and the creative spirit (Dunnett, 2000). Eckel and King (2004) stress that the structure of American higher education is profoundly influenced by limited government, freedom of expression and competition, as well as an equal opportunity.
Guided by these beliefs, American higher education reflects the essential elements of independence, equality, and individualism (Reese, 2001). In a similar regard, the students in American schools are equal to their teachers. The students are the center of the teaching/learning process; and a teacher’s responsibility is focused on how to develop a creative human spirit rather than trying to implant knowledge upon their students (Mungazi, 1993; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Consequently, in an American classroom, the core of teaching is around students, and the successful acquisition of knowledge is based around class discussions and activities.

To compare and contrast the differences between Chinese and American higher education, Fang (2008) points out that both Chinese and American educational systems have advantages and shortcomings, “The education system in China pays a great attention to the construction of knowledge and knowledge accumulation; comparatively, American education emphasizes the students’ ability to utilize the knowledge, cultivate their critical spirits, as well as knowledge development and innovation” (p. 61). Moreover, to examine the educational differences from the Chinese students’ perspective, Zhao, Zhou, & Huang, (2008) interviewed 100 Chinese high school students in three regions of China and found that the Chinese education system encourages students to work hard academically, yet their personal interests might not be given a chance to develop. American students, on the other hand, were encouraged to pursue their own interests in life, and could gain confidence that might not be associated with their academic success in schools (Zhao et al., 2008). This finding coincides with Fang’s research result (Fang, 2008).

It is notable that the concept of education in China is full acceptance of knowledge; while the American concept of education pursues a dynamic challenge to knowledge (Li, Prichard, &
MacDonald, 2008). These two education systems represent two contrasting views about the ways to obtain knowledge. The Chinese system focuses on skills, while the American one emphasizes creativity (Wang, 2006). The differences between the educational systems in China and the United States are significant and reflect a great deal about the broader differences in teaching/learning paradigms.

**Learning differences.** According to Charlesworth (1998), learning cannot be separated from cultural contexts and occurs through social interaction. The different cultural characteristics in different countries represent different teaching and learning paradigms (Hofstede, 1991). Chinese students from a collective culture may have difficulty functioning well in an individualized norm and value of the American classroom (Elkins, 1994). Li’s case study about six undergraduate students studying in the business program at Western Oregon University, found that Chinese students had difficulty in adapting to the learning paradigm of the American classroom which was significantly different from what they had experienced in the Chinese school system (Li, 2007). In an American classroom, Chinese students expected to engage in independent learning activities. Teachers only gave students a rough idea or the summarized points to key concepts or questions, which required students to find answers by themselves or through class discussions. In this type of class setting, there was no fixed answer to a given question, and students were free to argue with classmates and teachers to prove that their answers were valid. Shi (2011) summarized that in the American learning paradigm, a large portion of learning was based upon a student’s active participation and involvement in and out of class activities.
Undoubtedly, this learning context in the United States is contrary to Chinese students’ past learning experiences. In China, teaching manifests itself in a more formal and detailed way, focusing on the contents from the beginning to the end, with fixed answers given by the teacher (Shi, 2011; Wan 2001). Chinese students are familiar with a highly organized lecture style form of instructions following a highly structured curriculum led by their teachers (Kennedy, 2002). Students expect teachers to give them detailed instructions on each topic with the key points delineated and an outline on the blackboard or whiteboard for them to use to take notes; whereas, American teachers expect students to read and search for related information by themselves (Huang & Brown, 2009). As a result, transferring from a Chinese way of knowledge transmission to an independent American learning model is very challenging to the Chinese students.

More specifically, the differences in learning behaviors of different cultures may provide an explanation for the learning differences that Chinese students experience in American classroom activities. Zhang & Xu’s study on 11 newly-arrived Chinese graduate students in a North American university reported that in an American classroom, students were given the opportunity to present their own ideas in class. However, Chinese students were not familiar with this learning paradigm. They felt uncomfortable with a casual classroom atmosphere in which students could interrupt their teachers at any time for questions, and make jokes with teachers in class. These behaviors were not acceptable in Chinese culture. Facing the different classroom climate, Chinese students needed time to transition from a Chinese way of learning to an American learning paradigm (Zhang & Xu, 2007).
Truly, this cross-cultural transition from a Chinese to an American learning paradigm is not an easy journey. The discrepancies in learning styles certainly exist between Chinese and American education, and the differences function as a source of conflict that affects Chinese students’ academic adaptation from an ideology of collectivism in China to individualism in the United States (O’Connor, 2000). The collective mentality of Confucian heritage strongly influences Chinese students’ learning styles and can be considered a major barrier for a transition to a highly individualized and creative American classroom.

Likewise, it is well-acknowledged that being creative is the pride of American education. Critical thinking is a major feature of American education that is not compatible with the Chinese collectivist tradition (Tian & Low, 2011). Chinese students have long been considered lacking in critical thinking (Gu, 2009). However, there are recent debates on whether critical thinking is foreign to Chinese students (Cheng, 2011; Paton, 2005; Wu, 2009). In reviewing the published literature, Tian and Low (2011) attempt to investigate factors that may affect Chinese students’ critical thinking when studying in a western academic setting. They indicate that critical thinking has been an educational ideal in western countries since the 18th century, however, international students, especially those from China, lack knowledge about how to “be critical” appropriately in an American classroom. Some aspects of their previous learning style may be counterproductive in developing the critical thinking skills of Chinese students. For example, a type of teacher-centered teaching and restricted curriculum choices, a long tradition of memorization and recitation, as well as an exam-oriented academic culture are not conducive to individualized critical thinking.
Although western educators may perceive Chinese students to be lacking in critical thinking skills due to their previous educational and cultural backgrounds, there is insufficient empirical evidence from a holistic review to explain whether Chinese students lack adequate prior experience or are simply lacking in critical thinking ability (Tian & Low, 2011). Other researchers argue that Confucian pedagogy does advocate the type of reflective thinking and inquiry that encourages independent thinking (Kim, 1998; Wang, 2006). It is suggested that perhaps Chinese critical thinking is different from what it is in western ideology (Biggs, 1996; Watkins, 2000). According to Jin and Cortazzi’s observations on a large Chinese classroom culture, Chinese creativity is built by a slow process based on well-established and solid knowledge, while western teachers observe students’ learning through being creative (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998). Indeed, it stands to the reason that further studies are needed to investigate more on recent cultural, historical, and current educational contexts in China and what Chinese conceptions about critical thinking are in Chinese cultural heritage and contemporary China.

In addition, in order to understand Chinese students’ learning process, it is critical to consider factors such as cultural influence, learning motivation, teacher-student relationships, and complicated teaching/learning context. Obviously, culture and teaching/learning context affect a student’s learning in several ways regarding style, strategies, process, and approaches to learning. Learning differences among students from different countries and cultures can enrich classroom experiences; however, cultural differences may also have a great impact on effective learning.

**Teacher-student relationship.** In examining the relationship between teachers and students, the literature suggests that teacher-student relationships are completely different in
China, compared to those in the United States. From a cross-cultural perspective, Watkins (2000) finds that Chinese concepts of teachers’ missions are “knowledge delivery, exam preparation, ability development, attitude promotion, and conduct guidance” (p. 168). The responsibilities of teachers not only emphasize high quality learning outcomes but also inspire students’ passions for knowledge and moral duty towards the family and society. Turner (2006) also points out that Chinese students and parents have very high expectations of teachers, who play a dominant role in the student’s learning process. The common belief among Chinese people is that “there is no bad student, just a bad teacher” (Turner, 2006, p. 40). The teacher’s role is critical in this scenario and is different from that of the American academic setting.

For example, Chinese teachers adopt spoon-feeding type teaching methods in which a teacher speaks and students listen, without the opportunity to raise questions in class (Li, 2001). Nevertheless, according to Jin and Cortazzi’s findings, Chinese students do ask questions, but the time for posing questions is different from that of American students (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998). American teachers expect students to ask questions during the learning process, whereas, Chinese teachers prefer that students ask questions after they have learned independently from the teacher and reflected profoundly after class. This different teaching/learning style causes a misunderstanding between American teachers and Chinese students. For example, Western teachers intend to involve the students’ active participation through “simultaneous” discussion among students; conversely, Chinese teachers adopt “sequential talk” to involve students (Watkins, 2000, p. 169). The large class size in China makes “simultaneous” discussion impossible. Similarly, though Chinese students keep silent in class, this does not mean that they do not ask questions during the learning process, they usually ask questions only after they have
understood the course content outside the classroom. Their reflections come from a thoughtful thinking.

By contrast, in a two-way communicative American classroom setting, Fang (2008) describes that American teachers intend to stimulate students’ independent thoughts and encourage their students’ innovative ideas by using flexible teaching methods in a free and loose learning environment. Students can pose questions at any time. Teachers are usually happy to answer students' questions and also ask students additional follow-up questions to check their understanding of course content. Li (2007) indicates that American teachers enjoy being challenged by their students, perceive student’s involvement, influence, and personal attainment as more important than do Chinese teachers. Hofstede (1991) proposes that “an effective learning in such a system depends very much on whether a supposed two-way communication between students and teacher is indeed established” (p. 34).

Consequently, the discrepancies in teacher-student relations may cause difficulties for Chinese students studying in American classrooms, as they may consider it inappropriate to ask or raise questions at random in public without carefully thinking about whether it may cause embarrassment to the teacher. They may also dwell on their past experiences in a Chinese classroom, unable to adapt to the American classroom. However, due to lack of understanding of this group’s different cultural and learning backgrounds, American teachers may feel that silent Chinese students are not active learners in class, and they find it hard to perceive if Chinese students learn or not in the classroom (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998).

**Learning and outcome.** Despite the differences in teaching/learning between China and the United States, there is an ongoing scholarly debate regarding the best approaches to stimulate
learning and achievement through teaching. Chinese students are educated in a collective environment with a focus on content rather than the process which is characterized by exam-driven teaching with an emphasis on memorization (Mok, 2006). Though this teaching style is generally undesirable in western education, the fact remains that Chinese students tend to outperform American students in some international contests and excel in their academic studies abroad (Huang, 1997; Marton & Dall’Alba, 1996; Stevenson & Lee, 1996). The evidence showed that Asian students, particularly those from China, who participated in the exams for the first time in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) organized by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2009, ranked at the top of the pack, with the United States generally in the middle or, in math, toward the bottom (Paulson, 2010). This mismatch between an “inappropriate learning approach: rote-learning and memorization” and outstanding achievement has generated debate on this so-called “paradox” (Mok, 2006, p. 132). Nevertheless, several studies argue that Chinese students use memorizing as an integral part of understanding; they are not purely memorizing without understanding (Biggs, 1999; Marton & Dall’Alba, 1996; Waktins, 2000; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). The nature of memorization has been a puzzle in the exploration of Chinese student learning behaviors that needs far more empirical evidences (Tait, 2010).

Furthermore, to investigate Chinese student learning strategies and behaviors, Jiang and Smith (2009) did a cross-generational study among three generations of Chinese students from 1979 until now. They suggested that the traditional portrait of a Chinese learner is of a ‘passive’ rote learner (Biggs, 1996), syllabus-dependent learner (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998), and memorizing learner (Watkins, 2000) which should be reexamined. One of the major findings in their studies
suggested that the memorization strategy appeared to be more complex and dynamic than was traditionally recognized by some scholars. According to the other research findings, the Chinese people consider the thought of understanding to be a long process that requires mental effort, whereas, the students in the United States perceive understanding as a process of a student’s immediate insight and reflections (Wang, 2006; Watkins, 2000).

Truly, Chinese students have unique learning characteristics due to their cultural heritage. How their prior learning approaches relate to Chinese cultural heritage needs more empirical research. Several scholars (Biggs, 1996; Cortazzi & Jin, 2001; Wan, 2001) point out that Chinese students view effort and hard work rather than innate ability as attributes of academic success. Persistence and willpower are determinants that contribute to Chinese students’ high motivation to learn (Wang, 2006). Chinese students are willing to sacrifice their leisure time to contribute to their academic studies. As a result, Chinese students’ highly motivated quest for academic virtue may overshadow their adjustment stress in their learning transition to an American academic environment.

More profoundly, Cheng, Andrade, and Yan’s study analyzed the correlation between learning approach and achievement (Cheng et al., 2011). The study consisted of three samples: 129 American students in the United States, 134 Chinese students in China, and 121 Chinese students in an American University. An important finding in this research was that Chinese students in both China and the United States were quieter and more inactive in class compared to their active American counterparts, however, in spite of the differing approaches to learning, American and Chinese students in the three samples did not differ significantly in the end results of independent thinking and learning achievement. Chinese students tended to be more holistic in
learning, while American students excelled in an analytical approach. That is to say, different approaches to learning might lead to the same learning achievement regardless of how students learn differently in the process.

It can be seen that, because of their cultural heritage, the Chinese student’s approach to learning is, in a way, different from their American or western counterparts. Cheng, Andrade, and Yan (2011) speculated that different thinking styles and learning behaviors could, in the end, achieve similar academic outcomes. Apparently, a complete picture of the paradox of the success of the Chinese memorization approach is very intricate and needs to be further explored in the actual context.

Given the cultural diversity in American classrooms, different cultures are represented, and differences and preferences in learning are presented too. It is noteworthy that no one learning style is better than another. The students’ academic achievements are affected differently by the learning efforts and pedagogy of their teachers. A better understanding of how students from different cultures learn can help teachers tailor culturally responsive instruction in ways to support culturally different learners (Heffernan et al., 2010).

**Academic Adaptation**

Cross-cultural adaptation of international students has been a constant topic in cross-cultural studies over the past decade (Church, 1982, Kim, 2001). However, there are limited empirical studies on Chinese students’ coping strategies in the sharp teaching/learning paradigm shift from the Chinese educational setting to an American one. Previous literature suggests that international students’ adaptive challenges to American colleges and universities are multifaceted, including social, psychological and academic issues that are highly related (Church,
1982; Ward & Kennedy, 2001). Cushner and Karim (2004) describe that study abroad experiences are accompanied with considerable stress involving both confrontation and adaptation to unfamiliar physical and psychological changes. Gu (2009) summarizes the particular stress international students confront including cultural shock, learning shock, language shock, and role shock. Pusch (1979) generalizes that assimilation, adaptation, biculturalism, and multiculturalism are the four steps of a cross-cultural learning continuum. It can be asserted that to be a successful cross-cultural learner is not easy. In the adaptation process, there are many cultural differences that the students must learn and cope with, including academic, cultural, and psychological challenges.

There is no doubt that an international student who is adapting to a new country and a new campus culture may encounter many different and unexpected problems. In particular, Chinese students who originate from a culture that is located on the opposite pole from American culture may experience more difficulty than students from other regions which better fit the norms and expectations of an American academic setting (Hofstede, 1991; Li, 2007; Wan 2001). Nevertheless, successful adaptation can be a transformative experience in the learning process leading to valuable personal growth.

**Language incompetence.** Much of the literature has identified that a lack of English language competence is perceived as a major obstacle of a Chinese student’s academic success (Huntley, 1993; Sun & Chen, 1999; Tompson & Tompson, 1996). For Chinese students, the influence of the Chinese language appears to be a barrier in becoming proficient in English. Wan (2001) explains, “English language belongs to an alphabetic system, in which there is a
connection between sounds and symbols; while, Chinese language belongs to the ideographic system, in which symbols are used to represent ideas only” (p. 19).

The fact is that while most Chinese students are admitted into American colleges and universities with high TOEFL (The Test of English as a Foreign Language) and GRE (The Graduate Record Examinations) scores, they find out almost immediately that a high score on an English test does not guarantee that their English is sufficient for communication in academic or social realms. Pang (2007) points out that insufficient English hinders both Chinese students’ academic performance in the classroom as well as their social interactions with their classmates and people in the local community.

In a case study of several Chinese students studying in an American university, Wan (2001) postulates that some of the frustrations these students experienced originated from the difficulty of English communication. Understanding the accent and idiomatic communication style of teachers and classmates tends to be a problem in Chinese students’ classroom interactions. Huntley (1993) also finds that Chinese students tend to live with other Chinese students and are closer to the Chinese community than the local campus community; this appears to be a huge barrier for the improvement of their English communication ability.

Unsurprisingly, along with the concerns about language issues and social adaptation, academic concerns arise mainly from unfamiliar teaching/learning approaches, uncertainty in academic requirements, and a gap between the students’ performance and the teacher’s expectations.

**Unfamiliarity with discourse norms.** The transition from a teacher-centered to a student-centered classroom presents a challenge for Chinese students. In a study to understand
the academic stress Chinese students encountered, Yan and Berliner (2009) interviewed 18 Chinese students in a large public university in Southwestern America. The interviewees ranged from age 22 to 38, and their length of residency in the United States ranged from two to eight years. The study showed that inadequate educational preparation and unfamiliarity with American classroom formalities were the major concerns that contributed to the academic stress of Chinese students. For example, Chinese students had difficulty when using American standardized writing requirements and citations because they never heard of nor practiced this sort of notation before in China (Sun & Chen, 1999). Academic roles in American institutions require that “students not only have ideas, but also show how and where they got the idea” (Sun & Chen, 1999; p. 27). These different discourse norms between China and the United States along with language struggles lead to ineffective communication methods between Chinese students, and their American faculty and classmates. Trained in a classroom of habitual silence or verbal passiveness, Chinese students experience considerable stress when it comes to oral presentation, group discussions or raising questions (Yan & Berliner, 2009).

With the same research focus on Chinese student experiences in the cultural adaptation on an American campus, Zhong (1996) did an ethnographic study at a large Midwestern university by using an intercultural communication research framework to understand the social and cultural world of Chinese graduate students. She identified that cultural shock and academic shock, the relationships between teacher and students, the expectation of critical thinking, combined with teaching strategies in questioning, are the challenges students had to encounter in their adaptation to an American classroom. Despite the significant cultural change, the interviewees in her study were highly motivated for the transition to American life because they
were well prepared in China about the expectations of overseas education and life, and they had more optimistic and positive attitudes toward the problems in the adaptation process. Study abroad experiences entail a significant transitional challenge, therefore a good preparation and an understanding of the host country’s norms and formalities can help the transition process.

**Relationships among social, cultural and academic adaptations.** In addition to academic adaptation, international students, including Chinese students, find that it is difficult to fit into the host society (Zimmerman, 1995). Limited social interactions and separation from family and friends may cause emotional and psychological stresses (Gu, 2009; Sun & Chen, 1999).

To explain the relationships between the social, psychological, and academic phenomena of Chinese student cultural adaptation, Zhang conducted a study that investigated the influence of general, social and academic self-efficacy on the psychological, sociocultural and academic adaptation of 102 Chinese students studying at universities in New Mexico, Arizona, Florida and Ohio (Zhang, 2004). Zhang (2004) used a hard copy questionnaire and an email survey to query the students. The results showed psychological, sociocultural, and academic adjustments were highly related in terms of emotional comfort, societal interactive demands, and academic excellence. Among these three factors, academic self-efficacy tended to be a stronger predictor of overall intercultural adaptation; however, smooth psychological and socio-cultural transitions could lead to a better academic self-efficacy.

Due to the importance of the academic self-efficacy for international students, Wei et al. (2007) examined the factors that accounted for a student’s academic stress. He tested a three-way interaction of acculturative stress, maladaptive perfectionism, and the length of time in the
United States in predicting depression among 189 students from China and Taiwan at a midwestern American university through an online survey. The results revealed that the key factors influencing Chinese student academic stress and depression were the nature of academic and social interactions, the approaches to learning, pedagogies, academic expectations, duration of stay in the United States, as well as community involvement and extracurricular activities.

It is not surprising that the aforementioned studies found that the difficulties and misunderstandings encountered by Chinese students in American classrooms are mostly traced to the distinctive cultural norms between China and the United States. Different teaching/learning paradigms and social interactions, in particular, are the major difficulties Chinese students encounter in adjusting to American academic norms.

