CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WILLINGNESS TO APPROACH INSTRUCTORS ONLINE AT A US INSTITUTION OF HIGHER LEARNING

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Abstract

This study sought to discern if their native culture influenced Chinese international students’ willingness to approach instructors for online classwork at a US institution of higher education (IHE). Native Chinese students predominate at US IHEs, comprising 31% of enrolled international students (Institute of International Education, 2014). This work built on previous efforts that addressed cultural obstacles encountered by students, particularly online difficulties that included language competence, intercultural sensitivity, and instructor presence. A review of the literature found that previous research did not elaborate on student behaviors towards their online instructor. Hofstede’s three dimensions, PDI, IDV, and LTO, were used as a theoretical framework and analytical lens in this study. Interview questions focused on culture as it may effect participants’ inclination to contact their instructor for clarity if they had questions during online coursework. This study demonstrated that both student and instructor behaviors potentially inhibited participants’ willingness to approach their instructor online. Student behaviors included their interdependence on technology, friends, and themselves to solve information impasses. This dependence was motivated not only by self-consciousness in the manner students presented themselves online to the instructor, but also on the online structure for the course and self-perceived degree of the instructor’s friendliness. Friendliness was further qualified as the dichotomy of private vs. public responses, clear vs. ambiguous responses, and a perceived friendly vs. aloof manner. Recommendations for practice and research for students and online faculty include some coursework in intercultural online communication and online course design parameters that consider the needs of the second language student.

Keywords: Cross-cultural learning, Hofstede’s cultural framework, online coursework, higher education, international students
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem Statement

United States (US) institutions of higher education (IHEs) have experienced unprecedented growth with new enrollment in international students increasing from 564,766 students in 2005-2006 to 886,052 students in 2013-2014 (Institute of International Education, 2014). Chinese international students’ overall enrollment at US IHEs increased from 235,597 in 2012-2013 to 274,439 in 2013-2014 (Institute of International Education, 2014). This statistic substantiated by the Open Doors Report that describes China as the leading country to send students to the US, making up 31% of all international students (Institute of International Education, 2014).

Concurrent with the surge in US international student growth is the number of college students who took at least one online course during their enrollment. That figure rose from 1.6 million in 2002 to 7.1 million in 2013 (Allen & Seaman, 2014). The influx of Chinese international students attending American universities with the simultaneous expansion of online learning coursework has created a substantial teaching challenge for US IHEs. These institutions need to understand the nuances of Chinese learning methods and social behavior so that online coursework is developed appropriately.

To that end, several research studies examine Chinese international students’ acculturation into US IHEs. The work typically addresses traditional (i.e., face-to-face) classroom participation and English language proficiency (Cifuentes & Shih, 2001; Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008; Li & Rosson, 2012; Liu, Liu, Lee, & Magjuka, 2010; Shih & Cifuentes, 2003; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Tu, 2001; Zhao & McDougall, 2008).
Research studies have also examined intercultural sensitivity issues for international students at US IHEs with recommended best practices for instructional design, technology, and methods of teaching (Bennett, 2004; Brown, Aoshima, Bolen, Chia, & Kohyama, 2007; Chan, 1999; Chen & Bennett, 2012; Chen, Mashhadi, Ang & Harkrider, 1999; Cifuentes & Shih, 2001; DeBry, 2001; Edmundson, 2007; Mamiseishvili, 2012; Singh & Doherty, 2004; Zhang, Sillitoe, & Webb, 1999). More specifically, studies describe Chinese international students’ experiences with US IHE online coursework and their perceptions of instructor-student interactions (Chen, Bennett, & Maton, 2008; Ku & Lohr, 2003; Lee & Rice, 2007; Liu & Magjuka, 2011; Thompson & Ku, 2005; Zhao & McDougall, 2008).

Yet, research revolving around instructor-student interactions generally discussed the importance of instructor presence and immediacy of the instructor’s feedback (Baker, 2010; Chou & Chen, 2010; Dong & Chittooran, 2012; Gray, 2013; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010; Velez & Cano, 2008). Studies often overlook student behaviors toward the instructor, particularly how online Chinese international students interact with their US online instructors. An instructor may not realize the student’s need for clarification if a student hesitates to approach an instructor with questions or concerns. This may lead to poor communication, misunderstandings, and eventually failing grades.

Significance of Research Problem

There are several studies (Hsu, Watson, Lin, & Ho, 2007; Stephens, 1997; Waldeck, Kearney, & Plax, 2014; Zeng, 2010) loosely associated with the topic of students’ ‘willingness to approach’ instructors; however, these studies do not combine the four criteria enumerated in this study:
1) Cultural influences [on]
2) Chinese international students [with]
3) US instructors
4) Online.

These related studies covered the literature on Chinese students willingness to communicate in English (Zeng, 2010; Hsu, et al., 2007), inter-cultural communication competence (Stephens, 1997) and lastly, international students willingness, in general, to communicate online (Waldeck, et al., 2014). This research was significant because they examined Chinese students’ communication style and sociocultural tendencies that may be associated indirectly with the research problem. Nonetheless, a study that specifically examined whether culture influences Chinese international students’ willingness to approach US IHE instructors online was not located.

Many studies that examined communication between instructors and Chinese international students only focused on the instructor. These studies sought to specify criteria of “instructor presence” in an online course so that students would receive feedback comparable to a traditional classroom (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Chen et al., 2008; Ku & Lohr, 2003; Thompson and Ku, 2005; Tu, 2001; Zhu, 2012):

- Arbaugh and Hwang (2006) explained that regular and meaningful feedback that contributed to content expertise was what establishes online instructor presence;

- Ku & Lohr’s (2003) study investigated Chinese students’ attitudes toward their first online learning experience where the students found the instructor feedback lacking;
Thompson and Ku (2005) reported that Chinese students appreciated immediate instructor responses and structured guidance to know they were communicating appropriately and students were disappointed if they did not receive authoritative opinions from their instructors because they took feedback very seriously;

Tu (2001) attested to the importance of instructor presence as a significant factor of online learning and pointed out how expeditious online communication by instructors impacts all students’ learning and satisfaction positively, for native and non-native learners;

Chen et al. (2008) established that active discourse and guidance by a legitimate authoritative mentor is vital for Chinese students; and

Zhu (2012) agreed that the absence of instructor guidance and interaction online was problematic for the Chinese students.

Online learning is a departure from the traditional classroom where students’ uncertainty would customarily be signaled to the instructor by visual cues such as raising their hands to ask a question or clarify a point. The online instructor is unable to see students’ expressions unless the teaching format is a synchronous conference call where both participants are able to view one another online (using a camera). If the instructor is unaware that the student needs guidance, it is unlikely that the student would receive suitable feedback. A non-native student may not be accustomed to approaching an American authority figure with questions or concerns, although the US IHE instructor considers this behavior routine.
Even when the instructor provides feedback online, it can be misconstrued. The online format lacks not only visual (e.g. facial gestures) cues but also lacks auditory cues (e.g., intonations) that signal familiarity and ease of communication between instructor and student (Hsu, et al., 2007; Ku & Lohr, 2003; Yildiz & Bichelmeyer, 2003). For instance, an instructor nodding their head during a conversation can give the student encouragement, particularly to an international student, who may be unsure of their second language ability. A giggle can lighten a face-to-face conversation in the traditional classroom, yet online the instructor is limited to emoticons, keyboard characters, and other textual cues used to express feelings and expressions.

Poor communication may occur online regardless of substantial instructor presence or a student’s assertive personality. Culture-based behaviors may compel the student to feel uncomfortable approaching an instructor online. Self-perceived inadequate proficiency in English, native societal norms concerning authority figures and individual or peer group behavior all can determine the manner in which a student interacts with their instructor. Fear of displaying improper social behavior, commonly known as the need to save ‘face’, is prevalent in Chinese culture (Bond, 1996; Chen & Bennett, 2012; Korac-Kakabadse, Kouzmin, Korac-Kakabadse, & Savery, 2001; Tu, 2001). Tu (2001) explains,

Face-saving, one of the most notable Chinese traditions, has a forceful impact on the Chinese student’s interaction in the CMC [Computer Mediated Communication] environment. Chinese students are still very much concerned with face saving in the online environment despite the absence of a face-to-face contact and non-verbal cues. The computer
keyboard is perceived as a social form by Chinese students, which would affect face-saving by the quality of their writings. Chinese students perceive that bad quality writing when corresponding with an instructor causes them to lose face by conveying a bad impression and demonstrates a lack of respect for the instructor. (p.52)

By way of further illustration, Tu (2001) quotes a Chinese student stating, “I am very careful with my writing, particularly with messages to the instructor. I feel if I write something with the wrong grammar it will give the instructor a bad impression and I lose face” (p.53). Both student and instructor lose face; the student by writing poorly, and the instructor being presented with poor writing by the student, signifying disrespect (Tu, 2001).

Therefore, not only is it critical that faculty be culturally responsive to diverse behaviors that international students may display online (Baker, 2010; Ku & Lohr, 2003; Liu, et al., 2010; Tapanes, Smith, & White, 2009; Waldeck, et al., 2001), it is also imperative that students approach instructors online should they need further explanation to clarify content. In this way, the online learning platform can present cultural obstacles for the Chinese international student simply by the nature of its format.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to understand if culture influenced Chinese international students’ willingness to approach instructors online at a US institution of higher education (IHE). Diversity of the student population is a key component in higher education today, particularly in the online setting. Increasingly, students are no longer compelled to attend a university in their native country. Frequently, a culture will have
specific and sometimes unique normative behaviors that determine how a student behaves in certain classroom situations. The US instructor may not recognize these behaviors during the international students’ learning process. Whereas a US student may not hesitate to approach an instructor with a question regarding course content or related contextual information presented, an international student may feel awkward or embarrassed due to self-perceived inadequate language skills when confronted with a similar need to inquire. It is unlikely that an instructor will recognize an online student’s need for feedback, especially when the parties are not in a visual contact scenario. Consequently, a student’s tentativeness to approach an instructor can easily result in unasked and unanswered questions that ultimately hinder valuable learning opportunities online.

College campuses need to prepare faculty to work competently with individuals from different backgrounds and assist non-native student adaptation to US online learning environments. It may have profound negative consequences if students are reluctant to approach instructors by email, chat, discussion board, or conference if they have questions requiring individual feedback online.

**Positionality**

My reasons for studying this topic were both professional and personal. Employed in technology-related positions at universities for the past fifteen years, I have worked alongside, supervised, and worked under a diverse group of faculty, staff, and students. Although I have had experience with the coordination and technological side of online coursework, I came to realize the importance of the cultural side. Online education is expanding globally and it is common to have faculty and students residing in
various locations around the world participating in the same online course. Online partnerships between universities in different countries can fail even with the best intentions.

My initial intent was to study international student online challenges as a whole. However, I soon realized that I had to choose one homogeneous group in order to understand particular cultural influences. I chose Chinese international students not only because they represented the largest group enrolled at US universities, but also because a university ESL instructor informed me that she experienced difficulty communicating in her classrooms with Chinese international students. This led me to question whether communication between student and instructor was problematic also online, and if so, did the students approach the instructor for help. In the ESL classroom, I observed the instructor taking notice of the puzzled expressions of the Chinese students in the classroom and responding to it. Online, it may not be as easy.

Personally, the topic had me contemplate my father’s journey from early childhood through his service in World War II. English was his second language since his Finnish parents had immigrated to the US a year before his birth. As I was growing up and during our visits with my grandparents, he spoke only Finnish to his parents, much to the dismay of my mother. I thought about the ways my father may have coped with his requirement to learn a new language when he began elementary school and whether he had classmates, with whom he could communicate in his native language. I doubt it. I had never considered these questions and it created empathy in me to understand the challenges of the international student, in not only their attempt to learn
academic content, but also simultaneously trying to understand its meaning and ultimately its context.

Research Question

The study’s research question is as follows:

How does culture influence Chinese international students’ willingness to approach instructors in online courses at a US institution of higher education (IHE)?

- Were they confident enough to approach their instructors with questions or comments while online?
- If not, what were the reasons they did not contact the instructor?

This study explored the ways in which Chinese international students’ native upbringing influenced their communication online with their US instructor.

Theoretical Framework

Hofstede developed one of the most influential frameworks for studying cross-cultural communications (Liu, et al., 2010). Hofstede’s Cultural Framework (HCF) studied IBM employee data from fifty-three countries collected 1967-1973 (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). The survey was comprised of sixty questions that measured employee’s values and beliefs about culture (Hofstede & Bond, 1988).

Analyzing the data in 1981, Hofstede found certain cultural dimensions existed among all fifty-three countries at different levels. Hofstede’s Cultural Framework (HCF) initially consisted of four dimensions: Power Distance Index (PDI), Individualism versus Collectivism (IDV), Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS), and Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Chapter 2 provides a thorough explanation of the dimensions but a brief description is as follows: Power distance represents how unequal
members of society are from one another. Individualism versus Collectivism describes whether the society leans toward the well-being of the group or individual expression. Masculinity versus Femininity portrays how assertive or how nurturing a society is. Lastly, Uncertainty/Avoidance indicates how tolerant members of society are with behavior or opinions that are different from their own.

Another researcher, Bond, identified a cultural dimension he labeled, Confucian Dynamism in 1987 (Hofstede, 2011). Chinese scholars found this dimension by distributing a survey to students in twenty-three countries (Hofstede, 2011). Confucian Dynamism reflects “a society’s search for virtue” (Hofstede, 1988, p.19). Hofstede (2011) received Bond’s permission to add this dimension as HCF’s fifth dimension and renamed it Long-Term versus Short-Term Orientation (LTO) in 1991. Long-term orientation corresponds to Bond’s Confucian Work Dynamism and it defined as follows:

*Long-term orientation* stands for the fostering of virtues oriented toward future rewards—in particular, perseverance and thrift. Its opposite pole, *short-term orientation*, stands for the fostering of virtues related to the past and present—in particular, respect for tradition, preservation of “face”, and fulfilling social obligations. (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010, p.239)

A sixth dimension added in 2010, Indulgence, was not identified as having any implications for education. This dimension assesses a nation’s happiness or well-being (Hofstede, et al, 2010).

Hofstede measured cultural data on a scale from 0-120 along the five dimensions that had implications for education: Power Distance Index (PDI), Individualism and Collectivism (IDV), Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS), Uncertainty Avoidance
(UAI), and Long-term and Short-term Orientation (LTO). For example, a PDI score of zero (0) specifies the least acceptance of the unequal distribution of power, while a score near 120 specifies the greatest acceptance of unequal distribution of power within one’s society. China’s scores were: PDI-80; IDV-20; MAS-66; UAI-30; and LTO-87 (Hofstede, et al., 2010). US’s scores were: PDI-40; IDV-91; MAS-62; UAI-46; and LTO-26 (Hofstede, et al., 2010). Particularly noteworthy were US and China’s Power Distance Index (PDI), Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV), & Long vs. Short Term Orientation (LTO) scores. These three dimensions represented the highest cultural differences between China and the US in Hofstede’s data and PDI, IDV, and LTO provided the theoretical foci of this study.

Definition of Key Terms

Adaptation: “Both the functional requisites for survival and reproduction and the specific means that are employed for doing so by a given organism in a given environment” (Corning, 2000, p.41).

Culture: “The collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one category of people from those of another” (Hofstede & Bond, 1988, p.6).

Confucianism: “A set of pragmatic rules for daily life” Key principles: 1. “The stability of society is based on unequal relationships between people”; 2. The family is the prototype of all social organizations”; 3. Virtuous behavior toward other consists of treating others as one would like to be treated oneself; and 4. Virtue with regard to one’s tasks in life consists of trying to acquire skills and education, working hard, not spending more than necessary, being patient, and persevering” (Hofstede & Bond, 1988, p.8).
**Emoticon:** “A group of keyboard characters (as :-)) that typically represents a facial expression or suggests an attitude or emotion and that is used especially in computerized communications (as e-mail)” (Merriam-Webster).

**Face:** “The respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in his social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct; the face extended to a person by others is a function of the degree of congruence between judgments of his total condition in life, including his actions as well as those of people closely associated with him, and the social expectations that others have placed upon him” (Ho, 1976, p.883).

**Individualism /Collectivism (IDV):** “Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (Hofstede, 2011, p.92).

**Instructor Presence:** “Posting regularly to the discussion board, responding in a timely manner to e-mail and assignments, and generally modeling good online communication and interactions” (Pallof and Pratt, 2003, p.118).

**Language:** “The system of words or signs that people use to express thoughts and feelings to each other” (Merriam-Webster).

**Long-Term Orientation (LTO):** “The opposite of short-term orientation; together, they form a dimension of national cultures. Long-term orientation stands for
the fostering of pragmatic virtues oriented toward future rewards, in particular perseverance, thrift, and adapting to changing circumstances” (Hofstede, 2010, p.519).

**Online Learning:** “A form of education facilitated by information technology, and promoted by the form of social learning that creates connectivity and interaction between instructors and students” (Lee & Mendlinger, 2011, p.244).

**Norm:** “What is typical of a group, class, or series” (Merriam-Webster).

**Power Distance Index (PDI):** “The extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 2010, p.61).

**Virtue:** “Perseverance, thrift, ordering relationships by status, and having a sense of shame” (Hofstede, 2011, p.13).

**Organization of Study**

This doctoral thesis is composed of five major chapters. Chapter 1 comprises the problem statement, significance of research problem, purpose statement, research question, theoretical framework, definition of key terms, and organization of study. Chapter 2 begins with studies related to the Hofstede’s HCF three dimensions that represent the highest cultural differences between China and the US: PDI, IDV, & LTO. The review continues with studies that discuss Chinese culture and Confucianism in relation to the three dimensions. The next section gives a brief overview of online learning, its history, and comparison to traditional learning. The review concludes with the Chinese international students’ adaptation covering English language proficiency, intercultural sensitivity, and perceptions of instructor-student interaction. Chapter 3 describes the research design and methodology beginning with the research question,
qualitative research design, case study, recruitment and access, human participants and ethics precautions, data collection and storage, analysis, trustworthiness, and identifying researcher bias. Chapter 4 presents the findings from the data. Chapter 5 concludes with analysis, limitations, implications, conclusions, and recommendations for future research and practice.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

The literature review is organized from general to specific (Hofstede, 2006) beginning with “theory based” literature: Hofstede’s Cultural Framework’s PDI, IDV, and LTO and each dimension’s relationship to instructor-student interaction comparing China to US. The next section briefly describes Chinese culture and Confucianism with its ideological components that correspond to HCF. Following is a brief history of online education and its comparison to traditional learning. The literature review concludes with a look at the Chinese international student’s cultural adaptation, their experience with online learning, and perception of instructor-student online interaction.

Hofstede’s Cultural Framework (HCF)

As pointed out in Chapter 1, three out of five Hofstede cultural dimensions used for this study, PDI, IDV, and LTO, represented the highest cultural differences between China and the US in Hofstede’s data. This section begins with the literature about each dimension and then addresses each dimension’s specific relationship to China and the US.

Power distance Index (PDI). According to Hofstede (1986), the PDI relates to how much a less powerful person in a culture, for instance, a student versus teacher, accepts the unequal distribution of power. Cultures vary on how acceptable unequal
distribution of power is among individuals. Large-power distance organizations function within social hierarchies where an individual’s status is used to exercise authority (Hofstede, 2010). The authoritative figure dictates and does not expect the subordinate to question their expertise (Hofstede, 2010). In the educational setting, a large-power distance value indicates that the instructor is seen as guru, as shown in Table 2-1, with “students in class speak[ing] up only when invited to” (Hofstede, 2010, p.69). In large-power distance societies, learning is instructor-centered, and as the authority figure, the professor’s knowledge is not challenged (Hofstede, 2010).

