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# Expectations v. Reality: A Study about Chinese Students' Expectations and Experiences at a Midwestern University in America

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EXPECTATIONS V. REALITY: A STUDY ABOUT CHINESE STUDENTS'  
EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES AT A MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY IN  
AMERICA

by

Sarah Barg

A THESIS

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The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
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Under the Supervision of Professor James Griesen  
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University of Nebraska, 2013

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The purpose of this phenomenological study was to add to the research regarding the expectations and experiences of Chinese students studying at an American university. In doing so, this study sought to examine newly arriving Chinese students' expectations of what their experience would be like compared to the reality of what their experiences actually were while attending Midwestern State University (MSU). Ten participants participated in two semi-structured interviews. The first set of interviews explored what Chinese students expected their experience studying at MSU to be like. The following interview explored the actual experiences the Chinese students had while studying at MSU. Their transition was also linked to Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory.

The result was an in-depth understanding of what Chinese students not only expected their experience at an American university to be, but also a critical look at what those experiences actually were during their first semester studying at MSU. Interestingly, some of the expectations matched the students' actual experiences. However, not all of the experiences were mentioned in the expectation interviews. This research, combined with the literature, provides institutions like MSU with a better understanding of how to meet Chinese students' wants and needs.

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## Table of Contents

Chapter 1 - Introduction .....	1
Purpose of Study.....	2
Research Questions .....	2
Research Design .....	3
Definition of Terms .....	4
Significance of Topic .....	5
Overview .....	6
Chapter 2 – Literature Review .....	8
Introduction .....	8
Methods of the Literature Review.....	9
Transition Theory .....	9
The History and Future of International Students in the United States.....	11
Studies of International Student Adaptation.....	16
Challenges Facing International Students.....	18
Summary of Literature Review .....	21
Chapter 3 - Methodology .....	23
Introduction .....	23
Qualitative Research Design .....	24
Research Questions .....	26
Researcher Role-Reflexivity .....	26
Research Site .....	28
Sampling Procedure .....	28

Participants .....	29
Instruments.....	31
Data Collection.....	31
Storing and Managing the Data.....	32
Data Analysis .....	33
Data Validation .....	35
Ethical Considerations .....	36
Conclusion.....	36
Chapter 4 - Findings .....	38
Introduction of Participants.....	38
Research Questions .....	38
Baseline Information .....	39
Study Findings .....	41
Expectation Theme: Academic Life .....	42
Subtheme: Class structure in America is different than in China.....	42
Subtheme: Language issues will make classes harder .....	44
Experience Theme: Academic Life .....	45
Subtheme: American classes are different than classes in China.....	45
Subtheme: Professors are helpful.....	46
Expectation Theme: Social Life .....	46
Subtheme: Americans will be friendly.....	46
Subtheme: Hanging out with other Chinese students will be safe.....	47
Experience Theme: Social Life .....	48

Subtheme: I have mostly Chinese friends because Americans are friendly, but hard to establish close relationships with.....	48
Subtheme: I take part in activities on campus.....	51
Expectation Theme: Cultural Adjustment .....	52
Subtheme: American culture is much different than Chinese culture.....	53
Subtheme: Language could be barrier.....	53
Expectation Theme: Cultural Adjustment .....	53
Subtheme: Feel adjusted.....	53
Subtheme: American food causes issues.....	54
Conclusion .....	56
Chapter 5 - Discussion .....	57
Introduction .....	57
Summary of Findings.....	57
Summary of Results within a Theoretical Framework.....	58
Significance of Study .....	61
Implications for Student Affairs at Midwestern State University.....	63
Future Research .....	67
Conclusion .....	68
References .....	69
Appendices .....	74

#### List of Figures

Figure 1: Expectation and Experience Themes and Subthemes.....	42
Figure 2: Expectation and Experience Theme/Subtheme Comparison.....	57



## List of Tables

Table 1: Participant Demographics.....	30
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## List of Appendices

Appendix A: Admissions Recruitment E-mail.....	74
Appendix B: Reminder E-mail to Participants.....	76
Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol.....	78
Appendix D: Informed Consent Form.....	80
Appendix E: Example of Codes.....	83
Appendix F: Matrix of Interview Summary.....	85
Appendix G: Example of Transcript.....	87
Appendix H: Final Summary of Codes.....	89
Appendix I: Themes and Subthemes.....	91
Appendix J: External Audit Attestation.....	93

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Curiosity about Chinese students and their experiences studying at American higher education institutions should come as no surprise to anyone paying attention to current trends in higher education. The number of international students in the United States increased 5.7% from 2010/11-2011/12, and currently nearly totals 800,000 students; of these international students, nearly 200,000 come from China (Open Doors, 2012). This fact makes China the number one country of origin of international students in the U.S. The state where the study institution is located has more than 4,000 foreign students, of which 30% are from China.

Recruiting international students makes sense for colleges and universities; America is a highly desired location for foreign students and these students bring significant money and possible educational opportunities along with them. “Without question, as international students study in American institutions they provide many benefits for the U.S. They increase the diversity of student populations, add new perspectives to classroom conversations, and, related, increase our awareness and appreciation for other countries and cultures” (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 382). Lee & Rice (2007) also pointed out that even though American universities benefit greatly from bringing international students to their campuses, the administration at those campuses often do not consider the experiences of those students after they are enrolled.

Discovering what the experience was like for Chinese students studying at Midwestern State University (MSU) is exactly what this researcher sought to do; ask the

international Chinese students what they thought their experiences would be while studying at the University and then find out how their actual experience compared to those expectations. These research results will help American higher education administrations determine if they are adequately meeting the needs of their Chinese students, and will help outline potential educational opportunities for both American and international students studying at the same institution. With this interest in mind and with the available literature, the researcher developed a qualitative study to address the purpose of the study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to better understand Chinese students' expectations when they arrived at Midwestern State University (MSU) and then explore their actual experiences during their first semester at MSU. The phenomenon in question was the experience had by Chinese students during the first semester of undergraduate study in America. In this study, experience included academic, social, and cultural expectations and realities during the students' first semester at MSU. Also, for the purpose of this study, Chinese students were individuals born and raised in China, who had recently come to the United States to pursue a post-secondary education and their first semester at MSU would be the 2012 fall semester.

### **Research Questions**

The central research question was: How do Chinese students' initial expectations compare to their actual experiences throughout the first semester at MSU? This central question contained other sub-questions that help to explore the phenomena and which

were required in order to understand and interpret the main research phenomenon as a whole. Therefore, the following research questions (RQ) were investigated:

RQ1: What did Chinese students expect/experience the academics to be like?

RQ2: What did Chinese students expect/experience the social life to be like?

RQ3: What did Chinese students expect/experience the cultural adjustment to be like?

RQ4: Which resources did Chinese students expect/actually use on campus?

RQ5: Did Chinese students expect/actually interact more with other Chinese students, other international students or American students?

### **Research Design**

The goal of phenomenological research is to convey the essence of what multiple individuals experience with a particular situation or 'phenomenon' (Creswell, 2013). The researcher sought to create a holistic picture of what one group of students thought they would experience and then what they actually experienced. The participants were Chinese students studying at MSU during the fall 2012 semester. MSU is the pseudonym for the actual institution and used to help the participants stay anonymous in this study, ensuring honest responses and opinions. This qualitative study allowed the researcher to produce a detailed account of the expectations and actual experiences of the participants. By listening to these accounts, the researcher gave voice to the participants. The data combined with the literature base, allowed the researcher to affirm previous research and/or create opportunities for further research.