Despite the significant efforts that need to be made to meet these adaptive challenges in regard to language issues, unfamiliar discourse norms and cultural differences, the literature shows that most Chinese students are very successful in the United States (Huang, 1997; Olaussen, 1999; Orleans, 1988). Obviously, good academic performance may involve certain academic and psychological costs. However, there is no much systematic literature focusing on the coping strategies that Chinese students utilize in their adaptation process from their personal perspective.

It is recognized that an individual’s adaptation can be affected by many factors, such as the adjustment to local cultural norms, an individual’s personal demographic, and social and psychological characteristics (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). Chinese student adaptation strategies appear to have many individual aspects based on their personal backgrounds under a
particular social and cultural context. It is imperative to further explore their perceptions and gain insight on how they negotiate the differences during their academic transition.

**Student Perception of University Supports**

The presence of international students on American campuses can be very rewarding and challenging not only for international students but also for American educators. The overall adjustment and success of international students at American colleges and universities requires willingness as well as joint efforts from both American educators and Chinese students to make their transition process a rewarding learning journey (Yan and Berliner, 2009; Wan, 2001).

Perceived from a faculty’s perceptive, Bosher (2003) points out that by having students from different cultural backgrounds, American educators should understand “different countries have educational systems that vary in terms of what is taught, and how it is taught and how students are expected to learn” (p. 14). Faculty’s in-depth understanding of different cultures and learning styles and their encouragement can help establish the students’ confidence in their academic transition process (Durkin, 2008).

At the university level, there are plenty of programs on campuses that can help international students cope with problems and adjust to the American academic culture. Particularly, it is essential to increase international students’ awareness and access to these programs and resources including library resources, various orientation programs, language programs, social events, workshops and seminars (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998; Yan & Berliner, 2009).

In the discussion about which campus program can better assist international student adaptation, a study by Westwood and Barker (1990) introduces an effective International Peer
Program that is based on the pairing of international students and American students for significant interactions to assist the international student’s adjustment. A study by Abe, Talbot, and Geelhoed (1998) also shows that newly-arrived Asian international students who participated in the International Peer Program, had a more satisfactory social adjustment than non-participants.

International students studying in the United States are “involved in both confrontation and adaptation to unfamiliar physical and psychological experiences and changes” (Gu, 2009, p. 40). However, counseling services, which can meet their special needs, are minimal and generally ineffective (Yan & Berliner, 2009). Likely, there are also some inconsistencies and debates over international students’ help-seeking behaviors in the literature. Some researchers indicate that counseling service is one of the most important services that can help students release their stress. Yet, international students are unlikely to seek out formal counseling and would rather turn to family, and friends for help in solving their personal problems (Sun & Chen, 1999; Zimmermann, 1995).

In a study to investigate international students’ adjustment issues and demands for the university’s supports, Zhai (2002) conducted individual interviews among 10 international graduate students at Ohio State University. The results revealed that academic orientation, student counseling services, and language supports were essential to a successful adjustment of international students. However, international students often failed to take advantage of these services because of cultural differences, academic pressure, and isolation from the campus community. Instead, family and friends were the preferred source of help. These students especially preferred to look to other international students from the same country of origin, who
spoke the same language, shared the same culture, and might have experienced the same adjustment issues.

However, Zhou and Todman (2009) in their study of the patterns of adaptation of Chinese graduate students studying abroad, argued that the presence of a large Chinese student community on campus had provided a considerable social support for those students’ adaptation; it also made them unwilling to interact with people of different cultural backgrounds. Particularly, according to Furnham and Bochner (1986), Asian students influenced by their culture were very reserved about expressing their personal problems to the people they were not familiar with, and they tended to deny any depression or any negative experiences.

Looking at factors that may lead international students to be accepting of counseling services, Brinson and Kottler (1995) interviewed over 100 international students and found that most of the international students in their study did not know what counseling services could do for them. They may have been unfamiliar with the concept and processes of counseling or they may have lacked trust in using counseling services to address their personal issues; they were uncertain what counseling services could do to help them release their physical, psychological and other stress (Mori, 2000).

It is claimed that universities and educators can assist international students by trying to understand their home cultures, different learning styles, and frustrations in adjusting to the American academic environment and social life (Lewthwaite, 1986). However, there is a gap between the need for and proven utilization of adjustment methods of international students. There is limited literature on the help-seeking behaviors of Chinese students. With the growing presence of Chinese students on American campuses, the way in which university counseling
services and other student support programs can help this group of students adapt to the American academic and social environment is becoming more and more important. The university needs to increase awareness of student perspectives and cultural behaviors to improve the effectiveness and utilization of on-campus international student services and programs.

**Conclusion of Literature Review**

The aforementioned literature review exhibits four perspectives: the influence of Chinese culture on learning, differences in teaching and learning between China and the United States, the academic adaptation concerns of Chinese students in American colleges and universities, as well as Chinese students’ perceptions on university support. The review of literature illustrates that different cultures have different teaching and learning paradigms. According to the recent reexamination of existing research on Chinese learning in the Confucian tradition, Chinese learning and teaching are more subtle and complex than they initially appeared to be in some studies (Biggs, 1996; Cheng et al., 2011; Tian & Low, 2011; Waktins, 2000). There is, indeed, further research that should be explored to reappraise some common assumptions or generalizations on Chinese learning strategies in the ever-changing educational dynamic.

Moreover, cross-cultural academic adaptation itself, according to the literature, is a cultural learning process that aims to transfer prior knowledge and experiences from the home to the host culture (Pusch, 1979; Wan, 2001; Yan & Berliner, 2009; Zimmerman, 1995). The literature illuminates the factors that have been relevant to Chinese students’ cross-cultural academic adaptation. These factors include insufficient English competence, different teaching and learning paradigms, high stress caused by high expectations for academic success, unfamiliarity with discourse norms, cultural misunderstandings from faculty and classmates,
disconnection with local people and society, as well as a high tolerance for depression (Huang & Brown, 2009; Li, 2001; Pang, 2007; Sun & Chen, 1999; Wan, 2001; Zhang & Xu, 2007). The transition from Chinese to American culture can be considered as a “rebirth experience” for Chinese students who endure cultural, academic and role shock (Gu, 2009, p.47). Most of the studies focus on graduate students, cross-cultural challenges, and general differences between the two different cultures and educational systems (Li, 2007; Sun & Chen, 1999; Wan, 2001; Yan & Berliner, 2009; Zhang & Rentz, 1996; Zhang & Xu, 2007). Few discuss the overall experiences of Chinese students, particularly the voices of the first year undergraduate students. With the recent growth of Chinese undergraduate students studying in the United States, the current study particularly emphasizes Chinese students’ cross-cultural learning experiences at the undergraduate level. Considering that undergraduate students are less mature than graduate students, particularly in their first year transition, they may have different experiences from their graduate counterparts, and they may need more attention as they navigate their transition from Chinese high schools to American colleges and universities. This study aims to fill this research gap by using a qualitative research approach. The investigation in this study is to discover individual Chinese students’ academic adaptation experiences, and is not intended to provide any comparison with other international students’ cross-cultural experiences.

Cross-cultural adjustment is one of the common challenges that international students face, regardless of their ethnic, cultural, language, economic, and religious backgrounds (Gu, 2009, Li, 2007). The particular difficulty is the cultural adjustment related to the cultural distance between the host and home country (Arthur, 2004; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Hofstede, 1991; Petersen, 1991). Despite the rapidly growing Chinese undergraduate student population in
American colleges and universities, these newly-arrived freshmen from China face a multitude of adjustment challenges such as the significant differences in language, culture, educational systems, and social and political systems; their presence on American campuses also affects American academic culture and teaching practices (Pang, 2007; Wan, 2001; Yan & Berliner, 2009; Zimmerman, 1995). Therefore, it is essential that American higher education institutions should be aware of the cultural differences, understand the past educational experiences of Chinese students, and help them develop a successful and satisfactory educational experience in the United States.

**Chapter 3: Research Design & Methodology**

As investigated in the literature review, Chinese students are confronted with a broad range of cultural conflicts in relocating to an American academic environment and adjusting to American culture and norms. Given the complexity of cross-cultural academic adaptation described in the literature, the author’s research question targets understanding each participant’s academic transition experience from their personal stories. Therefore, a qualitative narrative inquiry methodology was deemed appropriate to discover the inner world of selected Chinese undergraduates and understand how they made sense of their academic adaptation from a Chinese background to an American learning environment (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008).

Chinese students’ adaptive experiences to an American learning environment are intricate and multifaceted because a significant difference exists in linguistics, teaching and learning styles, cultural values, and social traditions between China and the United States. In addition, a student’s personal factors all contribute to their adaptation experiences. In an effort to have
sufficient flexibility in obtaining an intensive, vivid and holistic description of the transitional experiences of selected Chinese students from their personal stories (Riessman, 2008; Merriam, 2009), the research questions in this study were designed to be open-ended, evolving and inductive to reflect the nature of the qualitative study (Bernard. 2005; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glesne, 2011). The primary research question is as follows: What are the lived experiences of Chinese undergraduate students in their transition from a Chinese educational background to an American learning environment? There are two secondary questions that build onto this research question: (a) What are the factors that have positively or negatively had an impact on the students’ academic adaptation? (b) What coping strategies have helped students overcome any difficulties in their academic adaptation? In working with these select narratives, the researcher anticipated obtaining in-depth details and understanding of the complexities of the broader population of Chinese students’ ongoing adaptation experiences and realities that will eventually lead to the improvement of educational practices supporting this group of students.

This chapter describes the manner in which the narrative inquiry approach was used. The first section speaks to the merits of the qualitative narrative as a research tool. The next section discusses the research site and the participants of the study. Following that are sections on how the data was collected and then analyzed, and finally, this chapter includes discussions on the trustworthiness, limitations and delimitations of the research design along with notes on how participants (human subjects) were protected.

**A Qualitative Narrative Inquiry Study**

The methodology of this study is based on the belief that the narrative inquiry is considered a fundamental human way of understanding an individual’s experience within certain
contexts and contributing to the meaning of human sense-making (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008; Riessman, 2008). The qualitative narrative inquiry is appropriate for this study because it provides an opportunity for the researcher to “gain insight into the way human beings understand and enact their lives through stories” (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 163). The qualitative narrative is especially well-suited to portray the cross-cultural transition experiences of these Chinese students and give them an opportunity to voice their rich and complex stories about their first year undergraduate studies in the United States through face to face interviews (Josselson, 2011; Riessman, 2008). In-depth interviewing can be an ideal way to gather, organize, and interpret their intricate experiences in this cross-cultural transition process (Lichtman, 2009).

Moreover, education researchers Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) iterate that narrative research not only focuses on individual experience but also highlights the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which personal experiences are shaped, expressed, and enacted. Through human beings’ narratives, one learns and comes to understand how people view themselves, their experiences and that of others around them. Thus, the emergent nature of the narrative inquiry approach presents a flexible inquiry and dialogical strategy that facilitates the collection of extensive information about the participants’ past and present experiences, family backgrounds, as well as a social and cultural context and how these experiences influence their transition to American institutions.

Narrative inquiry, as a vital way of knowing human experience, has gained a growing recognition in the social science research landscape (Riessman, 2008). Narrative, in its definition, “carries many meanings and is used in a variety of ways by different disciplines, often synonymously with story” (Riessman & Speedy, 2007, p. 428). Researchers have conducted
numerous studies using a narrative inquiry approach both within education and in the larger social sciences such as literature, history, anthropology, education, or psychotherapy (Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Freeman, 2004). Narrative inquiry provides an effective way to undertake systematic study of personal experiences and meaning rather than formulate a logical or scientific explanation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Lichtman, 2009; Riessman, 1993; Riessman & Speedy, 2007).

Understanding Chinese students’ transitional learning experience is the goal of this study, and “the use of narrative inquiry was in response to the recognition of the complexity of human experience in increasingly diversified societies” (Phillion, He, & Connelly, 2005, p. 9). The stories participants shared during the interviews not only described their experiences but also allowed them to rethink how it constructed the meaning of their past, present and future. In their storytelling process, the researcher was invited into participants’ lives to gather in-depth accounts of their experiences. The emergent nature of narrative inquiry allowed the researcher to modify research protocols in the process to conduct a more open, flexible and insightful study. Therefore, the narrative inquiry methods provided both a direction and a framework for the researcher to report and analyze participants’ stories for the common threads of information, as well as to interpret their stories as part of the researcher’s own learning experience (Andrews et al., 2008). Particularly, the narrative approach helped the researcher to establish a rapport with participants to learn and exchange the meanings of the stories in the research process that definitely added a validity check to the overall analysis of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

**Site and Participants**
The selection of site and participants in this study was based on certain criteria such as the participants’ pool, the researcher’s knowledge of the site and participants, the feasibility of data access and collection, the relationship between researcher and participants, as well as validity and ethical concerns (Maxwell, 2005).

The site of this study is one of the largest private research universities located in the northeast region of the United States. There are over 31,000 students enrolled at this university, and among them, international students make up 37% of its undergraduate student population (Office of Institutional Research, 2013). The university has experienced a 24% growth in the numbers of Chinese students over the past five years, which is true to the changing student demographic that colleges and universities across the United States face (Office of Institutional Research, 2013). In recent years, the Chinese student population in the university’s undergraduate programs has increased dramatically (Office of Institutional Research, 2013). In terms of the growth of the Chinese student population, the site of this study appears to closely reflect the common challenges that many American colleges and universities have faced in recent years with regards to the assimilation of Chinese students. Therefore, this site can be seen as a microcosm of American higher education institutions.

Participants are seen as the central part of this study. The number of participants, as well as the criteria for selecting participants is critical to narrative inquiry. According to Creswell (2007), one or more individuals who are accessible and willing to provide information are appropriate for a narrative study. Patton (2002) highlights that the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from a qualitative inquiry have more to do with information richness than with the sample size. Therefore, a purposeful strategy of a small sample size was utilized in this study.
to provide in-depth, rich information from three intended participants. Purposeful sampling was used to select settings, participants, or activities "deliberately" so that the choices provided unique opportunities for in-depth study (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). Moreover, due to the large amount of data from a narrative study, the sample size enabled the collection, organization and analysis of the data within the timeline set by this doctoral project.

Considering the sample type, a criterion sample was used in this research to choose the participants. Creswell (2009) indicates that criterion sampling involves choosing individuals who have had a particular life experience that suits this narrative study. The main criteria for participant selection were that, (a) they be Chinese undergraduate students in a four-year-degree program, (b) they be enrolled in their undergraduate programs and have finished their first year of study at the time of data collection, and (c) they be studying in majors different from those of the other participants. These criteria ensured the homogeneous background of the participants, and also considered the variables among this representation of Chinese undergraduate students in this study site.

After obtaining the approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university (Appendix B), the researcher reached the Chinese student volunteer team leaders in different university offices and associations such as the International Student and Scholar Institute, Global Student Success office, Asian American Association, and Chinese Student and Scholar Association by phone and email with a description of the nature of this study and potential candidate requirements and asked for their help in recommending a list of potential participants. The researcher also contacted Chinese students individually who volunteered in different university events and activities organized by the university offices. An email was sent to each
potential participant with the approved recruitment letter (Appendix C) to clearly describe the nature of the study and to invite and thank them for their voluntary participation. The researcher assumed that, as these students would have had volunteer experiences before, they would likely have a passion to help others. The researcher encouraged them to share their true personal stories in their transition process so as to help incoming Chinese students better prepare before studying in the United States, and to assist American educators in understanding the unique cultural background and experience of this group of students.

After several rounds of communications through emails and telephone calls with the potential participants, three undergraduate students were identified. They came from different cities and studied in the different high school systems in China; they were aged from 21 to 22 at the time of the interview. The researcher communicated with each of them via telephone first and followed up with an email with an attached informed consent form (Appendix D) and a protocol of preset interview questions (Appendix A) for them to review and to help them familiarize themselves with the research process. After they confirmed their availability, appointment requests were sent to them in order to schedule interviews. Each participant was interviewed three times. They signed the informed consent form in person during the first interview session. Each participant’s identity was protected by pseudonyms.

**Data Collection**

The primary source of data collection in this narrative study was through one-on-one interviews and the researcher’s reflective notes. Interviewing has been widely used in most narrative studies in human science and allows the researcher to spend extensive time with the participants to obtain detailed information about their lived experiences (Riessman, 2008).
The interview, as a form of data collection, consists of a number of techniques on how to facilitate the story and elicit narrations from the interviewees. Creswell (2007) highlights the importance of the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee in qualitative research. Primarily, the researcher needs to be familiar with the participants and build a rapport and an active collaboration with them in order to conduct an effective interview and collect the extensive information about the participants. Based on these principles, the researcher introduced herself, her background, and the purpose of this project, as well as research methodology to the participants in the initial communication via email or telephone. The researcher also asked participants for basic personal information in order to get to know them better. These warm-up interactions helped the researcher to break the ice and established some degree of familiarity with the participants that contributed to a rapport with the participants in the interview process.

The one-on-one, in-depth interviews conducted by the researcher were guided by three-interview approaches designed by Seidman (1998). Each participant was interviewed individually, in person, three times at a time and location convenient for the interviewee. Each interview had a particular topic. According to Seidman (1998), the first interview should focus on a life history of the participant allowing them to tell as much as possible about their experiences in a context related to their past learning experiences in China. In this session, “how” questions were asked more than “why” questions in order to hear in-depth personal stories of the participants (Seidman, 1998). Per Seiman’s guidelines, the second interview targeted the concrete details of the participants’ ongoing experiences (Seidman, 1998). The participants were asked questions concerning what they do and did to reconstruct their experiences, and no question asked for an opinion “but rather the details of their experiences” (Seidman, 1998, p. 12).
Finally, the third interview provided a reflection on the meaning of the participants’ experiences built upon the first two interviews and stimulated a discussion in a more relaxed atmosphere between the researcher and the participant. Following Seidman’s (1998) guideline, the third interview enabled the collection of additional information that was crucial to a contextual interpretation of the interviewees’ accounts and “added a validation check to the analysis” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). Each interview provided a foundation of details to help illuminate the next one.

Seidman’s three-interview approach was an ideal way to build a strong rapport and relationship with the participants in which both parties could learn and exchange their perceptions in their interactions (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2006). It also provided a venue for the researcher to explore additional thoughts and reactions about the participants’ rich and unique experiences, especially those that were not included in the interview questions. Moreover, this process helped to produce a broader and deeper collection of data. Through the process of communicating with the participants about transcript verification and clarification for the validation of the stories, the researcher and the participants had a prolonged engagement with each other and formed a strong collaborative relationship.

To gather the stories about the participants’ lived experiences, the interview questions in this study were developed based on the literature review, research questions and theoretical framework of the study. In order to allow the participants to share their personal experiences in a unique and personal way, the qualitative interview questions were open-ended, semi-structured, and framed by every day common language to collect vital, substantive and thick descriptions for sharing (Creswell, 2007; Elliot, 2005). For example, the questions were all related to what the
participants experienced with regards to the differences between their previous educational experience and their first year’s experience in an American university, the changes experienced in the transition process, challenges in meeting the demands of the new academic environment. They also dealt with the factors that caused these changes, as well as suggestions and comments the participants had for new students.

The sampling of queries posed to participants, as shown in Appendix A, was sent to them before the first interview. The participants were well informed about the questions in the interviews, and this allowed them to prepare and raise any questions they may have had. The interviews were conducted at times and locations that were convenient for the participants, and lasted around 90 minutes, as suggested by Seidman (1998). The informal and relaxed atmosphere allowed for the flexibility to gather autobiographical narratives of the participants’ cross-cultural experiences, followed by unanticipated but relevant issues raised by the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In the storytelling process, the researcher’s role was that of an attentive listener, and a note taker that gave the participants opportunity to narrate their stories in an uninterrupted way (Creswell, 2007).