In contrast, small-power distance societies encourage collaboration and strive to treat individuals equally (Hofstede, 1986). Educational environments are student-centered where the student is expected and encouraged to ask questions, express opinions, and manage their own learning. The instructor functions typically as a guide or facilitator to mentor the student as shown in Table 2-1 (Hofstede, 2010).

Table 2-1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SMALL-POWER DISTANCE</th>
<th>LARGE-POWER DISTANCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inequalities among people should be minimized.</td>
<td>Inequalities among people are expected and desired.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social relationships should be handled with care.</td>
<td>Status should be balanced with restraint.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less powerful people and more powerful people should be interdependent.</td>
<td>Less powerful people should be dependent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less powerful people are emotionally comfortable with interdependence.</td>
<td>Less powerful people are emotionally polarized between dependence and counterdependence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents treat children as equals.</td>
<td>Parents teach children obedience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children treat parents and older relatives as equals.</td>
<td>Respect for parents and older relatives is a basic and lifelong virtue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children play no role in old-age security of parents.</td>
<td>Children are a source of old-age security to parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students treat teachers as equals.</td>
<td>Students give teachers respect, even outside class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are experts who transfer impersonal truths.</td>
<td>Teachers are gurus who transfer personal wisdom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of learning depends on two-way communication and excellence of students.</td>
<td>Quality of learning depends on excellence of the teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less educated persons hold more authoritarian values than more educated persons.</td>
<td>More educated and less educated persons show equally authoritarian values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational policy focuses on secondary schools.</td>
<td>Educational policy focuses on universities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patients treat doctors as equals and actively supply information.</td>
<td>Patients treat doctors as superiors; consultations are shorter and controlled by the doctors.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hofstede, 2010, p.72. ©Geert Hofstede B.V. quoted with permission

**Large-power distance/China.** There are numerous studies about Chinese student behavior in the classroom that reference Hofstede’s PDI dimension (Bassett, 2004, Cifuentes & Shih, 2001, Shih & Cifuentes, 2003; Zhang & Kenny, 2010; Zhao & McDougal, 2008). Bassett (2004) described a cross-cultural case study that analyzed students engaged in a partnership between a Chinese and Australian university. Both groups discussed how conflict was resolved in their respective countries pertaining to HCF. The Chinese student’s perception of conflict resolution overwhelmingly stressed a large-power distance depicting the leader’s role as one expected to resolve disputes. In return, the subordinate complies, not challenging the leader’s power (Bassett, 2004). On the other hand, the Australian students from a small-power distance country thought that the subordinate should have an opportunity to offer opinions and help to negotiate a conflict. Likewise, Cifuentes and Shih (2001) acknowledged diverse cultural beliefs about the role of an online instructor between Taiwanese and US students. Taiwanese students’ regarded the instructor’s role as authoritative, whereas US students regarded the instructor’s role as facilitator (Cifuentes & Shih 2001). They also concluded that the
Taiwanese students tolerated unequal power between instructors and students whereas the US students did not.

Zhao & McDougall (2008) assessed Chinese students’ perceptions of online learning at Western universities and gathered qualitative data on six Chinese graduate students focusing on cultural influences. They found that Chinese students’ level of respect for an instructor’s authority and expertise was so absolute that the student never questioned it (Zhao & McDougall, 2008). The students did not expect to determine answers independently. Instead, they expected the authority figure (instructor) to tell the subordinates (students) what to do and subordinates are required to follow orders.

However, some studies suggested that Chinese learners were becoming increasingly more self-assured with their student-instructor relationships in the online environment. Bing & Ping (2008) studied whether national culture governed learners’ communication online at a Chinese university. They compared their results with Hofstede’s findings. They observed that the number of Chinese learners questioning their instructors increased and reflected a steady reduction in power distance between the ‘higher status’ and ‘lower status’ role in the online environment. This reduction was particularly apparent in certain areas of instruction where students would actively ask questions of their instructors privately on the topic of tests. Zhang & Kenny (2010) described Chinese education as instructor-dominated in a large-power distance society that defined performance by means of testing and gains in status. This was consistent with Bing & Ping’s (2008) study in that the Chinese learners’ chief online coursework concern was to ask about the assessment processes and the best ways to pass exams. However, although there was a steady reduction in power-distance among the Chinese
learners privately, they were still hesitant to ask questions or offer opinions publicly online for fear of embarrassment or losing face.

Djojosaputro, Nguyen, & Peszynski (2005) agreed and found that students from large-power distance societies do not wait for invitations from their instructors to ask questions as long as they were able to communicate in private. Djojosaputro, et al. (2005) claimed that students from large-power distance societies were hesitant to post in public online discussion forums for fear of appearing incompetent. Djojosaputro, et al. (2005) concluded that online learning was more suitable for small-power distance societies.

*Small-power distance/US.* The US student, on the other hand, is encouraged to search independently for solutions in their educational setting. US education is student-centered and identified by Hofstede as occurring in a small-power distance society. US students can differ with their instructor openly, and in Hofstede’s perception, are viewed by large-power distance societies as non-acceptance of persons of higher power. They can disagree, argue, and criticize course content openly (Hofstede, 2010). Student behaviors such as this are seen as a sign of disrespect toward the instructor in other cultures (Manikutty, Anuradha, & Hansen, 2007).

Koh and Lim (2007) stated that the online learning environment benefits are greater for small-power distance learners than large-power distance ones. They explained that students from large-power distance societies are less comfortable learning independently due to their greater dependency on the instructor (Koh & Lim, 2007). Kuboni (2009) discussed online learning and the modifications of the instructor’s role as a course transforms from traditional classroom to an online learning platform. Unlike the
traditional setting where the learning is instructor-centered, online learning places the students at the center with the student taking responsibility for their own progress (Kuboni, 2009; Swierczek & Bechter, 2010).

It appears evident that the student-centered focus frequently used in online learning does not necessarily translate as an ‘ideal’ way, to large-power distance populations to transmit knowledge. Typically, the instructor shapes and organizes online content and expects the student to control their participation and learning process. The instructor’s role is facilitator and less as authority. Another reason the online learning format is not ideal for large-power distance populations is that online course content is often open to interpretation. According to Kennedy (2002), the Chinese learning style depends on precisely presented information and distrusts inconclusiveness. Sharing online learning content among students, as in a discussion group, may also create uncertainty for Chinese students since they prefer to learn from the instructor rather than their peers who are not considered experts (Djojosaputro, et al., 2005; Tu, 2001). Traditional Chinese education is generally one-way with the Chinese student as passive learner (Zhao & McDougall, 2008).

**Individualism vs. collectivism (IDV).** IDV is the most studied HCF dimension to date (Triandis & Gelfand, 2012). Individualist societies generate inhabitants that are independent, give priority to their personal goals, and behave predominantly on their individual attitudes (Basabe & Ros, 2005; Hofstede, 1986; Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede, et al., 2010; Hofstede, 2011; Manikutty, et al., 2007; Reid, 2004; Shih & Cifuentes, 2003; Triandis, 2001). In contrast, collectivistic societies place group happiness over the goals of the individual (Würtz, 2006). Collectivist society members are interdependent within
groups, give priority to group goals, and behave in a communal manner as presented in Table 2-2 (Basabe & Ros, 2005; Hofstede, 1986; Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede, et al., 2010; Hofstede, 2011; Manikutty, et al., 2007; Reid, 2004; Shih & Cifuentes, 2003; Triandis, 2001, Würtz, 2006).

Table 2-2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COLLECTIVIST</th>
<th>INDIVIDUALIST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People are born into extended families or other in-groups that continue protecting them in exchange for loyalty.</td>
<td>Everyone grows up to look after him or herself and his or her immediate (nuclear) family only.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children learn to think in terms of “we”.</td>
<td>Children learn to think in terms of “I”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value standards differ for in-groups and out-groups: exclusionism.</td>
<td>The same value standards are supposed to apply to everyone: universalism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmony should always be maintained and direct confrontations avoided.</td>
<td>Speaking one’s mind is a characteristic of an honest person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendships are predetermined.</td>
<td>Friendships are voluntary and should be fostered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources should be shared with relatives.</td>
<td>Individual ownership of resources, even for children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult children live with parents.</td>
<td>Adult children leave the parental home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-context communication prevails.</td>
<td>Low-context communication prevails.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent socialization in public places.</td>
<td>My home is my castle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trespasses lead to shame and loss of face for self and group.</td>
<td>Trespasses lead to guilt and loss of self-respect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brides should be young, industrious, and chaste; bridegrooms should be older.</td>
<td>Criteria for marriage partners are not predetermined.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The most powerful influence on girls’ beauty ideals is girlfriends.</td>
<td>The most powerful influence on girls’ beauty ideals is boys in general.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hofstede, 2010, p.113. ©Geert Hofstede B.V. quoted with permission

Collectivist/China. There can be collective similarities in a culture’s behaviors in how they perceive and act in educational settings (Bing & Ping, 2008). Tapanes, et al. (2009) found that students’ individualist/collectivist dimension related considerably to their culture in the online classroom. In fact, students from cultures with large-power tolerances also typically have collectivist values (Basabe & Ros, 2005; Owens, 2008). The instructor/student interaction is formal and the instructors do not tend to socialize
with the students outside the classroom (Owens, 2008). In the classroom, non-verbal cues are believed to be critical in forming relationships by collectivist societies (Black, Mrasek, & Ballinger, 2003; Djojosaputro, et al., 2005; Korac-Kakabadse et al., 2001). In collectivist societies “communication tends to draw on the shared knowledge of the communicating parties” and is often referred to as high context communication (Würtz, 2006, p.276). Non-verbal cues in a collectivist society lets others know “what is expected and allow them to conform to group norms of social behaviors” (Hwang, Ang, & Francesco, 2002, p.91).

**Individualist/US.** Students who have a low tolerance for large-power distance tend to come from individualist societies (Owens, 2008). These students find it easier to adapt to interactions in an online environment (Bing & Ping, 2008). Online course discussions typically require commenting on other’s opinions or ideas and students from individualist societies are at ease doing so (Bing & Ping, 2008). Students from the US are familiar with learner-centered coursework directly challenging peers and the instructor (Bing & Ping, 2008). Djojosaputro, et al. (2005) agree that online learning is more suitable for students from individualistic cultural backgrounds where discussions are open, public, opinionated, and frequently peer-guided. Individualist societies are associated with low context communication where messages have direct intent. On the contrary, collectivist societies identify with high context communication that is ambiguous (Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, Kim, & Heyman, 1996).

**Long vs. short-term orientation (LTO).** As recalled from Chapter 1, Hofstede recognized both PDI and IDV in 1981 and LTO added six years later in 1987. Derived from Bond’s cultural dimension labeled, *Confucian Dynamism*, the fifth dimension was
clearly associated with Confucianism, as it consists of values that are elements of its teachings (Hofstede, 2010). Bearden, Money, & Nevins, (2006) agreed saying, “LTO has roots in Confucian values concerning time, tradition, perseverance, saving for the future, and allowing others to ‘save face’” (p.456).

The distinction between long and short-term orientation are frequently vague and conflicting (Fang, 2003). One example is stated by Bearden el al. (2006) describing the correlation between IDV and LTO is, “We might expect, for example, that the more collectivist a person's cultural influences are, the more he or she might prefer the traditional values of family and group harmony manifest in long-term relationships” (p.466). Others relate LTO to collectivism in the case of ‘saving face’ where it serves to protect the individual’s image within their social network (Bond, 1996; Chen & Bennett, 2012; Korac-Kakabadse et al., 2001; Tu, 2001; Venaik, Zhu, & Brewer, 2013). To complete the quandary, Nevins, Bearden, & Money (2007) explained that long-term orientated individuals plan for the future and respect tradition. Yet, Hofstede’s lists ‘respect for traditions’ under short-term orientation that is associated with the US individualist culture.

Table 2-3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SHORT-TERM ORIENTATION</th>
<th>LONG-TERM ORIENTATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social pressure toward spending</td>
<td>Thrift, being sparing with resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efforts should produce quick results.</td>
<td>Perseverance, sustained efforts toward slow results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern with social status obligations.</td>
<td>Willingness to subordinate oneself for a purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern with “face”</td>
<td>Having a sense of shame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for traditions</td>
<td>Respect for circumstances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>concern with personal stability</td>
<td>Concern with personal adaptiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage is a moral arrangement.</td>
<td>Marriage is a pragmatic arrangement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with in-laws is a source of trouble.</td>
<td>Living with in-laws is normal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Young women associate affection with a boyfriend.  
Humility is for woman only.  
Old age is an unhappy period, but it starts late.  
Preschool children can be cared for by others.  
Children get gifts for fun and love.

Young women associate affection with a husband.  
Humility is for both men and women.  
Old age is a happy period, and it starts early.  
Mothers should have time with their preschool children.  
Children get gifts for education and development.

| Source: Hofstede, 2010, p.243. ©Geert Hofstede B.V. quoted with permission |

**Long-term orientation/China.** Hofstede described long-term orientation as promoting virtues, for example, thrift, and perseverance that take into consideration future rewards. Hofstede’s LTO dimension was “originally labeled ‘Confucian dynamism’, reflective of Confucian values, such as perseverance and face-saving in relationships” (Nevin, 2007, p.263). Hofstede pointed out that the concern with face is a short-term orientation characteristic (US) and a sense of shame is long-term (China) (see Table 2-3). However, there are numerous conflicting viewpoints regarding Hofstede’s LTO dimension. There was literature that described Chinese culture avoiding ‘loss of face’ (Earley, 1997; Fang, 2003; Hu, 1944; Koh & Lim, 2007; Li, Wang, & Fischer, 2004; Shih & Cifuentes, 2003). Secondly, the literature pointed out that loss of face leads to sense of shame. There was a lack of clarity if they can even be separated (Fang, 2003, Li, et al., 2004).

Thirdly, articles spoke of the ‘loss of face’ as being characteristic of both China and US cultures or, in other words, universal (Begley & Tan, 2001; Ho, 1976; Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Masumoto, Yokochi, Pan, Takai, & Wilcox, 2001). Additionally, the literature pointed out that the loss of face led to a sense of shame (Fang, 2003, Li, et al., 2004). To complicate issues further, Li, et al. (2004) found two types of shame in the Chinese culture: a shame state surrounding oneself; and ones reaction to the shame
experienced by others. The ‘self’ shame state included the fear of losing face and guilt. The ‘others’ shame state encompassed disgrace and embarrassment (Li, et al., 2004). In conclusion, there is complexity surrounding the terms ‘face’ and ‘shame’ and whether they are separate or intertwined.

**Short-term orientation/US.** Bond initially conceptualized the LTO dimension as an orientation towards the present versus the future, pointing to the fact that values drive economic growth in developing countries (Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Yeh & Lawrence, 1995). However, many teachings of Confucius also encompass the values of the past, such as respect for tradition and age (Nevins, et al., 2007). This leads to further confusion with China categorized under long-term orientation as shown in Table 2-3 and respect for tradition categorized under the short-term heading (Fang, 2003). However, there are characteristics that help differentiate short-term from long-term orientation. Short-term orientation reflects a ‘need it now’ culture whereas long-term orientation stresses the work ethic and perseverance (Nevins, et al., 2007, p.265). In this way, short-term is oriented in the past and present, and long-term oriented toward future rewards (Hofstede, 2020). Perhaps Fang (2003) is correct in concluding that short and long-term orientations are interconnected views rather than opposing views. Regardless of the LTO debate, this study attempted to shed light on what long and short-term traits the participants reflected, if any, by including this dimension in the interview questions and analysis.

**Chinese Culture**

Confucianism influences Chinese culture along with other ideologies such as communism, socialism, and Marxism, which all tend to reject individual expression and
freedom of thought (Jiang, 2011). “Confucianism has influenced and shaped Chinese educational thought and practice since 200 BC” (Deng, 2011, p. 562). It was only after Deng Xiaoping’s reforms in 1978 (Wu, 2015) that the China’s Ministry of Education began sending students’ abroad to study at western IHEs. Although Confucianism was not prominent during Deng’s era, it was recently “promoted as the core element of China’s traditional culture” (Wu, 2015, p. 303). Therefore, for the purposes of this study and with keeping in alignment with Hofstede’s framework, Confucianism will be the sole ideology explored in the literature review.

Confucianism. Confucianism is an ideology established by the Chinese philosopher and educator, Confucius (551-479 BC). Confucian ideology has been steadfastly recognized as an influential system of moral, political and social principles pervading almost every facet of Chinese life since the Han era from 206 BC - 220 AD (Wang, Wang, Ruona, & Rojewski, 2005). The ideology stresses the significance of group identity, conformity, long-term relationships, and respect for hierarchy in order to maintain harmony (Triandis & Gelfand, 2012). Furthermore, Confucianism highlights the importance of ‘face’, intertwined within all Chinese social interactions (Wang, et al., 2005).

Hofstede’s concepts of power distance index (PDI), individualism vs. collectivism (IDV), and long- vs. short-term orientation (LTO) have direct associations with Confucianism. PDI emphasizes dominant-subservient societal hierarchies, for instance, the relationship between parent/child, manager/employee, and instructor/student. IDV collectivism and belonging to solid unified groups is also prominently present in contemporary Chinese culture (Lee & Dawes, 2005). Lastly, LTO is closely associated
with Confucianism in that one should be prepared to subordinate oneself for the sake of harmony.

Hofstede found power distance quite large in Chinese society and he attributes the degree to dominant Confucian philosophy. Confucius believed that “relationships are based on mutual, complementary obligations” with one of its' key principles being “the stability of society is based on unequal relationships between people” (Hofstede, 1988, p.8). In other words, for a society to function properly, the individual has a role to lead or follow. The ideology suggests that societal mayhem may develop should roles be confused.

The following four ideological components are key elements of Confucianism:

**Group identity.** Confucianism teaches that a person is not an individual but a member of a social organization (Hofstede, 1988). This viewpoint aligns with collectivism that pressures individuals to be part of the group with their personal interests taking an inferior role (Wang, et al., 2005). Collectivist societies teach children to think in terms of ‘we’ whereas in individualist societies it is ‘I’ as shown in Table 2-2. Most societies in the world adhere to a collectivist perspective in that they identify with a close-knit group such as family or organization (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). “Confucianist Chinese report sharing more collectivist beliefs than the inhabitants of English-speaking countries” (Basabe & Ros, 2005, p.191). Within these close-knit groups lies a hierarchy of positions.

**Respect for hierarchy.** The Confucian ideology asserts that all persons have a fixed position in society (Wang, et al., 2005). This hierarchy consists of authorities and subordinates (Wang, et al., 2005). Subordination requires devoted obedience, loyalty,
and courtesy to superiors (Wang, et al., 2005). Advancing one's opinion to a person of authority without prior solicitation demonstrates a lack of confidence toward the authority figure. In this manner, a subordinate causes a person of authority to lose face (Wang, et al., 2005). In the classroom, instructors dispense knowledge and in return, students reciprocate with respect (Goodboy, Myers, & Bolkan, 2012). This is represented in Hofstede’s PDI dimension where disparities in rank among individuals are anticipated and preferred (Table 2-1).

**Harmony.** Social harmony emphasizes the cultivation and maintenance of a hierarchical society (Hui, 2005; Wang, et al., 2005). Likewise, a hierarchical society provides group oriented social relations that are conflict-free and, therefore, considered harmonious (Wang, et al., 2005). The society depends on these hierarchical roles to avoid direct opposition among members. This characteristic is represented in Hofstede’s IDV dimension (Table 2-2) and is a component of a collectivist society where high context communication exists.