The phenomenological approach was chosen because “the purpose of phenomenology is to describe and understand the essence of lived experiences of individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon” (Litchman, 2013, p. 83). According to Merriam (2009) “phenomenology is a study of people’s conscious experience of their life-world” (p. 25). The important part of phenomenology to this researcher was the unique ability to “bracket” or remove the experiences of the researcher from the information collected. According to Creswell (2013), bracketing “does not take the researcher completely out of the study, but it does serve to identify personal experiences with the phenomenon and to partly set them aside so that the researcher can focus on the experiences of the participants in the study” (p. 78). Since this researcher had opinions, experiences and interactions with the population being studied, it was important to be able to “bracket” all that the researcher brought to the study in order to not interfere with the actual data gathered during the study.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms were defined.

- International students: “Students from abroad who are enrolled for courses at American schools, colleges, or universities and admitted under a temporary visa. These students' primary intent is to obtain an American undergraduate, graduate, or professional degree and return to their home countries” (Skinner, 2002).
- Adaptation: Adaptation includes adjustment, but also involves learning and relationships. It is interactive and implies personal development (Anderson, 1994).

### **Significance of Topic**

The number of international students attending institutions of higher education in the United States has been increasing at a rapid rate over the last couple of years (Open Doors, 2012). The institutions gain “valuable educational and economic contributions” but “for these benefits to continue, universities must become more knowledgeable about the adjustment issues these students face and implement appropriate support services” (Andrade, 2006, p.131).

According to Hudzik and Briggs (2012), success cannot be judged by the number of “full-fee-paying international students enrolled” in U.S. institutions of higher education (p. 3). Colleges and universities must start focusing on the quality of learning and living experiences they are offering international students. If institutions do not pay attention to these important experiences, they could face problems regarding their reputation, which could result in a decrease in international student enrollment, upon which many institutions have become dependent.

The purpose of this study was to provide understanding and insight into the expectations and experiences of Chinese students studying at Midwestern State University (MSU). The expectations were gathered after the participants arrived to the United States, but before they started their first semester academic classes. Then toward the end of their first semester participants described their actual experiences. The results of this study are significant in that they give voice to the Chinese students by allowing them to set the standard of their experience by explaining their expectations before the

experience occurs and then allows the same students to explain their actual experiences. Also, the results contributed to the growing body of literature on Chinese students studying at American institutions of higher education. The researcher wanted to allow the Chinese students a chance to explain their expectations of studying abroad and then follow up with their actual thoughts on the experience itself, providing MSU a chance to evaluate the situation that Chinese students feel they are in while studying at MSU. U.S. campuses benefit financially from bringing international students to their campuses and many U.S. campuses enjoy the potential educational benefits offered to their domestic students through interaction with international students such as intercultural exchange (Lee & Rice, 2007). This researcher explored how to make the experience of studying in the U.S. more advantageous for the Chinese students themselves; the fact that U.S. institutions could also benefit from this research was a secondary goal.

### **Overview**

By conducting this qualitative study, the researcher was seeking to give Chinese students studying at MSU a voice, allowing them share their feelings and experiences. In Chapter Two the researcher provides a brief overview of the history and projected future of international students, Schlossberg's (1989) transition theory, studies regarding international student adaptation, and challenges facing international students. In Chapter Three, the researcher explains the methodology used to gather data from the participants with regard to their expectations and actual experiences at MSU. In Chapter Four, the researcher discusses the themes discovered through data analysis. Finally, in Chapter Five the researcher discusses the summary of the findings of the study and how they

relate to the literature and theoretical framework. Implications for colleges and universities with Chinese students in attendance are also considered.



## Chapter 2

### Review of Literature

#### Introduction

The results of this study explored what new international Chinese students thought about their upcoming experience studying abroad at MSU and compared those responses to what they recounted their actual experiences were after one semester. Students were directed to discuss academics, social life and cultural adjustment. In this literature review the theoretical foundation of the present study will be described, including transition theory, studies of international students, research specific to Chinese students studying abroad, and an overview of the adjustment factors addressed in the literature.

The researcher reviewed the literature available on international students, Chinese students, and study abroad as the purpose of this thesis was to have an understanding of the expectations and experiences Chinese students had while studying at Midwestern State University (MSU). The researcher considered transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981, Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989), international student adaptation (Kalervo Oberg, 1960, Adler, 1975, Anderson, 1994, Tan, 1994, Heggins and Jackson, 2003, Ong, 1989), and challenges facing international students (Wilton & Constantine, 2003, Yeh & Inose, 2003, Sherry, Thomas, & Hong Chui, 2009, Wang, 2005, Li, Lindsey, Yin, & Chen, 2012, Mori, 2000, Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, & Nelson, 1999).

Cross-border education has existed since the beginning of higher education (Lee & Rice, 2007) and over the last couple of years, the number of research studies conducted

on this group has increased as more students began studying in Britain, Australia, and the U.S. (Lee and Rice, 2007). However, most studies addressing international students have been conducted to determine what the problems are and, more specifically, how English-proficiency can affect students' experiences. Research that asks international students what they expect to encounter in their host country and then follows with asking what they actually encountered is not the norm.

### **Methods of the Literature Review**

The researcher reviewed literature on international students studying abroad. The researcher did an overall search on international students as well as on Chinese students specifically studying in the United States. The main search engines that were used were: Google Scholar, EBSCO, ERIC and NASPA Journal. Major search terms were Chinese students, international student, and Chinese student engagement. The researcher also consulted the reference section of articles in order to identify and expand the number of articles for this review. The most useful articles were the ones that discussed Chinese students studying in the United States, but articles referring to international students studying abroad were also analyzed for relevant themes and issues.

### **Transition Theory**

The purpose of this study was to better understand the expectations of Chinese students studying at MSU and compare those expectations to the students' experiences after one semester at MSU. This transition experienced by the Chinese students can be explained by Schlossberg's transition theory. Schlossberg (1981) created a transition theory that defined transition as a phenomenon occurring "if an event or nonevent results

in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (p.5). Schlossberg noted that most transitions use a common set of variables: role change (gain or loss), affect (positive or negative), source (internal or external), timing (on-time or off-time), onset (gradual or sudden), duration (permanent, temporary, or uncertain), and degree of stress.

Adaption is important when dealing with a transition. According to Schlossberg (1981), adaptation is "a process during which an individual moves from being totally preoccupied with the transition to integrating the transition into his or her life" (p. 7). The three factors that influence adaptation are (a) the characteristics of the particular transition, (b) the characteristics of the transition environments, and (c) the characteristics of the individual. How these factors interact determined whether adaptation is successful.

Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) called the factors of transition the Four S's: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies. They discussed how the transition model helps practitioners understand students' needs through predicting, measuring, and modifying reactions to change.

According to Schlossberg et al., (1989) "Situation" referred to a specific event or nonevent that caused a transition. The situation can be described by knowing: (a) What kind of transition is it?; (b) Is it a positive, negative, expected, unexpected, desired, or dreaded transition?; (c) Did the transition come at the worst or best time possible?; (d) Is it "on time" or "off schedule"?; (e) Is it voluntary or imposed?; (f) Is the individual at the beginning, middle or end of the transition (moving in, through, or out)?

“Self” referred to what the person is bringing to the transition. The self can be described by knowing: (a) What kind of strengths and weaknesses does the individual bring to the situation?; (b) Does he or she believe there are options?; (c) Is he or she optimistic?; (d) Personal and demographics characteristics (gender, age, health socio-economic status, race, etc.)