In the data collection process, all interviews were audio recorded with permission from the participants and transcribed verbatim. A backup of the data was kept in a secure place. The author carried out data transcription because it was vitally important for the researcher to be extremely familiar with the data in the qualitative analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Although the recruitment letter and the consent form were written in English, all interviews were conducted in the participants’ preferred language, Chinese, in order to get an in-depth description of their transition experiences. The transcripts were completed and translated into English by the
researcher after each interview, and then the English transcripts were sent to participants by email for proofreading between the interviews. Each interview was set up within a two- to three-week time frame. Each participant was given an informed consent form (see Appendix D) requiring his/her signature to participate in this study by email first and signed in person at the beginning of the first interview. To protect human subjects, institutional review board approval (See Appendix C) was obtained before the data was collected.

Data Analysis

Data analysis of this qualitative study was an ongoing process that occurred in a natural setting simultaneously with data collection and continued to be entwined throughout the process of data collection and report writing (Creswell, 2007, Maxwell, 2005). The overall data analysis process was fluid and reflects a recurring spiral aspect of data management, reading and describing, classifying and interpreting, and representing other than a fixed linear approach (Creswell, 2007, p. 173). The data from this narrative study mainly came from participants’ stories in the interviews that appeared to be a massive volume of random and unconnected statements (Riessman, 2008). It was challenging to interpret the participants’ narratives, given the lack of a built-in structure such as the type found in the typical numerical data of a quantitative study. There was a need to analyze, synthesize, and reduce the amount of texts or biographical stories to capture the essence of the students’ experiences. Therefore, the analysis and interpretation of the narrative data set required a creative and systematic approach.

Certainly, a good qualitative analysis depends on understanding the data. Thematic analysis was applied in this study to search for themes that emerged from the participants’ narratives and to generate insights of interpretations on what was told in the stories, how the
story was organized and how the participants constructed themselves and their lived experiences (Riessman, 2008). The themes represented some level of pattern response of meaning within the data set in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to the qualitative researchers, thematic analysis can be seen as a fundamental tool to be used across different qualitative studies allowing flexibility in choosing theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is flexible, clear and detailed to interpret various aspects of the research topic, and it includes specific guidelines for “identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data and describing data in rich detail (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79). For this narrative study, the procedure of the thematic data analysis follows a step-by-step procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) that consists of six phases.

Table 1

Phases of Thematic Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description of the process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Familiarizing with data</td>
<td>Transcribing, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Generating initial codes</td>
<td>Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Searching for themes</td>
<td>Gathering data and collating codes into potential themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reviewing themes</td>
<td>Checking the themes in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic “map” of the analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Defining and naming Themes</td>
<td>Ongoing analysis to refine each theme and generate clear definitions and names for each theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Producing the report</td>
<td>Selection of vivid, compelling text extracts relating to the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. From Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 35)*
The analysis of the data began with the familiarization of verbal data collected from the interviews. This phase involved listening, transcribing and reading the raw data. The researcher was the major instrument of this study. After listening to the audio recording of the interviews several times, the researcher completed all transcriptions verbatim in English from an audio recording. This process was time consuming but rewarding and allowed the researcher to be immersed with the entire data set to develop a better understanding of the data for further analysis. The researcher re-listened to the recording and “checked the transcriptions back against the original audio recording for accuracy frequently” in order to obtain the true information from the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 18).

Moving into phase two, the researcher imported all data into MAXQDA, a computer software program that facilitates the efficiency of data collecting, storing and reporting (Basit, 2003; Bourdon, 2002). MAXQDA allowed the researcher to highlight the meaningful textual segments in colors, generate initial coding, develop textural and structural description, and synthesize the data in an effective way. However, the software is unable to conduct data analysis for the researcher (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Analysis of the raw data, started with coding, a process of creating codes by doing a close reading of the data and mining it for ideas that capture tentative ideas for codes, topics and noticeable themes (Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 2009). In the coding process, the researcher gave equal attention to all data, and initially coded as many potential themes as possible to retain accounts from the interviews. Some meaningful textual segments were coded several times in order to get a satisfied thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2006; MacQueen, McLellan, Lemal, Bartholow, & Milstein, 2008; Maxwell, 2005).
The intention in phase three was to identify themes. Codes were analyzed at a broader level involving sorting and collating all relevant codes. All initial codes relevant to the research questions and literature were incorporated into the themes. Coding was an ongoing process. Through coding and recoding, the codes and themes became more refined and helped explain thematic relationships and an in-depth analysis within and across the topics (Bauer, 1996; MacQueen et al., 2008; Maxwell, 2005). For example, a code from the first participant might surface early. In that case, the second source of data could be used as a comparison. Coding the second participants’ transcription could be better organized after looking back to a first interview. In this phase, the collection of major candidate themes and sub-themes and all extracts of data were coded in relationship to each other and kept entirely in the thematic map to be combined, refined, eliminated, or discarded in the next reviewing phase.

Reviewing and refining the themes was the focus of the fourth phase. This was to ensure validity, accuracy and consistency of the themes. The thematic map presented the links and relationship between themes visually. The researcher checked the themes back to the original data and reexamined the thematic map to determine robust and uniform themes. In addition, the participants’ reflections and opinions, as well as discussions between the researcher and the participants were also documented, presented and organized by themes. In this phase, the researcher continued working on data re-coding and themes verification until the themes could better represent the research questions and topic.

The task in the fifth phase was to define and name the themes. The researcher defined and further refined the themes to identify the key characteristics of each one with a detailed analysis, in relation to the research questions. A concise name and clear definition were given to
each theme after careful consideration. In the final phase, a summary report was written to translate the complex story of the data into a concise, logistic and coherent account. The summary report can be found in Chapter 4.

**Trustworthiness, Limitations and Delimitations**

Ensuring the trustworthiness of the research was an important consideration in this qualitative research design. Outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), specific criteria can ensure the integrity of the qualitative study to achieve internal and external validation and establish the trustworthiness of the research findings.

Frequently, triangulation is used to improve the trustworthiness in qualitative studies. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) identify four types of triangulation: (a) data triangulation which is the use of a variety of data sources; (b) investigator triangulation which is the use of different researchers or evaluators; (c) theory triangulation which is the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a set of data; and (d) methodological triangulation which is the use of different methodologies to investigate a problem.

In this study, investigator triangulation such as member check and peer review was utilized to facilitate the validity and reliability of the research data and the evaluation of the findings. The three-interview approach was adopted purposely to establish the validity of the research (Seidmen, 1998). By conducting in-depth, multiple interviews, the participants’ narratives were placed within a context and attained internal consistency. Following each interview, the interview transcripts were sent to the interviewee for review and verification. The participants were a vital link in the data analysis process and each was consulted to check accuracy and verify the content and the meaning of the data after his/her interview (Creswell,
Interviewing multiple participants in the study were also connected and able to check the data validity from the narratives of different participants. In effect, the entire research process was documented including recording, collecting, coding, synthesizing, and analyzing the data, so that it could be reviewed by the Doctoral Thesis committee, the participants, and my colleagues.

As a researcher, it is not easy to eliminate one’s background, belief, and perception from the study. The researcher’s own subjectivities may influence the data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the researcher shares the same language, culture and identity as the participants; however, the participants’ lived experiences may be quite different from the researcher’s. In an effort to set aside personal bias and judgment in the data collection and analysis process, the narrative method served as a powerful instrument to construct a rich and in depth description about participants’ lived experiences from their narratives.

As with all qualitative research, there were limitations, and the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the entire population of Chinese undergraduates in America. Since the purpose of this study does not aim to represent a collective generalization of Chinese undergraduates, this study might not apply to Chinese students at other American institutions, or even to Chinese students studying at the same institution. Instead, this study aims to understand the experiences of individual Chinese undergraduates at a particular American university. Additionally, as this study focuses on the academic adaptation of Chinese undergraduates, the results of this study might not apply to other types of adjustment.

Unavoidably, there are also some limitations generated by this qualitative research methodology. For example, the sample size of three participants might not generalize the overall
experiences of Chinese students studying in the United States. The participants’ views do not represent the views of all Chinese students in every discipline of this institution. The research results might have been affected by the way of communication, subjective interactions, bias from both the researcher’s personal Chinese background and the participants’ attitudes, as well as other human factors. In essence, this narrative inquiry is about human stories, and the participants might have avoided or not been willing to share their real thoughts about some personal matters and sensitive issues. In addition, all interviews were conducted in Chinese; the translations in English might fail to convey the exact meaning of the stories told by the participants.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Human subjects are of the utmost importance in a qualitative study. Qualitative researchers encounter many ethical issues in data collection, data analysis, and final reporting (Creswell, 2007). Since the narrative inquiry deals with human stories, this renders the participants more vulnerable than other forms of qualitative research (Chase, 2005). The present qualitative narrative research involved a moral and ethical effort to ensure the protection of the human subjects who participated during and after the research. All participants had to be over the age of 18 to be eligible to participate in this study.

In this study, the measures for human subject protection began immediately before the interview process. To be able to approach the participants, the researcher obtained the approval of the Institutional Research Board (IRB) to comply with the legal and procedural aspects of ethics. Before interviewing, the researcher communicated with the participants about the nature and purpose of the study both in writing and in a verbal explanation to address how the study
might impact participants or have potential benefits, and she also shared her personal background with the participants. After that, the participants were invited to participate and asked to sign a letter of consent (Appendix D). The participant’s confidentiality and identity were protected in the transcribed interviews, the data analysis process, and the final reporting by using a pseudonym. It was also guaranteed that there was no risk for students who determined whether to consent to participate (Creswell, 2007). The participants had the opportunity to ask questions about the study, and they were informed that they had right to decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the interview at any time. There was no penalty for the participant who wanted to quit (Creswell, 2009). As an interview proceeded, the preset questions were planned carefully to avoid questions that might invade participants’ privacy. The researcher assured all participants that information was confidential and anonymous both during and after research, and the participants reviewed transcripts immediately after each interview for comments, clarifications and corrections.

**Chapter 4: Findings**

In this chapter, the researcher uses the themes that can best represent the perceptions of the participants’ lived experiences in a broader social context along with the researcher’s interpretation. The vivid and direct quotations from the participants’ stories were selected to present “a scholarly report of the analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 35). The themes also take reference from existing literature and research, the research questions and theoretical framework of this study that connect all participants’ stories and lead to the final analysis and discussion.

In examining the individuals’ narratives based on the questions listed in Appendix A, five major themes emerged in this study. They are: (a) motivations for studying in the United States;
(b) Perceptions on the different learning environment of an American classroom; (c) academic challenge and adaptation; (d) coping strategies; (e) reflections on cross-cultural learning experiences. Some sub-themes were also identified under each major theme to bring forward the participants’ detailed descriptions about their stories. The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of undergraduate students from China in their transition to the American higher education system and how these cross-cultural experiences might have impacted their learning in American higher education institutions. The research findings from this study include the descriptive accounts of the participants and the interpretative analysis based around the aforementioned five themes. Ultimately, the findings of this study aim to increase the cultural awareness of Chinese students, as well as the understanding of American educators and administrators who may confront the impact of cultural differences in their classrooms.

Profile of the Participants

Before reporting the findings, a brief overview about each participant’s background in China is presented for readers to understand who they are. Taking part in this study were two females and one male, in their early 20s, both of whom were full-time undergraduate students studying at the same university. All participants met the university’s English entrance requirement and could speak English fairly well. The three participants in this study, originally from three different geographic locations in China, are pursuing different undergraduate majors. They had been in the United States for less than two and a half years at the time of their interviews. All three participants applied to American universities directly after finishing their high schools in China and did not have a chance to compare postsecondary education between China and the United States. None of the participants had any scholarships from the university,
and they were wholly sponsored by their parents. To protect the participants’ identities, pseudonyms are used. Table 2 shows each participant’s profile.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Hometown Region</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Year in U.S.</th>
<th>School in China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Southwestern China</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>1 year 3 months</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lan</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>East coast of China</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Mathematic</td>
<td>2 years 3 months</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yun</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Southeastern China</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>2 years 3 months</td>
<td>Public + British A level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jian, male, majoring in economics, had just finished his first year of undergraduate study at the time of his interviews. His hometown is located in southwestern China. The city is one of the most leisurely and carefree cities in China. He is the only child in his family, and his parents work in one of the biggest banks in the city. He had been regarded as an outstanding student studying in the public key-point schools in his schooling in China. He described his school experience, saying,

I always follow my teachers and parents, do exactly what they require me to do, and I was fully engaged in the intense competitions in achieving good scores in all kinds of exams and studied very hard to cheer my parents…My parents are willing to make sacrifices and spent a tremendous amount of time and money in order to prepare me to excel over other students in different aspects (personal communication, Nov.12, 2012).
Besides his outstanding academic performance in school, Jian also has superb musical talent. He started learning how to play musical instruments at age five. From what the researcher observed in the interview process, his personality shows a kind of shyness.

Lan, female, is gifted in mathematics. She is able to study what she likes at the American university. She is from one of the most populated cities in China. Located on the eastern coast of China, the city is regarded as a major business and financial center in China, as well as internationally. Education in this city is well developed. She said her parents were very busy with the family business and unable to provide intensive care for her education. At age six, she was sent to a private boarding school where she continued her schooling through age 18. Her school sent students back home every month instead of every week. She recalled her initial boarding school experience saying, “I had a strong sensation of abandonment and loneliness, particularly in the evenings and weekends” (personal communication, Nov. 19, 2012). From that time, she started to learn to be independent. She travelled to many different cities during her school vacations in China but never travelled overseas. Luckier than the first participant, Jian, Lan has a younger brother who makes her feel that someone needs her care. During the interview, she seemed hesitant to speak and was not a good story teller. Therefore, the questions were restated in different ways to facilitate conversation.

Yun, a female student, majoring in finance, came from southeastern China. The city she was born is very famous for its culture, history, industry, high technology, and education. Her parents are very successful business people in the city and their family business is in both China and the United States. Yun is the only child in the family, and her parents try to offer her a balanced educational experience and the opportunities to see the world. Starting from age 14, she
travelled and studied in Australia, the UK, and the United States during her summer vacations. She passed an extremely difficult exam which enabled her to enroll in one of the top foreign language schools in China for middle school. The school was full of rigors and competitions, designed to provide the students with a good command of foreign language skills. After Yun finished her middle school, her parents did not want her to compete in rigid China’s National University Entrance Exam (the Gaokao), and decided to send her studying abroad for the undergraduate study. In order to well prepare her for studying abroad, they sent her to the British A level course in her high school year. All courses in the British A level program were delivered by well trained teachers from English speaking countries that helped her to lay a solid foundation to build her English skills. Therefore, her fluent English made her very confident about her study in the United States.

In the interview and the member checking process, the three participants were very cooperative. During Christmas time, when Lan and Yun travelled back to China, and Jian travelled to another city in the United States, they all expressed that they could be reached via email for any further transcript verification and informed the researcher of their available dates when they returned to the United States. During the interview process, the researcher established a very strong rapport with the participants which enabled her to get a deep and rich story about their experiences with ease.

Themes

The above participant’s profile and overview illustrate the background of each participant. These three students reflect the same issues and characteristics in general of the group of Chinese students as a whole at this site. Starting from their individual stories, this study intended to gain
an understanding about how their personal cultural background might impact their learning and achievement.

In reviewing participants’ complicated and massive narratives collected by the three interview approach (Seidman, 1998), the thematic analysis procedure designed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used as a roadmap to “identify, analyze, and report the pattern (themes) within data” (p. 6). In this study, the thematic analysis is data-driven and attempts to provide a more detailed and nuanced account of each particular theme within the data set inductively. Before the interviews, the protocol of interview questions with prompts (Appendix A) was sent to the participants for them to better understand what questions would be posed during the interviews. These interview questions were structurally formulated to elicit responses on participants’ lived experiences in their cross-cultural transition from Chinese to American education. During the interview process, the protocol was very effective in not only guiding the participants to organize their thoughts and recall their experiences, but also in helping the researcher focus the narratives that were needed for the project. The participants’ narratives were presented following the five emerging themes shown in Figure 3:
Figure 3. Five themes and sub themes

1) Motivations for studying abroad
   - External motives
   - Internal motives

2) Perceptions on the different learning environment in American classrooms
   - Informal & interactive classroom
   - Teaching and learning approach
   - Extra-curricular activities

3) Academic challenge and adjustment
   - Language challenge
   - Unfamiliarity of American academic norms
   - Involvement in the university community
   - Self-efforts

4) Coping strategies
   - External supports from friends (Chinese friends and others)
   - Supports from faculty & advisors

5) Reflections on the cross-cultural learning experiences
   - Personal growth
   - Cultural learning and transformation
   - Future plan
Theme 1: Motivations for studying in the United States. Learning experience and academic achievements are influenced by the underlying motives. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of Chinese students pursuing undergraduate degrees in American higher education institutions. In light of this, participants were asked how they made their decisions to study in the United States. These decisions, reflected in their narratives and collected as data, appeared to have been made due to a mix of external and personal motivations.

For those interviewed, external motivations were the driving force of their decisions to study abroad. Those motivations included social and cultural context, parents’ expectations, and peer influence. The research findings indicated that the traditional focus on educational excellence continued to play a dominant role in Chinese society. High achievement in education was closely associated with social status. However, given new factors such as the rapidly growing number of affluent parents, China’s one-child policy, prevailing beliefs regarding the value of studying abroad, and Chinese people’s aspiration for educational excellence, it is the author’s belief that Chinese parents do not want their only child to compete for the limited university spaces associated with the rigid National University Entrance Exam. Going abroad is becoming an alternative for Chinese students to escape from the National University Entrance Exam, and this may help to explain the greater influx of Chinese students into American schools in recent years. The parents of the participants in this study played a very influential role in their children’s decisions to study abroad. Parents’ decisions were also shaped by the social environment and factors such as educational opportunities, the job market, and peer influence.

In this study, two participants were directly influenced by their parents, and one participant made the decision based on peer influence and parental support. All participants
expressed that they were extremely dissatisfied with China’s exam-oriented education system and its related teaching and learning approaches. Under the exam-oriented education system, students, parents and schools all face enormous pressures in working toward victory in the National University entrance exam. Jian shared his unpleasant experiences:

In order to get a good job in China, people must have a better university education. To get into a top university, the students must do well in the National University Entrance Exam. For this exam, I started preparation at age five. From primary to high school, I had to pass countless competitive exams to be enrolled in the key-point schools. Finally, an extreme, rigid university entrance exam waited for me that would determine my fate. I am the only child in the family, and my parents have high expectation about my future. They poured out all their love for me, and encouraged me to study for academic excellence. To be a winner in this final competition, my parents sacrificed all their spare time to accompany and coach me. My father even studied my textbooks in order to coach me better. On the school side, teachers’ salaries and the school’s ranking were all related to their students’ admission rate to the top universities. All teaching activities were around a preparation for the National University Entrance Exam. Students were given lots of mock exams to be familiar with the real exam. The core of teaching was to raise students’ scores in the exams” (personal communication, November. 12, 2012).

In return for all the effort made by his parents, Jian said that he had been studying very hard to obtain good scores in all kinds of exams through his school years. He went to the additional training classes his parents arranged for him to distinguish himself from other students.
He followed exactly what the teachers asked him to do. He made all endeavors and tried to win in the rivalry of the National University Entrance Exam.

The pressure of the exams is not only placed on students but also their parents. Like other Chinese parents, Lan’s parents expected her to receive a better university education. However, the reality is that only a small percentage of high school students can be admitted into the top universities in China through the one-chance, high stakes National University Entrance Exam.