**Face (Mianzi).** Confucianism teaches the importance of maintaining dignity, or what is widely referred to as, "saving face" (Hofstede, 1988). To preserve face means to remain dependable and honorable in one's social interactions (Wang, et al., 2005). The Chinese notion of ‘face’ is significant to PDI, IDV, and LTO (Dong & Lee, 2007). In respect to PDI, the amount of ‘face’ that is placed on an individual is directly proportionate to their social rank (Dong & Lee, 2007). Therefore, it is imperative that an individual of lower rank never argue with nor offend an individual of higher rank. This leads to an IDV collectivist social viewpoint that members avoid direct confrontations.
‘Loss of face’ has strong roots in collectivist societies where high-context communication prevails. Chua, & Gudykkunst (1987) explain,

In low-context cultures, individuals are more efficient in separating the conflict issue from the person involved in a conflict over a task, and yet remain friends. In high-context cultures, the instrumental issue is intertwined with the person who originated that issue. To disagree openly with someone in public is to cause a "loss of face," which is an extreme insult. (p.32)

However, as mentioned earlier, Hofstede’s loss of face is listed under LTO short-term orientation (US) and sense of shame is listed under long-term orientation (China) (see Table 2-3). He also refers to shame as connected to collectivist societies stating, “Along with harmony, another important concept in connection with the collectivist family is shame” (Hofstede, 2010, p.110). Li, et al. (2004) explain that shame is connected to the ‘self-perfection’ aspect of Confucianism. According to their definition of shame, loss of face is just one category and revolves around the self. The second category focuses on the shame felt from other’s wrongdoings (Li, et al., 2004). Wang et al. (2005) points out that it is more important in Chinese society “to give face to others than to protect one’s own” (p.318). This sense of shame demonstrates the importance of harmony and the self-preservation of the group. Li, et al. (2004) explained that the Chinese view shame as a virtue unlike other cultures that may consider it an unwanted emotion. Fear of loss of face, a sense of shame, neither, or both, may inhibit the motivation of a Chinese international student to approach an instructor online.
Online Learning

**Brief history of distance education.** Correspondence education, established as early as the 1700’s, provided equal access to educational opportunities for students who were unable to relocate to conventional sites (McIsaac, 1998). This type of learning was proliferated by the dependable mail delivery that was recently established. The US Postal Service enabled lesson submission and feedback in a timely manner and this alternative method was attractive to a population that could not afford fulltime residence at a formal school (Harting & Erthal, 2005).

The 1800s brought about the university extension services and home-study programs. In the 1900s, schools started exploring film, radio, and television and other delivery systems (McIsaac, 1998; Harting & Erthal, 2005). This influx and variety of media revolutionized learning in the late 1900s and distance learning programs were further promoted in the US by teacher shortages and state mandates in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) (McIsaac, 1998). The personal computer’s eventual adoption as a learning tool in the late 1990s was contemporary with the arrival of digital video and broadband communications (Harting & Erthal, 2005).

The methods of distant learning delivery have evolved over the years, yet its foremost mission has undeniably remained stable. Meeting the needs of underserved or remotely located populations, whether cultural or economic, has been the predominant driver and staple of online learning (McIsaac, 1998; Harting & Erthal, 2005). Online learning can also relieve scheduling conflicts that arise from more than one required courses offered on campus in the same time block. Adding to the attraction of
accessibility, online learning with its self-paced pedagogy and flexibility, permits students to work on their learning tasks and assignments at their own convenience (McIsaac, 1998). Although accessibility and convenience have been plausible attractions, there have been concerns that the social elements considered necessary for learning was lacking in settings without face-to-face interaction. In the absence of classroom meetings, online learning has altered the manner in which instructors support students. Increasingly instructors’ roles have been evolving from the conventional deliverer of information from the front of the classroom to the online facilitator and guide.

**Comparison to traditional learning.** Authors described distance education as “alien to traditional didactics” in that conventional instruction revolves around the teacher whereas distance education revolves around the institution (Keegan, 1980, p.17). Non-traditional learning can often equate to a lack of hands-on approach versus the typically idealized perspective that the classroom is a bustle of interchange between instructor and student. Various researchers acknowledged this point of view. According to LaBay and Comm (2003), the lack of inter-personal interaction in online learning makes it difficult for instructors to assess whether a student understands the course content. Desai, Hart, and Richards (2008) agreed that the type of social interaction that elicits spontaneous responses and instant feedback is conducive to traditional learning and not present in online learning. The separation of the instructor and students in place and, often, in time, is one of the elements that differentiates online learning from traditional learning (Holmberg, 1974, Keegan, 1980). Transitioning learning from the classroom to online courses has shifted the focus from instructor teaching to student
learning. This can create enormous challenges for students who have grown up in large-power distance and collectivist societies where high context communication reigns. As Wurtz (2006) explained,

Face-to-face communication in HC [high context] cultures is thus characterized by an extensive use of nonverbal strategies for conveying meanings. These strategies usually take the shape of behavioral language, such as gestures, body language, silence, proximity, and symbolic behavior, while conversation in LC [low context] cultures tends to be less physically animated, with the meaning depending on content and the spoken word. (p. 278)

Examining the problem from the Chinese students’ perspective, research found there were cultural challenges that reduced their desire to participate in online coursework (Thompson & Ku, 2005). Cultural challenges included: unfamiliarity with the online written form, unacceptable amounts of reading, lack of verbal and social context cues, incorrect interpretations, unsatisfactory cultural exchange, anxiety over ‘losing face’, deferred feedback, and insufficient language competence and writing skills (Cifuentes & Shih, 2001; Thompson & Ku, 2005, Tu, 2001).

**Chinese International Students**

Chinese international students attending US IHEs may experience significant barriers to successful online learning experiences. In the process of adjusting to western culture, the US IHE classroom can also appear foreign to the Chinese international student. Western cultures have adopted an individualistic model for their social structures with a teaching style that includes opinionated discussions (Hofstede, 2001).
The discussions can also be rigorous, along with disagreements that do not usually impact the personal relationships among the students. On the other hand, the Chinese approach places instructors in a position of unquestionable authority. Chinese ideologies bolster a HCF large-power-distance relationship between instructor and student and perpetuate a reliance on the instructor’s (absolute) wisdom (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010).

Several studies elaborated on China’s Confucian philosophy that dictates an eastern education style with instructor dominated formal instruction (Wang, 2006). To reiterate, Chinese culture upheld by Confucian philosophy, directs respect to individuals in leadership positions (Chan, 1999; Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001). This reverence applies to all leaders and subsequently creates students that avoid any manner of challenging opinions, holding absolutely no opinion that differs from that of the instructor. (Jiang, 2011).

**Cross-cultural adaptation.** Research is somewhat conclusive regarding obstacles that create online cross-cultural difficulties, pointing to aspects of language and institutional intercultural sensitivity (Jiang, 2011; Ku & Lohr, 2003; Liu, et al., 2010).

**English language proficiency.** Language skill was a predominant factor influencing cross-cultural adaptation (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984; Zhang, et al., 1999). Exchanges between students, peers, and instructors could be cumbersome if the course language is the student’s second language (Dillon, Wang, & Tearle, 2007; Li & Rosson, 2012). Liu, et al. (2010) pointed out that the Chinese international student appeared to struggle most when it came to using English at foreign institutions. Chinese students’ English language writing was often seen as lacking cohesiveness and continuity by western standards (Zhao & McDougall, 2008). Language competence tests such as the
Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) measure the adequacy of an international student’s language skills to enter US colleges (Singh & Doherty, 2004). Still, a student may struggle with their comprehension even though they pass the test.

One reason that has been suggested is that China’s foreign language instruction emphasizes reading and writing, with less emphasis on speaking and listening skills (Lee & Rice, 2007). Bartlett and Fischer (2010) revealed that Chinese students often study months for the TOEFL without significant improvement in their speaking ability.

Another conclusion pointed to the completely different language groups to which English and Chinese belong; English being a West Germanic language and Chinese a Sino-Tibetan (Jiang, 2011). Another possibility for Chinese students’ language problems in their US IHE experiences is the university application process. Bartlett and Fischer (2010) detailed the application process for some Chinese students applying to US universities. Instead of applying by themselves as is expected in the US, a Chinese student’s family may hire an agent compensated to complete application forms, write an application essay, and other third party services as is typical process in China. The hope is that this process will result in acceptance from a US university. However, this can have ill-fated consequences for the student whose second language skills are inadequate and the university is unaware of their need for English Second Language (ESL) classes.

Rubin & Rubin (2005) provided an example of a Chinese graduate student who tested out of required English proficiency courses, yet was dismayed at how difficult it was to manage his coursework. The task of thoroughly comprehending an assignment can create immense anxiety for the international student. It is difficult for a course’s
instructor to be responsive and supportive to a students’ need when the international student may misunderstand the content and not notify the instructor.

Culture-specific terminology, colloquial language and jargon, may also impede an international student’s learning success even though the student is fluent in Standard English. Verbal nuances and idioms can be prevalent in a course’s content. These misinterpretations create unclear expectations between the international student, their peers, and instructor (Shih & Cifuentes, 2003). This language liability can inhibit concentration thereby restricting learning gains (Hara & Schwen, 1999). Liu, et al. (2010) agreed that cultural nuances might limit foreign students’ communication and understanding of course content. These challenges only intensify in an online environment, devoid of social context cues (Thompson & Ku, 2005).

To compound the issue, China, described as a HCF large-power distance society, accentuates the expectation that instructors, as knowledge distributors, take the initiative in the learning environment (Yildiz & Bichelmeyer, 2003). Li and Rosson (2012) found that the level of language proficiency acquired by Chinese international students affected online discussions at a US university causing confusion and hindering productive outcomes. The Chinese students were slower to comprehend and express themselves clearly. This subsequently discouraged their willingness to join in a conversation (Li & Rosson, 2012). In response, the native speaking American students held back ideas in an attempt to help the Chinese students convey their thoughts and opinions (Li & Rosson, 2012).

Three key findings from Zeng’s (2010) study of factors that negatively impacted Chinese students willingness to communicate in English are: 1.) “participants did not
connect language learning with cultural learning”, 2.) “participants still depend on traditional Chinese English as a [Foreign Language] EFL classroom ways of language learning” and 3.) “situational factor of familiarity with the new environment” (p.156). Hsu, et al. (2007) found that instructors nonverbal (e.g., relaxed posture, gestures) and positive verbal behaviors (in a face-to-face classroom where they could be seen) were interrelated considerably with Chinese students’ willingness to speak in English. The instructor’s responsiveness and caring attitude reduced the students’ English speaking anxiety, tension, and the embarrassment and fear of losing face. Non-verbal cues can be critical in communication by collectivist societies to form relationships (Djojosaputro, et al., 2005).

In addition to an instructor’s demeanor, the importance of cultural sensitivity when designing coursework can decrease language issues. Dillon, et al. (2007) pointed out that teaching should support the student’s cultural orientation because language and culture are closely related. An international student can lack the necessary communication skills and approach learning from a different cultural background. These diverse sets of experiences, expectations, and thinking can be attributable to language difficulties (Stephen, 1997). Cultural competence can have considerable influence on inter-cultural communication competence (Stephen, 1997). Zhang, et al. (1999) agreed that language plays a small role in the academic adjustment of international students.

**Intercultural sensitivity.** Cultural sensitivity is an important online component for embracing international learning differences. Although instructors claimed culture and language as the most pronounced challenges for international students, Nieto and Booth (2010) found that helping second language learners feel comfortable and accepted
add to the degree of success for these learners. Intercultural sensitivity is “the ability to
discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences” (Hammer, Bennet, &
Wiseman, 2003, p. 422). Practicing intercultural sensitivity is essential for educators to
be effective with students from different cultures (Nieto & Booth, 2010).

In a study in Australia, Chinese students found that academic procedures
prevailing over their first year academic experiences were considerably different from
what they were familiar with in China (Zhang, et al., 1999). Besides different rules, the
Chinese students thought that the instructors did not clearly communicate the behavior
patterns they were supposed to abide by. It can be hard to place blame for this
unfortunate miscommunication if an instructor is unaware that a student is having
difficulty. A student could alleviate these types of circumstances if they approached the
instructor for clarification. Yet the student may hesitate if they are unaccustomed to a
different protocol in the classroom.

US instructors that acknowledged a student’s PDI dynamics may help themselves
understand how international students interface in the online coursework (Koh & Lim,
2007). ESL instructors have the highest level of intercultural sensitivity in the area of
engagement and interaction due to the nature of their occupation (Nieto & Booth, 2010).
The rigorous amount of reading and difficulties in oral communication can create
obstacles for Chinese students online and the lack of intercultural sensitivity can further
discourage them from enrolling (Ku & Lohr, 2003).

Some of the literature to-date reveals certain approaches available for universities,
faculty, and instructional designers to facilitate effective online learning for global
students (Cifuentes & Shih, 2001; Debry, 2001). Chen, et al. (1999) suggested culturally
sensitive dialogue and trust building. Chan (1999) recommended awareness of cultural values, being sympathetic to student understanding, sensitivity to group psychology, limited use of abstract thinking approaches, clear instruction, and engaging course materials. Cifuentes and Shih (2001) prescribed substantial student interaction opportunities, using visuals to facilitate communication, and awareness of cultural differences in communication styles. The Chinese student’s online experience is just one puzzle piece of this largely misunderstood area of research to understand the communication and comprehension barriers between cultures. The literature highlighted the importance of global awareness and the need for strategies to implement successful learning for all students.

**Perceptions of instructor-student interaction online.** Studies pointed out Chinese international students commented on the importance of instructor presence online and students’ need for substantial feedback. China promotes instructor-centered as opposed to student-centered learning (Hofstede, et al., 2010). Yildiz and Bichelmeyer (2003) found that an instructor’s apparent absence was disturbing to Taiwanese students who considered the instructor’s opinions as essential because they speculated, consistent with their own cultural values, that their peers’ opinions were likely incorrect. Chen et al. (2008) identified the lack of the instructor’s online guidance, feedback, and overall interaction as detrimental to Chinese international student’s effective learning. These students expressed dependency on the subjective perspective of the instructor. For the Chinese learner, the instructor is considered the most informed and experienced person in the learning transaction and expected to have high integrity (Bond, 1996, Hofstede, et al.,
In Chinese society, it is usually thought that the instructor has not dispensed sufficient information should a student fail (Stephens, 1997).

It becomes clear from the literature that the Chinese international students did not know who’s “voice” to listen to in class, without an instructor’s comments providing structure and focus. If a peer contributed an opinion, they would wait until the instructor confirmed the validity of the student’s statement. In fact, Chen et al. (2008) established that the greatest online learning challenge for this group was a decrease or absence of instructor input. The quantity, quality, and timeliness of input provided by instructors was critical in how the Chinese students gained insight and value on their perspective. Chen et al. (2008) noted that the viewpoint provided by the instructor was necessary for affirmation, since the students only then considered it evaluated by an expert. Chinese students can even be hesitant to participate in open discussions as they are concerned that they may receive misguided peer opinions (Chen et al., 2008; Djojosaputro, et al., 2005; Shih & Cifuentes, 2003; Tu, 2001).

The Chinese students in Thompson and Ku’s (2005) study described their online experience as exploring unknown territory and therefore expected guidance from the instructor. Instead, they felt they were left “discussing among ourselves blindly” (p.42). This suggests that they viewed their capable peers as less than capable leaving them feeling ill advised. However, Thompson and Ku (2005) pointed out that the online instructor’s role in US IHE was typically accepted as facilitator and not one of an authority dispersing opinions. Traditionally Chinese international students view the instructor as authority. To compensate for this they suggested Chinese international students receive guidance from their capable peers. Djojosaputro, et al. (2005) agreed
and suggested that online instructors enable private messaging between students to allow them to develop and build social relationships and trust.

The literature indicated that the topic of Chinese international students at US IHEs has been widely studied. However, not explored is the relationship among Hofstede’s PDI, IDV, & LTO, and specifically, its cultural implications for Chinese international students’ willingness to approach the instructor online.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

This study sought to understand how Chinese culture and its differences from US academic culture influenced Chinese international students’ willingness to approach online instructors at US IHEs. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 covered three dimensions of Hofstede’s cultural framework, Chinese culture, and Confucianism, a brief history of online learning and its comparison to traditional learning, Chinese international students’ adaptation at a US IHE covering English language proficiency, intercultural sensitivity, and perceptions of instructor-student interaction.

However, there was scant literature on Chinese international students’ willingness – or lack thereof – to approach instructors in online courses at a US IHEs, and particularly absent were studies that addressed any cultural norms that influence that behavior. This study’s research design and methodology focused on this particular area to develop better understanding of this group’s individual experience taking US IHE coursework online. This chapter reiterates the study’s research question, and discusses the rationale for qualitative case study methods, participant recruitment and access, human participants and ethics, data collection storage and analysis, trustworthiness, and identification of researcher bias.
Research Question

The research question is as follows:

How does culture influence Chinese international students’ willingness to approach instructors in online courses at a US institution of higher education (IHE)?

- Were they confident enough to approach their instructors with questions or comments while online?

- If not, what were the reason they did not contact the instructor?

This study focused on obtaining data relative to the following three areas:

1. student demographics;
2. a narrative account of their US IHE online learning experience, and;
3. HCF’s dimensions PDI, IDV, & LTO cultural influences on their perceptions of their interactions with US online instructors.

Qualitative Research

The perpetual nature of evolving technology and innovative tools combined with increased online learning and the rise in number of Chinese international students at US IHEs creates a demanding role for research and practice. The role of a culture’s effect on a student’s participation online is multifaceted. Quantitative research can often overlook complex human-centered issues related to culture (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Whereas, a qualitative research design allowed the participants the opportunity to express their individual experiences through interviews that posed open-ended questions related to their transition into a new culture, particularly its education system, and their experiences with their online instructors and online coursework.
The interviews were designed to allow the raw experience of their transition to the US education style, online learning, to be converted into words (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interviews were semi-structured and used an open-ended approach to allow the participant to articulate their perspective and enable them to shape their responses (Creswell, 2012). Although the interview questions aligned with the research question and HCF’s three dimensions, open-ended probes permitted the surfacing of unknown barriers or factors that the literature review may not have revealed or were not apparent to the researcher. This approach sought answers that could produce findings not necessarily determined in advance and that may be applicable for future study (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). Interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed.

**Case Study**

The researcher’s reasons to adapt the case study approach for this research was to attempt to describe the ‘how’ and ‘why’ participants experienced their US IHE online interaction with their course instructor in the manner that they did; specifically, the relationship between culture and the Chinese international students’ willingness or unwillingness to approach the instructor of their online course with questions or concerns. Yin (2003) explained that “case studies are the preferred strategy when "how" or "why" questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (p.1). This study explored six cases that represented Chinese international students’ actual experience within the context of adapting to a new learning environment that may have cultural implications.
The case study research design also “benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis” (Yin, 2003, p.13). This study used HCF’s framework to explore whether PDI, IDV, LTO dimensions contributed to or detracted from the Chinese international student’s willingness to approach the instructor. The proposition directed the focus of the interviews with the participants and the subsequent coding that assisted in the discovery of themes and sub-themes.