“Support” referred to what sources of support are available to the person experiencing transition. Support can be described by knowing: (a) Does the person have support from family, friends, co-workers, and supervisors?; (b) In what ways do people give support?; (c) In what way do they hinder the person’s efforts to change?

“Strategies” referred to how the person in transition copes with said transition. Strategies can be described by knowing: (a) Does the person use several coping strategies or just one?; (b) Can the person creatively cope by changing the situation, changing the meaning of the situation or managing reactions to stress?

Assessing the transition from expectations to experiences for Chinese students in this study included how they dealt with the Four S’s. The information can be beneficial as colleges and universities continue to recruit students from across the globe.

## **The History and Future of International Students in the United States**

### *History*

“Cross-border education has existed since the earliest formations of higher education, beginning with the University of Paris opening its doors to scholars outside France to train its students in the 13th century” (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 383). Trice (2003) stated that international students first came to America in 1784, and by 1946, there were

15,000 international students studying in America (Jenkins, 1983 as cited in Trice, 2003). Then in 1954, (after World War II) there were 34,000 students; the number jumped to 155,000 by 1974, and increased to “over a half a million” in 2000 (Davis, 2000 as cited in Trice, 2003, p. 379). Skinner (2002) noted that, “[i]n 2000, Asian students (from China, Japan, and India) constituted more than half of international enrollments” (para. 3) and that “more international students pass through America's doors than those of any other country, making the United States the world's most sought-after and diverse educational region in the world” (para. 2). This information shows a steady increase with international students seeking out American institutions of higher education; furthermore Asian students have been the dominant group of international students seeking a post-secondary education in America. “Rapid economic development in many countries, particularly in Asia where there is strong demand for science, engineering, and graduate training, accounts for much of the recent growth” (Davis, 1995; Il’Chenko, 1993; Lulat & Altbach, 1985 as cited in Trice, 2003, p. 379).

The terrorist activity in the United States during September of 2001, did impact negatively the number of international students in the U.S. According to Bollag (2004), visa restrictions, placed on foreign students and scholars, immediately impacted the number of international students allowed into the U.S. Hudzik and Briggs (2012) noted that after September 11, 2001, the number of students enrolled in U.S. institutions went down to 22,556, but quickly recovered. By 2012, 723,277 international students were studying in the U.S.—a record high (p. 1).

According to Lee and Rice (2007), international student enrollment added \$12 billion to the U.S. economy, and education was the fifth largest export of services in the U.S. (IIE, 2003a). Britain and Australia also have tried to tap into the financial benefits of international students. Lee and Rice (2007) articulated their caution of viewing international students as only financial benefits:

This ‘irony of globalization’ (Habu, 2000, p. 62) is that while studying abroad provides great opportunities for personal and professional growth, it also encourages a narrow view of students as economic revenue, which in turn can place less emphasis (and accountability) on their cross-cultural and academic experiences. The added downside is that while some view international students as revenue sources and as cheap skilled labor (in the sciences and engineering departments especially), they are also perceived as threats to U.S. economic self-sufficiency (Rhoades and Smart, 1996). National policies revealed a deep-seated fear of the country’s dependency on international students, which became known as ‘the foreign student problem’ (Rhoades and Smart, 1996, p. 142). (As cited in Lee and Rice, 2007, p. 384)

### *Future*

Current trends in globalization show that more students will continue to study abroad. Hudzik and Briggs (2012) noted that “the global supply of students is projected to grow to at least 250 million seats by the year 2025—a 150 percent increase from 2000” (p. 1). Most of this growth will be outside of North America and Europe. China, South Korea, Mexico, Russia, Taiwan, Thailand, and Brazil are all actively recruiting students to come to their countries to improve the quality of their own systems and this often is implemented by the development of cross-border partnerships.

Hudzik and Briggs (2012) admitted that “the U.S. remains a highly attractive destination and the raw numbers of incoming students will likely continue to increase, barring catastrophic events or policies of the U.S. or sending countries” (p. 1).

Catastrophic events (such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001) or political policies are something higher education institutions in the U.S. need to be highly aware of; in 1979, there were 55,000 students from Iran studying in the U.S.—making it the top sending country. Then diplomatic relations were cut causing many of these students to return to Iran. If this were to happen today with China, India, or South Korea (who make up 46 percent of total international student enrollments in the U.S.) the repercussions for institutions would be horrific, causing overall enrollments to plummet.

In April 2012, The International Association of Universities (IAU) issued the document called “Affirming Academic Values in Internationalization of Higher Education: A Call for Action.” This “Call for Action” asked institutions of higher education to embrace and implement the following standards and philosophies:

1. Commitment to promote academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and social responsibility.
2. Pursuit of socially responsible practices locally and internationally, such as equity in access and success, and non-discrimination.
3. Adherence to accepted standards of scientific integrity and research ethics.
4. Placement of academic goals such as student learning, the advancement of research, engagement with the community, and addressing global problems at the center of their internationalization efforts.
5. Pursuit of the internationalization of the curriculum as well as extracurricular activities so that non-mobile students, still the overwhelming majority, can also benefit from internationalization and gain the global competences they will need.

6. Engagement in the unprecedented opportunity to create international communities of research, learning, and practice to solve pressing global problems.
7. Affirmation of reciprocal benefit, respect, and fairness as the basis for partnership.
8. Treatment of international students and scholars ethically and respectfully in all aspects of their relationship with the institution.
9. Pursuit of innovative forms of collaboration that address resource differences and enhance human and institutional capacity across nations.
10. Safeguarding and promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity and respecting local concerns and practices when working outside one's own nation.
11. Continuous assessment of the impacts—intended and unintended, positive and negative—of internationalization activities on other institutions.
12. Responding to new internationalization challenges through international dialogue that combines consideration of fundamental values with the search for practical solutions to facilitate interaction between higher education institutions across borders and cultures while respecting and promoting diversity  
(International Association of Universities, 2012, p. 4-5)

Following this list, the IAU reiterated that institutions involved with internationalization should “be clear and transparent about why they are undertaking a particular initiative, how it relates to their academic mission and values, and what mechanisms can be put in place to avoid possible negative consequences” (p. 5).

These requests come almost as a warning, and many people knowledgeable about internationalization have noted that institutions need to be more aware of the risks associated with the increase of international students. Egron-Polak (2012) discussed that the expansion of internationalization within higher education for commercial goals, rather than academic advancement, would come at a cost. “It will not lead institutions to focus research on solving some of the most pressing global problems or issues. Yet, these are



among the important purposes of internationalization of higher education, included in many rhetoric statements” (p. 2). The American Council on Education’s (ACE) *Mapping Internationalization on U.S. Campuses Project* said “...this optimism about the progress of internationalization is not always grounded in reality. The 2011 data show solid gains in some areas, but stagnation or even declines in others, and that progress varies widely by institutional sector” (p. 1).

### **Studies of International Student Adaptation**

Oberg (1960) discussed cultural adaptation and created a model with four stages describing culture shock: a Honeymoon stage of excitement, a Crisis stage of rejection, a Recovery stage of acceptance, and an Adjustment stage of appreciation and happiness. Then in 1975, Adler built a model of transitional experience, claiming problems and frustrations due to culture shock created “higher levels of personality development” (p. 14). Adler (1975) said his model was both descriptive and prescriptive.

It is important to be aware of terms when considering acculturation. Two terms to consider are adjustment and adaptation. According to Shaffer and Shoben (1956) adjustment is the reduction of short-term needs and adaptation is important for long-term racial “survival” (p. 56). Both terms focus on the fit between a person and their environment, but the difference lies in time frame. The longer a student studies in a given U.S. school will be a determinant on if they are adjusting or adapting, and therefore how much they can acculturate.