To be enrolled in a good university is regarded as the sole means of finding a decent job. Usually, to achieve this goal, parents’ efforts start with their child’s kindergarten experience, and continue on through primary and secondary school. Lan’s parents were too busy to face this pressure and sent her to a private boarding school when she was six. Although many private boarding schools are committed to developing each student’s potential and unique gifts in and out of class, significant emphasis is still placed on high academic performance under exam oriented educational system in China. Lan explained,

Every student was educated at an early age about the importance of high exam scores in the schools that determined not only an access to the university, but also a door leading to a prosperous life. The goal of education in all schools in China is to prepare students to take the National University Entrance Exam. This is no exception in the boarding school. To attract more enrolled students, the boarding school aims to pursue high quality teaching in its core subjects and enables students to achieve high scores and abilities that meet parents’ expectations for the University Entrance Exam (personal communication, Nov.16, 2012).
To avoid the tough National University Entrance Exam and the pressures posted on their daughter, Yun’s parents realized that their daughter’s suffering in the process of competing for high academic achievement and had affected Yun’s development as a well-rounded person severely. They decided to get her out of this exam loop. After graduating from middle school, Yun chose to study in a British A level course rather than an ordinary public high school. The A level course adopted an international curriculum whose purpose was to prepare Yun for studying in the UK. Her parents believed that the A level courses could help her to minimize the language barrier and better adapt to the western teaching methods upon her arrival in the UK. Yun commented very highly regarding the A level course that gave her a different learning experience from that of her peers in China. The teachers paid attention to the students’ well-rounded development, instead of solely focusing on exams. Besides the regular classes, the program offered additional tutoring sessions and different extracurricular activities organized by students themselves. Students were able to develop their interests based on what they really liked and this applied not only to activities but also to course selection Yun selected business-related courses. Compared to what she suffered in middle school, Yun could not imagine how she went through.

Every day, I studied almost 14 hours including my class hours and extra studies after school in order to reach the academic goals set by my teachers. There was no weekend in my schedule. Cramming and rote learning were the methods teachers used most often in the classroom to stuff the students as much as possible. Excessive academic burden, countless homework and endless practice exams made me tired of studying. Teachers demanded we complete both the required and the optional assignments in the textbooks. There were also a great amount of extra exercises drawn from other textbooks or high
level textbooks that were designed to challenge students in order to excel among the students from the other schools. We had to recite texts, and copy the text book many times for memorization. I had become numb, and did not have a smile on my face. I did not have any chance or energy to develop my individuality, interest and personality. I was unable to figure out why these exams and homework were important, and why I had to compete. I did not have enough time to sleep every day. I lived like a robot following its programming designed by my parents and teachers. During weekends, my parents sent me to different specialized training classes, such as piano, painting, Olympics Mathematic to make me distinguishable from my peer students. My parents also hired a tutor to provide extra tutoring during the weekends. This was the routine of my life and other students my age. I felt I was more like a machine rather than a human being (Yun, November. 20, 2012).

The findings revealed that the students were the bearers of the pressures of the high expectations for academic excellence. They had to face the pressures from their families, schools and society. This endless hard work was toward merely achieving a high academic grade. Lan said every time when she returned home, her ears were full of her parents’ reminders about studying hard. When they called her during the weekdays, the initial topic after their greeting was to ask her about grades in recent exams.

Undoubtedly, these pressures made the participants passive learners and deprived them of their happiness, creativity, curiosity and imagination. Consequently, studying abroad became their alternative to gain a better higher education and escape from China’s National University.
Entrance Exam, particularly when their families had sufficient financial capability to support such alternatives.

Jian’s decision to study in the United States was driven solely by his parents. Actually, he took the University Entrance Exam and failed to enroll in a top-tier local university. When he was in high school, his parents sent him to a local English school to prepare for the TOEFL during his summer vacation. He took the TOEFL test before he went to the last year of his high school following his parents’ arrangement. At that time, he did not know how he could use this test report. Before he took the University Entrance Exam, his parents had already started his American university application process without telling him. They were not satisfied with Jian’s final results on the National University Entrance Exam, and told Jian that he got an acceptance from an American university. Jian was very obedient, and happy to follow his parents’ decision. He mentioned,

I was not involved in the decision-making process. I followed my parents’ decision to study in an American university. Honestly, my parents did not have knowledge about American universities. Their selection was based on the studying abroad agent’s recommendation and their colleagues’ experiences because many of my parents’ colleagues also sent their children to study abroad as well (personal communication, Nov. 12, 2012).

Before his study in the United States, Jian’s knowledge about the United States was from Hollywood movies and TV programs. He did not have any detailed information about the university and the city he would study in. There was no prior preparation for this overseas study
because he did not know what he needed to prepare. He was accustomed to his parents making all arrangements.

Lan indicated that she made the decision to study abroad by herself. She was afraid of the National University Entrance Exam. She gave up by herself and told her parents she planned to study in the United States. Her parents were very supportive and willing to sponsor her financially. After graduating from the high school, she enrolled in a TOEFL training course immediately in order to improve her TOEFL score, and then she found a studying abroad agent to assist her in applying to American universities. She felt the process was simple and easy. She had no idea what she needed to prepare. She was happy that some of her former high school classmates would study at the same university with her.

Compared with the other two participants, Yun’s parents involved Yun in the decision process. As the only child in the family, her parents hoped that she could have a happier life. Her preparation for studying abroad started at an early age when she chose the British A level course. The British A level course in China was meant to help Chinese students study in the UK. She shifted to the United States as the study destination based on her father’s suggestion because the American universities were becoming more popular in China and some American universities recognized A level course credits. Yun selected and applied to various American universities with the assistance of her high school teachers. Her father always respected Yun’s decision and offered his constructive comments.

The findings showed that although three participants had different school experiences in China, their decisions to study abroad were generally driven by social and cultural factors, parents and peer influence, as well as personal motivations. Among these factors, the parents
played a dominant role in their children studying abroad. Without the strong financial support from the family, the participants may not have had the chance to pursue their undergraduate studies in the United States. A value of educational excellence is a tradition in China that is deeply rooted in Chinese culture. The current Chinese government’s “one-child policy” is one of the major driving forces of the increase in Chinese students studying abroad as parents have very high expectations and are willing to contribute everything to their only child. No matter who made the decision to study abroad, the participants valued the opportunity that allowed them to experience a different culture and lifestyle, as well as pursue advanced knowledge.

The findings also support the idea that the participants were prepared to study hard at an American university. The participants were not only socialized to educational excellence, they also had a strong desire to please their parents by achieving academic excellence. They all believed that studying in the United States could cultivate them to be more independent and intelligent, and expanding their world views would ultimately help them in their future global job-hunting. The participants’ aspiration and determination for a better education helped them to overcome the difficulty in their adaptation to the American learning environment. Unlike the students studying in the United States several years ago in past studies (Sun & Chen, 1999; Wan, 2001), the participants in this study did not rely on scholarship, and were fully sponsored by their families.

**Theme Two: Perceptions on the different learning environment of an American classroom.** While talking about the participants’ academic experiences at an American university, all participants expressed that, compared to what they had been accustomed to in
China, they had encountered significant differences. These included differences in the classroom nature, teaching and learning style, teacher-student relationship, and extra-curricular activities.

**Informal & interactive classroom.** In both countries, the classroom is where the teaching and learning activities happen, the teacher and the students are the key figures in the classroom. However, different cultures have their own unique classroom norms. After entering their American university, the participants in this study encountered a totally different classroom culture from the one they experienced previously.

Jian said he was shocked when he saw his American classmates interrupting the teacher in the classroom to express different opinions. To argue with the teachers was regarded as a very offensive behavior in China. However, this was a common practice in the American academic setting.

The American classroom does not seem to have a structure or rule. Students can call the teacher’s given name directly, and are allowed to use laptops and the internet, speak, eat, drink and joke in the classroom. Even without notifying the teacher, a student can leave the classroom… The teacher is not the only speaker, and students are also expected to express their own ideas and opinions in class. The classroom atmosphere here is so relaxed and flexible… What stood out to me is that the teacher is very relaxed. They can sit on the edge of the desk or chairs when they teach, or let students lead the whole class in some courses. Indeed, the teacher and the students are equal in an American classroom (personal communication, November 19, 2012).

Lan shared the same view as Jian. Lan’s description of her classroom in China portrayed a different picture than the American one described by Jian.
The classroom in China was a serious place governed by rules and formalities. Students were expected to be attentive and show sincere respect to their teachers. In the classroom, the students were required to sit straight in their chairs. When a teacher entered the classroom, students should stand up to greet the teacher to show their respect at the beginning of each class, and then sit down for the lecture. Usually, the teachers had to remain standing for the entire lecture in order to better monitor students. Students were expected to humbly obey the teacher’s commands and remain absolutely silent in class, and questions were not allowed without a teacher’s permission. Students were not permitted to speak with each other either. This was the basic formality from primary to high school. The classroom nature in China required students to capture everything the teacher said in class, take notes and study independently after class. Homework and exams were the ways to assess whether students understood or not (personal communication, December 1, 2012).

Unlike the other two participants, Yun was familiar with the casual classroom atmosphere because she experienced a western teaching style in her British A level course in China, and she took summer courses in Australia, the UK and America before enrolling in American college. Her prior experiences prepared her to quickly adapt to the American learning environment. She indicated that she enjoys the relaxed approach to teaching and learning, and she asks her teachers’ questions if she has any during class. However, she admitted that she would never criticize or argue with her teachers and classmates in a face to face communication or straightforward manner like her American peers. She has her ideas but does not speak up because she feels it is unnecessary to argue. Sometimes, she saw some American students
arguing heatedly over a very simple question. She was reluctant to accept this type of direct communication style because it was regarded as disrespectful in Chinese culture. However, this did not mean she did not participate during class. Lan and Yun had this viewpoint in common, and Lan explained it as follows:

It is obvious that there are some cultural differences existing in education between China and the United States because China is an eastern country and the United States has a western style. In the learning process, I became aware that there were some significant cultural differences in the classroom between these two countries. For example, students are educated to receive the knowledge from their teachers in China, and they are unwilling to speak up, question, and criticize their teachers. Here in the United States, students are encouraged to acquire knowledge by themselves as that is considered the basis of creativity. They need to think and raise questions to challenge teachers. I have been educated under the Chinese education system for many years, and the shift from the Chinese passive learning pattern to an active American learning atmosphere takes time and needs more practice. In my first semester, I seldom spoke in class, and even right now, I can speak up in class, but I never criticize my classmates nor teachers because this is considered as impolite in Chinese culture. I prefer to express my opinion and am willing to hear the different voices. My previous cultural background more or less affects me in my study. I am very clear about the differences in educational practices between China and the United States, but I cannot totally follow the way American students behave in class (personal communication, December 1, 2012).
In addition, all participants mentioned that an American class size was relatively small compared to a classroom of 50-60 in China. In particular, the classroom layout between American and Chinese schools is different. In a small American class, the desk and chairs are movable, and the teacher often arranges the furniture so as to be more conducive to discussion. Students can choose where they want to sit. On the contrary, in China, the desks and the chairs are arranged in rows. Students have their fixed seats for all courses. The American classroom layout is designed for flexible teaching methods. The students can sit in a circle, or half circle, or two or three students may sit together for a group discussion or other team activities. Most of time, the class appears to be more noisy and chaotic. Conversely, Chinese style fixed classroom layout is appropriate for lecture style teaching. Students are required to be quiet and attentive as the listeners. The classroom atmosphere in China is very formal and disciplined.

The findings indicate that different classroom nature determines different teaching and learning practices. Chinese students are habitually silenced in class and lack practice and training in making public speeches; while the American students have had lots of training and practice in their schooling, and appear to be more confident in public speaking and class presentations.

Jian said, he thought his classmates were brave to speak in class, no matter if their opinions were correct or wrong. However, he was accustomed to be a silent listener; it would take a while for him to change his deeply rooted habits. The causes for his silence in class were not attributed to his understanding of course content, but his language ability, inborn timid nature and unfamiliarity of speaking in public due to his previous educational background. Lan and Yun also reported a lack of confidence, and background information about course topics also affected their active participations in class. Their habitual silence in class needs time and effort to change.
**Teaching and learning approach.** The participants expressed that they experienced a very different teaching and learning approach at the American university compared to their previous Chinese education. The major distinctions reported involved the role of the teacher, the role of students, and their relation to teaching content and assessment methods.

*Teacher's role.* All participants commented that the role of American teachers was different from those of their Chinese counterparts. The teaching methods in American universities are mainly viewed as student-centered and problem-based rather than the teacher-centered, knowledge-transmission teaching they were accustomed to while they were in China. In an American learning environment, students are expected to be independent learners rather than recipients of established knowledge from their teachers. The attitude toward knowledge is to cultivate students’ practical skills rather than theoretical knowledge; the teaching and learning are not limited to the classroom.

Lan stated, 

In the United States, the teacher acts more like a facilitator, and they give students lots of autonomy. Students are required to be familiar with the course content and raise questions for debates and discussions in classes. Students are likely to learn from the self-directed study rather than from the authorized teachers. Therefore, independent learning is a significant feature of an American learning style. American teachers believe that the responsibility for learning lies with the students. I was accustomed to a dependent learning style and followed exactly what the teachers required me to do in China (personal communication, December 1, 2012).

Jian echoed Lan’s comments, saying,
In China, teachers are always correct. If students have disagreements, usually they do not argue with teachers. Any argument with the teachers is regarded as disrespectful. In an American classroom, discussions are the common practice between the teacher and the students, while, the teacher is the authority who delivers lectures through the entire class in China. Usually, there is only limited time for students to ask questions during the class. The size of a class in China is around 60. Teachers are unable to give all students’ opportunities to speak up. The method of asking several students' questions is a means of determining if the majority of students in class understands the course content. Most of the time, students are busy writing down the notes and try their best to follow what the teacher said. In the American university, both teacher and students play important roles in class. Students are given more chance to express their own opinions and contribute to the class. American teachers encourage the brainstorming, and give more time for students to speak and argue in class. There is nothing right or wrong about their ideas or opinions as long as they can generate something new or different (personal communication, November 19, 2012).

Yun said,

Compared to the classroom in China, there is not a strict order in class. Students appear to be the center of the teaching. The teaching atmosphere is very relaxing. Students can pose their questions at any time if they want. American teachers always ask student questions. An active two way discussion is the norm of an American classroom. There is no standardized syllabus. Each teacher has his/her own autonomy to decide what to teach in class. The final class grade is composed of not only the results of one test, but of
classroom participations, presentations, assignments, team work and tests as a whole. Lots of in-class discussions promote mutual interactions to help students improve their verbal skills and learn through dialogues and debates. Class presentations encourage students to take a leadership role, share their knowledge, and improve public speaking skills. Course readings require students to expand their perspectives and synthesize new materials through the independent search for information. Peer student feedback promotes learning through constructive critiques of each other’s work. In this learning cycle, my English language ability, academic writing, presentation and reading, as well as critical thinking skills have been fully developed (personal communication, December 3, 2012).

The student is the center of learning in the American academic culture. Jian was puzzled about the teacher’s role in the American university. Unlike his teachers in China, American teachers are not likely to offer students’ detailed guidance, students must figure things out by themselves, and teachers do not track their students’ academic performance. According to Jian,

Teaching in an American class comes from class activities. The different class activities such as group discussions, student’s presentations, group projects, teamwork and other activities enable active interactions between teacher and students and among students. Students are fully engaged in the learning process. At the beginning of my undergraduate study, I was very shy and always kept silent. Now I am becoming more active, but still cannot compare with my American classmates because I had not practiced this type of interaction before when I was in China. In China, textbook focused teaching is the only activity in a class. The teacher speaks and students listen. Usually there is no
interaction between teacher and students. Students can ask questions after class individually not in a group. Students act as listeners in class. The teacher could not observe the students’ distraction in their minds. Sometimes, students that sit in the back row could have a nap in a big classroom. In the American academic setting, if I do not ask my teacher questions, he/she will not come to ask me. If I fail a course, I have to retake and repay the full tuition for that course, unlike in China, where students’ failure is their teacher’s responsibility. My teachers in China were very demanding and responsible. They monitored their students’ academic progress, and approached them to offer help. If I did not submit my homework, they would continue to ask me do that, and kept me stay late in school to complete it under their supervision. In addition, the teachers also worked very closely with my parents to make sure I was on the upward track of the academic path. If I did not perform well on a test, the teachers would call my parents to encourage them to coach and mentor me. If my parents were busy, they would conduct a home visit to discuss with my parents about how they could work together to help me. Usually, if I had any question, I went to their offices for help. They would stay as long as I needed even after working hours. Their dedication to the students and commitment to teaching made a deep impression on me. In China, I established a very good relationship with my teachers through after-class discussions (personal communication, November 12, 2012).

Lan recalled that her private boarding school teachers were more supportive than those in Chinese public schools because the students’ parents were very demanding. If students were weak in some subjects, the school would arrange an individual tutoring session to help them. Every evening, a teacher accompanied students in their self study session; students could ask
questions if they had difficulty finishing the homework. However, she did not see any of her American teachers approach her. Her interaction with teachers was limited to the classroom. Lan described the difference in her primary and secondary experiences in China as compared to her university experience in the United States as follows:

By contrast, my teachers in China would approach me to offer help when they observed that I had difficulties with my homework and exams. If I had a question, I could go to the teacher’s office to ask directly without any appointment because they always stayed in their office after classes… American teachers, however, seldom approach students, and students need to check their teachers’ office hours and schedule an appointment if they need to ask questions face to face. Students also could send emails to ask teachers, but sometimes, the responses were not timely… Compared to American teachers, Chinese teachers have a heavy workload in class, and they have to speak from the beginning to the end. They also have to review and revise all students’ assignments, homework and test papers after class. Whereas, the American teachers usually involve students in the teaching activities. Both teachers and students are active players in the class. Sometimes, the students will review their homework and assignments with each other. American teachers motivate students to learn by themselves… In some sense, some American teachers are not those who have rich teaching experiences. Some teachers may lack teaching experience but are strong in research. Sometimes, they may say they do not know the answers to the questions raised by students. My teachers in China, on the other hand, were very knowledgeable in their specialized area and knew how to lead and
educate students. They could answer all questions from students (personal communication, November 16, 2012).

The nature of teaching is determined by a nation’s social and cultural contexts. Chinese students are the products of exams. Teaching approaches in China are shaped by an exam-oriented education system. Memorizing and repetition are the major ways to acquire book knowledge. Yun reflected on her previous school experience and offered opinions about the differences in teaching between the two countries.

The United States has a more open, flexible and innovative educational system than China. There is no standardized syllabus. Each teacher has his/her own autonomy to decide what to teach in class. A free academic environment allows teachers and students to share ideas with each other in the classroom. There are lots of co-learning activities among students and between students and teachers in class. There is no right or wrong answer, but students can express why and how he/she comes up with this idea. Disputing or discussion is a normal expectation in class. The students can argue with the teacher if he/she has different opinions. In an American classroom, critical thinking is valued and creative ideas are encouraged. Students’ academic performance is not assessed by exams but the entire classroom performance including classroom participations, presentations, assignments and team work… In the teaching process, the American teachers try to create an avenue for students to develop their hands-on experiences. Learning by doing is a common practice in American teaching with a combination of classroom learning and real world experience. In my previous study, I learned from the textbooks not from the real world. My study seemed isolated from the world. The purpose of my study was to
get a high score to be admitted into a good university. At the American university, I really learn and benefit from this new academic system that offers me an opportunity to be an independent learner and thinker. Indeed, I am experiencing a totally different teaching approach (personal communication, December 3, 2012).

The participants also pointed out the teaching methods in science and mathematics were quite similar in both China and the United States, but the types of exam were different. American teachers prefer to test how students can use the formulas taught in the class; while Chinese teachers tend to test if students are able to memorize the formulas. Lan added that American-style teaching intends to create an avenue for students to connect learning with the real world to develop students’ practical and problem-solving abilities. In her previous study in China, textbook knowledge was not related to the world but for purposes of the exam. Jian proposed that Chinese teaching focuses on theory rather than application. Chinese students’ academic performance is solely assessed by exams and not by other learning activities.

To summarize, the three participants expressed that they experienced the teacher’s role change from the teacher-centered teaching style to the student-centered learning style. The findings also revealed that communications took place between teachers and students in both Chinese and American schools, but the timing was different due to a different school system and communicative styles. In America, the teacher and students have active communications inside a class; however, the relationship between them after the class is distant. Most American teachers have fixed office hours for students. Students need to make appointments for questions or ask questions in class. To the contrary, the students in China are required to listen attentively rather than speak in class, but they approach their teachers for questions after classes. The relationship
between teacher and students is much closer after classes in China than that of American teachers. The participants commented that American teachers do not take responsibility for student success when compared to Chinese teachers. Instead, the students’ job is to take more responsibility and initiative in their own learning.