**Recruitment and Access**

The recruitment plan for this study focused on identifying six students who were (a) Chinese international students, (b) at least 18 years old, (c) who have lived in the US less than five years, and (d) who have completed at least one online learning course at a US IHE. One of the key features of qualitative sampling is the use of “small samples of people, nested in their context and studied in-depth” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.27). The six participants qualified under this description as they were a small sample from the same country that attended a specific college within a specific university.

The second criterion eliminated the need for parental consent. The third criterion was essential in order to get a non-native experience of an international student who had not fully acclimated to their new cultural environment. Schram & Lauver (1988) pointed out that the “evidence on the effect of length of time in a host country is conflicting; although there is some indication that the longer a student is in the host country the fewer problems the student is likely to have” (p.147). The fourth criterion permitted student flexibility to have engaged in online coursework at another US IHE.

The IHE in this study offers seven fully online graduate programs, two undergraduate programs, three certificate programs, and approximately fifty
undergraduate and graduate online courses
(http://online.unlv.edu/content/programs/degree-and-certificate-programs). There were
766 (86.8%) undergraduate and 212 (72%) graduate Chinese international students out of
1185 total international enrollments for fall 2014 (UNLV, Institutional Analysis &
Planning, n.d.). The university’s “Chinese Students and Scholars Association’s” (CSSA)
is the main organization that connects this population and campus members who have an
interest in Chinese culture. CSSA’s main mission is to assist international students from
China who may need support acclimating to the US IHE culture in addition to educating
the community on issues related to this population.

Upon approval from Northeastern University’s (NEU) Internal Review Board
(IRB), University of Nevada – Las Vegas’s (UNLV) IRB, and CSSA’s faculty advisor,
the researcher contacted CSSA’s president and co-vice presidents regarding recruitment.
An invitation (see Appendix A) was placed on the association’s group Facebook page
and emails sent to the presidents and co-vice presidents. One of CSSA’s vice presidents
acted as a liaison in locating six Chinese international students who met the four criteria
and were interested in participating in a 60 minute interview individually (Appendix C)
based on the invitation. All participants understood that the results of the study could
potentially provide better understanding about the relationship between culture and
student-instructor interactions for Chinese international students enrolled in US IHE
online coursework. Participants were questioned whether they were comfortable using
the English language during the interview and all six participants replied in the
affirmative.
Human Participants and Ethics Precautions

The recruitment of the participants and the research procedures of this study complied with both NEU and UNLV’s IRBs guidelines. Participant contact and data collection did not proceed until after the researcher had received both advisor and IRB final approval. The researcher, exercising the principles of respect, beneficence, and justice made sure that the study participants voluntarily engaged, had fair and equitable treatment, and comprehended any risks or benefits, fully understood the purpose of the study as specified in the Belmont Report located on the US Department of Health & Human Services website (http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.html).

Each participant signed a copy of the consent form (Appendix B) that explained the purpose of the study, the reasons to take part in the research study, what they would be required to do, their rights to refuse or withdraw, and permission to have the conversation audiotaped. Consent forms (Appendix B) and the interview protocol (Appendix C) took every precaution to protect the anonymity of the participants. The primary investigator, student researcher, and a professional transcriber, Rev.com, were the only entities with access to the participants’ data. Rev.com is an online transcription service and was used for that purpose only.

Ethical considerations dictated that the researcher should ensure data was non-identifiable and anonymous. Pseudonyms preserved the confidentiality of the respondent’s documents in order to exclude any identifiable information and to prevent any risk of accidental disclosure. There were no known risks to participation in this study.
except for the disclosure of personal thoughts shared by the participants about their transition from China to the US education system and their US IHE online experience.

**Collection and Storage**

Data was collected in the form of private, oral interviews that allowed one-on-one discussion between the researcher and the participant on specific sets of topics pertinent to the research question and the study’s theoretical framework (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). Using the same open-ended questions (see Appendix C) in each interview allowed the “participants the opportunity to present their individual understandings and experiences” (King & Horrocks, 2010). It also provided consistency in data collection that allowed for comparison among the six interviews. The researcher attempted to communicate as clearly as possible with the respondents to prevent misinterpretation. An iPhone voice memo application was used to record sixty-minute semi-structured interviews with each of the participants. The transcripts of the six interviewer’s audio mp3 files were the primary source of data.

After obtaining the transcribed audio files, the text files were imported into the computer analysis program MAXQDA. Although most qualitative analysis programs are basically sorting mechanisms, MAXQDA was chosen because of its ease of use.

The audio, text, and signed consent forms were stored on a private password-protected computer to protect the complete confidentiality of the participants. There have been no written or oral materials linked by any identifiable data point to the participants in the study. Data will continue to be stored for three years and then destroyed.
Directed Content Analysis

Content analysis was developed during the 1920s-1930s and later became popular in the 1960s on into the 21st century (Mayring, 2000). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) advocated three distinct approaches to qualitative content analysis: conventional, directed, and summative. Conventional content analysis begins with no preconceived categories, and summative content analysis discovers core content, whereas directed content analysis has the possibility to confirm or extend a theoretical framework conceptually.

“Qualitative content analysis is defined as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p.1278). The initial codes derived from theory, subsequent related transcript segment codes, and discovery codes all culminated into themes. This type of qualitative content analysis was termed a directed approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Directed content analysis was chosen because it allowed data to be aligned with the theoretical framework, in addition to including open-ended responses that broadened the possibility of discovery.

Upon receiving the MP3 transcriptions, the researcher listened to the audio tapes several times while reading the transcriptions to make sure they were transcribed accurately (Sands, 2004). This not only allowed errors to be corrected but also allowed the researcher to become familiar with each participant’s voice.

HCF’s dimensions, PDI, IDV, and LTO, defined the initial coding categories and other patterns as they emerged (Hsiu & Shannon, 2005; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Deriving the initial codes from HCF’s dimensions provided the direction to the analysis
beginning with “theory or relevant research findings as guidance for initial codes” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p.1277). However, the researcher did not want preordained theoretical perspectives or propositions to bias and limit the findings of the analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989). In other words, alternate themes were permitted to develop if the text required additional codes that did not fit within the areas identified by the HCF’s PDI, IDV, and LTO dimensions. Therefore, new codes were added and initial codes were refined during analysis and subsequently checked to determine if recoding was necessary (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Some of the data could not be coded using categories derived from HCF theory but were under other categories discussed in the literature review. “Newly identified categories either offer a contradictory view of the phenomenon or might further refine, extend, and enrich the theory” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p.1283). Codes were drawn in order of how significant they were in the participants’ responses (Curtis, Wenrich, Carline, Shannon, Ambrozy, & Ramsey, 2001). In this data, the significance referred to how frequently a certain word or phrase was expressed.

The directed approach was initiated by reviewing text passages that reflected the initial code/sub-codes derived from HCF’s three dimensions (see Table 3-1).

Table 3-1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural dimension</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Example of text coded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power Distance Index (PDI)</td>
<td>Importance to students of clear instruction</td>
<td>“Some professor would just provide the syllabus without any explanation on that. Sometimes I will feel confused about what they actually want. For example, like</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
writing a paper and for what they're actually looking. I'm currently taking English two thirty-one and I was asking to write a paper comparing this thing and this thing. The professor just say that comparing A and B, but he did not say what area he is looking for. Like what about A and B? He was just saying comparing A and B.”

The six transcripts were reviewed in MAXQDA’s document browser and text passages that reflected HCF dimensions were added as codes under the predetermined theoretical headings (see Figure 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>^</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>B...</th>
<th>End</th>
<th>W...</th>
<th>Preview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aiden</td>
<td>Culture/FDI: Students are dependent/int...</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Actually I'm not that social at times. I don't kno...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1: Example of codes*

Saldaña (2009) identified codes as “essence-capturing and essential elements of the research story” (p.8). Memos were added to MAXQDA’s document and code systems to clarify certain words or contexts. Additional memos were added on the imported and coded transcripts to identify whether statements were linked to theory and/or the literature (see Figure 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>^</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>B...</th>
<th>End</th>
<th>W...</th>
<th>Preview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>not found in literature</td>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>DISCOVERY</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2: Example of memos*
The MAXQDA software aided the researcher in identification of patterns, themes, and relationships between variables (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Patterns were identified by similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence, and causation (Saldaña, 2009). “Themes are statements that explain why something happened or what something means and are built up from the concepts” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). These commonalities were compared to HCF’s PDI, IDV, and LTO dimensions to obtain verifications about the participants’ perceptions.

**Trustworthiness**

Within this study, trustworthiness was achieved by careful transcription of the audio files, memos, and accurate coding, that was checked and rechecked by the researcher so that all data was reviewed (Maxwell, 1996). The analytic procedure used in the coding, directed content analysis, increased the trustworthiness by initially coding using theory headings, related transcript passages ranging from a simple to in-depth statements that reflected the interview and research questions, and allowed for the emergence of patterns that might not have been anticipated (Hsiu & Shannon, 2005). Close attention was paid to any words or statements that may have had alternative explanations than the ones theoretically considered (Maxwell, 1996). All coding was re-examined by the researcher to see if any text passages were coded incorrectly.

The final coding was applied when there was sufficient consistency upon numerous re-checks and the researcher reexamined all interview passages after all of the coding was complete (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). The researcher checked the MAXQDA’s code system summary grid to make sure that all pertinent text passages were linked to themes and then listened to the audiotapes again to identify if any were
missed (see Figure 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code System</th>
<th>Emily</th>
<th>Chloe</th>
<th>Liam</th>
<th>Aiden</th>
<th>Olivia</th>
<th>Sophie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of dear</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are dependent on</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2: Summary grid*

“If the researcher wants to be sure to capture all possible occurrences of a phenomenon, such as emotional reaction highlighting identified text without coding might increase trustworthiness” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p.1282). I searched theme text using MAXQDA’s document browsing function to verify all related verbiage had a code attached.

Analytic memos regarding participants, research question, code choices, emerging patterns, categories, themes, theory, problems, and personal or ethical dilemmas were documented, reflected on, and potentially analyzed if they proved significant to the results of the study (Saldaña, 2009). Every effort was made to preserve credibility and validity so that the research truly measured what it was intended to measure and the results accurately reflected the participants’ experiences (Golafshani, 2003).

**Identifying Researcher Bias**

HCF’s PDI, IDV, and LTO dimensions and the data from participants’ interviews were coded and interpreted through my non-Chinese heritage and academic training. This background can be both a hindrance and asset. A hindrance in that my entire knowledge of Chinese culture has been obtained from what I have read, viewed through media, and discovered through interactions with individuals from China. However, a non-Chinese heritage may be an asset since my opinions about the dynamics of Chinese culture have never been established and I can observe from a stranger’s perspective.
With that being said, I do not believe that Hofstede’s characteristics as assigned to US and Chinese populations are necessarily fixed and unchangeable. Differences listed in Hofstede’s Tables 1-3 appear to overlap occasionally and I use them only as a theoretical guide for this study.

Chapter 4: Report of Research Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the study. The findings were based on interviews designed to understand if culture influences Chinese international students’ willingness to approach instructors in online courses at a US institution of higher education (IHE). The demographics of the sample consisted of six Chinese international students who were at least 18 years old, who have lived in the US less than five years, and who have completed at least one online learning course at a US university. This chapter presents the research findings into the following three sections:

(1) profile of the participants;
(2) emergent themes, and;
(3) summary.

Data was collected through individual interviews that used open-ended questions such as “If you did not understand an instructor’s explanation, would you ask for clarification?” Conversational probes to understand fully the participants’ answers followed these open-ended questions. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Profiles of Participants

The study participants included four females and two males. Five participants were from mainland China and one from Macau, a Chinese city across the bay from
Hong Kong. All the participants were in their early 20s and had resided in the US for three years or less. Their motivations for attending a US university included a sense of adventure, freedom from a regimented educational system, positive influences from a traveled relative, and disenchantment with a small town. Two female participants, Emily and Olivia, attended 1-2 years of high school in the US. These were both positive experiences for them and additional motivation for enrollment at a US IHE. In addition, a global accolade received by the William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration (WHC) was also an influential component. The WHC is a popular college for international students due to its world-renowned gaming institute, given the increasing popularity of gaming in the Far East, and its graduate hospitality administration executive online program.

A few of the students experienced parental concern over their departure from their home country but most parents were enthusiastic for their child. All participants attend the university full-time. Despite a few participants working part-time to cover everyday expenses, their sole financial support for their studies resides with their parents. Although none of the participants had ever attended a Chinese university, they are in contact with their hometown friends and kept abreast of their Chinese university experiences.

One of CSSA’s vice presidents and study participants, Chloe, was a crucial link to organizing the study participants and interviews. All the participants honored their pre-determined interview date and time. The following table provides a background synopsis of each of the six participants and will be followed by a retelling their stories. “This process includes examining the raw data, identifying elements of a story in them,
sequencing or organizing the story elements, and then presenting a retold story that conveys the individual’s experiences” (Creswell, 2012, p.515). The interviews were informal and conducted individually in an office behind closed doors for privacy.

Table 4-1
Participant Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>High School Location</th>
<th>Reason for Studying in the US</th>
<th>Length of Time in US</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Mainland China &amp; AK</td>
<td>H.S. Experience &amp; Freedom</td>
<td>3 yrs.</td>
<td>Hospitality Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>Macau</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Macau</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>1 ½ yrs.</td>
<td>Hospitality Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
<td>Major &amp; Freedom</td>
<td>2 yrs.</td>
<td>Hotel Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aiden</td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>2 yrs.</td>
<td>Hospitality Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Mainland China &amp; CA</td>
<td>Sports &amp; Freedom</td>
<td>4 yrs.</td>
<td>Hospitality Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
<td>Aunt &amp; Freedom</td>
<td>3 yrs.</td>
<td>Hospitality Management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Emily. Emily came to the US from mainland China to pursue her undergraduate degree in hospitality management. She has spent a total of three years in the US and is currently a sophomore. Before spending two years at the university, she spent one year in the US as an exchange student during her junior year of high school in Alaska. This proved to be a positive experience and one of the reasons she pursued university studies in the US. She finished high school in three years, returned to China, and prepared to enroll at the US IHE. Studying and testing for the TOEFL took another year in China. Her high school English language experience in Alaska was helpful to her university transition in the US; however, the English vocabulary she used there was rudimentary.

1 Pseudonyms have been assigned to protect the anonymity of all participants
compared to that which is commonly used in US conversational English and in undergraduate university studies. Therefore, she has experienced unanticipated language barriers in her US university studies.

Emily had taken one online course since attending university in the US. The online course was easier for her than learning in the face-to-face classroom. For instance, when she typed emails she could correct her spelling or grammar before transmission. Emily said, “Sometimes there are some words that I'm not very sure about or I misunderstand the words. I think sending emails will make the words more clear. You can actually explain and use the corrected words.” She thought online learning provided a simpler communication format for Chinese international students than the traditional classroom.

However, this was not the case with face-to-face verbal conversations. Emily gave an example of this by questioning the correct use of the word ‘verbal’ during the interview, “verbal conversations . . . Verbal, right?” If she misunderstood words when she received a typed message, she could look up the meaning. She was less likely to understand a person when they were speaking and did not catch every word and its meaning. It is also easier for her to make mistakes when she spoke rather than typed.

Emily thought the online format also allowed her to manage her time better. It was easier to hold down a job while taking online coursework. She could also visit China to spend time with her family and friends while enrolled in US online courses. Taking online coursework during the summer worked well for her as long as she studied in Hong Kong. Unlike mainland China, Hong Kong does not interfere with her internet connection. She has had friends that have taken US university online coursework in
mainland China and have had considerable technological issues. They were unable to use Gmail and were frequently disconnected during online exams. She relayed, “It [internet connection] was really bad”.

She had concerns about emailing her online instructors because they might not reply in a timely manner. She explained, “For example, if I go to a face-to-face course, I can ask the professor directly, so I can actually see the professor twice a week. If I have any problems, I can directly ask the professor. If I do the online course, sometimes professor might not respond that fast.” Emily’s overall view of the online instructor was that they were there only to provide guidelines, syllabus, and content. Consequently, the student must read and study alone without a source of authoritative explanation. She viewed online education as self-education for these reasons.

Sometimes online instructions were not clear for her. She illustrated an example by describing a recent paper assignment, “The professor just say that comparing A and B, but he did not say what area he is looking for. Like what about A and B? He was just saying comparing A and B.” She concluded that he wanted the students to be open-minded and creative but the instruction was too vague for her. In a classroom, she would ask the instructor for more clarification but online she could only rely on email. She thought it was essential for online content to be clearly expressed so Chinese international students understood and could obtain an optimal grade.

**Chloe.** Chloe was the only participant who was not from mainland China. She came to the US from Macau, a special administrative region of the People’s Republic of China across the bay from Hong Kong, which was a British territory from the mid-1800s until 1997. She pointed out that Macau, much like Hong Kong, was not as restricted as
mainland China. Macau has gambling, uncensored internet connection, and academic freedoms not typically available to mainland Chinese students. Still, she explained, “The educational system in Macau is a bit like too restricting. A lot of things, they say, ‘You must do this and that.’ I want more freedom. I choose US.” Macau was also “such a small place” that she wanted to get away and experience a grander university environment.

Chloe was a sophomore majoring in hospitality management and had lived in the US for almost two years. Her transition to a US university was not difficult since her high school was English speaking and most of her classes were taught in English, so she was accustomed to English-speaking coursework. Yet in Macau, there were many rules to obey at the school and she wanted more freedom. There she would sit at a table with a notebook and copy what was on the blackboard. There was little or no interaction between the student and instructor. Most of her fellow students accepted this type of education, which is similar to their college experience in China. She asked them, "Do you communicate . . .? No, we just sit there and study. Just study according to the syllabus, finish the exam, go to the final exam and then, done”. She said, “That's what they have to do.” She thought that was why her Chinese peers in the US were uncomfortable with group work: they did not know how to cooperate with others.

Chloe had taken two online courses. She did not have difficulty with her online coursework because it was mostly typing. She would translate a word online into Chinese if she did not understand its meaning. If she were still unfamiliar with the word, she would sometimes look up the definition in English using Google. She indicated that looking up the English definition is sometimes easier and somewhat simpler than
translating the word into Chinese. She attributed that to her background attending an English-speaking Chinese high school. She confided that her online courses were easier than her face-to-face classes. In face-to-face lectures, she may not catch every word the professor said. Unlike verbal lectures, online material was typed so it was easy to identify peculiar words. In addition, Chloe added, online coursework allowed her the freedom to study at her own leisure and that enabled her to manage her time better.

Chloe considered peer reviews helpful and appreciated other student perspectives. If student’s opinions varied on a discussion forum, she would wait to see if the professor responded, or wait for another student. If there were no comments, she would email the instructor and ask, “So, which one is correct”? Instructor clarification was important for her not only for understanding the content but also for grades. She would not hesitate to ask her instructor if she had any questions about instructions or homework. However, if she had numerous questions, the online format was challenging. It was easy to ask many questions face-to-face but emailing back and forth became cumbersome. She would rather have her questions answered immediately.

All the same, Chloe did not feel that communication between instructor and student was crucial for online coursework. Much of the time, she handled the reading assignments on her own. If she decided to contact an instructor, she used email because she felt it was more secure than other online methods. She blamed the lack of student motivation or lack of clear and specific feedback for why her Chinese friends did not contact the instructor. An instructor’s response should not be only, “Very good” but should provide detailed feedback that explained why.
The main reason Chloe asked for clarification was so that she understood the content and received a desirable grade. Still, online coursework characteristically could consist of higher enrollment so she understood that replying to every student post was sometimes difficult. She would not question an instructor about her score or blame them if she failed. It was Chloe’s opinion that online coursework relies solely on self-motivation. She asserted, “If you are too lazy to read the book or ask for help than that is your problem.” Unfortunately, her Chinese friends could be too passive or self-conscious to ask an instructor for help. They would rather ask a friend than the instructor. They felt they may not express themselves accurately or that the instructor would think the question was stupid.