Anderson (1994) stated that cross-cultural adaptation includes, but is not limited to adjustment. She developed a model describing six principles of cross-cultural

adjustment: (a) it involves adjustments, (b) it implies learning, (c) it implies a stranger-host relationship, (d) it is cyclical, continuous, and interactive, (e) it is relative, and (f) it implies personal development. This model concludes that adaptation is acknowledgement of hurdles and strategies to overcome those obstacles. This is the model that the researcher found more accurate and the definition of adaptation that was used for this study.

According to Tan (1994), students from minority groups often report feeling unwelcomed when they attend traditionally white colleges or universities and this makes it difficult to adapt to their new environment. Also, Asians uphold many traditions, and cultural values (Kitano & Daniels, 1990) and these traditions and values can have a huge influence on issues related to transition process (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). If the host country is not positively receptive toward the international students, they will often not be satisfied in their new surroundings (Brown, 2009). However, Wehrly (1988) found that Asian students tend to be a resilient group on a college campus.

Higgins and Jackson (2003) developed the following list of topics that must be explored to help the enculturation of Asian students into an American setting:

1. the socialization of Asian international students;
2. the concerns and feelings of Asian international students;
3. the acculturation to the campus environment;
4. preferences of student services for Asian international students; and
5. the role of educational achievement for Asian international students. (p. 380)

Asian international students often have trouble adapting to the United States because they tend to socialize and study only with other Asian international students (Ong, 1989). “This reality creates a tremendous challenge with regard to institutional-wide involvement” as most ethnic groups tend to model the same patterns (Heggins & Jackson, 2003, p.382).

### **Challenges Facing International Students**

Once international students are safely in their host country they often face challenges and difficulties fitting into the new culture. Wilton and Constantine (2003) conducted a quantitative study of students from Latin America and Asia studying in the U.S. and discovered that language and cultural differences caused these students to face greater levels of stress than other international students.

According to Yeh and Inose (2003), international students face many challenges such as language, culture, academics, finances, racial discrimination, and homesickness. Multiple studies show that international students are lonely once they reach their study abroad destinations because they “...lack of familiar friends and social networks, but also the lack of familiar cultural and/or linguistic environments...both social support and social connectedness are therefore very important in ensuring that international students succeed in their new environment. The number of friends an international student has in the new environment is therefore a major factor in their success” (Sherry, Thomas, & Hong Chui, 2009, p. 34). Sherry, Thomas, and Hong Chui (2009) found that international students “acknowledged the importance of language issues, understanding new cultural norms, financial problems, friendships and social support. They also highlighted one

topic which is often neglected in such discussions: the receptiveness of the University community in particular to international students” (p. 37).

According to Wang (2005), Chinese students’ primary source of stress is caused by anxiety over their future career and/or finding a job. Li, Lindsey, Yin & Chen (2012) found that while American and Chinese students cope with stress in similar fashions (“venting, positive reframing, religion, self-blame, and planning”), there were still differences (p. 220). Americans “use self-distraction, substance use, emotional support, instrumental support, humor, and acceptance more frequently than did their Chinese counterparts”, but “Chinese students reported using strategies related to denial and behavioral disengagement more frequently than did American students” (p. 220). These differences in stress-coping styles need to be recognized when higher education administrators are trying to devise activities to help students de-stress.

Mori (2000) stressed the importance of educating international students about the American educational system in order to help them acculturate better. Things to educate on include: “student-teacher relationships, academic credits, grading scales, class attendance, class discussion, types and frequency of quizzes, examinations, presentations, and assignments” (p. 142). She argued that if students were more aware of these things they could then focus their energies elsewhere.

U.S. institutions recruit international students for many reasons, including: “educational, cultural, and financial reasons; and the corollary obligation, which is to welcome, serve, retain, and involve them in mutual intercultural learning with Americans” (Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, & Nelson, 1999, p. 67). Therefore, it is

imperative that student affairs professionals “support for international programs and services, persuade others that international and domestic diversity is a necessity, and work closely with academic affairs leaders irrespective of the reporting lines of the international student office and study abroad office” (p. 67).

According to Peterson et al. (1999), U.S. institutions need to address the following questions:

- Are prospective students properly screened for English language ability through a reliable standardized test?
- Have their previous academic work and ability to pay been adequately evaluated?
- Are quality initial and continuing orientation programs available for international students?
- Are there programs promoting mutual intercultural learning and respect between international and American students?
- Are international office staff knowledgeable about basic visa law and new regulations of the U.S. Information Agency, Immigration and Naturalization Service, Department of State, and Department of Labor? (p. 68)

“Meaningful interaction between domestic and international students requires planning and programs. International ghettos may develop if comfort and friendship are found solely with others sharing the common experience of adjusting to American behavior” (Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, & Nelson, 1999, p. 72). This can leave international students feeling “disappointed, unfulfilled, and even exploited” by the host country (Sherry, Thomas, & Hong Chui, 2009, p. 33).

However before institutions can develop refined intercultural programming for all students on their campuses, they first must excel in “the orientation of international students, visa advising, crisis intervention with international students (in cooperation with the student counseling center), and programs improving relationships between international and American students” (Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, & Nelson, 1999, p. 73). Peterson et al. (1999) said, “Although your supervisor may not increase your budget, protecting your office from budget cuts over an extended period may provide opportunities for innovation” (p.74).

### **Summary of Literature Review**

Much of the existing research conducted has addressed the challenges that face international students. This review focused on language, culture, academics, finances, racial discrimination, homesickness, stress and more (Yeh & Inose, 2003; Wilton & Constantine, 2003; Wang, 2005; Sherry, Thomas, & Hong Chui, 2009; Li, Lindsey, Yin, & Chen, 2012).

Researchers have more recently examined the overall economic and social benefits of the global internationalization that have taken place. The researchers often cautioned higher education institutions (that seem to be primarily focused on the financial benefits from global students) that if they were not more thoughtful about campus environments, services, and programs, the international enrollment numbers could drastically decrease. One of the ways that colleges and universities can assess international students’ satisfaction and needs is through the usage of the theoretical framework of Transition Theory proposed by Schlossberg (1981).

Given the current research on international students, there is a need to ask other questions about the experiences of these students. Hudzik and Briggs (2012) noted that institutions need to have a clear set of objectives when recruiting students. They suggest that institutions need to be addressing questions such as:

- Are we chasing money versus chasing the best?
- Do we value diversity in international students?
- Can we avoid or manage being hostage to “events”?
- Are we ready for the new international student “consumer”?
- Is domestic “backlash” likely to be an issue?
- Are we prepared to meet international students’ needs once here?

Thus, this researcher began this thesis research to explore perhaps the last of the aforementioned questions by asking Chinese students what they expect their experience to be like and then finding out what their actual experiences were.

The next chapter, Chapter Three, focuses on the methodology of this research project. It is followed by a summary of results presented in Chapter Four, and a discussion of the findings and their implications in Chapter Five.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### Introduction

The literature presented in Chapter Two established the need to understand the expectations and experiences of Chinese students studying at American universities. Although a wide array of research about international students exists, the literature was focused on the challenges that face international students, including language, culture, academics, finances, racial discrimination, homesickness, and stress. Another set of research focused on the economic and social benefits of the recent global internationalization. However, there is little research that examines what international students expect to experience compared to what they actually experience.