*Student’s role.* A good student image in China is a person who obeys and pays great attention exactly to what the teacher says. The student’s role in China would be that of a passive listener in class and very dependent on their teachers. In comparison, American academic environments are structured for students to be independent learners. Independent learning is a significant feature of an American learning style. American teachers believe that the responsibility for learning lies with the student. Students play a dominant role in their own learning process. All participants indicated they had to learn how to study by themselves.

Jian said in an American learning environment, teachers require students to be self-motivated learners. Students are given more chances to express their own opinions and ideas which ultimately develop a student’s creativity and problem-solving ability. Students in American classes are encouraged to be engaged in brainstorming, participating and speaking. Upon commencing his undergraduate studies, Jian was unable to transition from his role as a passive listener an active participant in the classroom. He shared,

The difference in my learning compared to my American peers is that American students like listening attentively in class. They do not take detailed notes like me. I follow my Chinese learning habit to take all notes in class for an independent learning after class. I spend lots of time engaging in self-studying after class. If I was unable to take complete notes, I would borrow from my classmates-- either Chinese students or other international
students. My American classmates’ notes are pretty simple. If they have a question in the
class, they spontaneously interrupt the teacher and ask for a clarification or discussion.
They love to voice their opinions and ask questions in class… In contrast, I am relatively
silent in class and busy with note-taking. During presentations, my American peers use
very simple notes to highlight key points; while, I have to prepare a full script so that I
can memorize it and then speak well in front of the class because I have not had this kind
of experience before (personal communication, November 19, 2012).
Lan further explained,
The teaching approach in the American academic environment encourages students to
learn through active participation. Many courses are organized around classroom
discussions, student projects and informal debates. For the most part, the teacher acts
more like a facilitator in some business and humanity related classes, and students are
required to make presentations and lead discussions. An inactive participation results in
low grades… The students play a very active role in the American classroom. Every time,
the teacher asks a question, American students immediately respond. If they do not
understand questions well, they ask the teacher for clarification. Sometimes, American
students interrupt teachers when they have questions. In the group discussion or team
projects, American students always volunteer to be the group or team leaders and learn
from their active engagement.

While in China, the nature of the classroom decides that students are less active in
class because the teacher is the center of teaching activities. A learning process in China
is to accept knowledge passed on by the teachers. The most intense learning usually takes
place outside of the classroom to reproduce the textual knowledge and work on the test papers based on the teacher’s requirements. The learning activities focus on the textbooks, and students are very dependent on their teachers. Studying on your own is an important component in order to memorize important textual knowledge to achieve a better exam grade during the learning process (personal communication, December 1, 2012).

Yun pointed out the differences in the roles the students play in their learning in China and the United States.

Chinese students are educated to receive knowledge from the teachers in China. They are trained to accept knowledge and listen to the lectures attentively in class. Chinese students usually ask questions after thoughtful thinking. They do not like raising any question in public, and prefer in-person communication with the teacher individually.

The communications with teachers in China rarely take place during class. Students pose questions for those areas they do not understand, but they never argue with their teachers. In an American academic setting, students are encouraged to acquire knowledge by themselves. Open discussion is a very common practice. Questions are raised and discussed simultaneously. Of course, in-class discussions promote an interaction between teachers and their students, and this is helpful for students in order to improve their verbal skills and learn through dialogues and debates. The class presentations encourage students to take a leadership role, share their knowledge and improve their public speaking skills. Students are required to use academic resources extensively to obtain additional materials related to their courses in order to expand their perspective and synthesize comprehension. Peer student feedback promotes learning through constructive
critique of each other’s work. Students at the American university are required to be independent learners, and American teachers place great emphasis on student initiatives and practical experiences. The students have less homework, less memorizing, more discussions and learning-by-doing activities, and they are required to figure out creative solutions to real life problems. However, not every American student is active in class, and it really depends on the students’ personalities (personal communication, December 3, 2012).

Clearly, learning at the American university is not limited in the classroom. Lan really enjoyed her after-class activities, and they played a critical role in complementing, enriching and extending her classroom learning experiences. After class team projects assigned by the teachers allow her to communicate and negotiate with team members and learn how to lead group discussion. After-class group work and activities provide her an opportunity to practice critical thinking and time management skills, and they enhance her academic and social competence and self-confidence.

Regarding the perceptions of the differences of students’ roles, all participants expressed that there were students who always followed the teacher’s instructions both in Chinese and American schools. They always studied hard to meet requirements. In their first year transition, the participants had positively changed their roles as a student in the new academic environment. However, they did not admit to being passive learners. Their learning approaches were directed by the teaching methods and goal of the study. Chinese and American education systems presented them with different ways to learn. Shifting from a long-term teacher-centered style to a new student-centered teaching approach requires time and effort.
**Extracurricular activities.** Extracurricular activities are very important learning components in the American education system. Students in American schools can select from a wide range of extra-curricular activities that not only give them an opportunity to gain social, cultural and practical experience, as well as vocational interest and entertainment, but also help them refine their core skills in different aspects outside their regular school day. Extracurricular activities include service learning, community involvement, volunteer jobs and club activities that play an integral role in a student’s emotional, intellectual, social and personal development.

However, these activities are not common practice in Chinese schools. Teaching and learning approaches in China are teacher centered, classroom-focused and exam-oriented following a fixed curriculum. Chinese students do not have the time to experience extracurricular activities due to the pressure of the rigid National University Entrance Exam. Both Jian and Yun said that there were sent to different after school training classes such as English, music, and Olympic Mathematics. These extracurricular activities were not based on their interests but driven in general by an exam-oriented education system. Lan described that American students pay great attention to extracurricular activities while Chinese students are willing to spend more time on academic study. All participants valued American learning opportunities and experiences. They were involved in extracurricular activities at various levels. Yun was involved in a club associated with her academic field and quickly became familiar with the other students in the same area. She also worked as a part time tutor, and also joined a dance club in the city. She appreciated all of the professional development and entertainment opportunities. Lan attended a Yoga class on campus and worked as an intern in a local shop.
These after-class activities provided a balance in her life and study, as well as a chance to meet others locally.

Jian was excited to experience extracurricular activities available at the American university. He shared,

I was excited for all the activities open to me. I joined several sports clubs based on my American peers’ recommendations. After a while, I found my interests could not be found in the university clubs because American peers have different interests from me. I like table tennis, badminton and football while my American classmates favor hockey, soccer and baseball. I gave up club activities and do what I like individually in my spare time. Most of the time, I prefer to have my own activities with my Chinese friends.

Particularly, I had not experienced community service before; I was very interested in exploring this activity. I participated in a volunteer job organized by the university in my first year of study. However, I felt very disappointed. I had to knock on doors informing people living in a poor neighborhood about the assistance we could offer them. Some of them opened the doors but did not trust us. Others even refused to open the doors. I could not figure out how I could help people. After that, I lost interest in the volunteer job and in service learning (personal communication, November 19, 2012).

All participants commented that academic study was still their top priority throughout their freshman year, because they had to deal with lots of challenges in their transition. Their extracurricular activities were not very active like those of their American peers. They enjoyed the extracurricular activities after finishing their required academic assignments. They made arrangements to attend activities they enjoyed. Unlike their American peers, the participants do
not have an interest in night life such as bar-hopping or partying. Most of their activities are associated with the Chinese friends. Influenced by their past assumptions as well as previous experiences in China, they are in the process of becoming acquainted with American-style extracurricular activities. They are open for these opportunities but remain skeptical. They are not active like their American peers in extracurricular activities, but they are starting to be involved, becoming accustomed and are starting to benefit from these activities.

**Theme 3: Academic challenge and adjustment.** The transition to a different learning environment may result in a certain level of discomfort and stress due to significant differences in the participants’ previous learning experiences and attitudes toward learning. The findings reported that insufficient English skills, unfamiliarity with the American academic norms, and engagement with the university community were seen as the major concerns in participants’ initial stages at the American university.

**Language challenge.** In response to cross-cultural challenges, the first thing that came to mind for the participants was their English competency. Language difficulty was seen as a major concern in participants’ daily classroom participation and academic writing, as well as social life. In general, the participants excelled in their courses that did not require high language proficiency, and had more difficulty in business and humanities courses that demanded a strong command of the language.

Prior to their arrival in the United States, they had studied English starting in primary school. Participants reported that English language training had become very popular in China under the feverish interest in study abroad, to some extent, even more popular than Chinese language training. Different types of English courses had mushroomed across the country in the
past decade (Lin, 2002). Besides the regular English courses required at school, the three participants took additional English courses outside of school, consistently from an early age because their parents believed English would play an important role in their children’s future. The three participants’ schools in China also hired native speakers to teach English. This was especially true in Yun’s case, whose high school used English as the instructional language. All participants were expected to have a strong command of English before leaving China. However, in the transition from a Chinese speaking to an English speaking country, language really challenged them.

Jian expressed his worries about his English proficiency.

English I learned was for exams in China. I was not confident in real communication situations. Suddenly, too many new English vocabulary came to me. I was overwhelmed. I tried not to speak in class if the teacher did not ask me. Initially, I had difficulties in comprehending my teacher’s speaking. I had to record lectures, keep all notes, and ask the classmates for help. After class, I also did lots of studying on my own to understand the course content. However, I seldom asked teachers any questions because I was nervous that they could not understand me, or that I would not understand them, or that they might feel my questions were too simple to answer. Anyway, I remained silent in class to avoid embarrassment (personal communication, November 19, 2012).

Lan was not confident in English either. When she arrived, she felt that the English she learned in China was different from what local people really spoke in the United States.

Overall, the biggest difficulty for me upon arrival was English. My TOEFL score was at the university entry requirement, however, the English training course I took in China
was to help me prepare for the TOEFL test techniques, not improving my functional English ability. My speaking and listening, and particularly writing ability turned out to be an obstacle in my academic study. All my stress and pressure originally stemmed from my insufficient English. I could understand what others said, but I would have difficulty in expressing myself accurately. Shyness was my weakness. I was too shy to talk with people in English because I was not confident… In class, my lack of competent English affected my class participation. I was too nervous to make mistakes in my speech. I preferred to keep silent. In addition, presentation skills were new to me. I did not know what I should do to prepare for presentations. Incompetent oral English skills and the lack of prior experience prevented me from actively participating in class discussions. Literally, I am more confident in the courses that do not need in-class presentations and group discussions such as Mathematics (personal communication, December 1, 2012).

Yun described her challenge in terms of language. She said, although I had all my high school courses delivered in English, the major difficulty I faced upon arrival was still English. I did not have any significant difficulty following instructions in class, but I had problems in understanding my American classmates after class when we chatted. I could not catch the meaning of idioms and words related to local life, for instance, the name of the local ice cream shop, the town’s name, and local events. I do not think my language ability prevented me from the active engagement of class discussions; however, my challenge was with some cultural differences in communication. Culturally, I do not want to express my disagreement in front of the teacher and my classmates. I prefer to be well prepared and then speak without any
mistake in class. I do not want to lose ‘face’ in front of my classmates. Unfortunately, in class time is not enough for me to prepare my speeches well (personal communication, December 3, 2012).

From the participants’ narratives, English proficiency has a great impact on their interactions both inside and outside classroom activities. Lack of English proficiency and self-confidence also appear to be the reasons for their silence during class. Besides listening and speaking concerns, writing academic papers seems to be another concern for the participants, particularly in businesses and humanities related courses. Participants reported their challenges in writing.

Jian: Writing a paper in English was a painful process in my studying at the American university. First of all, the way of thinking in English is different from China due to the differences in education and culture. Thinking in English is the basis of writing an English essay or paper. In Chinese writing, teachers usually require students to hide their goals and develop statements step by step literally until the end of the paper. But in America, teachers encourage students to make their statements very clear from the beginning of the paper. Second, in English, the writing style is totally different from a Chinese one. For example, in English writing, literature is being used frequently to support the essay or paper, but students need to provide extensive resources on where they found these previous studies. While in China, I could cite some data from the previous studies to support my paper without providing where I found those data. In the American academic setting, it is called plagiarism that would lead to “Fail” in the final
grade. In addition, the proper use of connecting words and definite articles was another thing I ignored in the beginning (personal communication, November 19, 2012).

Lan: The writing convention in my American undergraduate study is different than what I experienced in China. Chinese-style teaching focuses on established textbook knowledge; and teachers like to see how many articles and famous sayings can be utilized in students’ compositions. Usually, people in China do not own their own words. The formats for using others’ words are different from what American institutions require. In the American academic setting, the use of someone else’s idea or wording without acknowledging is called plagiarism which Chinese students do not fully understand in our previous education and need to learn how to prevent properly by using paraphrasing, citations and quotation. I lack knowledge in basic citation and quotation formats. Some of my teachers use software to scan student papers for plagiarism. It has become a major challenge among Chinese students. As Chinese students had a totally different writing convention before, some students faced harsh punishment when they did not use appropriate citations and quotations (personal communication, December 1, 2012).

Different from Jian and Lan, Yun learned western writing convention in high school, but she also selected a writing class at the beginning of her undergraduate study. The writing class was very helpful to improve her academic writing. She followed instructions, paid attention to the differences in writing, and did lots of practice. She expressed that thinking in English was critical in writing; however it would be an ongoing process to change from the Chinese way of thinking to the English way of thinking. In an American academic domain, students are required to write more critically, a writing style to which Chinese students lack exposure.
Despite English being a major academic challenge, all participants believed that their English could be improved by continued practice and self-effort. They undertook various strategies to immerse themselves into English speaking environments. Watching TV and movies, listening to the news, through campus engagement, attending special training sessions and making friends with local and international students were the most useful approaches for improving their language proficiency. For example, to overcome his weakness and shyness in speaking, Jian made efforts to approach his classmates and teachers to talk. He also enrolled in a Public Speaking course as an elective to improve his English speaking ability and confidence. After several months, he was able to catch up with the teachers and communicate well with classmates in class. However, he admitted that being silent in class was still his weakness because of his language ability, inborn timid nature and the unfamiliarity of speaking from his previous educational background. Jian described his progress in the following passage:

After several months’ immersion in an English environment, I became braver than before. I did not care if I made any mistakes or not when I spoke. If my classmates could not understand me, I would repeat several times until they understood. I also started approaching teachers for questions because I felt that I paid such a high tuition and I needed to understand the lectures. I also learned that students with high academic performance could find a job comparatively easier. I worked hard toward that goal. I studied diligently to improve my English. My academic records have improved so that I am able to meet the course requirements. Sometimes I still remain silent in class, but this does not mean I do not understand or I do not have my opinions. I always try to better organize my speech. Most of the time, other classmates are much quicker to give a
speech. I was lacking in practice as a speaker during class because I had been trained to be a listener in class for almost 12 years. It will take time to make this change… I do not think my language appears to be a big barrier in my studying and life in the U.S. (personal communication, November 19, 2012).

Yun introduced her method of English improvement. She believed that more involvement on campus was helpful. Living in a dorm had been a good experience that connected her to the campus life and interactions with American students and students from different countries. She realized that the only way to increase her vocabulary was to have conversations with local people. Yun was lucky to have an American roommate in her first year of undergraduate study. To communicate with her American roommate daily allowed her to have more practice and helped her significantly change her way of thinking. After she moved out, she still kept a regular schedule to study in the university library. She liked the campus learning environment so that she could focus on the subjects and make full use of library resources. After continued practices, her English and self-confidence had been improved a lot in her transition process. Yun said,

There was no shortcut. The only way I could increase my vocabulary was to practice, practice and practice with my American roommate and native speakers. After several months, I made great progress. I could join chats with my American classmates and local people easily (personal communication, December 3, 2012).

The findings indicated that even though English was not sufficient for the participants to function perfectly like a native speaker, they believed that their English abilities are enough for their academic activities and social networking. Speaking like a native speaker required time and practice. The participants were confident because they were highly motivated to learn a new
language and adapt to a new language environment. Self-motivation was a key in their transition process. Yun commented that, “if a student lacks self-motivation, it is hard for them to do well in either American or Chinese universities” (personal communication, December 3, 2012).

Unfamiliarity of American academic norms. American classroom formalities are different from the Chinese ones. According to the participants, they all experienced an initial stress in attending classes, selecting courses, doing presentations, participating in the group work, writing papers, and communicating with faculty and students. Besides English incompetence, the unfamiliar domain of an American academic environment serves as another source of challenges for the participants.

The participants’ narratives showed that most of their academic challenges were associated with the differences in educational systems between China and the United States, mainly the teaching and learning practices and classroom nature. The participants did not have prior knowledge and practice of American-style academic norms and conventions in their schoolings in China. They all agreed the biggest difference in the American university was the focus on becoming an independent learner. The teacher would no longer offer detailed instructions on what they should learn and how to learn. Suddenly, students were given a great deal of freedom to exercise their independence and responsibilities for the courses they intended to study, as well as when and how to study. Thus, initially, they faced difficulties in dealing with this greater freedom as undergraduate students.

Jian mentioned his difficulties in selecting the courses.

I really like the academic flexibility that American education offers me. To accommodate the students’ demands, the university has a long list of subjects in the course catalog for
us to choose from. Faced with too many courses, I did not have an idea on which one I needed to take. When I was in China, my courses were fixed by the government. At the American university, my advisor recommended some courses for me based on her understanding and prior experience working with American students. However, I found out that those courses were not what I liked, and they were hard for me to learn. For example, they thought American history would be a fun and easy course for me. Unfortunately, it was very challenging because I had not studied anything about American history before. All the names of the important people in American history and famous events confused me. On the contrary, our American classmates thought this course was the one with a lesser burden for them because they learned it in their high schools. I learned from this lesson. I preferred to ask Chinese students or other international students to share their experiences in course selection (personal communication, November 19, 2012).

Lan expressed her challenge in her class communications and learning assessments. American classroom formalities are different from China’s, I did not experience dialog in a classroom before. I was familiar with a one-way communication style in class and did not know how to involve myself in a class discussion. I was puzzled when trying to figure out when it would be appropriate for me to speak, and how to express myself better. I realized that there is a difference in the classroom. I observed and imitated what my American classmates did. After becoming acquainted with them, they also shared with me some of the formalities.
Group work and team projects are very common class activities in American classes. The group work requires group and individual presentations. In China, we were focused on doing our own work, not group work. In the American university, I learned how to work with my classmates together to construct the understanding of new knowledge in relation to a real world issue or problem. The American learning approach allowed me to practice my problem solving and teamwork abilities, and learned by doing rather than receiving knowledge passed by the teachers.

In addition, the student’s final grade is determined by the classroom participation, assignments, group work, team project and tests. My performance in different class activities all contributes to my grades For example, the course “Macroeconomic Theory” consisted of class presentation, paper and homework 25%, two quizzes 50% final 25%, total 100%. The rule here is if I fail one course, I need to repay tuition for retaking the course rather than retaking the final exam like my experience in China. I have to make a commitment to studying hard in different learning activities, not just focus on the final exam (personal communication, December 1, 2012).

Lan commented that following American formalities was easy, while to be an effective learner in this new formality was very challenging. There was a process from unknown to known, with constant practicing and an adherence to the “no pain, no gain” philosophy. After a year, she has become more confident. Luckily, the university she attended had lots of Chinese students who could share their academic experiences with her so that she knew what the gaps were, and she learned from the other Chinese students’ lessons to fill these gaps more effectively.
Yun expressed that she had difficulty defining what exactly critical thinking was and how to criticize others’ task in a manner that would be appropriate in an American learning environment.

I was educated to respect the authority of knowledge and the teacher in the Chinese culture. There is a deep cultural gap between China and the U.S. that makes it difficult for me to argue and challenge established knowledge or teachers in class discussion or in writing a critical paper. In the new learning culture, I acknowledged that critical thinking was a way of learning. The whole American education system promotes critical thinking from different learning activities. I must offer my opinion about agreement or disagreement. The understanding of knowledge is built through activities, not memorization and repetitions. It was challenging for me to critically assess others because I did not have prior practice. Through practice, I was able to jump out of the box to present my independent thoughts. However, the Chinese cultural concern of face still hampered me from criticizing others in order to maintain a harmonious interpersonal relationship. To think critically is easier said than done. I am still in a process of learning how to challenge myself and others (personal communication, December 3, 2012).