Chloe thought that many international students, including her Chinese friends, only wanted to pass the course. She, however, did not look at her coursework as just another grade. Chloe’s mother told her that she was at the US University to learn. She reflected, “My mom always told me, ‘don’t waste time in US. Your school is so expensive.’” Her online course grades were comparable to her face-to-face grades, and she said she would definitely enroll in another online course.

**Liam.** Liam was a sophomore from mainland China and came to the university because he wanted to study hotel management at WHC. He had been in the US for two years and found the education style very different from his experience in China,

In China's we have each class 45 minutes, but now it's more than 1 hour, and we have about 10 class per day, but now I can just 2 or 3 class per day. We have a lot of homework. We have night class. We use the night
class to do the homework, but here we can do the homework by our own, we just in time we like to do the homework like that.

Liam completed one online summer course during his last summer vacation in China. The technological barriers during that summer term were extremely problematic. The Chinese mainland’s internet management censored and blocked internet content. In one case, he had an assignment that was very difficult for him due to the extensive writing involved, “I remember it was to read the textbook and write something about it. Write an essay about it. That's a big assignment for me. I just seldom write that big essay.” He had not finished the assignment when he realized the deadline had passed, in China we have a different time to Americans, so other time I was thinking did I pass the due. It is really hard to think that other day. I want to write an email to the instructor and I want to ask him can I get another chance to do the assignment but I found, oh I can't send Gmail in China.

He did not call the instructor either. He ended up reading a textbook and writing an essay for extra credit to make up for the assignment missed. The course also required watching videos on YouTube, a website he could not connect to in China, “Yeah, that's a problem. That's a big problem. When I was in China our professor ask us to see some video on the YouTube, but in China, we cannot connect to the YouTube. I have to do other extra credit essay to get an A grade.” Liam was able to communicate with his US roommate enrolled in the same course, but living in Hong Kong. His roommate was his main link and social connection to the course.

Liam enjoyed the freedom of his online course despite his technological difficulties. He was able to work during the day and return to study in the evening. A
face-to-face course would have required him to interrupt his work day to attend class. Although he was successful in the course, he had no plans to take another online course in China. “I got an A grade,” he said, “but it was really hard.” Liam did not alert the instructor to his internet issues. Liam said that he would have only contacted the instructor if he had failed the course because of the technology issues,

I [would] go back to school and have a face-to-face meeting with the instructor and tell him about the problem, and try to let him make me pass the class because the technology problem I can't solve it. If I failed by this problems I will try to find the instructor about this. If I just didn't do so well in the class, okay it's fine, just do nothing, just retake it or something like that.

Even though Liam would have preferred the ability to email his instructor, he was able to complete the course relying on the syllabus and his peer in Hong Kong. The syllabus listed the extra credit assignment that provided enough points for him recover from his missed assignment. For this reason, Liam did not think the online instructor’s role was as important as the traditional face-to-face role. He viewed the online instructor as only a guide since he was able to accomplish the readings and assignments on his own. He felt no real connection to the instructor partly due to the technological issues with one-way communication.

Liam felt Skype could have helped the internet barrier, but the instructor did not include a Skype number on his syllabus. China does not have Facebook, YouTube, or Gmail, so Skype would have been the best choice. A discussion forum was not included in the course, which he thought could have benefited communication between him and
the instructor. If he ever does embark on taking another online summer course in China, Liam would contact the instructor beforehand to bring attention to overseas issues and see if there were any solutions.

**Aiden.** Aiden came to the US from mainland China. He was a sophomore majoring in hospitality management and had lived in the US for two years. As with other participants, he decided to attend a US university to gain more freedom with his educational environment. In the US, he could arrange his own class times and schedule, and it made him feel more confident. Even though his Chinese classroom was face-to-face, there was a lack of interaction between students and instructor. It was difficult to be friends with an instructor in China. He attested, “The professor is not like ... I think the professor in China is hard to be like a friend or something else.” In China, the instructors give the students terminology and definitions but practical explanations were often overlooked,

I don't know how to say . . . just like in China it's more likely that the professors give you the terminology, the explanation, and some other definitions. I think the practical explanation or something like practical experience is less than here [in US]. It's more textbook-based educational style in China, I think.

Aiden had taken one online course. As with Liam, Aiden took his US online course while overseas. However, his experience was in Hong Kong where the internet was more stable. He was able to use Gmail and other internet software to communicate with the class. However, he did not contact the instructor while taking the course. The reason, he explained, was that the syllabus was entirely clear in the online course. He
confided that this clarity varied depending on the particular course and instructor. Aiden said that the course would be difficult for him if the material were not as clear. The instructor was key to providing details, as he explained,

I just think it is really important because the only thing . . . I mean I can get information, the only way I can get information is from the instructor.

If he or she cannot explain or describe the assignment or requirement or what we will do next clearly, I maybe miss some assignment or quiz or maybe misunderstand something I have to know.

Aiden found the language barrier greater in his face-to-face classes since the class instruction was verbal and not written. Online coursework gave him the ability to look up definitions and terms. Online feedback was also very important to Aiden. If you upload an assignment and the instructor just gave you a grade, you did not know how to improve your grade the next time you submitted an assignment. Aiden would email the instructor privately if he had a question. Discussion boards were useful for group projects but he would not post a question there to an instructor.

Aiden did not miss the social aspect of the traditional face-to-face classroom. He explained, “Actually I'm not that social at times. I don't know how to say that. I prefer to study alone and do the . . . And complete my homework or something else, I don't know.” He thought being alone was a habit. He also did not like group work. This was primarily due to the irresponsibility of group members. He did not confront a group member if they did not accomplish their part of the project. Aiden admitted, “I think I just don’t like that.” Instead, he takes it upon himself to complete their section for them. In a situation like that, he felt that he had to do whatever it took to get a decent grade.
Olivia. Olivia was from mainland China and decided to attend a US university because Chinese coursework was very hard and she did not consider herself a “study, study person”. She was more interested in sports, and schools in China were not supportive of any outside activities other than studying. She delighted in singing and dancing but she never had time to pursue them because academics were the priority in the Chinese school system. Her parents noticed her discontent and asked her if she wanted to attend a university in another country, perhaps the US.

She noted that her parents were very different from most Chinese parents because they did not typecast her or make her study. She attributed their broad-mindedness to their own higher education background. Although they were strict, they were open to her opinions. She pointed out that she was not like some of her spoiled Chinese friends in the US whose parents were rich. She did not think they appreciated their parents. They just used their money and did not study. Olivia thought they were wasting their lives.

Even Olivia’s grandparents were university students. Most parents back home in China only managed to complete junior high school. Olivia’s family supported her move to the US unlike her friend’s parents. She confided, “A lot of my friends, their parents, they just don't know why a lot of people send their kids to the US and to other places. They think China is good.” Even more so, the Chinese government thought that she should not attend school in the US, especially as early as high school. All the same, her parents and relatives supported her and thought she should experience another culture.

Olivia agreed to go to the US since she enjoyed taking English at her Chinese high school. She left China and attended a private high school in California for her junior and senior year. She found the California high school very different from her school
back in China. It was more intense than the local public schools but easier than her Chinese high school. The math and science coursework were not difficult for her at all while the subjects of English, literature, and history were. Fortunately, her instructor had broad experience assisting international students and helped Olivia improve immensely.

Olivia was pleased with her two years spent at the California high school. She appreciated going to basketball games and playing tennis and volleyball. Although she participated in extra-curricular sports at the California high school, she confessed that she had not engaged in any of these activities at the university level. “You typically have to be in the PE department and extremely proficient to play at a US university,” she explained, though she was thankful that she had that option if she so chose.

Olivia was also required to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) to attend a university in the US. The test assesses English language proficiency and is used by institutions around the world. She was prepared for the assessment since she took English at her Chinese school and spent two years at a US high school. Including her junior and senior years in high school, Olivia had now lived in the US for four years.

Olivia was majoring in hospitality management and had taken one online course. She had to take the particular course online as there was not a traditional face-to-face class available. She did not encounter any language barriers simply because she felt no need to communicate with her online instructor. She had no questions since the syllabus was very detailed. She had taken a course from this particular instructor before so was familiar with his teaching style. Her enjoyment of literature benefited her online experience since the requirements were mainly reading. Initially, Olivia was
apprehensive about the difficulty of completing an online assignment. However, in the end she surprised herself by doing very well in the online course and had plans to take another.

Her perception of an online instructor’s role was different from a face-to-face instructor. You could ask a face-to-face instructor a question directly and they could answer your questions thoroughly. She depended on herself online and rarely communicated with the instructor. If she did contact an online instructor, she would only do so privately. She would not feel comfortable if other students saw her questions to the instructor. Her online course did have a discussion board but only the students used it. She understood that the instructor did not have the time to go through each thread on the discussion boards. Besides, it was a large class and she did not expect them to. The students would not even reply to one another’s questions at times. Olivia said she would rely on her Chinese circle of friends if she thought they knew the answer.

Olivia usually decided on her courses by the instructor’s online ratings (e.g., RateMyProfessor.com). She had found that instructors have their own rules with online courses. Even though some were not very good at teaching, she would blame herself if she received a poor grade. She would blame it on not enough effort on her part. In one case, Olivia was late uploading an online assignment because she had emailed the instructor and he had not responded. She hesitated to email him again, because of what he may think of her. She was afraid the instructor would think, “Why is she so hurried”? She waited until the last minute so the instructor would not become uncomfortable.

Although she would always try to improve her grade by asking the professor what she could do, it still felt weird and awkward. Yet, Olivia thought US instructors were
easier to communicate with compared to Chinese instructors. In China, she said, your role was only as student and the instructor’s role was only that of an instructor. There were defined lines. She found that US instructors could talk to you like a friend. It was much more comfortable and easier to communicate. She said,

They're [Chinese instructors] just so straight . . . they're an instructor, they're an instructor. You're a student, you're a student. You know? Here, like instructor can talk to you as friend some time. We feel like we're close friends. It's much like comfortable to talk with instructor. It's much easier.

In China, they just so instructor.

Olivia really liked the education style in the US, but after she graduates, she wants to return to China to work and to look after her parents. She also believed China needed talented people. The last generation was so poorly educated that the Chinese government now encouraged people to attend graduate school. Her parents’ agreed and wanted her to attend graduate school in the US. If she did continue her education in the US, she planned to go to a different school and experience a different climate, somewhere cold.

**Sophie.** Sophie was from mainland China and decided to attend a US university because her aunt had studied and worked abroad in England at a bank. Sophie’s dream was to follow in her aunt’s footsteps and study abroad. She wanted to study in the US. Her father disagreed with her decision but her mother supported her. Her father finally gave in. Sophie was now a junior and had been in the states for three years majoring in hospitality management. Her dream of opening up a coffee shop in China influenced her degree decision.
Like the other study participants, she took a TOEFL class and test in China. The hospitality program required a score of 80 or higher. Sophie found the test very difficult as it included six hours of writing, listening, reading, and speaking. Although she spent twelve years learning English in China, the focus tended to be reading and simple words with less time spent on writing or speaking,

Yeah, little small words, short sentence and easy words, easy conversation. Just ‘How are you?’ ‘How old are you?’ when I was in primary school. Then in China, we're more focused on the reading so a lot of words we know what it means but we don't know how to use in the conversation and how to use in the writing.

Sophie confessed that she has a huge problem with writing. Along with other participants, she used Google to translate. Sometimes the translation was weird and she still did not know how to write appropriately. She used the term “Chinglish” to describe how Chinese translated to English, “Chinglish like it's a play to be like Chinese things. Chinese people can understand them but for native speaker maybe they think they said this but never use it. We do not understand what it say.” Sophie had taken four online courses. She described every class as different. Some used video, others discussions, and still others PowerPoint presentations. She preferred PowerPoint presentations. Videos were too quick and difficult to pause. Sophie may not understand what the instructor was saying and wanted to look up a word but she could not cut, paste, and use translate as with PowerPoints. It was hard to hear and understand each sentence. Rewinding and forwarding became cumbersome,
Yeah, like rewind so it take a long time but the . . . I want, I can look it but the video, I can't. Some word when I listen, I don't know what it means and I can't use translate so it's a little bit difficult to watch the videos online. Yeah, I can copy and paste to find what the word exactly means. In the video, I can't . . . I just hear the word. I can understand what the main point is but I can't understand each vocabulary and each . . . I can't, I can't hear each vocabulary and each sentence very clearly.

She believed it would be helpful for the videos to include PowerPoint presentations so the instructor could point to the relevant section during the lecture. An alternative would be to provide the students with a supplemental PowerPoint to accompany the video. She could not translate PowerPoint’s that were used in the classroom. She would end up taking photos and audiotaping the lectures, which created similar issues as video lectures. Besides misinterpretation, she added, she could not always remember everything the instructor taught. She explained,

I definitely will take pictures of all the professor played in the class because I'm not a memory person that when you teach I cannot remember all the information, I can't. I definitely will take the PowerPoint then take . . . Maybe take note one for home or in the class.

Consequently, she would have audio she could not understand and had to rewind to comprehend. Photos were images, so she could not cut and paste the text from them.

The courses she took did not include discussion forums specifically to ask the instructor a question. However, Sophie wanted her instructors to have a good impression of her, so she tried her best when she wrote in the discussion forum so that she received
positive feedback. She viewed her peers feedback as their personal opinions and not necessarily accurate. On the other hand, if the instructor responded affirmatively then she knew whether her post was correct or incorrect. She researched her information thoroughly before she posted on a discussion forum. Due to this, she was very disappointed when she received a negative review by the instructor.

As with other study participants, she considered her instructor-student communication to be personal. Sophie preferred to communicate directly with her instructor by email. That way she would immediately receive notification through her cellphone that they had responded to her question. Sophie was more likely to contact the instructor if she considered the instructor a friend or if the instructor emailed the class and asked if anyone had any questions. Otherwise, asking a question about something she did not understand made her feel embarrassed. She was concerned the instructor may regard the question as silly and this made her feel self-conscious so she would not ask. If she did ask the instructor a question and did not understand the answer, it made her feel like an idiot. In that case, she would just try to translate, ask her friends, and write what she thought the answer was.

Sophie preferred to have examinations online, not so she could search for the answers but so she could translate the material. Examinations did not always allow the amount of time needed to connect her languages and answer questions about the content. Her first choice was to have face-to-face classes with assessments online as long as the instructor taught well. She explained,

Face to face, I need more concentrate and for the exam is a little bit
difficult than the online then because online then I can use translate so
sometimes I can better understand of question asked. I always get better grade in online class than my face-to-face class.

In the end, Sophie managed to acquire high scores in her online courses regardless of the issues and had plans to enroll in future online coursework. She agreed with others and found it was easier to define and translate course content online, and it helped when the syllabus assignments and exam due dates were clearly spelled out.

All study participants were asked if their online scores were agreeable to them and they all responded favorably. This was in an attempt to prevent any irrelevant criticism of the instructor by the student who may be responding to a poor grade (Brocato, Bonanno, & Ulbig, 2015).

**Emergent Themes**

Power distance index (PDI), individualism vs. collectivism (IDV), and long vs. short term orientation (LTO) were established as the three Hofstede cultural dimensions representing the highest cultural differences between China and the US. In an attempt to answer the research question: “How does culture influence Chinese international students’ willingness to approach instructors online at a US IHE?” the study’s theoretical framework initiated the coding through content analysis that reflected HCF’s dimensions.

Data that was grouped into codes according to theory may or may not have aligned with the HCF’s key differences within each cultural dimension. For instance, the participants revealed interdependence between technology, the instructor, and their friends during their learning experiences online. HCF large-power distance societies would characterize students, less powerful, and “emotionally polarized between
dependence and counter-dependence” (see Table 2-1). The following themes were identified and will be discussed in detail:

- **Theme 1: Student behavior that inhibits interaction with instructor**
  - Subtheme 1: Interdependence
  - Subtheme 2: Good impressions and harmony

- **Theme 2: Instructor communication that encourages interaction with student**
  - Subtheme 1: Private
  - Subtheme 2: Clear and immediate
  - Subtheme 3: Friendly

**Theme 1: Student behavior that inhibits interaction with instructor.** There was an overall sense of self-sufficiency relayed by passages from each of the participants’ transcripts. Not only did they adjust to the US education style that was less regimented than what they had experienced growing up, they were not solely dependent on the instructor. The dependency on a more powerful person in a relationship was attributed to PDI large-power distance societies (China) (see Table 2-1). Contrariwise, the participants were interdependent, a PDI small-power distance (US) characteristic, relying on their Chinese friends, technology, and their own competence before attempting to approach the online instructor. However, in some instances, the interdependency even leaned towards counter-dependency, a PDI large-power distance characteristic (China) (see Table 2-1) in that the participants described their online experience as ‘self-education’, as contact with the instructor was considered non-essential. Their personal circle of Chinese friends was valued as an ‘in-group’, sharing information, behavior that
could be attributed to the cultural attributes of an IDV collectivist society (China) (see Table 2-2). They depended on online translators for convenience and avoided other technologies, such as email, because of awkwardness and inconvenience. This resembles a key difference, ‘effort should have quick results’, referenced by LTO short-term orientation societies (US) (see Table 2-3).

**Sub-theme 1: Interdependence.** This sub-theme is listed under HCF’s PDI dimension and applied to the US’s small-power distance society. Hofstede (2010) described interdependence as a subordinate’s [student] preference for a limited rather than complete dependence on an authority figure [instructor]. The transcripts revealed that each of the participants took matters into their own hands by finding solutions to comprehend course material and communication quickly. Small-power distance societies encourage students to search independently for solutions in their educational setting. As elaborated on earlier, students from large-power distance societies are less comfortable learning independently due to their greater dependency on the instructor (Koh & Lim, 2007).

The participants’ reliance on friends related to IDV collectivist dimension (China) similar to sharing resources with an extended family. Relying on both technology and friends saved participant ‘face’ and any shame incurred, linking to LTO short and long-term dimensions. Although utilizing their technology and their friends for help contributed to their resourcefulness, these also provided the participants’ reasons to less likely contact their instructor for assistance.

**Technology.** Access to the internet further limited the need and desire for the participants to approach the instructor for explanations. Not only because they could
access tools online that improved their understanding of course material, but the act of emailing and receiving a response from the instructor was thought as taking too much time and effort, and the response was unreliable.

The six participants all commented that they either translated words into Chinese with Google translator or looked up the English definition by typing the word in the browser’s search bar. Liam thought the online course was easier than the face-to-face because he had time to search words as opposed to guessing their meaning or asking the instructor. The online coursework format helped him overcome English language comprehension barriers. Sophie also was partial to online coursework so she could use Google translator. She achieved better grades online than her face-to-face classes because of the online language tools. Not only did Sophie prefer the flexibility to use an online translator to interpret words but also the online format allowed extra time to understand the meaning. She did not ordinarily contact the instructor because she had to rely on email that required extra time. Defining or translating online was quicker. In this way, the participants turned an environment of online text-based communication with almost non-existent social context cues, into an advantage.