Thus, the purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe what Chinese students expected to experience at Midwestern State University (MSU) compared to what they actually experienced at MSU.

The participants were new undergraduate students at MSU during the Fall 2012 semester and were from China. Their contribution to the research was based on two separate semi-structured interviews. One interview was conducted at the beginning of the semester, before the start of classes and the other was during the tenth week of the semester. During the interviews, the participants were asked to reflect on questions such as: RQ1: What did Chinese students expect/experience the academics to be like at MSU?, RQ2: What did Chinese students expect/experience the social life to be like?, RQ3: What did Chinese students expect/experience the cultural adjustment to be like?, RQ4: Which



resources did Chinese students expect/actually (to) use on campus?, RQ5: Did Chinese students expect/actually (to) interact more with other Chinese students, other international students or American students?

### **Qualitative Research Design**

The researcher explored Chinese students' thoughts and perceptions about their American college experience at MSU. Stake (2010) explained the differences between quantitative and qualitative as being twofold: "aiming for explanation and aiming for understanding" (p. 19-20). According to Lichtman (2011) qualitative researchers must "hear the voices of those studied" and unearth the experiences that were lived (p. 70). The qualitative approach in this study allowed the researcher to gain a detailed understanding of both expected experiences and the actual experiences. The semi-structured interviews empowered the participants to share their experiences and collaborate with the researcher throughout the research process. Their stories provided rich descriptions, which can expand international student and Chinese international student literature.

Among the qualitative approaches, the researcher chose the phenomenological approach because "the purpose of phenomenology is to describe and understand the essence of lived experiences of individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon" (Litchman, 2013, p. 83). According to Merriam (2009), a "phenomenology is a study of people's conscious experience of their life-world" (p. 25). In this study the phenomenon was the experience of coming to MSU to pursue a bachelor degree. The researcher wanted to use the unique ability of "bracketing", or removing the

experiences of the researcher, from the information collected. According to Creswell (2013), bracketing “does not take the researcher completely out of the study, but it does serve to identify personal experiences with the phenomenon and to partly set them aside so that the researcher can focus on the experiences of the participants in the study” (p. 78). Since the researcher has had many experiences and interactions with the population being studied, it is important to be able to “bracket” everything the researcher could bring to the study in order to not interfere with the actual data gathered during the study.

Creswell (2013) noted that it can be difficult to set researcher biases aside. Litchman (2013) also discussed some of the challenges associated with phenomenology. First, phenomenology is often discussed in very philosophical terms and can be difficult to interpret. And “bracketing” is sometimes thought to be impossible as a person could struggle to put their culture, background, and gender aside.

There are two types of phenomenology: Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Transcendental Phenomenology. Transcendental Phenomenology looks at a phenomenon with a child-like innocence, intentionally addresses the existence of material reality set against a positive environment, and holds back pre-conceived and pre-learned feelings and ideas. Hermeneutic Phenomenology focuses on interpreting meaning and finding significance of the experience (Creswell, 2013). In this research study, the researcher used transcendental phenomenology to bracket the researcher’s pre-conceived notions and to look at the data with an open mind.

## **Research Questions**

The main research questions were: What were Chinese students' expectations of studying at MSU and what were Chinese students' actual experiences while studying at MSU? These central questions assumed other sub-questions, which were required to understand and interpret the main research phenomenon as a whole. Therefore, the following research questions (RQ) were investigated:

RQ1: What did Chinese students expect/experience the academics to be like?

RQ2: What did Chinese students expect/experience the social life to be like?

RQ3: What did Chinese students expect/experience the cultural adjustment to be like?

RQ4: Which resources did Chinese students expect/actually use on campus?

RQ5: Did Chinese students expect/actually interact more with other Chinese students, other international students or American students?

## **Researcher Role –Reflexivity**

One of the most valuable aspects of a transcendental phenomenological research study is the process of “bracketing”. Creswell (2013) explained that bracketing is when researchers explore their own biases, values or expectations regarding the research. By setting aside any prior judgments or opinions, researchers eliminate elements that could interfere with the research process and results. This then allows for the participants' voices and views to be at the forefront of the research project. This is specifically helpful in this research study as the researcher was very involved with the participants due to her professional assignment.

At the time this study was conducted, the researcher was a graduate assistant in the International Student and Scholar Office (ISSO) at MSU. The responsibilities of this position included conducting daily “check-in” sessions for newly arriving international students. In this role the researcher had direct interactions with international students when they arrived on campus. The researcher was able to hear international students’ thoughts and concerns and to answer their questions. Also, the researcher guided and assisted students before they had a chance to seek other help on campus. The researcher was always interested in the students’ stories: where they came from, why they decided to come to MSU, and what they thought. The researcher did have concerns about who the students could talk to once they left her office.

Prior to starting her assistantship in the ISSO, the researcher traveled to China for a class to study the Chinese education and family systems. This experience contributed to the researcher’s passion about this topic because she was able to see Chinese students in their home country.

Finally, the researcher was a student on MSU’s campus. The Chinese students whom she interviewed were students who she saw walking to class or sitting in the student union. The researcher made connections with these students and believed they were comfortable sharing their true thoughts and experiences with her. The researcher saw this mostly as a positive aspect. Furthermore, the researcher had long conversations on her front porch or through text messages with some of the students who participated in the study.

### **Research Site**

The study was conducted at a mid-sized Midwestern predominantly white research institution. There were approximately 1,900 international students on the campus and Chinese students were the most represented with 45%. To help keep the anonymity of the participants the institution is being referred to as “MSU.” The researcher wanted the participants to feel comfortable sharing all of the experiences, both positive and negative. In order for the participants to feel comfortable doing this, they had to be reassured that no one would be able to connect them with the research.

### **Sampling Procedure**

The participants for this study were selected through criterion, purposeful sampling. Creswell (2007) said purposeful sampling was “selecting individuals...for the study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the researcher’s problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125). Participants needed to (a) be Chinese; (b) be 19 or older (c) be new students at UNL during the 2012 fall semester; (d) new to education in America; and (e) be willing to participate in multiple interviews throughout the semester.

The researcher contacted students in a variety of ways to solicit participation in for the study. The Office of Admissions at MSU e-mailed a letter (see Appendix A) to incoming Chinese students for the fall 2012 semester asking them if they would be willing to participate. This e-mail explained the nature of the study and asked anyone interested in participating to contact the researcher via e-mail or phone. Some responses

were received but, to ensure enough participants were collected, the researcher sought out alternative ways to recruit participants.

All newly arriving international students were required to check-in with the International Student and Scholar Office (ISSO). The researcher was granted permission to solicit participants after these check-in sessions. At the end of each session, the researcher would ask that Chinese students stay for an extra five minutes, then she verbally explained the nature of the study. Students were asked to sign a paper with their e-mail and phone number if they were interesting in participating. After receiving the names of interested participants, the researcher tried contacting them and setting up the first interview.

Between the e-mail sent by Admissions and asking students at the ISSO check-in, the researcher had more participants than needed. E-mails had to be sent to some students thanking them for their willingness to participate but informing them that they would not be needed. Once the list of participants was set, the researcher sent out a reminder email about the interview (see Appendix B) in which she informed participants about the time, place, and length of the interview.