Encountering the new academic formality, the participants are in the process of reconstructing and renegotiating their identities to fit into an American learning environment. They are aware of the differences, and make an effort to adapt to the new environment by their endeavors. Their Chinese values of diligence and independent effort, as well as their motives to learn, facilitate the adaptive process.

*Involvement in the university community.*
Good relationships with faculty and peers are important for Chinese students’ involvement in the American university community and their academic success. In transferring from a Chinese way of knowledge transmission teaching to an independent American learning paradigm requires Chinese students to be more proactive in approaching their professors with questions for help so as to build the rapport with faculty. At the same time, active communication with peers is also very helpful for the Chinese students in developing a deeper understanding about American culture and academic norms.

*Relationships with faculty.* To shift from the Chinese school system to American higher education, the participants encountered a different style of relationship building with faculty. Communication and interaction were the major method of relationship building. Participants pointed out that both teachers in Chinese and American schools were very nice, but varied in several ways. In China, the teachers are authorities of knowledge and role models, and students are expected not only to accept knowledge from them, but also love and care for them. The students treat teachers more like their “parents” (Wang, 2006). Although a teacher-student relationship is distant in class, it is very close after class. Chinese students share with their teachers everything in their lives and studies. For example, Jian keeps a long-term friendship with his English teacher from high school. Lan communicates with her teachers more often than her parents when she is in the United States. Yun visits her teachers every time she travels back to her home city. On the contrary, the participants expressed that even though students and teachers were equal in the American classroom, the relationship was distant after class. American teachers and students can joke, argue and chat in class. After class, there is a gap between them. Participants said that they had difficulty building a satisfactory relationship with
their American teachers. American teachers only handle academic issues. There are advisors who offer help in academic advising and other areas. Usually, the teacher does not give much detail or guidance on how to study while students have the autonomy to work out their study plan in order to meet academic goals. Unfortunately, participants commented that they did not observe any faculty or advisor who had an awareness of students’ cultural differences and was able to provide culturally responsive academic support and guidance. American teachers and advisors treated all students equally no matter which cultural background they came from.

Jian: All my American teachers are very nice. They are willing to answer students’ questions in their assigned working hours. The difference is I need to make an appointment with them. I disliked sending them emails because some of them did not reply in a timely basis. Unlike my Chinese teachers, American teachers generally do not offer help, but students need to approach them for questions if they have any. To get a quick answer, most of the time, I preferred to ask my classmates for help. If I could get answers from my classmates, I would not make appointments with a teacher.

At the beginning, the obstacle of approaching the teacher was my English. After I gained more confidence in my English, I felt that even when I approached the teacher they would still let me handle things by myself. Therefore, I tried not to disturb them… The advisors in the American university are very important too, and they act as a resource to direct students in the right direction and create a campus connection for students. However, I seldom approached them because I could get the information from my Chinese friends and classmates easily (personal communication, December 3, 2012).
Lan: In my study in the United States, I seldom approached any faculty and advisors. Most of the time, I relied on myself and asked help from my Chinese schoolmates and classmates to work out my academic questions or concerns. Advisors in the American university are a good resource as long as students approach them for help. What I felt was their assistance was very superficial; students still needed to figure out things by themselves. In China, we had a teacher who was in charge of each class. They offered help to students in and out the class in both academic and personal issues. Students and teacher could build a very good relationship. I assume this is why Chinese students including me do not ask for help because we wait for the teachers’ offers. In the American university, the American teacher and advisor seldom approached students for help like we experienced in China. I perceive that the relationship between students and teacher in the American university is more like a business. The teacher only works in their paid time. Thus, my relationship with American teachers is limited to the classroom, no further communications and connections after class. I have to rely on myself. Initially, it was very challenging and stressful. After one year, I am confident I can survive on my own way at the American university (personal communication, December 1, 2012).

Yun experienced three years of UK education in China, and she had more experience working with western teachers than the other two participants. She shared her positive experiences.

Most of my American teachers are kind; however, it really depends on the individuals. Some are more patient than others. I love to ask my teachers questions if I do not understand in class. I go to teachers’ offices in their fixed office hours, or send an email
to make appointments. They all are very friendly. Each teacher has a lot of students to supervise, and the fixed appointment time is too short for in-depth communications with each student. It is pretty hard to develop any close relationship with them. They finish teaching and leave. As for the advisor, one of their roles is to help students to select the courses. I do not think they are helpful because they understand American students better than international students. When I seek advice on university policies or other rules, I prefer to approach the senior Chinese students on campus for suggestions and recommendations (personal communication, December 3, 2012).

*Relationships with peer students.* Regarding the relationship with American students, all participants commented that they could work with them in the group discussions and team projects, particularly in an area where American peers were relatively weak. However, they were closer to Chinese and other international students. Their closest friends are all Chinese. Their relationships with American peers remain in the academic setting only, and there is no close connection with them in life. Regarding the reasons, Jian explained it might be due to the cultural differences.

I tried to approach American students on campus. Most often, I do not know what I should say; I assume they do not know what to talk about with me either. We have different experiences and cultures and do not have common knowledge about our counterpart’s backgrounds. Language is also a barrier that hinders the friendship between Chinese and American students… One of my American classmates laughed at me because I did not have a driver’s license. For them, this was unbelievable. They had the driving class in their high schools. Honestly, I am not sure what an American style
friendship is… My impression is that American peers are very independent and have a very relaxed attitude toward friendship. When I invited them to join us for an event, if they refused twice that indicated they did not want to be with us. In Chinese culture, we rarely say “no” to friends. Particularly, American students are very engaged in their own affairs. They are busy with all different extracurricular activities and part-time jobs. Some of them are extremely active in clubs and social activities. They admire Chinese students very much because most Chinese students are supported by their parents financially. The top priority for Chinese students is to study and achieve a good academic performance. But the American students need not only study hard to be eligible for the scholarship, but also earn money to pay part of their university tuition. Due to the cultural differences, I have difficulty making friends with American students. Most of my close friends are Chinese. Perhaps we have the same culture and attitude toward friendships (personal communication, November.19, 2012).

Jian also shared some of his unpleasant group working experience with American classmates.

The majority of my American classmates is very friendly. But some of them do not want to have international students on their team projects who might affect their academic performance because the international students’ English is not good enough. I was assigned to a project with a group of American students. One American student came to talk with me and let me handle a small part of the project. I thought he cared about my English, and tried to help me. Actually no, I got a very low grade in this project. My group members said the final grade was determined by individual contribution. I was
very upset about the result because they did not give me a chance to do the portion I needed to handle (personal communication, November 19, 2012).

Lan had a better experience than Jian.

American classmates enjoyed working with me in the Mathematics exercise because I am strong in this area. I can get along with all my classmates. Comparatively speaking, the students from the same country are easier to communicate with other than the one from other countries. I do not have difficulty being close with my American peers. Some of them are very nice and friendly. I have some American friends. Most of them are my classmates. Unlike a sustainable friendship with the Chinese, the relationship with American classmates does not last long. After a vacation without the frequent contacts, the relationship becomes alienated (personal communication, December 1, 2012).

Yun’s English is pretty good compared to the other participants. She loves to talk with people from different countries.

My personality is pretty open and easy going. I am very social and love to make friends. I like chatting with people no matter which countries they are from. However, I found it difficult to join chats with American students because we were unable to find the shared topics. For example, they enjoyed talking about their favorite shows, movies and their volunteer job or club activities which I really did not know the context to jump into the conversations. I believed that there was a cultural gap between us. It is hard to get into an American circle because I have a lack of common knowledge and background information about the local culture and society.
In fact, I feel more comfortable with Chinese friends. All my closest friends are Chinese, and a few from other Asian countries. Usually, Asian students are closer with each other. My relationship with my American classmates only exists on campus. We can do team work, after class discussion and go over course content together, but we are not that close as friends. In particular, I feel American students do not know other countries well. Chinese students and other international students have more of a world view than their American peers. For example I have been to many different countries in the world and cities in the United States. Whereas, some of my American classmates even have not been out of the State they live in. Although American peers are very polite and friendly, they are not interested in making friends with international students. To establish a good local social connection appeared to be my biggest obstacle because I did not know how to step into the local community. The church seems to be a common place to get to know local people, but I do not have any religious beliefs. I do not know in which way I can forge my relationship with the Americans. I am satisfied with my existing social connections with Chinese friends and other friends from different countries.

Living in the United States, I have learned a lot about local culture and people. I fully understand that cultural differences exist between Chinese and Americans. I can see that I have been influenced by American culture in my living and studying; however, it is impossible for me to be completely Americanized because I grew up in China with Chinese cultural influence for many years (personal communication, December 14, 2012). Each of the three participants expressed that their social lives were active in the United States. They had their circle of Chinese friends and friends from the other countries. The
multicultural American campus offered them an opportunity for cultural learning, English improvement, and adapting to a diverse American campus. They were satisfied with their current social network, and had established a meaningful relationship with local people and a sound connection with the campus community.

**Theme 4: coping strategies.** Cross-cultural academic adaptation is a process that takes place gradually. According to the participants, they all met a different level of difficulties in adapting to the new academic environment due to systematic differences between China and the United States. Most of them came to the United States with little preparation in regard to American educational practices. However, as reported by the participants, the instructions in class were organized based on the expectations that the students have already been educated in the American educational system for years. Most of the teachers had the same expectation for all students. They did not consider the students’ previous cultural and educational background. Therefore, students from different cultures and educational systems needed support and guidance to be familiar with the new teaching and learning norms in their transition.

In this group of student’s adaptation process, the participants adopted different coping strategies to overcome the difficulties. From a cultural perspective, Chinese people have a tendency to solve problems by themselves and usually do not tell their sufferings to strangers (Zhang, 2004). All participants expressed that their preferred source for support was first through their own effort, and then sought after in the following order: family, friends, classmates, and finally, if they still needed help, they might approach the faculty and advisors or university offices.
Self-effort. For this study, self-effort means long time engagement in independent hard work on the course content that participants had difficulties with or did not understand. For instance, Jian paid great attention in listening to lectures and took extensive notes in class for after-class independent study. Lan made a great effort to improve her presentation skills. Yun studied a long time every day in the library to be able to access the library resources to enhance her understanding. Generally, Chinese students were cultivated to study hard from their previous education system in China (Hofstede, 1997; Wang, 2006; Zhang, 2004). If they could not understand the content in class, they could learn by self-study and make every effort to perform well academically. All of the participants in this study made a great effort to improve their English and shifted their roles from dependent to independent learner. In addition, the environment pushed them to handle their own affairs as their parents were not around to assist. They were still very close to their parents for advice and suggestions. For instance, Yun expected advice from her father and uncle first for help in her life; Lan approached her boyfriend for help she needed in her studies and life.

Chinese circle of friends. Once the participants needed external supports, their most preferred sources were their Chinese peers. The participants felt more comfortable approaching Chinese friends, classmates or senior Chinese students at the university, and this was considered the most effective and pragmatic way to solve their personal and academic problems. They perceived that it was pretty easy to approach their Chinese peers compared to busy faculty and advisors. For example, Jian mentioned, “the senior Chinese students studying in the same major at the university always provide valuable information and feasible advice in life and study” (personal communication, November 19, 2012). Yun
said if she needed immediate help, she would think of her Chinese friends. Lan mentioned that when she needed help, she relied on herself, her boyfriend or Chinese friends work things out. All participants shared that they received more help and supports from their Chinese peers than their faculty and advisors.

Fortunately, the university the participants attend has a large group of Chinese students, and there is also a Chinese community in the area including many Chinese supermarkets and restaurants. Chinese students in the university have established their own association to help the students from China. Therefore, it is pretty convenient for the participants to seek help from Chinese peers and the local Chinese community.

Other support. Participants also approached classmates for help in their first year undergraduate studies including other international students and American peers. However, they felt it was comparatively easier for them to forge relationships with other international students than with their American peers.

Faculty and advisors were usually the last source for help because participants felt they were unable to get immediate support from them. The appointment formality with faculty and advisors delayed the support. Sometimes, participants felt they were unable to get clear guidance from faculty and that the students still needed to figure out how to resolve issues by themselves. The three participants had different attitudes towards help from faculty. Lan seldom approached the faculty for help. Yun felt very comfortable in approaching faculty for advice, but she did not have too many questions to ask faculty. Jian was in the middle. If his friends and classmates could help, he would not go to the faculty.
Participants in this study either felt it was too cumbersome, or simply decided not to utilize available university academic support and assistance; instead, they preferred to handle their problems or issues by themselves, or through their family and friends.

**Theme 5: reflection on the cross-cultural academic experience.**

All participants acknowledged that they have gained from different aspects in the United States, in areas such as personal value, cultural learning, attitude toward life and study, as well as the way of thinking. They believed that studying in the United States is a worthwhile endeavor for their lives. Next section presents the participants’ reflection about their personal growth, cultural learning and transforming process, and their thoughts for the future plan in the United States.

**Personal growth.** Although experiencing cultural difference is often associated with some challenges and stress, it can be an important part of learning, self-development and the personal growth process. In general, all participants in this study were fairly positive about their transition experiences in a new academic setting and culture. All of them expressed the feeling that studying in the United States was a wise decision, and that their adaptation process was rewarding.

All participants appreciated what this cross-cultural learning brought to them. During the process of adaptation, they had developed a greater sense of responsibility for their studies and lives as seen in quotes below.

Jian: My biggest gain here is to be independent. I really enjoy life far away from my parents. In China, my parents made all arrangements for me. I could not do the things I really liked and make decisions regarding my own affairs. Living and studying in the
United States has helped me cultivate new learning habits and build a new life. No family members were around me to offer help; I have had to cope with everything in my life and study by myself… I realize that studying is my personal affair. I take initiatives in my study. I make adjustments to adapt to the new learning environment. I make the effort to build up my confidence, and try every chance to improve my English and academic performance. Particularly, I meet lots of new friends, and have become more social than before because I need help from my friends. My communicative and social skills, therefore, have been improved in the friendship building process. My personality also has changed from shyness to openness (personal communication, December 7, 2012).

Lan: The most important change I made was that I became more self-disciplined. In China, I was a passive learner, and monitored by my parents and my teachers. I was rebellious against what they said. Here in the United States, nobody reminds me what I need to do or how I should do it. I become more proactive and know how to be responsible and flexibility in maintaining my routine life at my own pace. I like the American teaching style that gives students opportunities to gain hands on experience rather than just passing exams. Freedom is what I like most here. I do not need to follow the goal my parents set for me. As for study, I enjoy studying here because I like my major very much, so I am not pushed by my parents. I have a strong internal desire to study the subjects I like. As for my life, I can live in my own way. On my vacation, the visits to different cities help me to understand the country and its culture more in-depth. I am pleased to take this challenge of the change process because the American cultural
environment gives me a chance to grow up in my own way (personal communication, December 10, 2012).

Yun: In America, I have to figure out everything I face in my daily life. I have to cook, clean, shop, rent and move by myself. At home, my parents arranged everything. I really learn a lot; this is impossible in China. My study in an American university is a very joyful experience. I have opportunities to make my own decision and learn how to organize my time. Studying is not my entire life. I have leisure time with my friends, and do things I like. In this process, my confidence has been established because I know I can do the work, I can keep up with classes, I can handle everything by myself independently, my parents are so proud of seeing the changes that I have made (personal communication, December, 14, 2012).

Cultural learning and transforming. American higher education is seen as a valuable learning experience from the perspective of the participants.

Jian: American higher education is open, flexible and globally-focused this presents Chinese students with a totally different learning experience. For instance, I have classmates and teachers from different countries. The multi-cultural environment here is what I am unable to experience in China (personal communication, November 19, 2012).

Lan: American education has brought me a more diverse and flexible learning environment that broadens my views and allows me to realize my potential, build up my confidence, and grow in every dimension intellectually, physically and spiritually independently (personal communication, December 10, 2012).
Yun: American culture is unique in the world. This country has people from all over the world. Its culture is more open than others and more tolerant of differences. People here are willing to accept different cultures, more accepting of foreigners because lots of people in this country are foreigners. Without travelling around the world, I can meet students from other cultural backgrounds in my class. Exposure to the others who have different values is an especially enlightening and eye opening experience for me (personal communication, December 14, 2012).

As Yun was exposed to western culture before, her adaptation process was comparatively smoother than the other two participants. In the above narratives, the participants reflected that studying in a different culture gave them a good opportunity for personal development and growth, and it helped them establish a greater sense of responsibility for their lives and who they want to be. The participants said that they were very proud of their cross-cultural experiences. In the process, they improved their ability to communicate with people from various cultural backgrounds, and they gained independence in their lives and studies away from their families. The following quotation is from Jian, but it reflects the perspective of each of the participants and provides a strong statement in terms of how they viewed the cultural differences and their changes in the transition process.

Jian: I see cross-cultural learning as an opportunity rather than a challenge. Of course, there are lots of cultural differences between China and the United States. Some differences I really appreciate. My previous educational background in China was able to lay a solid foundation for basic knowledge via ways of memorization and repetition. In an American academic setting, education focuses on cultivating students’ creativity and a
broader problem-solving ability. Creativity cannot be memorized but cultivated. The difference is beneficial. Because of this difference, I am able to combine American creative thinking with my Chinese skills. American higher education gives me an opportunity to develop my independence, creativity, confidence and initiative, I want to be myself, not what my parents or other people want me to be.

Studying in the American university helped me create new learning and life habits. The change from a dependent to an independent learner was not easy, but the environment forced me to change. Compared to a highly intense student life in China, undergraduate study at an American university is more desirable. I perceive that the adaptive process is inspiring, but it is rewarding because I look forward to this change. This change is more like a timely rain to the dry basin. Experiencing the cultural differences adds the value in my growth as a well rounded being (personal communication, December 7, 2012).

The findings provide evidence that the participants did not have any awareness of cultural issues when they were in China. When experiencing challenges associated with different cultural norms in the United States, the participants gained self-awareness about the cultural differences, and their cross-cultural skills were developed in their adaptation process. They interacted with people from diverse cultures and learned the role culture played in their academic studies. Meanwhile, negotiating with the cultural differences also allowed them to gain a deeper understanding of Chinese culture. In the cross-cultural adaptation process, although there were variations among the participants due to their different personal backgrounds, personalities and prior preparation, they all believed that the adaptation was a process of discovering themselves
which brought them to a new level of self-reflection and development not only academically but also culturally.

**Future plan.** Regarding their future plans, the three participants expressed their uncertainties due to immigration policy and other considerations. Jian hopes he can have a chance to work and live in the United States as the freedom he experienced here is his desirable lifestyle. If he returns to China, he believes it would be hard for him to “be himself” in China’s complicated cultural context. In other words, he will be back into the relationship network in which his personal life will be closely monitored by his parents, relatives and people in the neighborhood. Similarly, Lan has lots of uncertainties too in terms of the future. She plans to go back to China after her undergraduate studies. However, the current employment prospects in China are not good. Lots of university graduates in China are unable to find suitable jobs. Her boyfriend has already found a job in the United States. She plans to stay here for one or two years to gain some work experience in the United States and see how the job market is growing in China. Yun’s family has a business in the United States, however she prefers to create her own future rather than working in her family business. She is considering applying for postgraduate study first. At the end of the interview, she told the researcher she received a job offer to work at a well-known company in the city as a cooperative student. The selection process was very competitive. She was grateful to have this opportunity. Her parents were also very proud of her growth and competence.

**Summary**
In Chapter 4, the purpose, participants’ profiles, data collection method and the process of the study were reviewed. The data results were reported based on each emergent theme with verbatim quotes from the participants to support the findings.