Friends. Three out of the six participants said they would approach their Chinese friends with a course question before asking the US online instructor. Chloe explained, “For my friends . . . really, Chinese friends, they will say, ’Okay, never mind, just ask my friend.’ They would choose their friend first instead of instructor”. Sophie, Liam, and Olivia spoke about the importance of friends to help them understand course content. Sophie explained, “Yeah, if I do not understand maybe I will ask my friends or if sometimes my friend is not with me maybe, I just ignore it. Because I don't know how to
ask it like, email or on the discussion.” Liam and Olivia also asked their friends first if they thought they knew the answer.

The reliance on friends related to the IDV collectivist dimension (China) in that the relationships between international Chinese students functioned similarly to that of the extended family that shared resources. Using the Chinese native tongue added to the ease of communication among the Chinese international students especially concerning comprehending course material. As Sophie alluded to previously, asking a question to friends that speak your native language was much easier than figuring out how to ask a question in your second language to a US peer or instructor.

Sophie also explained that students do not typically ask questions of their instructors in China. As a PDI large-power distance society, the instructor is guru and to question them would appear inappropriate and disrespectful. Even though dependency by a less powerful individual on a more powerful individual is connected to large-power distance societies (China), it was very difficult for students to ask their Chinese instructor for help. It created the perception that material has not been presented sufficiently by the instructor. A student of lower rank asking a question can appear offensive to the instructor of higher rank who is regarded an expert. This can result in a loss of ‘face’ or feelings of shame as stated earlier by both HCF’s LTO short and long-term dimensions.

Self: Lastly, the six participants relied on their own ingenuity to accomplish the online tasks at hand. Emily explained that students tend to work independently due to the nature of online coursework (i.e., lack of face-to-face) and its loose guidelines. Some instructors provided examples from the book content, but overall, “You have to read it by yourself without explanations.” She associated online learning with self-education.
Chloe depended mainly on herself and considered the online experience guided by the student rather than instructor. She explained,

I don't think the instructor can really help a lot in online course because I really read the book by myself. If you felt like . . . Just depend on the person, like depend on me. If I'm motivated learner, I will ask every question. It really depends on the person who took the online course.

Liam also thought that instructor-student communication was not as important when the coursework was online. The professor told the students what to read and what assignments to complete. He remarked that he could have easily completed the course even if there was no instructor. His attitude was aligned with a counter-dependence on the instructor, a PDI large-power distance behavior (China). Hofstede (2010) described counter-dependence as a form of rejecting dependence on the authority figure. Liam said, “I think it's not so important. The instructor actually, I didn't talk to them, and I didn't write an email to them, so no connection between me and the instructor. I just did nothing to contact the instructor at the time I took the class.” A significant component of the participants’ interdependence was relying on them to figure out course logistics using a variety of resources that were convenient, timely, and spared them ‘face’.

**Sub-theme 2: Good impressions and harmony.** For the possible exception of Chloe, who was one of CSSA’s vice presidents and the most assertive of the group, the participants said they would contact the instructor only in circumstances when their friends could not help or they could not find a solution online. Besides being dependent on technology and their friends, participants were sensitive to how they were perceived by their instructor. They did not want to contact the online instructor for fear they may
not understand the instructor’s answer. This fear was only intensified if they contacted
the instructor and did not understand their answer. This made them even more hesitant to
contact the instructor a second time concerned that they would appear incompetent. The
participants’ reluctance to place themselves in an awkward or embarrassed situation to
save face was a characteristic of LTO short-term orientation (US).

All six participants spoke of how they wanted to appear knowledgeable to their
instructor. For instance, if Sophie did not understand her instructor’s answer, she would
not communicate that to him or her. Instead, she said,

When the instructor writes something down, I do not understand I feel
very . . . I don't know how to say that. It's not a good feeling so it's very
difficult to ask someone that who do not understand when he writes it and
then not ask . . . Sometimes I will think . . . Yeah like, some question
maybe other student understand but just I do not understand it, I ask then
he say, my god it's a silly question. Why you asking me? Sometimes it
will make me feel very . . . self-conscious.

Sophie said that asking the instructor to explain their answer made her feel “like
an idiot”. She said the instructor would think that she does not know anything about the
field, does not pay attention, or simply cannot learn.

Olivia asked her online instructor if she could do extra credit to improve her
grade. She said she felt weird and awkward asking about her score. Sometimes she
emailed an instructor and they did not reply. She said if she emailed the instructor twice
she would be afraid of what they thought of her. They may wonder why she was so
hurried. She would wait before she emailed the instructor a second time so they would
be comfortable. Olivia sometimes waited until the last minute to contact the instructor before the assignment was due.

Liam took his US online course on summer break in mainland China. He explained he would have returned to school and had a face-to-face meeting with the online instructor if he had received a poor grade. A poor grade would be the only reason he would contact the instructor, especially if the issue was due to technological problems. If it were due to his poor effort, then he would simply retake the course. He explained, “If I failed by this problem [technology] I will try to find the instructor about this. If I just didn't do so well in the class, okay its fine, just do nothing, just retake it or something like that.”

Chloe, the most assertive of the participants felt comfortable approaching the instructor online. However, she would not want a confrontation about grades. When asked if she would contact her instructor about her scores, Chloe said, “No, not really. If I find some problem of my grade, like some of the scores, some of the grade of my exam, I will contact them, but I will not argue, "When will the grade be out?" or "Why are my grades so low?" I won't ask those questions. Yeah, I won't.”

She thought other Chinese international students would not contact online instructors for any reason. She explained, “They may think that, ‘Oh, would the instructor think that I'm so stupid to ask this question?’ They will ask, ‘Is this question too stupid?’” Chloe’s opinion was, "None of the questions [are] stupid. My Chinese friends should not think, ‘Oh, should I ask the instructor?’” Chloe thinks that her friends also just may be too embarrassed about their English language proficiency to approach the instructor. She suggested,
Yeah, maybe [they are] just too passive to approach the instructor, or maybe some of because of the language barrier; they don't know how to express themselves accurately, so maybe they will just choose, ‘Okay, I can solve the problem by myself instead of asking the instructor’. That's what I know, my friends”.

Chloe thought Chinese international students also might have the attitude that online courses require little effort. Chloe said they thought, “Just complete the assignment and pass the course.” Not causing conflict and saving face kept their relationships harmonious with their peers as well. Sometimes it meant taking initiative and finishing a group members’ project in order to get a reasonable grade. Aiden disliked it when group members did not take responsibility for their part of an online project. In fact, if a group member did not complete their part of a project, Aiden felt a sense of responsibility to step in and complete it himself. In this way, he avoided conflict with his group and bypassed having to contact the instructor.

Chloe pointed out that some of her friends felt quite uncomfortable or unfamiliar when they engaged in-group work. She attributed this to their unfamiliarity with allocating jobs and cooperating with one another. Chloe described how they do group work as such,

You do this part, I do this part, and after Sunday, we just come and combine all the things," and that's so-called group work, never communicate, or like argue and all the things between. They just do their own work and then combine all the things.
Chloe continues to communicate with her friends in college back home in China. When she asked them whether they participated in collaborative coursework, they say, "No, we just sit there and study. Just study according to the syllabus, finish the exam, and then, done." She felt lucky that she has had many chances to communicate with instructors in the US classroom.

**Theme 2: Instructor communication that encourages interaction with student.** Reasons for not contacting the online instructor included embarrassment (e.g., ‘feel like an idiot’), lack of privacy (e.g., discussion versus email), timeliness (e.g., tiresome act of emailing back and forth), student motivation (e.g., ‘just get grade, no need to contact), and experience with limited feedback (e.g., replied with comment ‘good work’). These refer to LTO short-term orientation (US) preference for saving face and effort that produces quick results (see Table 2-3). Participants also preferred IDV individualist low context communication (US) (see Table 2-2) with the instructor likely due to the unfamiliarity with US culture and language and PDI small-power distance (US) instructor informality.

**Sub-theme 1: Private.** Five of the six students emphasized they only would use email to communicate with the instructor. The ability to communicate privately aided their motivation to contact the instructor. They did not want their conversations publicly displayed online with the instructor for fear they would appear ignorant by class peers. This attitude was associated with LTO concern with face and sense of shame. As pointed out earlier, HCF’s concern for ‘face’ is listed under short-term orientation (US), and having a sense of shame is associated with long-term orientation (China) and Confucianism.
Emily felt more comfortable emailing the instructor than asking the instructor a question on the discussion board. She thought email communication actually improved instructor-communication and decreased any English language barriers,

I think sending emails will make the words more clear. You can actually explain and use the corrected words. For example, when you have verbal conversations . . . sometimes there is some words that I'm not very sure about or I misunderstand the words . . . I might make some mistake.

As mentioned earlier, Chloe was from Macau and one of CSSA’s vice presidents and most assertive of the participants. This may have had to do with the less restricted culture of Macau. She would not hesitate to contact the instructor in private if she had questions about course content. Aiden would contact the instructor by email for privacy but and timeliness, although he never had a reason to. He explained, “I prefer to email the professor directly. Yeah. You know I can get some, I can gather notice on my phone if I get an email from the professor. I think it's about timing.” Olivia also said she was not comfortable having other students see her questions to the instructor. Although she felt at ease communicating with peers in an online discussion forum, she would not post a question in a forum to the instructor. Not only for privacy, but also because she did not think her instructor would answer her back on a discussion forum. She would email an instructor because she thought it was easier for them than discussion threads. With weekly assignments and numerous discussions, chances are that they would not be able to read and answer every question.

Likewise, Sophie preferred to email the instructor online rather than post a question on the discussion board. She explained, “If we post something on the discussion
board than everyone can see it. If I ask some specific personal question to the professor, use email. The web campus we have message I think or email.” Liam did not specify his preference since he was unable to email his US instructor during his online summer experience in China. Privacy was the predominant reason for Emily, Aiden, Olivia, and Sophie to use email as their top communication preference. However, there were a few other reasons for this inclination. Emily noted clarity; Chloe, security; Aiden, timeliness of smartphone notifications; and Olivia, timeliness of email versus discussion.

**Sub-theme 2: Clear and immediate.** Four out of the six participants spoke about the importance of articulate and fast responses from the instructor. Emily said she might miss an assignment or quiz if the instructor did not explain requirements clearly. Emily gave an example earlier where the professor wanted the students to compare A and B. This assignment was too ambiguous for her and she desired that the instructions be more specific.

Emily believed the majority of online clarity falls on the syllabus. As long as the syllabus included details, there was no need to contact the instructor. If she did have a question, she preferred the timeliness of email to posting a question online. Discussion boards work well for group discussions but not necessarily with instructor-student communication. Feedback is particularly crucial online. She explained,

> If I go to a face-to-face course, I can ask the professor directly, so I can actually see the professor twice a week. If I have any problems, I can directly ask the professor. If I do the online course, sometimes professor might not respond that fast. You know, if you upload an assignment and if
there are instructor just give you a grade online you don't know how to
improve next time so the feedback is really important to me.

Emily further commented, “I think feedback is pretty important. Like last time, I
uploaded not on time because I really wanted to hear from him. Can I get a partial point
of my work or I cannot? I wanted that.” If the instructor did not reply in a timely manner,
she anticipated missing the response by the deadline.

The role of the online instructor to Chloe is impersonal. In the traditional
classroom, she can ask a question and continue questioning the instructor until she is
comfortable with the answer. She felt online communication was impersonal so she
hesitated to ask a question. At least email was private and more secure than calling or
posting on the discussion board. Yet, the task of emailing back and forth also could be
tasking and time-consuming but she was not sure she could reach the instructor by phone.
Chloe would preferred an immediate response and got frustrated when there was a
weekend delay,

I want like immediate response somehow when I'm really frustrated, I
want . . . "Oh, can you ask me quicker." Like waiting for like Saturday or
Sunday, it's not their office hour. I may need to wait until Monday. Yeah,
just about the time.

It was also very important that feedback not be general, as in, "Good, very good,
bad" but specific so the student actually understood what the instructor wanted. She
acknowledged that this could be difficult for online instructors since they typically have
many students and not enough time for detailed comments. Chloe conceded that her
activity online depended on her interest in the topic. If she had low interest, then she was less active.

Aiden also believed an instructor’s feedback was imperative online, more so than in the face-to-face classroom. If Aiden needed to email an instructor for clarification, he appreciated that his smartphone alerted him to incoming mail so that he could get an answer instantly. Immediate communication was critical. Discussion forums were okay for group projects but not ideal for instructor-student interaction online.

Sophie had a clarity issue with an online course. Every week the students would have a forty-five minute class and every other class they would have an exam. The instructor taught four chapters and she thought she would review those particular chapters. However, when she viewed the study guide most of the questions were not in the textbook. They also were not on the PowerPoint. She explained,

If he didn't mention in the class so I maybe think I choose the wrong chapter but if his study guide is like this two point like, I will mention this in class . . . This in exams, mention this, mention this, mention this and I do not study well then I will do not blame him. It's my fault, I know. If I prepared well and when I see the exams is not written on the study guide and he do not mention in the class, I definitely will blame to the professor.

Sophie had plans for enrolling in another online course the next semester. She anticipated feedback from the instructor due to all the homework and discussion assignments required. She pointed out that feedback was not only encouraging but motivated her to do well. Sophie revealed, “Yeah, so when I get feedback, I know he's
reading and I won't get good feedback and I won't have . . . He have a good impression for me so I will try my best to do it.”

HCF does not apply the need for quick results to LTO long-term orientation societies (China). However, the Chinese international students’ persistence to find ways to adapt to the language and online format was remarkable and displayed a perseverance that applied by HCF to LTO long-term orientation (China). Participants also preferred IDV low context (US) communication with the instructor likely due to the unfamiliarity with US culture and language. Clear instruction helped them to clarify and interpret what was expected of them, supporting a comprehension level that enhanced how comfortable they were to approach the instructor. Immediate feedback encouraged their communication attempts with instructor and prevented them from submitting late assignments.

**Sub-theme 3: Friendly.** Not only did cultural norms influence approachability as described in the first theme, but also an instructor’s demeanor influenced whether an instructor was approachable. The participants described Chinese instructors as formal (PDI large-power distance society) and US instructors as informal (PDI small-power distance society). The study participants compared the Chinese education and US education styles and spoke about the differences in approachability related to the instructor’s demeanor. An instructor perceived as a friend gave the Chinese international student permission to approach.

Four out of the six participants spoke about the informality of US instructors compared to China. It was Olivia’s opinion that it was easier overall to approach an instructor in the US than an instructor in China. She explained,
They're [Chinese instructors] just so straight . . . they're an instructor, they're an instructor. You're a student, you're a student. You know? Here, like instructor can talk to you as friend some time. We feel like we're close friends. It's much like comfortable to talk with instructor. It's much easier. In China, they just so instructor. I don't know how to describe them.

Even an instructor’s online demeanor can influence whether a student contacted them or not. Olivia spoke about how she hesitated to email her US instructor a second time if he did not respond to her first email. It made her wonder what he may think of her. She would wait until the last minute to email him again so that she would not appear so bothersome.

Chloe appreciated the interaction between instructor and student in the US. Her English high school teachers were graduates from US or Canada and encouraged students to ask questions. Yet, Chloe said that Chinese students were still passive. She explained, They just think, I can read the book. After reading the book, I can finish everything, and I can finish my homework. No reason for me to ask. Okay, I just sit here, and time's up. I go." Most of the students would think like this, so I told them, "Well, no, I don't want to be here."

Sophie would approach an instructor if she thought they were a friend. Otherwise, she would ask her Chinese friend or just try to ignore that she did not understand. She confessed, “I don't know how to ask it like, email or on the discussion but I feel very . . . How to say that, if he's a friend I will definitely say what do you mean or something.” She thought instructors could create a climate where students could feel more comfortable contacting them. She explained,
Yes, if the . . . For example, if the instructor sent us an email to ask whether you have any questions for now. I will feel much comfortable to reply to email about the question I have. If the instructor does not ask then I have some questions, I think I may not need to ask.

Interestingly, this viewpoint supports Hofstede’s description of the large-power distance classroom, in that “students in class speak up only when invited to” (2010, p.69).

Aiden commented on the Chinese instructor-student interaction by stating, “The instructor is not like . . . I think the instructor in China is hard to be like a friend or something else.” He described the relationship further,

You know in China it's more like I'm a student . . . Sorry. The teacher tell you to do this for about an entire . . . Tell you to do this in some maybe some days and then you have to do what they ask you to do right now or maybe something like that.

Aiden described the Chinese style as a more textbook-based educational method. It was hard to have a friendship with a Chinese instructor. He felt it was much easier to approach instructors if the student sensed that they were a friend.

Summary

The preceding themes drawn from the students’ interviews had significant correlations to the theoretical framework. The patterns exposed in the data consisted of two major themes and five sub-themes. These themes related to HCF’s three dimensions in the following manners:

**PDI.** The participants PDI large-power distance dependency on a more powerful person (e.g., instructor) was not particularly obvious from the themes that were drawn
from the interviews. Although they were respectful of the instructor as an authority figure, they leaned towards an interdependent, PDI small-power distance (US) behavior. They relied on their Chinese friends, technology, and their own competence before attempting to approach the online instructor. Their coursework relationships were interdependent, a HCF’s PDI dimension applied to small-power distance societies (US). The Chinese students did not approach instructors in their homeland country because the instructors represented the authority figure not challenged. One of the reasons the Chinese international students came to the US was for the unregimented learning atmosphere and informal instructor presence. Yet online, the majority of the participants resorted to this same approach for different reasons. It was not necessarily the commanding or imposing view they had of the instructor, but simply because they received quicker answers by depending on technology and their Chinese friends. Communication was easier and they were less likely to lose face. In some instances, the interdependency leaned towards counter-dependency, a PDI large-power distance (China) characteristic in that the participant avoided any contact with the instructor.

**IDV.** The freedom from restrictions not only propelled them to embark on university studies in the US, but also provided the fortitude to rely on their own self-sufficiency and determination. Once in the US, the participant’s close circle of Chinese friends shared a relationship similar to the IDV collectivist society’s extended family (China). Participants wanted the course content clearly communicated in an individualist low-context communication style (US). This is an important consideration when developing any course content, but particularly essential when it is distributed to second language students previously immersed in a high context culture. Their unfamiliarity
with US culture and language necessitates this requirement even more so. When they received grades, they wanted specific feedback on why they received a particular score so they knew what was expected of them. Instruction and feedback that was comprehended easily not only supported their learning but encouraged the students to approach the instructor since it signaled that the participant would likely understand their email responses as well. The timeliness and thoughtfulness of an instructor’s communication also added to their approachability.

**LTO.** The participants wanted quick results for their efforts, a LTO short-term orientation (US), whether they were trying to translate or define an English term or if they emailed the instructor. HCF does not apply the need for quick results to LTO long-term orientation societies (China), however, the participants quickly sought out the means to overcome language and other online format obstacles they encountered. This dependency on both technology and their Chinese circle of friends saved ‘face’ and subsequent shame (LTO short and long-term societies). Using these resources contributed to their unlikelihood of contacting their instructor for assistance. On one hand, not contacting the instructor linked closely to PDI large-power distance (China) where society members are consciously aware of their place in the hierarchy. Questioning authority is offensive since the high ranked citizen’s expertise is not up for debate. It can result in loss of face and shame for both parties placed in this awkward encounter. Even though the participants were aware that US classrooms were not structured on this type of hierarchy, they resorted to this behavior because they were not confident in their English proficiency communicating with the instructor. On the other hand, if they felt their conversations with their instructor were private, comprehensible,
lacking any face or shame, and timely, the participants were willing to engage with the
individual of higher authority. These instructor-student communication qualities
encouraged the participants to approach the instructor. Chapter 5 reviews and
summarizes the findings presented in Chapter 4, similarities to the literature reviewed,
and any discoveries not reported by the literature.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings

As explained previously, this study explored the impact of self-perceived cultural
norms as it influenced Chinese international students’ willingness to approach instructors
online at a US institution of higher education (IHE). Culture-based behavior, in flux and
transitioning as these Chinese students became accustomed to studying in a US
environment, is critical to understanding the how they perceived communicating with
their instructors on-line. This chapter summarizes the study’s findings and interprets
them in relation to the relevant theory and the literature. It also describes data
limitations, offers suggestions for future practice and research, and provides conclusions
based on the work.