### **Participants**

Creswell (2007) recommended ten participants for a phenomenology study (p. 131), and the researcher ensured ten participants. Six students were male and four were female. Two other students (a male and a female) were also interviewed in the first “expectations” interview, but the researcher discovered one was an Intensive English student and the other had spent a year in the U.S. prior to attending MSU. These students

were not interviewed again or used in the data as the researcher wanted only Chinese students whose first higher education experience in the U.S. was at MSU and who were seeking a bachelor degree.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

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Participant	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Living Situation
1	Chun	Female	19	on-campus
2	Feng	Female	20	on-campus
3	Jiao	Female	22	on-campus
4	Jun	Male	20	on-campus
5	Bao Yu	Female	20	on-campus
6	Ping	Male	22	on-campus
7	Ying	Male	21	off-campus
8	Wen	Male	20	off-campus
9	Sheng	Male	20	off-campus
10	Yong	Male	21	off-campus

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The students in the study were from China. Most of the participants did not know each other. Some of the participants went to the same school in China, and, therefore

were friends. All of the students in the study were a part of 2 + 2 partnership programs MSU had with institutions in China.

### **Instruments**

As the interview protocol was developed the researcher was purposeful in including Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering's (1989) Four S's of transition theory: (a) Situation, (b) Self, (c) Support, and (d) Strategies. However, the researcher wanted to use very simple questions so the participants could direct the interview. The interview protocol was revised multiple times and the researcher consulted a mentor and student affairs professional at MSU to validate that the questions would answer the research question and allow for the Four S's to be explored.

The researcher used the interview protocol as suggested by Creswell (2007) by including the general information about the participant for future reference in the top left corner, introducing the researcher, reviewing the informed consent form, clarifications about the purpose of the study, and then answered questions (p. 136).

### **Data Collection**

The data for this study were collected from participants through semi-structured interviews (see Appendix C). The researcher conducted and used ten "expectation" and ten "experience" interviews. Unfortunately, one of the "experience" interviews got deleted before it could be removed from the recorder. Therefore, there were ten "expectation" interviews and nine "experience" interviews used. The interviews were audio recorded by the researcher. The researcher paid an outside source to transcribe the interviews. Then the researcher verified the transcriptions and analyzed the data.



Participants sat down with the researcher one-on-one. The participants were given an informed consent form (see Appendix D) to read prior to the interview. Each participant read the informed consent form, and then signed it, and the interview started. Once the interview started the participant could take the questions in any desired and could say as much or as little as preferred. Participants were encouraged to ask questions if they did not understand the nature of the question. Being the sole researcher and working with Chinese students (who sometimes had limited English abilities) it was very important to stay focused on what the participants were saying; it made note-taking on their body language or demeanor very difficult. After all the questions were answered, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions or to offer any final comments. At the close of the first (expectation) interview, the researcher reviewed the protocol for the next steps. This included setting up a schedule for meeting in a few months for the “experience” interview.

### **Storing and Managing the Data**

After the data collection, the researcher developed backup copies of the audio files on her personal (and private) computer (Creswell, 2007). The researcher also developed a master list of information regarding the participants such as their names and where they were interviewed. The electronic copies of this information made it easy for the researcher to keep track.

## **Data Analysis**

The researcher “bracketed” her personal experiences with Chinese and other international students in order to “set aside the researcher’s personal experiences (which cannot be done entirely) so that the focus can be directed to the participants in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 193).

The researcher read the first ten (expectations) transcripts in their entirety to get an overall impression of what the data were portraying. The researcher then began to analyze the data using open coding. Merriam (2009) emphasized that, “because you are open to anything possible at this point,” you should be as expansive as you want to be to hone in on data that could be useful (p. 178). This was done on paper copies of the transcripts. The researcher highlighted significant words and gathered those into similar categories. By coding pieces of data at this point, the researcher was developing themes. After reading one transcript, the researcher knew it was important to go back and review all the transcripts, then group the codes that went together to develop the initial categories. After this process was completed with the “expectation” interviews, it was then repeated separately on the “experience” interviews.

After the first transcript was coded, the following transcripts were coded in the same way: reading them through, analyzing via open coding and adding all of the categories pulled from that specific transcript to the excel document. After doing this with the second expectation interview, the first expectation interview transcript was revisited to see if any other data stood out. Then the second interview was reviewed once more to see if any important data was missed or over-looked. After this process was

completed with the first ten expectation interview transcripts, the researcher started the process over with the second nine experience interview transcripts. It was a time consuming process, but in order to thoroughly analyze the data in an objective way, it was necessary. For the first set of expectation interview (and then the second set of experience interview) transcripts the researcher compiled the axial codes to come up with themes that occur in more than one interview.

This first list of categories was long since it was impossible to know what would emerge from the rest of the data. “Categories should be responsive to the purpose of the research, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent” (Merriam, 2009, p. 185-6). The categories developed are known as axial codes or analytical coding. “Analytical coding goes beyond descriptive coding” because it comes from a reflection on the meaning by the researcher (Merriam, 2009, p. 180). The researcher created a Microsoft Excel document (Appendix E) to keep track of all the axial codes.

Once these axial codes were sorted into themes, the researcher created another Excel document where she took significant statements from the transcripts and grouped them into “meaning units” or themes (Creswell, 2013). By combining the themes and being selective the researcher was able to develop themes for the “expectations” and the “experiences” that were used to write this phenomenological study. The first sets of interviews were then compared to the second set of interviews to determine if the categories are similar or different and in what ways.

The researcher also developed a collection matrix with the summary of the answers to the questions (see Appendix F) while simultaneously pulling the quotes to support the codes/themes (for a sample of the transcripts see Appendix G). Once the quotes were taken from the transcripts, the researcher wrote the preliminary summary of the codes. The final summary of the codes (see Appendix H) was created as the researcher began to write the thesis.

### **Data Validation**

Conducting a study and analyzing the data is important, but another important step was validating the techniques used throughout the research process. According to Merriam (2009) the researcher will need to use an internal validity check to ensure the findings are consistent with the participants' reality. The researcher wanted to perform member checks, asking the participants to read over their transcripts and provide feedback for the themes identified. However, due to the challenge of reaching participants again and concerns about confidentiality this was not possible. The researcher did not only conduct research reflexivity, but also used a Chinese Master's student in her program for peer debriefing.

An auditor examined codes and subsequent themes as an external validation method. The auditor was provided with digital copies of the audio files, the transcripts, the collection matrix with summary of answers to the questions (see Appendix F), a preliminary summary of the codes (see Appendix E) along with themes and sub-themes (see Appendix I), and a final summary of the codes (see Appendix H). The auditor analyzed all of the above documents, and the final copy of the thesis. Once the audit was

complete, the auditor provided the researcher with a letter of external audit attestation (see Appendix J).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations that might arise from this study were addressed as the researcher sought Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from MSU. The participants signed informed consent forms approved by IRB, they were reminded that their names would not be shared, and that all of their answers would remain confidential. The researcher explained the rationale of the study to the participants and prompted them that they were not required to participate. Pseudonyms were used during the discussion of the results.

In the original IRB protocol, the researcher proposed to conduct a series of three interviews with the ten participants. Consulting with her advisor about time constraints and saturation of information, resulted in a reduction to two interviews.

Other ethical concerns that had to be taken into consideration during the duration of the study. For instance, given the researcher's graduate assistant position during this study, she had many interactions with the population being studied and had some biases. Nevertheless, this concern arises in all research as most people study topics in which they are interested and/or involved. The researcher addressed this issue by being purposeful when "bracketing" her experiences throughout the process.