The findings showed that the cross-cultural learning experience of the participants in this study was rewarding and meaningful. The motives that drove the participants’ decisions to study in the United States were a mixture of cultural, social and personal factors. Generally, the desire to learn in an environment different from the exam-oriented education system in China was a major pushing factor to drive participants to study abroad. Influenced by mixed social and cultural factors, the parents were the key driving force and determinant in supporting participants’ studying abroad. Only one participant in this study had a good preparation for her study abroad in terms of language proficiency, academic, intercultural communication and other logistics planned by her parents. The other two participants did not have adequate preparation or prior knowledge about their studies in the United States. All of them experienced a significant cultural difference in their adaptation process, and the research results showed that a better preparation for studying abroad and highly motivated learners could lead to a smoother transition in acclimating to the new cultural and learning environment.

Participants expressed that studying at an American university was exciting and challenging because they experienced differences academically and culturally. The study showed that participants faced difficulties in adapting to the new academic setting at an American university. The difficulties in adapting primarily resulted from the different teaching and learning paradigms, teacher-student relationships, general classroom nature, as well as the education system. They experienced the changes in both the teacher’s role and the student’s role.
These research findings were consistent with the results of past studies, in that the participants encountered a series of challenges in a transition from a Chinese educational background to an American education system, such as language difficulty, unfamiliarity with American academic norms and an ineffective involvement with the American university community. The findings also revealed that participants preferred their independent efforts for problem-solving in their adaptation process. Like other Chinese students, the participants formed a very close friendship with other Chinese students studying at the university through their studies in the United States. The Chinese friend network had pros and cons in participants’ cross-cultural adaptation. Participants could always get help from their Chinese friends immediately. On the other hand, they ignored the services that the American university provided. To rely exclusively on Chinese friends may have affected their effective utilization of the American university’s services and their connections with local people and culture (Yi, Jun-Chih, Jenny, Kishimoto, 2003).

Despite the fact that the participants faced lots of challenges in their cross-cultural adaptation, they all had a very positive attitude toward the cultural differences in their academic studies at the American university. The research findings indicated that participants collectively acknowledged that the cross-cultural adjustment represented an invaluable personal gain and cultural learning experience, and they all shared a strong motivation to adapt and develop not only as students but also as individuals. Participants expressed that they really enjoyed being independent, and that this was considered a great opportunity for their personal growth.

**Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**
This chapter concludes the findings and discusses their practical implications for the present study. Through interviews with the three undergraduate students from China at a particular American university, this study explores the experiences of Chinese students in their cross-cultural transition from the Chinese educational background to their undergraduate studies in the United States. The primary research question and two secondary research questions used to guide to this exploration are as follows:

Primary research question:

What are the lived experiences of Chinese undergraduate students in their transition from a Chinese educational background to an American learning environment?

Secondary research questions:

1) What are the factors that have positively or negatively had and impact on the students’ academic adaptation?

2) What coping strategies have helped students overcome any difficulties in their academic adaptation?

Specifically, the central question attempts to capture the overall meaning participants ascribe to their cross-cultural experiences. The two secondary questions were to discover the positive and negative experiences related to a learning transition from a student’s perspective and understand how participants made adjustments in this transition.

As a way of understanding human experience, narrative inquiry is an essential approach to understand the lives of individuals from their own stories (Andrews et al., 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, Riessman, 2008). Narrative inquiry, a qualitative research method, was utilized in the present study as an appropriate means for obtaining an in-depth and vivid description of
cross-cultural learning experiences of the participants from their personal stories. The narrative approach allowed the researcher to collect first-hand narratives from participants’ in-depth accounts and interpret how they made sense out their academic adaptation.

In order to understand cross-cultural learning experiences of Chinese undergraduate students, the three interview approach designed by Seidman (1998) was employed to conduct semi-structured interviews. The one-on-one face to face interviews were guided by a structured protocol using open-ended questions in order to obtain a detailed account of the participants’ past and present experiences, as well as their reflections on the meaning of their transition experiences. To analyze the data, the thematic analysis method was applied to identify, analyze, and report the common themes following the six-phase procedure outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). To present a clear report of the findings, five common themes were generated from a detailed analysis of the participants’ stories:

1. Motivations of studying in the United States
2. Perceptions on the different learning environment in an American classroom
3. Academic challenge and adjustment
4. Coping strategies
5. Reflections on cross-cultural learning experiences

The findings of this study were rich and insightful. Some of the results were consistent with those of previous literature and research, but many of the findings were new or rarely discussed in previous literature. The following section provides a detailed analysis around aforementioned five themes.

**Motivations for Studying Abroad**
The motives that drive Chinese students to study abroad are frequently discussed in the previous literature: These include internal drive such as the pursuit of advanced knowledge and different learning and lifestyle, self-development in values, attitudes and world views, and external drive such as a continued shortage of education resource and job opportunities in China, increased recruitment by foreign institutions, the prevailing belief of studying abroad as a way for a high quality education, value of education, escape from a dissatisfactory environment, pressures from society, parents and peers (Holroyd, 2006; Mori, 2000; Wang, 2006).

**Escape from the competition of the GaoKao.** In this study, the reasons for three participants’ studying abroad were driven by mixed factors including external social and cultural context, parents and peer influence, as well as personal considerations. However, all participants expressed that choosing to study abroad was an alternative for them to pursue a better higher education without competing in the extremely demanding National University Entrance exam in China. This finding was consistent with the literature that revealed a shortage of Chinese educational resources and the increasing tendency of students to try to escape from a dissatisfactory environment (Holroyd, 2006; Mori, 2000; Wang, 2006). The literature also showed that many believe the exam-oriented education system has consumed Chinese students’ lives and led to an imbalance in the overall development of students (Davey et al., 2007; Turner, & Acker, 2002; Wang, 2006; Yao, 2004; Zheng, 2008).

**The dominant role of the parents.** This study’s findings also point out that the influence of the participants’ parents and peers play a key role in their decisions to study abroad. This factor has been rarely discussed in the past literature because, for the most part, the literature deals with the graduate population rather than the undergraduate group, and the graduate students
made their decisions to study abroad by themselves (Sun & Chen, 1999; Yan & Berliner, 2009; Wan, 2001). As for the three participants in this study, Jian stated that his decision to study in the United States was made solely by his parents, including the decision for his studying abroad destination, university and major. Similarly, Yun’s parents created a well-designed education plan and prepared their daughter adequately to study abroad. Differently, Lan made a decision to study in the United States by herself but was influenced by her peers and the positive climate in China’s current social context regarding studying abroad. All participants’ families provided them with strong financial support for studying abroad. The parents’ dominant role in their children’s ability to study abroad was evident and was consistent with the previous literature (Bond, 1996; Cheng et al., 2011; Wan, 2001), as well as Hofstede’s cultural definition about power distance in Chinese culture (Hofstede, 1991).

“One-child” policy. The findings showed that the Chinese government’s one-child policy was also considered to be an important pushing factor that contributed to the increased number of Chinese undergraduates studying abroad. Among the three participants, two of them are the only child in their families. Chinese parents have an extremely high expectation for their only child. The one-child-policy’s influence on education was rarely explored in past research. However, Chinese researchers indicated that education has been highly valued in China and influenced by Confucian ideology as a route to fame and success (Wang, 2006; Zhang, 1995). No doubt, Chinese parents are willing to devote every effort to their only child’s education and success.

**Fast-rising personal wealth in China.** Financial concern was one of the most common issues previously mentioned in the studies regarding Chinese students’ adaptation process
(Huang, 1997; Orleans, 1988; Pedersen, 1991; Saches & Chan, 2003). However, the facts in this study revealed that the participants in this study did not have any financial difficulties in their studies at an American private university. The participants did not rely on scholarships for their undergraduate studies in the United States, but rather on strong financial supports from their parents. On one hand, with the growing increase of affluent families in China, the affordability of American higher education is no longer an issue. Chinese parents have the financial capability to offer an overseas education to their children. On the other hand, American higher education institutions have made aggressive recruitment efforts in the study abroad market in China to attract self-sponsored Chinese students. Full-paid Chinese students have become a major means of revenue generation in order to overcome institutional financial strains and adopt a global perspective (Altbach & Knight, 2007; De Wit; 2002; Dunnett, 2000). Therefore, Chinese students play a valuable role in the economic mission of American colleges and universities. However, American universities and colleges, in general, struggle with providing culturally responsive services for students from different cultures. As the number of Chinese students continue to grow it is critical for American educators to respond to this group’s unique adjustment issues in order to alleviate their transitional stress to the American culture in general, and more specifically, to its academic culture (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009).

**Perceptions on the Different Learning Environment in an American Classroom**

The participants’ first year of study at an American university represents a key transition period away from the Chinese teaching and learning paradigm and into a new pattern of learning associated with American academic norms. According to each participant’s story, in comparing and contrasting their previous and current educational experiences, the results revealed that the
participants experienced a dramatic change in teaching and learning practices. These changes affected all teaching and learning processes from the educational system to the daily teaching and learning activities. The changes were everywhere in the academic activities, from a teacher-center to a student-centered teaching approach, from memorization and repetition to critical thinking and learning by doing, and from being passive listeners to being active participants. Therefore, the participants experienced a completely different academic domain at an American university from their Chinese schooling.

**Experiencing differences.** Hofstede’s five culture dimensions identify the relationship between culture and learning. Hofstede (1997) points out that national cultural differences affect teaching and learning practices in school settings. Culture, in turn, becomes an invisible compass that directs people’s ways of thinking and their behaviors (Dimmock & Walker, 1998; Hollins, 1996). There are numerous factors related to student learning that are connected to culture. For example, Zhang & Xu’s study on 11 newly-arrived Chinese graduate students at a North American university report on how Chinese students negotiated cultural differences in teaching and learning activities (Zhang & Xu, 2007). Similarly, Li (2007) presented a case study of six undergraduate students studying in a business program at Western Oregon University which indicated the difficulties Chinese students encountered in adapting to an American academic setting including language, academic norms, the teacher-student relationship, student-student relationships, and extra-curricular activities.

The interpretations of this study’s participants’ past and present experiences confirmed the findings of the past literature. The transition from a Chinese to American education system is not an easy journey considering the great differences in the teaching and learning systems.
Chinese students need to be aware of these differences and make appropriate adjustments to a new teaching and learning norm. The finding of the present study also showed that the participants appreciated the new education system, and were motivated to develop their skills to meet the demands of the new academic requirements. For example, Jian valued the opportunities to express his own opinions and ideas in class, and ultimately developed his creativity and problem-solving ability. Lan developed her time management skill and presentation ability through her active learning. Yun really enjoyed after class activities that complemented and enriched her classroom learning experience and allowed her to practice critical thinking and develop self-confidence.

However, participants argued that it was not appropriate to use terms such as “habitually silent Chinese students”, “passive learners” and “lack of questioning” to define them. Instead, it was suggested that an understanding of how different cultures affect learning would be more appropriate. A nation’s culture and a teaching/learning context determine the student’s learning style, strategies, process, and approaches (Hofstede, 1997). The teaching approaches in China require students to be quiet in class, while an interactive American classroom requires students to be active participants. There is an ongoing debate that has centered on “the paradox of Chinese learners” (Watkins, 2000, p. 164). On one hand, the Chinese learning strategy is often criticized as rote and passive (Biggs, 1991; Kennedy, 2002, Dahlin & Watkin, 2000); on the other hand, an alternative viewpoint indicated that the Chinese learning approach should be valued and reexamined by “a completed image about Chinese learners” (Cheng et al., 2011, p. 826). Chinese students’ unique learning characteristics related to their cultural heritage will need more empirical research. In this study, the researcher only focused on understanding
participants’ perceptions on how they viewed the cultural differences. The participants reported that they learned in an active way, in both Chinese and American classrooms. In China, they were accustomed to asking the teacher questions only after they had studied their lessons on their own outside of class; however American teachers expected immediate two-way communication in class. This finding was coincident with Jin and Cortazzi’s (1998) research result regarding the differences in communication between faculty and students in China and the United States.

The evidence indicated that American educators should be aware of the unequal power relationship between Chinese students and their American peers in class. Compared to their American peers with 12 years’ training and practice in American schools, Chinese students were lacking practice and experience in the American teaching and learning paradigm. However, culture can be learned (Hofstede, 1991). External environment also plays a critical role in influencing people living in a particular culture and social norm. The participants were confident that their efforts, aspirations and motivations for learning would help them adjust into a brand new American academic setting. They were still in the process of practicing and becoming acquainted with the American academic setting, however, it would take time for adaptation to occur (Hartshorne & Baucom, 2007).

The findings exposed the different teaching and learning practices between China and the United States. This implies that American educators need to be aware of the cultural differences, appreciate different learning styles and enhance communications with students from diverse cultures. It is suggested that American educators should develop a better understanding of
different cultures and learning styles in order to better assist international students in their academic transition.

**Academic Challenge and Adjustment**

Under the theme of academic challenge and adjustment, the participants’ perceptions of academic concerns associated with their cross-cultural learning experiences are examined, along with how they responded to those concerns. An analysis of the data shows that the three participants had encountered an array of challenges that pertained to their academic performance. These challenges were more prevalent in the initial stage of adjusting to a new academic norm and included language challenge, unfamiliarity of American academic domains, relationships with faculty and students.

**Challenge.** The findings above are consistent with the results of empirical studies about the adaptive issues Chinese students face when studying abroad. Much of the literature has identified that the lack of English language competence is perceived as a major obstacle of the Chinese student’s academic success. (Huntley, 1993; Sun & Chen, 1999; Tompson & Tompson, 1996; Wan, 2001). In Chinese students’ adaptation process, language proficiency affected Chinese students’ academic performance in an active American classroom and resulted in frustration (Yan & Berliner, 2009). For instance, Wan (2001)’s case study on Chinese graduate students studying in an American university, exposes frustrating experiences stemming from difficulty with English language communication. In addition, Pang (2007) adds that lack of English proficiency affected not only Chinese students’ academic performance but also their social interactions. Tomich, McWhirter, and King (2000) point out those international students who are competent in English have a less stressful experience and more confidence in adapting
to an American learning environment. The results of this study supported the previous studies. For instance, Yun had a stronger English and academic preparation in China. Her adaptation process was comparatively smoother than the other two participants from this research.

Besides the language challenges, research findings also revealed that the participants experienced a dramatic shift in adjusting to differences in an American academic domain. These differences mainly involved cultural assumptions and philological traditions between the two countries. American culture values individuality, self-expression, competition and independence which are incompatible with the Confucian tradition in China (Ting, 2001). Instead, Chinese culture emphasizes collectivism, self-effort, cooperation, and group thinking (Wan, 2001). The participants grew up in China and studied under the Chinese educational system for years and experienced an initial hardship to get used to the American academic setting. For instance, they had difficulties when faced with independent learning, course selection, two-way interactions and group work, as well as a different teacher-student relationship.

A number of empirical studies also identify that Chinese students are accustomed to an authoritative teaching style for the transmission of knowledge; they may experience considerable stress when encountering academic autonomy in an American classroom (Gu, 2009; Huang & Brown, 2009; Pang, 2007; Sun & Chen, 1999; Upton, 1989; Wang, 2007). Yan and Berliner (2009) interviewed 18 Chinese students in a large public university in southwest America and supported findings that inadequate educational preparation and unfamiliarity with American classroom formalities were the major concerns that contributed to their academic stress.
Theoretically, Hofstede’s five cultural dimensions provide a framework for understanding the relationship between culture and learning, and it offers valuable insights to explain how Chinese students’ learning styles were influenced by their cultural heritage (Hofstede, 1991). In shifting from their Chinese education to an American academic setting, the participants were supposed to change from “we” to “I”, and “how to learn” to “how to do” (Hofstede, 1986, p. 313). The different discourse norms between China and the United States along with language difficulty affected participants’ communications and relations with American faculty and peers.

Previous studies have criticized the fact that Chinese students often fail to obtain appropriate English training in China (Huntley, 1993; Sun & Chen, 1999). Chinese students start to learn English in elementary school, but the way of teaching English in China results in “deaf and mute” English that is not for spoken communication but for reading and writing only (Wan, 2001, p. 17). However, with the rapid economic development in China, English teaching has gained great attention. Chinese students, particularly those who live in urban areas, can access a variety of English training programs easily. The English teaching method is transforming with more emphasis on listening and speaking (Lin, 2002). The present study findings highlight the participants’ acknowledgement that English was an important tool for their future, and that they received different levels of English training in China. In addition, their schools hired native speakers to teach English, which had contributed positively to participants’ English learning. Compared to Chinese students studying abroad in the past, current students have much better English preparation in China than previous generations. Participants perceived that they could
function well in American classes after an initial adjustment, but there was still a gap compared to the native speakers.

The obstacles that affected participants’ classroom performance were mixed and included English ability, habitual Chinese communication styles, lack of self-confidence, prior learning habits, as well as unfamiliarity of the American academic norms.

Moreover, participants believed that a working relationship with American faculty members was challenging to build. In their previous education in China, Chinese teachers were more responsive than American faculty, and they abandoned the usual formalities outside of the classroom, developing a close tie and trust with their students. Students not only could get knowledge, but also expected the love and care of their teachers in China. On the contrary, American faculty could joke with students in class, but they kept their distance with students after class. Appointments were required to meet with American faculty. The participants were not familiar with this formality, but they were in the process of learning to adjust to it. Jian said he began to schedule appointments with faculty when he had questions. However, it was not easy for the participants to develop a trusting relationship with American faculty because their meeting time was limited in those working hours open for the students. Likewise, the relationship between participants and their American peers remained only in class activities, and was distant in social activities. The findings evidenced that distinctive cultural differences between the two countries disconnected the participants with their American peers. The three participants all found that they could not find appropriate topics to discuss with their American peers due to different cultural backgrounds and interests. Hence, it was relatively easier for
participants to forge relationship with other international students because they were all new to American culture, and willing to be open-minded to students from different cultures.

**Adjustment.** A transition from a teacher-centered to student-centered classroom required participants to fundamentally change their ways of studying in order to adjust to a new learning environment. Lan said, “There was a process from unknown to known” (personal communication, December 1, 2012). The transition process was a rebirth experience that allowed participants to reconstruct their identities in the American academic setting and make the necessary adjustments to adapt to a new academic environment (Gu, 2009). The implication of this study suggests that Chinese students’ overall adjustment and success require mutual efforts from both American universities and Chinese students to meet the academic challenges. American educators should assist new Chinese students by trying to understand their home culture and different learning styles, and offer appropriate guidance and support to make their learning experience successful and fulfilling in the United States. On the student side, Chinese students should have adequate preparation in English proficiency and related knowledge about American teaching and learning approaches, as well as relevant background information about their majors and related requirements before coming to the United States. To avoid a stressful experience in this cross-cultural transition, Chinese students should develop a readiness and awareness to meet the challenge of different academic cultures between China and the United States. An integration strategy to be involved in the host culture and the local community would help Chinese students’ cross-cultural adaptive process in an effective way.

**Coping Strategies**
Findings reported that the participants’ coping strategies appeared to have many individual aspects based on their personal backgrounds, social and psychological characteristics. For example, Jian was very shy when he was in China. In his study in the United States, he challenged himself and approached native speakers proactively in order to improve his English and self-confidence. Instead of approaching native speakers, Lan tried to make friends with other non-Chinese students to practice her English. She felt comfortable speaking when she was with students from other countries because English was not their native language either. After practicing with non-native English speakers, she gained confidence in her ability to speak English. Yun believed that an English-speaking environment was important for her to polish her English. She said, “I am actively engaged in campus activities and try to make friends with students from different countries” (personal communication, December 3, 2012).

**Self-effort.** The existing literature did not systematically discuss effective coping strategies of Chinese students studying abroad. This study intended to have an in-depth description about how participants coped with their academic difficulties. In the adaptation process, participants expressed that they had gained a great experience in meeting the challenges in their studies and lives. The research findings reinforced the result of previous studies and the Chinese’s long-term orientation based on Hofstede’s cultural dimension analysis. Influenced by Confucian tradition, the participants had a strong believe that academic success was associated with hard work and persistent efforts (Li, 2001). They were highly motivated to pursue academic excellence and did not want people to know their sufferings due to the ‘face’ concern. Generally, participants tended to solve their problems by themselves. Therefore, the most common coping strategy among the participants in this study was their individual, personal
effort. Participants believed that their continued effort and persistence could help them to overcome difficulties. If they were unable to solve the issues they faced independently, they would then approach their friends, faculty and advisors.