Table 5 is a reference for the research findings that compares the participants’
narrative with the theory and the literature. The bold uppercase X’s indicate where the
participants deviated from Chinese HCF dimensions or the literature, partially or entirely.
The lowercase x’s acknowledge similarity with Chinese HCF dimensions or the
literature.

Table 5-1
Findings and Interpretations
Theme 1: Student Behavior that Inhibits Interaction

Subtheme 1: Interdependence.

Findings and interpretations in relation to theory.

PDI large-power distance (China) versus PDI small-power distance (US). As depicted in Table 5 under "PDI" there were some similarity between Chinese student dependency and counter-dependency on their online instructor. In PDI large-power distance societies, the “quality of learning depends on excellence of teacher” (see Table 2-1). Since Chinese instruction is teacher-oriented, much of their learning experience depends on the instructor’s teaching skill. As the ‘less powerful’ individual in the relationship, the participants depended on the instructor to provide them with all instructions required to complete the course. Provided they had all the course content ingredients from the instructor, the students were perfectly content to accomplish
independently all that was expected of them. In fact, some Chinese students thought they were perfectly capable of completing the entire course on their own, without any discourse between themselves and the instructor. If they received a poor grade, it was because of their lack of effort and not the instructor’s teaching skill, reflective of PDI large-power societies.

The instructor’s role as facilitator or guide was acceptable to the participants with help from technology and their Chinese friends. This revealed an interdependence that is associated with PDI small-power distance cultures (US). They worked out solutions on how to manage information that was otherwise incoherent to them. If they had comprehension issues with the course material, they resorted to online translators and dictionaries. In these ways, the participants displayed interdependence, dependence and counter-dependency characteristics of both HCF’s PDI large (China) and small-power distance (US) societies.

*IDV collectivist societies (China) versus individualist (US).* The participants kept a close circle of Chinese friends that resembled an extended family of support. They could no longer depend on the high-context communication (China) in the online course portal, but they could depend on it outside the course with their Chinese friends. This thinking in terms of “we” is a characteristic of the IDV collectivist society. Online in the US, the participants depended on low-context communication (US) consisting of explicit instructions that were easily defined and translated. Participants relied on themselves and appreciated the less-regimented educational atmosphere in the US. In this way, the participants displayed dependence, counter-dependence, and interdependence characteristics of both HCF’s IDV collectivist (China) and individualist (US) societies.
LTO long-term orientation (China) versus short-term orientation (US). The participants displayed short-term orientation (US) characteristics since they favored efforts that produced quick results when trying to comprehend their online coursework. To overcome language barriers, they resorted to the internet, or their close circle of Chinese friends. Creating this interdependence also saved ‘face’ and subsequent shame (LTO short and long-term orientation societies). Discussing course expectations with their extended family of Chinese friends alleviated the risk of communicating ineffectively with their instructors. They could ask their friends in a language that was comfortable to them and sending or receiving email that may be misinterpreted. Online tools also liberated them from directly communicated with the instructor since they could type in a word to define or translate. These resources were "work-arounds" that not only provided convenience but avoided face-saving and shame situations. Their extended family and technology helped them circumvent asking a stupid question (face-saving) or placing the instructor in discourse that may suggest they had not presented the content adequately. The participants also exhibited long-term orientation (China) perseverance, as their self-reliance turned them into capable and successful students, even though they may have had reservations about their abilities initially. This perseverance comes from a long-term distance society that attributes success to effort, and failure to the lack of effort (Hofstede, 2011). These examples provide a basis for considering that participants displayed shame and face-saving characteristics of both HCF’s LTO long-term (China) and short (US) orientation societies.

Findings and interpretations in relation to the literature. As discussed by Kennedy (2002), online course content left open to interpretation is not ideal for the
Chinese culture’s learning style that depends on accurate information. This type of learning is seen as more compatible with small-power (US) distance societies where student and instructors treat each other as equals. The quality of learning is based on two-way communication and a demonstration of excellence by the student (see Table 2-1). Koh & Lim’s (2007) research agreed and determined online learning benefits were greater for small-power distance learners than large-power distance ones. The literature typically described large-power (China) distance societies as accustomed to subordination and adaptation to hierarchies. Students from these societies are described as less comfortable learning on their own due to their dependency on the instructor as authority. The participants’ resourcefulness at finding solutions through their own ingenuity, technology, or close circle of friends was not evident in the literature.

Yet the participants in this study took responsibility for their learning and were not dependent on the instructor other than a detailed explanation of assignments. To compensate for course content that was open to their interpretation, students typically relied on their friends, online dictionaries, and translators. The study participants generally accepted the online instructor as facilitator who provided only guidelines and content. Online learning is student-centered in that the student takes responsibility for their own learning (Kenobi, 2009; Swierczek & Bechter, 2010). Contrary to the literature, a student-centered focus was acceptable to this large-power distance group. The participants drew from their collectivist background that required harmony and their close circle of Chinese friends for high context communication relying on shared knowledge. Chen et al. (2008) established that the greatest online learning challenge for Chinese international students was a decrease or absence of instructor input. He
contended Chinese international students could not figure out answers without help from the instructor. Contrary to this, participants were willing to determine answers to their questions independently.

**Subtheme 2: Good impressions and harmony.**

**Findings and interpretations in relation to theory.**

*PDI large-power distance (China) versus PDI small-power distance (US).* The participants’ did try to exert a good impression and maintain harmony with their instructor and peers. They hesitated to ask questions for fear it may imply that they had not studied or followed course instructions. They did not want to waste the instructor’s valuable time with ‘silly’ questions. If they did question the instructor and they did not understand the answer, the students would not ask the instructor to repeat or elaborate from fear that the instructor would think that they lacked knowledge, were unable to learn, or simply did not pay attention to course content. They did not rely on two-way communication attributed to small-power distance relationships between instructor and student. In this way, the participants displayed restraint, obedience, and respect characteristics representative of HCF’s PDI large-power distance (China) society.

*IDV collectivist societies (China) versus individualist (US).* The participants did not want to argue or debate with the instructor. The participants favored harmonious relationships; those where neither party was embarrassed or disrespected. There was a certain sense of “we” between their Chinese friends and themselves. They worked as a team to overcome cultural barriers and their circle of Chinese friends offered a feeling of camaraderie. They did not have to interpret what their friends were trying to say. Their Chinese friends helped them to avoid asking the instructor questions that the participants
thought would appear silly or hard for them to communicate. In this way, the participants displayed the harmonious, non-challenging characteristics representative of HCF’s IDV collectivist (China) society.

*LTO long-term orientation (China) versus short-term orientation (US).* The participants were very conscious of how their instructors perceived them as students. They wanted instructor to have a good impression of them and saving face kept them from feeling embarrassed (shame). To circumvent the risk of asking what they thought might be a silly, awkward, or misinterpreted question from the viewpoint of the instructor or a possible discourteous email conversation, participants often followed the following steps:

1. If they had questions that they felt they were asking in an eloquent English manner, they would first use an online Chinese-English translator;
2. If they did not understand the translation, they would seek to define the perplexing word using an online dictionary;
3. If they still did not understand the question, they would ask their Chinese circle of friends;
4. If their friend could not help them, they would write a response that they thought would answer the question.

This behavior matched LTO short-term orientation (US) ‘concern for face’, and long-term (China) ‘sense of shame’ (see Table 2-3). There was not a clear distinction between the two as revealed by the literature. Two types of shame were identified, ‘self’ (i.e., losing face, guilt) and ‘others’ (i.e., disgrace, embarrassment) and the participants referred to both (Li, et al., 2004). In this way, the participants displayed both the shame
and face-saving characteristics representative of HCF’s LTO long-term (China) and short (US) orientation societies.

Findings and interpretations in relation to the literature. Dong & Lee (2007) claimed that the amount of ‘face’ that is placed on an individual is directly proportionate to their social rank. The Chinese instructor’s perceived social rank for the Chinese student is high. Therefore, the participants placed higher significance on how they were perceived by their US instructor compared to their US peers. It also was apparent that the participants’ language incompetence, or at least their perception of their language incompetence, became a communication barrier between themselves and the instructor. This interpretation was supported by the literature indicating that unfamiliarity with the English language created obstacles for Chinese international students (Cifuentes & Shih, 2001; Thompson & Ku, 2005; Tu, 2001).

The participants’ views also were in alignment with the literature depicting the importance of ‘face’. Chua & Gudykkunst (1987) spoke about how the Chinese do not want to disagree with someone, especially someone of higher rank, for fear of "loss of face," which is considered an extreme insult as Chua & Gudykurst (1987) pointed out in their article. Manikutty, et al. (2007) also described this behavior as a sign of disrespect for the instructor. The participants were respectful of their online instructors by taking precautions not to waste their time with silly questions or misinterpreted communication. Wang, et al (2005) determined that to preserve face meant that the individual had to remain dependable and honorable in their social interactions. By not appearing as a diligent student or one with a shaky command of English, they became embarrassed and felt awkward. To avoid the embarrassment of a mistyped email, or worse, not
understanding the answer, restrained most of the participants from contacting the instructor. This inaction preserved not only their face but their instructor’s face as well. Dillon, et al. (2007) and Li & Rosson (2012) commented on the lack of English language proficiency as one of the reasons exchanges between students and instructors were cumbersome.

There was a comment by study participant Chloe about the passive nature of her fellow Chinese students in general when it came to their willingness to contact their instructors. Zhao & McDougall (2008) identified passivity among Chinese students’ attending a Western university by the way they never questioned the instructor’s expertise. However, Chloe and the other participants did not express a hesitancy to question the instructor because the instructor’s authority was so absolute. Instead, she and the other participants did not approach the instructor because: (1) questions may imply that they had not studied or followed course instructions (2) email was time-consuming trying to communicate in their second language in an intelligible manner and comprehensive manner.

**Theme 2: Instructor Communication that Encourages Interaction**

**Subtheme 1: Private.**

*Findings and interpretations in relation to theory.*

*PDI large-power distance (China) versus PDI small-power distance (US).* The educational system in China is teacher-centered and the teacher initiates all communication. This might be the reason all the students were hesitant to contact the online instructor. This contributes to a style of student communication that relies on the instructor taking the initiative in the conversation. In the US, the participants’ evaluated
whether contacting the instructor was necessary. This attitude was enhanced by their self-consciousness in their ability to comprehend and communicate in English. They contemplated whether their question was worthy, or if they communicated it appropriately. Furthermore, asking the question publicly only would increase the chance that they would appear incompetent to the instructor and any of their peers.

In addition, large-power distance societies believe that a student’s ability to learn depends on whether the instructor is competent or incompetent. By asking questions publicly, the instructor could be viewed as communicating information inadequately, or worse, inept at teaching. Approaching an instructor privately through email to ask a question would be preferable to a public forum. In this way, the participants displayed characteristics of HCF’s PDI large-power distance society (China).

**IDV collectivist societies (China) versus individualist (US).** Approaching an instructor privately through email is preferable to speaking one’s mind in a public forum as the student may risk appearing confrontational. Inaccurate or improper communication that would cause conflict or misunderstandings is avoided. Hofstede (2011) explained that in a collectivist society, a Chinese student finds it illogical to speak up unless the instructor addresses them personally. Since an instructor does not ‘point’ to a student and ask them a question in an online environment, this type of interaction would be atypical. The participants did not want to post questions to the instructor on public forum for privacy reasons. Furthermore, some of the participants thought that even if they did post, their questions would not be answered by the instructor. Interestingly, Hofstede (2011) mentioned how students from collectivist cultures’ were less willing to speak up in a classroom composed of ‘out-groups’, or ‘strangers’, without a teacher.
present. They felt more comfortable among students from similar backgrounds as their own. In the end, communicating with their Chinese circle of friends was just easier. It allowed for high-context communication without the need to explain or address any English language incompetence. In this way, the participants displayed characteristics of HCF’s IDV collectivist society (China).

*LTO long-term orientation (China) versus short-term orientation (US).* The need for private communication with the online instructor was expressed by most of the participants. This need relates to LTO concern for saving face and sense of shame. The participants were not comfortable asking questions publicly online. Although they rarely emailed the instructor privately, email communication would be their preference for online conversations. I think the participants would very likely approach online instructors if the instructor sent out email invitations to open up conversations. Since they were anxious about their English writing ability and felt uneasy about their English language comprehension, the participants did not necessarily want to take the initiative. Furthermore, they are not brought up in the Chinese school system to initiate a conversation with an instructor. Invitations by the instructor to approach them through email could help to alleviate their anxieties of face-saving and shame. In this way, the participants displayed characteristics of both HCF’s LTO long (China) and short-term (US) orientation societies.

*Findings and interpretations in relation to the literature.* The participants’ comments did agree with the literature that pointed to their reluctance to post online question or opinions publicly for fear of being judged or considered incompetent (Djojosaputro, et al., 2005). Djojosaputro, et al. (2005) concluded that online learning
was more suitable for small-power distance societies (Bing & Ping, 2008; Djojosaputro, et al., 2005). Bing & Ping (2008) found that Chinese students at Chinese universities actively asked questions about how to pass exams. The students’ would contact the instructor only if they wanted to improve their grade or felt their grade was in error. In this case, they would be able to speak in their native language, and therefore, with less apprehension. Hofstede (2011) noted that in a collectivist society, students receive preferential treatment if they have the same background as an instructor. Individualist societies would consider this nepotism. Although the participants in this study said they would contact the instructor if they had concern about their grades, none of them did. Instead, they solved the issue independently, virtually, or by communicating with their circle of Chinese friends.

The participants did respond favorably to the idea of online instructors reaching out to students to see if they had questions. The literature agrees that large-power distance cultures prefer authority figures soliciting opinions from subordinates (Wang, et al., 2005). It is acknowledgement by the instructor that the content was difficult and an invitation to the students that questions were important to the instructor. It would indicate that the instructor took a stake in the student’s understanding and learning. By taking this initiative, the instructor acted as a knowledge distributor, a role appealing to students from large-power distance societies (Yildiz & Bichelmeyer, 2003).

**Subtheme 2: Clear and immediate.**

**Findings and interpretations in relation to theory.**

*PDI large-power distance (China) versus PDI small-power distance (US).*

Instructor communication that clearly communicated course content was essential to the
participants. For PDI large-power distance societies, the instructors “are gurus that transfer personal wisdom” (Hofstede, 2010, p.72). In fact, the Chinese classroom is so strict that the instructor “outlines the intellectual path to be followed” (Hofstede, 2011, p. 69). Considering this, it is understandable how ambiguous course guidelines can be confusing to a student who grew up in this type of learning environment. Instruction in a non-native language only adds to the uncertainty. Clear and immediate direction by the instructor on assignments or essays helped the participants feel more confident about course expectations. In this way, the participants displayed characteristics of HCF’s PDI large-power distance (China) society.

**IDV collectivist societies (China) versus individualist (US).** Besides the fact that clear and immediate communication helped the participants understand the course requirements, it was particularly necessary for them because of their culture’s high-context communication. In the high-context collectivist society, opinions are determined by the extended family and not by the individual (Hofstede, 2011). This extends to the Chinese classroom where instruction is formal and the students conform and know what is required of them.

In contrast, the US classroom is informal and online US students use the syllabus to understand what is required of them. If the syllabus requirements are not clear to them, they contact the instructor. Low-context communication prevails and US students are acquainted with looking for the information they require if it is not immediately apparent. A US student would probably have more difficulty adapting to a collectivist/high-context society since they would not intuitively knowing the correct behavior. They would need to conform to unspoken rules instead of speaking one’s mind.
A clearly written syllabus helps the Chinese student navigate in an environment with which they are not familiar. In this way, participants displayed characteristics of both HCF’s IDV collective (China) and individualist society (US).

**LTO long-term orientation (China) versus short-term orientation (US).** The participants expressed the importance of detailed information and an instructor who responded to inquiries within a reasonable time. If the students had experiences with instructors that did not respond, or were slow to respond, the participants thought that their inquiry’s grammar may not have been articulated appropriately. That caused them embarrassment or anxiety waiting upon a reply. Worse yet, their grammar may have offended the instructor or made the student appear unknowledgeable. If the instructor responded with an ambiguous or brief reply that the participant did not understand, they were less likely to contact the instructor again. In this way, the participants displayed both the shame and face-saving characteristics of HCF’s LTO long-term (China) and short-term (US) orientation societies.

**Findings and interpretations in relation to the literature.** The participants’ expressed the need for clear instruction and immediate feedback. Clearly communicated instruction encouraged the participants to approach the instructor because they had a better understanding of the content and therefore could formulate a "better" question. If they did not understand the instruction, they used resources online or asked one of their friends for help. If instruction is in your first language, one is more likely to understand the instruction and therefore discern what knowledge gap to explore. However, study participants remarked that vague instructions in your second language can make international students nervous. The participants spoke about the frustration of vague
assignments and feedback from instructors. If they did feel confident enough to email the instructor with a question, and the response was too brief or confusing, they were less likely to contact them again. Chen et al. (2008) also identified Chinese international students’ discouragement by the insufficient feedback from online instructors.

Assignments that included video or audio lectures were difficult to understand and did not allow participants to translate them. If they did not recognize a word than the entire sentence may have no meaning. As noted by Ku & Lohr (2003), lack of intercultural sensitivity can discourage Chinese international students from enrolling in an online course. Chan (1999) recommended awareness of cultural values, being sympathetic to student understanding, and limited use of abstract thinking approaches. One of the participants gave an example of this when she was clearly confused when a professor assigned a comparison essay without detailing the parameters of the assignment.

Literature (Black, et al., 2003; Djojosaputro, et al., 2005; Korac-Kakabadse et al., 2001) identified non-verbal cues as crucial for communication in collectivist societies. The online student either relies on text or visual images. Yet text and visual communication can be so vastly different from culture to culture. For the participants, not only was the text in their second language, but language in any media was difficult to comprehend. This corresponds to the literature that suggested that China’s foreign language instruction emphasized reading and writing, with less emphasis on speaking and listening skills (Lee & Rice, 2007). Videos are often seen as a progressive style of online communication and it can be a way to break up the monotony of all text-based communication. Yet, culture-specific terminology can at least be copied/pasted if there is
a transcription available. Generally, videos can suffice for instructor introductions, but not content that would need to be later assessed.

**Subtheme 3: Friendly.**

*Findings and interpretations in relation to theory.*

*PDI large-power distance (China) versus PDI small-power distance (US).* One of the main reasons why many of the participants enrolled at a US university was to experience a less formal learning environment. They were dissatisfied with the strict Chinese learning style that created a barrier between instructor and the student. They looked forward to having a friendlier relationship with their instructors in the US. I was actually surprised by this because I thought that they would be more comfortable distancing themselves from the instructor due to their history of living in China where there is a hierarchical relationship between instructor and student. In PDI large-power distance society (China) members are reminded constantly of their place in the classroom hierarchy.