### **Conclusion**

In Chapter 4, the findings of all of the interviews conducted will be discussed. Both the expectation and experience interviews shared the same three themes, but their

subthemes differ. These themes relate to the expectations Chinese students had prior to starting classes at Midwestern State University (MSU) and to their actual experiences once they had completed approximately ten weeks of classes. Some of the subthemes are repeated from the expectations and the experiences, indicating the participants were accurate in their expectations. However, many of the subthemes are different, indicating the participants did not anticipate certain experiences upon their arrival at MSU.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the expectations Chinese students studying at Midwestern State University (MSU) had before the beginning of the Fall 2012 semester and compare those to the experiences the same Chinese students had at MSU at the end of the Fall 2012 semester. The intent of this study was to contribute to the international student, more specifically Chinese student, literature by providing an insight to the expectations and experiences of Chinese students had when studying in the U.S. In this chapter, the researcher presented the findings from the study by introducing the themes that emerged from the interviews with the participants.

#### **Introduction of Participants**

In order to participate in the study, participants needed to be from China and studying in the U.S. for the first time at MSU during the Fall 2012 semester. The Chinese students also needed to be 19 years or older. With the criteria in place, the researcher conducted a total of ten expectation interviews and ten experience interviews.

#### **Research Questions**

RQ1: What did Chinese students expect/experience the academics to be like?

RQ2: What did Chinese students expect/experience the social life to be like?

RQ3: What did Chinese students expect/experience the cultural adjustment to be like?

RQ4: Which resources did Chinese students expect/actually use on campus?

RQ5: Did Chinese students expect/actually interact more with other Chinese students, other international students or American students?

### **Baseline Information**

During the expectation interviews, the researcher asked participants about their reasons for opting to study in America and MSU. While it was decided this information did not represent a theme answering the research question, it is helpful to understand the participants.

The question, “Why did you come to America to study?” was often answered with a mention of the quality of education offered in America. Sheng said:

Because American computer education is better than Chinese, and I think I can't learn something useful in China. In class, teacher only asks something. Say only something and results of education for us is only to pass an exam and not very useful.

Ying mimicked this sentiment, “To get a better education. I want to learn more in my major – Computer Science.”

A second common reason for coming to America was the chance to have new experiences. Jun stated, “Because I want to experience totally different life, and, since I was very young, I want to challenge and learn more in this country.” Feng combined both the quality of American education and the chance for a new experience:

Because I want to go to a really new environment and [learn] some different culture and touch different people. . . . I also know the University in America is really good. . . . America has some really professional things. [It] is better like



some business – in business field, something. Yes. That’s why I came to America.

When participants were asked why they decided to come to MSU, reasons offered often had to do with their perceptions of friendliness. Bao Yu said, “I heard that the people here [are] very friendly.”

The main reason the participants came to America and specifically MSU was because of partnership programs MSU had with institutions in China. Bao Yu explained, “Because, in China, our University has partner with a program with [MSU]. So, I’m just a transfer student. I’ve already studied for two years in China and then to join the [MSU] to study for the Junior year.” Wen elaborated:

Our college has a partnership program with this University and we have a credit transfer, so it is a remarkable way to save money. We can learn our credits for two years there and learn credits for two years here. It is a way to save money. Your end provides very good education and good rank in your American university so we decide to come here.

These programs make it easier for Chinese students to transfer in and help create connections. Many of the Chinese students interviewed for this project had a positive encounter with an individual from MSU while in China. Chun explained:

[MSU] is a very good University and that the status of [State Name] is a very safe place for us to stay. And the teacher in [MSU] – they were sent to our school and teach our teachers English. They are very nice and friendly, so I really want to go to this University.

Feng had a similar experience:

...the last semester when I was in China, some of the [State Name] students came to our school and talked about their lifestyle. Their life in [State Name]. And, so that's really, really useful for me. And our English teacher, she used to be [State Name]'s writing teacher or something and so, she can tell us something about [State Name]. So, actually, I have many – I have much information about [State Name]. So, I am not afraid to be here.

The researcher did not intentionally recruit participants from a partnership program, but coincidentally, all ten participants interviewed did come from a partnership program.

### **Study Findings**

Participants were asked about their expectations after arriving on Midwestern State University's (MSU) campus but before classes had started. Most participants were interviewed a few days after they arrived, and, when asked about their expectations, they had to draw upon assumptions and previously conceived notions. About ten weeks into the Fall 2012 semester, the same ten students were interviewed again and asked the same questions as in the expectations interview. The participants were not reminded of previous responses because the researcher wanted them to keep open minds when answering about their experiences thus far at MSU. Below are the parallel expectations and experience themes, followed by their subthemes. The responses to research questions four and five were merged into the first three themes as they did not prove to be themes on their own.

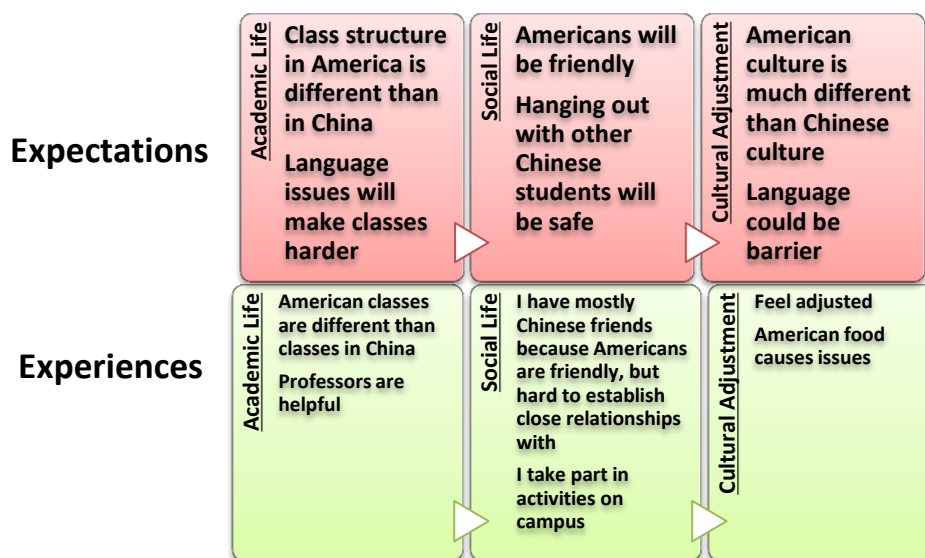


Figure 1. Expectation and Experience Themes and Subthemes

### **Expectation Theme: Academic Life**

#### ***Expectation Subtheme: Class structure in America is different than in China***

The first subtheme under Expectation: Academic Life was “class structure in America is different than in China.” Overall, participants thought the American classroom would be more active than the Chinese classroom. They also thought there would be more communication with the professors and they would be expected to ask questions in class and participate in group work. Jun stated:

I suppose, the class here will be more active. And the people will be less . . .you know, in China there are too many people, and we didn’t enjoy our class. And just cope with teachers and our homework and the other stuff. But, I think when we study here, the experience will be really different, and we will really enjoy our study and learn what we want to.

Ying mentioned how the “fear” of talking in a Chinese classroom would not exist in the American classroom. “I think everyone will be very active and there is no fear to talk and no fear to ask questions.” Sheng discussed how asking professors questions in China could be different than in America:

...education is different in China than in America. In America, I think students in class may ask professors questions...they ask professors questions. But in china we do not ask professors in class. We ask questions after class.

Wen also spoke to differences in the communication between students and professors, “...more communication and not teacher provided assignments...that is the education system in China. We want changes.”

Ping echoed, “I think we have more cooperation and communication here [at MSU]. In China, you generally have more assignments and homework by ourselves, but I think we can do more...together – work together here.”