The participants recalled that their first year study in the United States was very intense. They spent lots of time and energy on independent efforts to overcome initial academic difficulties and to adjust to the new academic norms. As the results of their hard work, they were able to improve their English, made an adjustment in their adaptation to the new academic environment, became involved in on-campus activities and established a good social network with Chinese and other international students. This was in accordance with findings in the existing literature that Chinese students in accordance with Confucian tradition, had a belief in diligence for academic studies, and were highly motivated to achieve academic success (Chen et al., 1995). The findings also supported Hofstede’s cultural dimensions that illuminated continuous efforts and persistent hard work in academic study as a valuable long-term orientation that could produce an outstanding student (Wang, 2007).

**Support from Chinese friends.** As for help, the findings revealed that participants’ most effective support was from their friends, particularly Chinese friends. Senior Chinese students on campus were the best resource for help, perhaps because they had experienced the same adjustment issues. This finding was consistent with a study performed by Zhai (2002) among 10 Chinese students studying at Ohio State University showing that Chinese friends and family were the preferred source of help for Chinese students. In this study, the three participants stayed connected to their families, and they approached their families for help during the first several months. For example, when Yun had just arrived, she cried every day
and called her mother for help. After they got to know other Chinese students, they approached their peers for help. Zhou and Todman (2009) pointed out that the presence of a large Chinese student community on campus could provide considerable social support for Chinese students. The findings of this study showed the same result. The three participants were very satisfied in that they could access help not only from the large Chinese community in their campus, but also from the Chinese community in the surrounding city.

Besides Chinese friends, other people available for help were participants’ classmates, roommates, faculty and advisors. As the participants’ first year studies were busy, participants did not have the time to explore off-campus social networks in their first year of studies. They made friends primarily in class or on campus. According to their narratives, international students were easier to work with than American peers. They preferred to approach the international students first and then American peers. Usually their problems could be solved without approaching faculty and the advisors. To some extent, participants’ coping strategies prevented them from effectively utilizing the support available from faculty and advisors. The participants shared the same point that Lan expressed, “I rely on myself and if possible, ask help from my Chinese school mates and friends to solve the problems I met in my studies and life. Most of the time, I really do not need the help from faculty and advisors” (personal communication, December 1, 2012).

The participants approach to faculty and advisors was relatively passive, and they may not have been able to get sufficient guidance and support from available resources—faculty and advisors during the transitional process. The results of this study suggest that Chinese students may need to take a more active role to interact with faculty and advisors and establish a
meaningful relationship with them. On the other hand, American institutions should offer orientation courses that are tailored to Chinese students who are new to the United States. These orientation courses should focus on Chinese students’ cultural differences and provide them with guidance on American academic requirements, regulations and policies, as well as how to utilize the university’s support services. In addition, it might be valuable to offer courses on academic writing, presentation skills, email communications with faculty and advisors, as well as an introduction about international student offices and their responsibilities. Cultural highlights of the city of which the university is a part would be also very useful for them to be familiar with local culture. These courses can be designed not only for Chinese students but for all international students.

**Reflections on Cross-cultural Learning Experiences**

Cross-cultural adaptation is an important part of the study abroad experience as it involves understanding and negotiating cultural differences. The findings of this study revealed that participants acknowledged the difficulties of cross-cultural experiences due to the significant cultural differences identified by Hofstede’s five cultural dimensions. Cultural differences had an immense impact on participants’ academic studies and local connections. The adaptation to the American academic setting and social life took place gradually. The participants’ freshman year was considered to be the start of their cultural adaptation process in a vastly different American teaching and learning environment. More involvement with local people and society may have helped their understanding of local culture and people and also may have helped them acknowledge the differences. Overall, participants perceived their cross-cultural learning experiences as being meaningful and worthwhile because they experienced
growing pains and gains. They became more mature and independent by coping with a variety of challenges in the new academic environment.

**Implications for Educational Practices**

In recent years, the population of Chinese students studying at American universities and colleges has risen dramatically (Institute of International Education, 2012). There is now an increased need to study the factors that influence the success and satisfaction of Chinese students in the United States. The university in which this study was conducted is home to a large number of international students, and among them around 36% are from China (Office of Institutional Research, 2013). How does the university respond to the unique adjustment issues faced by a large group of Chinese students on its campus? This study not only provides a basic understanding of Chinese undergraduate students’ cross-cultural learning experiences, but also offers productive practical implications for educational practice.

With the rapid growth of Chinese students studying on campus, many American university faculty, advisors and administrators have shown a great interest in understanding more about this particular group of students’ academic experience on campus. Below are some recommendations for American educators when they develop policies and programs for the international student population including students from China. There are also a few suggestions for Chinese students who are either preparing to study abroad, or in the process of adjusting to American institutions.

**Suggestions for American educators:** American institutions who want to attract and retain more Chinese undergraduate students should…
1) be aware of the cultural differences between China and the United States and understand the past educational experiences of Chinese students, in order to help them develop a successful and satisfactory educational experience in the United States.

2) offer orientation courses that are tailored to newly-arrived Chinese students, including English, academic writing, and presentation skills. Orientation programs for international students should include practical information about logistical support, communication protocols at the university, information about the American academic system and tips on how to adjust to a new culture.

3) improve the effectiveness and utilization of existing on-campus international student services, academic and counseling support, as well as student organizations.

4) offer a training program for faculty and administrators regarding different cultures to enhance culturally responsive teaching and service and to better assist international students in their academic transition.

5) be aware of the learning differences of this particular group, and provide opportunities for dialogue between international and American students to address the cultural differences, enhance their mutual understanding and communication.

6) develop a peer program that connects international students with American peers to facilitate international students’ cross-cultural adaptation.

**Suggestions for Chinese students:** Chinese students who want to be successful in American institutions should…
1) take an active role in being involved in the campus community including interacting with faculty, advisors and American peers.

2) develop a readiness and awareness about different cultures before departing from China to alleviate some of the stress of adapting.

3) expand out of the Chinese circle and embrace an integration strategy to be involved in the host culture and the local community, which will in turn help their cross-cultural adaptation process.

4) be self-motivated to study in an American institution, instead of being pushed by their parents.

5) have adequate preparation in the English language and related knowledge about the American academic domain, as well as relevant background information about their selected majors before coming to the United States.

**Limitations of this Study**

The intention of this study is to get an in-depth description of the participants’ experiences in their first-year transition within the American higher education institution through their own perspective. This study was limited to a relatively small sample size, which consisted of three single, full-time undergraduate students in their early 20s at a particular American university. Generalizations of the findings to other Chinese students, who have different educational backgrounds or who are studying in different countries and universities, should be cautioned.

Moreover, the study only focuses on the perspective of Chinese students rather than the views from American educators. Further research which should be explored to cover a larger
number of students and academics is needed to present a more comprehensive and holistic picture of Chinese students’ cross-cultural adaptation.

**Opportunities for Further Research**

The present study was an exploratory attempt that provides a basis for further research on Chinese students’ experiences in American higher education institutions. Based on this study, the researcher has identified several potential related studies that will explore this topic further to get a more comprehensive and holistic picture of the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students.

First, a study should be designed to cover a larger number of students at several institutions of higher education in the United States. Participants in the study would include both students and faculty to get a broader picture that includes perspectives from both sides. In addition, the research would focus not only on Chinese students’ academic experiences but also on their social experiences. The research would use a quantitative survey approach in order to verify the findings of the current study.

Second, a follow-up study that examines how different cultures affect learning could be designed using a qualitative approach to include 15 international students from 3 countries studying at an American university.

These follow-up studies may offer holistic and comprehensive information for American colleges and universities, American students, international students and other readers who wish to gain a better understanding of how different cultures learn differently and how culture affects a student’s adaptation to the American learning and living environment.

**Conclusion**
Despite the limitations, this study is significant in that it identifies five themes that will add to the existing body of knowledge on Chinese undergraduate students’ academic adaptation to American universities and colleges. It is relevant given the recent influx of Chinese students to the American academic scene. As previous literature was more focused on graduate students from China, the current study centers on the undergraduate level, a different demographic of international students from China. It adds a new perspective about how undergraduate students from China experience their first year of academic transition from the high schools of China to an American university.

This study is useful because it focuses on examining the cultural differences Chinese undergraduate students experience, and it will provide American educators with an insightful understanding about this particular student group. The study may also be helpful to better understand any Asian students who share a similar culture with China, as well as international students as a whole. The present study also identifies contributing factors and motives that may have led to the increase in the number of Chinese students seeking to study abroad, factors which include the booming Chinese economy, the “one-child” policy, and a competitive exam-oriented education system. These factors emerged with the rapid economic development in China and were rarely discussed in the past literature. Moreover, the study also examines the differences in educational systems between China and the United States from Chinese undergraduate students’ perspectives. Furthermore, it highlights Chinese undergraduate students’ positive and negative experiences in their cross-cultural academic adaptation, and investigates how they negotiate the cultural differences in their studies in the United States.
Specifically, Hofstede’s five cultural dimensions serve as a theoretical framework to conceptualize the relationship between the culture of learning and how Chinese students’ previous educational background influenced their adaptation to the American learning environment (Hofstede, 1991). In an effort to discover the inner world of Chinese students, a qualitative narrative inquiry was utilized to allow Chinese students’ cross-cultural learning experiences to be understood and shared.

Though cross-cultural adjustment may be a challenge common among all international students. Chinese students are from a culture that is distinctly different from the United States, and these students may be more likely to encounter unexpected issues and concerns. Their coping strategies for adjusting in the new academic domain are identified in this study in order to better understand how this particular group learned and reacted to a different teaching and learning approach. In this study, participants’ cross-cultural learning was rewarding and inspiring. They reflected that studying in a different culture provided them with a good opportunity for personal maturation and growth, and helped them develop a greater sense of responsibility in their lives and toward who they want to be. This study shows us that it is not easy to be a cross-cultural learner. It requires courage, determination and persistence to succeed in doing so. There were many cultural differences that the learners needed to adjust to, get used to, learn and unlearn. Overall, it was portrayed as a very rewarding and great learning experience. The findings of this study provide valuable insight into the cross-cultural experiences of selected Chinese undergraduate students. The students have the personal capability to manage their changing roles in the new academic environment and social norm, however, faculty and advisors also have a role to play in assisting these students to live up to their potential in an American
classroom. To do so instructors may find it helpful to first understand the cultural differences of Chinese students and then respond to their educational background and language competencies with culturally responsive instruction and guidance. By encouraging Chinese students to ask for help and by making sure they are accessible, faculty and advisors can open better lines of communication and more productive relationships with their Chinese students. At the institutional level, due to the rapid influx of Chinese students to American campuses, it is evident that American institutions have become increasingly interested in the Chinese students’ transitional issues. It is critical that these institutions develop and provide adequate campus support programs and services to assist international students, including Chinese students, so they can succeed in an American academic setting. The individual Chinese undergraduate student’s perspective and insights drawn from this study will, it is hoped, offer valuable information to American educators, Chinese students and other international students as they consider the usefulness of this study in their own contexts.
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Appendix A

Interview Protocol—guided by three-interview approach designed by Seidman (1998)

Phase I (Life history):

1. Please tell me briefly about yourself and your background.

Prompts:

(1) Say something about your high school experience in China.
(2) Please describe your hometown in China
(3) Say something about your family

2. How did you decide to study your undergraduate degree in the United States?

Prompts:

(4) What other options did you have?
(5) How did you choose this particular university?
(6) How your friends and family influenced your decision to study in the United States?
(7) How did you prepare yourself for undergraduate study in the United States?
(8) Who will pay tuition?

Phase II (Contemporary experience)

3. What do you like most in your study in the American university?

4. What were the major difficulties and challenges you experienced in your first year undergraduate study at the university? How did you deal with them? What kind of coping strategies have you used for overcoming the difficulty in the transition process?

Prompts:
(9) What are differences between your undergraduate study at the American university and your high school experience in China?

(10) What was your impression about your teachers, advisor, your classmates, and the university in general?

(11) What is your relationship with your American peers and the students from other countries?

(12) What challenges do you think are typical for the international students from China?

(13) How do you think your English ability influence your academic and social life in the United States?

(14) What do you think students from China do well and not so well in the American universities?

5. What are some of new issues/challenges you face most recently?

6. How do you make friends in the United States?

7. Have cultural differences affected you and your study in the United States?

Prompts:

(15) What challenges do you think exist because you are an international student from China?

(16) How are things different between you and American peers?

(17) What are the differences between the Chinese teachers and the American teachers?

(18) Do you get any support from the American university?

(19) What is impressive to you and your biggest obstacle in the American university?

8. What is your perception about changes between prior Chinese education and current American education experiences?

9. Have you changed in any ways? Did you do things differently than when you just came here?
10. What was the turning point in your experience?

11. Who will ask for help when you have difficulty in your studying and life?

12. How do you connect with your family and friends when you are in the United States?

Phase III (Reflection on meaning)

13. How do you make sense of your cross-cultural experience?

Prompts:

(20) Describe how you feel your cross-cultural experience

(21) How did you adjust differently than other Chinese students?

(22) What would you recommend to new students?

(23) What factors motivated you to succeed in the American university?

14. How is cross-cultural adaptation related to your success in your study in the American university?

Prompts:

15. What lessons have you learned from your experience as an international student in the United States?

Prompts:

(24) What is a favorite story you will share with your family and friends back to China?

16. What does studying in the United States mean to you?

Prompts

(25) What is your future plan after completing undergraduate study?

(26) What role of your overseas studying will play in your life?

(27) Will you choose to study in the United States if you are given the second chance to choose?
Appendix B

IRB Approval

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: November 1, 2012  IRB #: 12-10-04
Principal Investigator(s): Liliana Meneses
                        Hong Zhang
Department: Doctor of Education Program
            College of Professional Studies
Address: 50 Nightingale Hall
         Northeastern University
Title of Project: Cross-cultural Learning Experiences of Chinese
                 Students at an American University
Participating Sites: N/A
DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: OCTOBER 31, 2013

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when
   recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new
   information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses  must
   be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month
   prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any
   other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Appendix C

Participant Recruitment Letter

Ver.2012-11-1

Recruitment letter to seek the participants

Student Name
Address
Date

Dear XXX,

My name is Hong Zhang, originally from China. I am a doctoral student in the School of Education, College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University and also work at the College of Professional Studies as an Assistant Dean for International Program Development.

I got your contact method from staff name/student name/ from*** Office/ *** Program. Or we met before in *** event at the Northeastern campus, we had a very good conversation

Currently, I am working on my doctoral research project that focuses on Chinese students’ cross-cultural academic learning adaptation in the United States. The purpose of my project is to learn about academic adaptation and cross-cultural transitional experiences of undergraduate students from China enrolled in American colleges and universities. To complete this project, I would like to invite you to take part in my research study by participating in a series of interviews about your lived experiences in this transitional process. Below is the brief statement of my research project:

The cross-cultural adjustment is one of the common challenges that international students face regardless of their ethnic, cultural, language, economic, and religious backgrounds. Particularly, the difficulty of cultural adjustment is related to the cultural distance between the host and home country. With the rapid increase of Chinese undergraduate student enrolling in American colleges and universities, these newly arrived freshmen from China are interfacing a multitude of adjustment challenges such as the significant differences in languages, cultures, educational systems as well as social and political systems, and their presence also affects American academic culture. Therefore, it is essential that American higher education institutions should be aware of these cultural differences, understand the past educational experiences of Chinese students, and help them develop a successful and satisfied educational experience in the United States.

This qualitative study aims to understand Chinese undergraduates’ cross-cultural transitional experiences, not to evaluate the students’ experiences. The research result will provide valuable information to the American educators and incoming Chinese students who plan to study in the United States.

- There is no compensation offered for participation.
- I do not foresee participation in the project posing any risks for you.
- I will keep your participation confidentially and your information will be kept anonymous.
- I will offer you the opportunity to review the transcripts of study interviews and to request that any of your contributions be withheld from the analysis.

Specifically, I appreciate your time to take part in the following:

- Interviews: I plan to conduct three one-on-one comprehensive interviews with you at the Northeastern University campus, either in library or cafeteria. My goals for the interviews are to obtain an in-depth description about your transitional lived experience from Chinese educational background to an American educational setting. The interviews are anticipated to start in late fall,
2012. Each interview will be spaced within three days or one week of each other. The reminder of each interview appointment will be sent to you a week before by emails. The length of each interview will take approximately 90 minutes. Chinese language will be the major language for the interviews. With your permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded for transcription and analysis purpose only. I will do my best to limit the time required of you, but your collaboration of reviewing my findings and conclusions will be valuable to my project.

Your participation in the research project is entirely voluntary. Your decision to participate or quit any time will have no effect on your standing at the University. Even after the study begins, you can refuse to answer any question and may withdraw at any time without any penalty or other negative consequences.

Please let me know if you have interest in participating in this research project or any questions and concerns you may have. Please contact me at: zhang.hon@husky.neu.edu or 617-459-7397. This study has been reviewed and approved by the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (#12-10-04).

Please reply me by ***, I will call you 2 days after I send this email to make sure you receive it. Many thanks for your consideration to take part in my research.

Sincerely,

Hong Zhang
Graduate Student, Doctor of Education Program
School of Education, College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University

APPROVED

ISO 0000

VALID: 12-09-09

THROUGH: 12-10-10
Appendix D

Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, Department: School of Education, College of Professional Studies
Investigators Name: Principle Investigator: Liliana Meneses; Student researcher: Hong Zhang
Title of Project: Cross-cultural Learning Experience of Chinese Student at an American University

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask the researcher any questions that you have.

When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you are an undergraduate student from China studying at a 4-year college degree program in the United States. You must be at least 18 years old to participate.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to learn about academic adaptation and cross-cultural transitional experiences of undergraduate students from China enrolled in American colleges and universities.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participant in three one-on-one interviews to tell the researcher your personal stories about your lived experiences both in China and the United States, as well as a reflection on the cross-cultural transition as it relates to your academic adaption experience.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
You will be interviewed by the researcher at the Northeastern University campus, either in the library or cafeteria. The interviews are anticipated to start in the late fall 2012. Each interview will be spaced within three days or one week of each other. The length of each interview will be around 90 minutes. A reminder for each interview appointment will be sent to you a week before by email. Chinese language will be used in the interviews. With your permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded for transcription and analysis purposes only. At the completion of the interview sessions, a transcript and translation will be sent to you via email for your verification and correction.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There are no foreseeable risks and discomfort for you to take part in this research. If you feel uncomfortable answering any question, you can refuse to do so and you can stop the interview at any time. To avoid any question that may cause discomfort to you, the researcher intends to hear your story instead of evaluating your experience.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, your answers may help the researcher better understand the cross-cultural transitional experiences of the undergraduate students from China who enroll in American colleges and universities.
Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that
you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group
data and will not identify you, the University or any individual as being of this project. The audiotapes
and transcripts will be maintained securely in a USB with password. The paper documents will be
locked in the cabinet. Participant’s information will be de-identified and coded in the transcripts. All
audiotapes of interviews will be destroyed after the researcher finalizes analysis and transcription.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do
not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at
any time if you do not want to continue. Your decision to participate or not will have no effect on
your standing at the University. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit anytime, you will
not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a student.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
Any question or problem you may have, you can contact either the student researcher, Hong Zhang,
by telephone: 617-459-7397 and via email at zhang.hong@husky.neu.edu, or the principle
investigator Dr. Liliana Meneses at telephone: 703-474-1886 and email: l.meneses@neu.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director,
Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA
02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
There is no payment to be given in this study. A beverage and cookies will be provided during the
interview sessions.

I agree to take part in this research.

My preference regarding the audio-recording of the interviews is as follows:

☐ I do NOT agree to be audio-taped.

☐ I agree to have the interviews audio-recorded for transcription and analysis purposes only.

Signature of person agreeing to take part __________________________________________________________________________ Date ________________

Printed name of person above __________________________________________________________________________________________

Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent __________________________________________________________________________ Date ________________

Printed name of person above __________________________________________________________________________________________