Though the participants may have been satisfied with their face-to-face US coursework, their online course experience did not fulfill the instructor interaction they desired. This was partly due to the sheer nature of the online experience, where the instructor functions primarily as a facilitator. A few participants even commented how they had or could have completed the course without any interaction with the instructor at all. I had the feeling they were anticipating or could have benefited from an online atmosphere that was friendlier, with instructors that reached out and made themselves ‘present’ and available. One participant expressed that they would like online instructors to solicit questions from the students during the class. In this way, the participants
preferred to view, or did view, the instructor as equal, a characteristic of students in HCF’s PDI small-power distance (US) societies.

**IDV collectivist societies (China) versus individualist (US).** The participants were unfamiliar with IDV individualist society’s manner of informal conversation between instructor and student. It was difficult to be friends with an instructor in China and half of the participants expressed their preference for a friendly student-instructor relationship in the US. Yet, the inability to speak one’s mind by not finding the correct words to say contributed to their hesitancy to contact their instructors. The Chinese collectivist society operates on a social system of in-group and out-group. Their circle of friends were the in-group, from the same ‘clan’, spoke the same language; therefore, they were the most comfortable communicating with this group. In this way, the participants displayed clan characteristics representative of HCF’s IDV collectivist (China) society.

**LTO long-term orientation (China) versus short-term orientation (US).** Loss of face or embarrassment elevated the participants’ hesitation or reluctance to approach the instructor. If they understood the content, had a question, and felt they could articulate the question adequately to the instructor, they were more likely to approach the instructor online. This helped the conversation flow smoothly and consistently between the student and instructor.

Any misinterpretation of content and communication only accentuated barriers. Instructors, who reached out to the Chinese international students online by inviting their questions and comments could give students permission to share their voice. The participants spoke freely about their partiality for friendly interactions with instructors. It was much more comfortable and easier for them to communicate. Hofstede (2011)
determined that Chinese students were more likely to speak up if instructors solicited questions from the class. A friendly atmosphere where the instructor appears to value the student’s opinions could help alleviate self-consciousness and anxiety for students who worry about face-saving for themselves and the instructor. In this way, the participants displayed face-saving and shame characteristics of both HCF’s LTO long-term (China) and short-term (US) orientation societies.

**Findings and interpretations in relation to the literature.** The participants were very aware of their image online. They did not want to jeopardize it by appearing stupid, bothersome, unprepared, or hasty to the instructor. Any of these behaviors were perceived as disrespectful to the instructor. The instructor’s online friendly demeanor of soliciting and replying to questions promptly influenced the participants’ behavior. Hsu, et al. (2007) found Chinese willingness to approach the instructor connected to the instructor’s positive verbal behavior, responsiveness, and caring attitude.
A sequence of events occurred due to lack of communication between student and instructor (see Figure 2)

Figure 2: Cycle of instructor/student communication.

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to a small sample of only six Chinese undergraduate students from one university and one program. This sample had a uniformly singular reason for attending a US university; their interest in an informal, unregimented learning atmosphere. This could imply a tendency toward individuality and self-sufficiency, both characteristics that go against the grain of their native culture, yet could explain their reliance on multiple resources for their online success. Another limitation was that the participants were a self-select group of scholar students from a Chinese student university association who volunteered to participate. It may be that the student association attracts independent-minded students who are not representative of all Chinese international
students. Two of the participants attended US high schools for 1 to 2 years before attending a US university and their tenure in the US may have affected their success in the transition.

**Suggestions for Future Practice**

The findings and interpretations revealed that some aspects of Chinese culture, such as the importance of good impressions and harmony did influence the Chinese international students’ willingness to approach instructors online at the university. This was evident by their use of technology and their close circle of friends they depended on to save face for themselves and their instructors in the event they appeared unprepared, difficult to understand, or their questions were silly. Other cultural influences and similarities to those found in the literature and found in this study were the need for harmony, preciseness, good impressions, and privacy. I discovered aspects that were not mentioned in the literature but could be categorized were: 1.) the participants’ interdependence on technology and close circle of friends, and not so much a dependency on the instructor subjective perspective; and 2.) the importance of text-based content (not images) that can be copied, defined, and translated easily. The literature revealed the importance of culturally sensitive dialogue and images to convey messages. However, it did not discuss text applications for understanding vocabulary.

To create a less stressful online experience for the Chinese international students and to break down barriers that may prevent them from approaching the online instructor, the following recommendations at the institutional, departmental, course and instructional level are offered for future *practice*:

**Institution**
Core Requirements. The participants’ hesitancy to approach their instructors was influenced by how well they thought they comprehended the course material. The students in this study described struggling with comprehension and difficulty with using words in verbal conversations and writing. Core requirements that concentrate on speaking, listening, and writing skills for Chinese international students could help this population improve communication, comprehension, and confidence. According to the participants and the literature, Chinese-style English language instruction concentrates on reading and writing. One of the participants spent twelve years learning English in China, entirely focused on reading and writing simple words. Lee & Rice (2007) agreed that the English writing component taught in China did not sufficiently give the students the skills to write an essay. This requirement could supplement the gaps between what the student already knows and what they need to reduce the amount of anxiousness and stress.

Lock-down Browsers. Some institutions lock down their browsers for online examinations. This prohibits the flexibility for international student to search so they can define and translate. Instructors and course designers also set up online examinations so that students cannot search, restricting time allowed for each question. University disability centers notify an instructor to allow additional assessment time to support students with disabilities, but second language students do not generally have those modifications.

Departments/Schools

Online Communication Training. Provide training related to online interaction for international students and online instructors. Learning how different cultures
communicate can improve awareness and increase an individual’s sensitivity to the needs of others. Training for students should include US verbal nuances and idioms, what to expect in an online course, and best practices for success. Enlist ESL instructors to assist with areas of engagement and interaction since they have the most experience and it is the nature of their occupation. Part of the training could have the participants involved in a pilot course they contribute and interact with weekly and then discuss any issues.

**Course**

**Acknowledge Class Diversity.** Ask that students’ respect the diversity of the group. Add a diversity component in the coursework’s essential information that educates and guides student behavior towards an atmosphere that appreciates everyone’s viewpoint. Included would be instructor and student introductions that describe where they were born and where they live now. Student cultural backgrounds are relevant so that the instructor has an idea of how many international students are enrolled. Where they live now is relevant because the instructor will become aware of any special accommodations that certain countries require for the successful dissemination of online course content. Students that live or vacation out of the country may require special types of software as one of the participants in this study did. Instructor introductions help the student to become acquainted with the instructor and contribute to a friendly environment. Allow the students to decide on what they want to reveal in the open forum but also give them the opportunity to disclose privately. Other discussion topics could include a frequently asked questions.
**Free Online Global Applications.** Students may not have the capability to email or view certain websites if they are overseas. Online students often take courses in one country while living or vacationing in another. Enable Skype so that students have the ability to contact the instructor regardless of their location. Skype allows free video calls, instant messaging, and a translator that allows individuals to video chat in different languages, in real time. The software can translate English, Spanish, Italian, and Mandarin. Google’s smartphone app can transcribe spoken text in one language, translate, and speak it aloud in another language. Apple’s Messenger app has keyboards in multiple languages. These apps allow students to express themselves in a language that is comfortable for them if they so choose.

**Instructor**

**Invitation to Ask Questions.** How comfortable the international students feels in the course encourages their participation. Invite students to ask questions anonymously in a “ask the professor” public forum, by email, or setup optional synchronous web conferencing intermittently throughout the semester so that students can discuss or type questions to the instructor. These sessions could be archived for students that may not be able to attend. Allowing anonymous public forum questions can prevent students from becoming self-conscious, while giving them the opportunity to write questions in appropriate English. If the size of the course is too unwieldy to answer every student question, explain that you will choose and answer two questions per week that are the most applicable and/or the most often asked.

**Simple and Clear Instruction.** Developing a comprehensive and consistent syllabus and detailed course content is mandatory. Course assignments, resources, and
assessments should take the population it addresses into consideration. Omitting difficult words, cultural idioms, and text that cannot be copied into online dictionaries and translators, sets up barriers for the online international student. If possible, test pilot online course content with international students to make sure each course component is user-friendly.

Provide text with media. Provide text along with visual images, audio, and video. Best practices for online content and communication would be to have transcripts available for international students to cut and paste into online dictionaries and translators. They may be unfamiliar with the lesson context of a displayed image or may not understand instructors who speak quickly, or use words, phrases, or idioms unfamiliar to the international student. Participants in this study frequently had to define and translate words and phrases. Unlike native speakers, international student course requirements are two-fold; (1) to understand the meaning of words and phrases in the content; and (2) complete the requirements of the course.

Timely and Thoughtful Instructor Responses. Enlist graduate students to assist with questions if there are huge enrollments in a particular online course section. Participants in this study grew anxious thinking that their questions may have been silly or incomprehensible when there was a lag in response time by the instructor. LMS mobile applications can be downloaded to smartphones so that instructors can make post quick announcements, discussion responses, blog interaction on the go. Make sure email and discussion forum questions are answered within a certain timeframe as specified on the syllabus so that students are confident that their needs are met. In addition,
thoughtful responses that elaborate, rather than a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer, increases the international students’ likelihood that they will contact the instructor again.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

- Repeat study with larger number of participants for a broader perspective.
- Repeat this study with Chinese international students who had taken an online course after they had taken an online communication training.
- Repeat this study with Chinese international students who had taken an online course where the instructor had implemented course and instructor recommendations.
- Repeat this study comparing international students from different cultures.

**Conclusions**

This study sought to discern if their culture influenced Chinese international students’ willingness to approach instructors at a US institution of higher education (IHE) online. The study builds upon previous efforts that addressed cultural obstacles for Chinese international student enrolled at US universities, particularly online difficulties that included language competence, intercultural sensitivity, and instructor presence. Hofstede’s three dimensions, PDI, IDV, and LTO, were used as a theoretical framework and analytical lens.

The literature review identified culture-based behavioral variables that could influence Chinese international students in a course of instruction at a US IHE. A study was designed to probe the influence of a variable using both predetermined text questions and investigator initiated open discussion. Data were transcribed and reduced to themes.
and subthemes to categorize responses and to identify prevalent themes from the context of the questions.

Two main themes and several sub-themes emerged from the findings. The two main themes; 1.) student behavior, attitudes, and expectations that inhibits interaction with the instructor and; 2.) instructor communications that encourages interaction with the student demonstrated that both student and instructor actions affected whether the students’ willingness to approach their instructor online. Student behaviors included their interdependence on technology, friends, and themselves to solve information impasses. The lack of dependence on the instructor was motivated by their concern with face-saving and degree of instructor’s friendliness, timely responses, and clarity.

Instructional support that improves their university-level English language ability should be offered. Online interaction training, alternate text formats, comprehensible content instruction, a friendly environment, and timely communication exchange all have a potential to contribute to a mixed language student population’s perception of the course and their overall online experience. Increasing globalization in higher education necessitates a learning environment that is assessable, comprehensible, encouraging, and supportive. Future findings derived from the social interactions between instructors and Chinese international students online could have additional implications not only for Chinese international students as represented by this cohort, but also all other non-native speaking international students, and online learning in general.
References


Online: http://www.swdsi.org/swdsi07/2007proceedings/papers/401.pdf [09.06.2015].


Sheridan, K., & Kelly, M. A. (2010). The indicators of instructor presence that are important to students in online courses. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 6(4), 767-779.


APPENDIX A
Invitation to Participants

Research Volunteers Needed

You are invited to participate in a research study that focuses on culture and online student/instructor interaction. This study is being conducted as dissertation research in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Northeastern University.

- You must be a Chinese international student
- You must be at least 18 years old
- You must have lived in the US less than five years
- You must have completed at least one online course at a US university

Requirement
60 minute interview

Location
UNLV main campus

If you are interested in participating, please contact:
Mary Albrecht
Cell: (702) 204-1749
Email: albrecht.m@husky.neu.edu

APPROVED
NUHRS
VALID THROUGH 2/28/08
APPENDIX B
NEU IRB Approval

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION
RENEWAL APPROVAL

Date: February 18, 2016
IRB #: CPS15-01-06

Principal Investigator(s):
Karen Harbeck
Mary Albrecht

Department:
Doctor of Education
College of Professional Studies

Address:
20 Belvidere
Northeastern University

Title of Project:
Cultural Influences on Chinese International Students
Willingness to Approach Instructors Online at a US Institution
of Higher Learning

Approval Status:
Closed to Enrollment – Ongoing Analysis Only

Participating Sites:
Permission letter in file

Original Protocol Approved:
February 19, 2015

DHHS Review Category:
Expedited #6, #7

Informed Consents:
N/A

Monitoring Interval:
12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: FEBRUARY 17, 2017

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
UNLV/CSSA Study Permissions

Hi Mary,

Based on the materials you have provided and correspondence with our office, it has been determined that review by UNLV's Institutional Review Board (IRB) is not required at this time. I believe that it is still required (as per your NEU IRB approval) that you obtain facility authorization from the CSSA group.

Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions.

Thank you,

Dax Miller, CIP

From: Alfred Izzolo <al.izzolo@unlv.edu>
Date: Tue, Mar 3, 2015 at 4:43 PM
Subject: Re: Permission please!
To: Mary Albrecht <albrecht.m@husky.neu.edu>

yes you have my permission to solicit student volunteers from the CSSA club - Al Izzolo
APPENDIX D

Copyright Use Permission

Van: Mary Albrecht [mailto:albrecht.m@husky.neu.edu]
Verzonden: zondag 23 november 2014 23:45
Aan: rights@geerthofstede.nl
Onderwerp: permission request

Dear S/M,

I am currently in the process of writing my thesis at Northeastern University. During my research, I came across the following tables:

- 3.3 - Key Differences between Small- and Large-Power-Distance Societies, p.72
- 4.2 - Key Differences between Collectivist and Individualist Societies, p.113
- 7.2 - Key Differences between Short- and Long-Term Orientation Societies, p.243

and would like to request permission to include them in my thesis. They were cited from the following publication:


Please let me know if you require any further information, otherwise thank you in advance for your kind consideration.

Best regards,
Mary Albrecht

From: Geert Hofstede B.V. <rights@geerthofstede.nl>
Date: Tue, Nov 25, 2014 at 5:15 AM
Subject: RE: permission request
To: Mary Albrecht <albrecht.m@husky.neu.edu>

Dear Mary,

As long as the permission is only for your thesis and not for commercial purposes, you are free to include the tables. The credit line you have mentioned is correct, but please add: ©Geert Hofstede B.V. quoted with permission

Feel free to let us know if there is any other way we can assist you with your thesis.

Wishing you much success,

With kind regards,
Geert Hofstede B.V.

Loes Cornelissen
Rights Manager
Den Bruijln 15
6881 AN Velp
The Netherlands
APPENDIX E

Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigators: Dr. Karen Harbeck PhD, Principal Investigator; Mary Albrecht--Doctoral Student Researcher

Title of Project: Cultural Influences on Chinese International Students Willingness to Approach Instructors Online at a US Institution of Higher Education (IHE): A Narrative Study

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We invite you to take part in a research project. This form explains the study. You may ask the researcher any questions that you may have. 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 participate in this study because you are a: (a) Chinese international students, (b) at least 18 years old, (c) who has lived in the US less than five years, and (d) who has completed at least one online learning course at a US university.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this narrative study is to understand if culture influences Chinese international students' willingness to approach instructors online at a US institution of higher education (IHE).

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to interview with the researcher. The researcher is interested in exploring Chinese international students' experiences with online coursework at a US university and how their native upbringing may or may not impact communication with their instructor.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

The study will take place at a convenient public building yet private location, of your choice, at a time that best suits your schedule and will take about 60 minutes to complete. Following is a description of the interview.

- Researcher will briefly explain the study and respond to any questions
- Researcher will request you to sign the consent form
- The researcher will then ask you to answer a series of questions about:
  
  1) your cultural and academic transition from a student in China to one in the US; 2) your US IHE online learning experience; and 3) your student-instructor perceptions and interactions.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for participating in this study. All the data collected will be strictly confidential. You will be assigned a pseudonym, and your identity will be kept confidential. Should you mention persons in your life, they will also be assigned a pseudonym. All of the data collected will be managed and stored safely. You are allowed to withdraw from the study at any time.

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 us to learn more about the specific social interactions between the instructor and the Chinese international student online that may influence learning. This information may have further implications for intercultural online learning and online learning in general.

Who will see the information about me?

Your cooperation in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you.
participated in this study and your answers will remain anonymous. Any publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you or any individual as being part of the project.

The data collected in the interview notes, audiotapes, and transcript will be provided a pseudo name and an identification number. Your real name will not be used. The data will be stored securely on a password-protected computer. No unauthorized persons will be allowed to read the data collected or materials affiliated with it. We would only permit people who are authorized such as the Institutional Review Boards to see this information if required.

**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 during the interview. Once you begin the study, you may quit at any time.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Mary Albrecht at albrecht.m@husky.neu.edu or 702-204-1749; the person primarily responsible for the project. You may also contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Karen Harbeck at k.harbeck@neu.edu or 781-321-3569.

**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: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
There will be no financial cost to you to participate in this study.

**Is there anything else I need to know?**
You must be at least 18 years old to participate, be a Chinese international student that has resided in the US less than five years and who has completed at least one online course at a US university.

**I agree to take part in this research.**

________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part

________________________
Printed name of person above

________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent (Mary Albrecht)

Date: ______________________
APPENDIX F

Interview Guide

Introduction: Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. We have reviewed the consent form together, you have been provided a copy of the form for your records, and you have given your verbal consent to participate. This interview will last approximately 60 minutes and is being audio-recorded for transcription and analysis purposes only. The information shared in the interview will be confidential. Your name will not be included in this study to protect your privacy. Before we begin, do you have any questions?

Demographics

1. Are you from mainland China (PROC), Hong Kong (HK), or Taiwan (ROC)?
2. Why did you decide to attend a US university?
3. How long have you lived in the US?
4. How many quarters/years have you completed at the university?
5. What is your major?
6. Did you experience any challenges transitioning from the Chinese education system to the US education system? If so, in what way?

Online learning

7. How many online courses have you taken?
8. Did the English language create any barriers for instructor-student communication online? If so, how?
9. How would you compare your online course experience to your face-to-face course experiences?
10. How well did you do in the online course(s)?

11. Would you be inclined to enroll in another US online course based on your experience?

**Culture**

12. How would you describe the role of the online instructor? (PDI)

13. How important was it to you that the instructor clearly communicated important course topics (PDI)

14. How important was it that your instructor provided clear and accurate feedback? (PDI) (IDV)

15. Would you contact the instructor if you were not clear on online instructions for a particular assignment? If not, why? (PDI) (IDV)

16. If so, would you contact them privately or on the public discussion board? (PDI) (IDV)

17. If an instructor engaged in a discussion topic based on something you contributed to a conversation, did you respond? If not, why? (PDI) (IDV)

18. How comfortable were you having your question answered by a peer on a discussion board? (PDI) (IDV)

19. Would you wait until the instructor confirmed the validity of a peer’s statement to accept the content as valid? If so, why? (PDI) (IDV)

20. Did you assert your viewpoint or opinion when an instructor asked a question on a discussion board? If not, why? (PDI) (IDV) (LTO)

21. If you did not understand an instructor’s explanation, would you ask for clarification? If not, why? (PDI) (IDV) (LTO)
22. Would you contact the instructor about your grades? If not, why?

(PDI)(IDV)(LTO)

23. Would you blame the instructor if you received a failing grade? If not, why?

(PDI)(IDV)(LTO)

24. Do you think culture influences Chinese international students’ willingness to approach instructors online? (Research Question)

As we conclude our interview, were there any additional comments you would like to add?

Do you have any questions?