When Wen was asked his thoughts about academic challenges, he exclaimed, “Ya! Group projects. That’s [what] I think is the most important thing for Chinese students. Group projects, we lack skill of teamwork, so we have to practice it.”

Chun elaborated on the anticipated differences in class structure and on her fears:

Uh – things – education in China – it’s, very different from in the States. In China, we just go to class and listen to what [the] teacher said and maybe sometimes the teacher will make some – send some homework for us to do, but the deadline is flexible, so it’s really casual and the final exam is not very difficult because, before that exam begins, [the] teacher will give you some information about what’s the range of the exam and what it will – so it’s very easy for us to prepare it. So, the final exam is very easy to get a high score. But the United

Sates, I think [laughter] there will be [many] pop quiz here. And, the exam is maybe – I don't know whether teacher will tell you the range of the exam or they won't – so I think it's a better place for me to get some more skills here and I can really learn something here, but not what the teacher said in a classroom. And, I think the tough things about the academic education here is – for me – is that because I'm new here, so I'm a little bit afraid of that I may not understand what teacher said – clearly, completely. And, if the classroom there's no Asian people – just me and there's all the American students there and wonder whether they will help me if I really get in trouble with something.

***Expectation Subtheme: Language issues will make classes harder***

Anxiety regarding academics was evident, but participants expressed worries about the language barrier, since English was not the first language of any of the participants. Feng explained:

It's all about the language part because I think the professor – when professor having a class – he or the professor won't-- because I [am] the only Chinese student in his or her class, so he, maybe, slow down his speed. So, I'm afraid of if I can follow the professor's speed and take some notes down.

Bao Yu was nervous about the language barrier, but confident she'd overcome the challenge, “Because I haven't taken a class, maybe the first week it's a little bit hard to understand. Maybe some professor's accent is strong, but I think I'll go through it.”

Yong thought along the same lines:

At first I think the English skills [are] very important for foreign students [because] maybe, we cannot get what the professor ... are talking about. I think after a few months go ... we can suitable for this. And the other think maybe

because I haven't taken any classes here, I do not know what programs will happen to me because different people have different programs.

Ying had similar anxieties and less confidence:

I think I not there to talk – because you know, I'm Chinese and it's hard to talk in English to make my – and make me understand. All people talk in English. I think it will be hard for me to study the English.

### **Experience Theme: Academic Life**

#### ***Experience Subtheme: American classes are different than classes in China***

For the experience interviews, the participants were not reminded of their responses from the expectation interviews. This Experience Subtheme matched closely to the first Expectation Subtheme. Wen and Jiao pointed out, classes in America are very different than the classes they had while in China. Wen discussed how the assignments are graded differently:

I don't think Chinese – the way of Chinese judge a paper isn't the same as your guys [Americans] do it, because like we have a more flexible ways – like we don't have the – this strict formatting and we ...so sometimes we can do it causally. But, formally is a very important part of it for you how you guys judge a paper. So, it's a big challenge for us to do it.

Jiao brought up requirements to talk more in her American courses. “We talk a lot and we have to talk a lot ourself. Our mind, our thinking. In China, it's not. We just accept knowledge. Accept all teachers say. So that's the difference.”

***Experience Subtheme: Professors are helpful***

When asked about academics, eight participants mentioned something positive about interactions with professors. Yong said:

Some professors are very nice. But you know, I think my way is good, and I have not so many questions, so I won't just talk with professors so much. So, it depends. But I think if I want to get help from my instructors, I email them, and they will give me a response real quickly.

Jiao had this to say about a professor: "I talk to my teacher a lot. So, I have class – American Education. They – my...classmates is international students. So, the teacher is nice to our international students." Jun was excited about her academic experience, "All my classes go pretty well, and I really love my teachers and my classmates."

Jun pointed out that MSU had some professors and teaching assistants (TAs) that were originally from China, which was something the participant really appreciated, "They [professors] are very kind and very good. Actually I have two professors; one professor and one TA, one of the TAs come from China. So, it's very nice to communicate with them."

**Expectation Theme: Social Life**

***Expectation Subtheme: Americans will be friendly***

Chun discussed how she thought Americans would be friendly, "I think other people will be very friendly, nice and they will talk to me, and I think I can make friends with some – with many American people here." Chun also expressed how much she

wanted Americans to be friendly, “That’s why I came here...I really want to interact with American people.”

Feng had already met some Americans upon arriving at MSU and had this to say, “I have met some really, really kind local students, and they helped a lot. So, I think I can know much more American students.” Jun was very confident about his ability to meet Americans:

... I think it will not be difficult to make friends here. And I think you guys are really fun. And you can make many different, but happy activities, and I want to join you and have a good time.

***Expectation Subtheme: Hanging out with other Chinese students will be safe***

Although many participants said they thought Americans would be friendly, and they desired to hang out with Americans, they more frequently admitted they would feel safer hanging out with other Chinese students. Feng simply said, “It’s true that the students [who] come [from] Asia makes me feel safe.” She went on to say:

I’d love to be around more with American students, but my first reaction [is] to be with Chinese students because, maybe, it’s just their opinion of the semester, so, maybe after this semester, I will show that I love to get around with American students.

Sheng was very confident, “I stay with Chinese mostly because I live off campus and can’t meet many American people. We [Chinese students] live together, go out together.”

Yong went into more detail explaining why he would be hanging out with Chinese students:



Chinese students play with Chinese students. It is very hard to play with American students, or India, or any other countries. Because I think when if we play sports and America students are so strong. Chinese students do not like bars. I think lots of [us] don't like bars. I think maybe our interest is different.

### **Experience Theme: Social Life**

*Experience Subtheme: I have mostly Chinese friends because Americans are friendly, but hard to establish close relationships with*

The experience regarding social life ended up being very similar to the expectations. The majority of participants indicated that they spent most of their social time with other Chinese students even though some of them know Americans. Yong talked about why he has mostly Chinese friends:

Because I...knew some Chinese people in China. So, after we all come here, we also good friend, so it just – I don't want to expand my social circle, and even I don't meet any of the Chinese guys, just me. I just stay away some.

Yong discussed:

Socially been like...hmm, I think I am not just spend all of the time to do this part, and then I see now how I have some good friend [Chinese friends] and I think that's enough and I don't want to expand my social circle. Because, of my major's Computer Science, I think I know lots of people, maybe where I need to spend lots of time to know a new person. So, I think I don't have so much time. I think I have some few good friend is enough for me. It's kind of happy, but it's not unhappy. It's just lifestyle. Because you usually choose the lifestyle which you will feel comfortable. And, my major and the study also is very good – important thing for me. And if it me, that's so much time.

Ying said, “Actually, I spend most of my time with my Chinese friends.” But went on to say, “Oh, I live off-campus. I . . . most time, I hang out with my Chinese friends, but I have two American friends. They are very nice.” Chun echoed, “I want to meet more America friends, and, yeah, we get along with each other. I’m also comfortable with my Chinese friends.”

Jiao said she had a Chinese roommate on campus who she did not know prior to arriving to campus. According to Jiao, “We get along very well,” and “As long as you have friends, you are not bored. Friend is important.” Jiao explained her disappointment with having mostly Chinese friends:

Well, when I was in China, I thought, here, no matter what country you from, or people you are, you are friends. You can make all kinds of friends. But, here Chinese together with Chinese and Americans stay with American.

When asked why this was, Jiao said:

I guess I have communication problem – language problem. The culture conflict and sometimes I usually talk to different people - the people from different countries. I don’t know if I talk is right, so it’s more difficult to me.

Jiao blatantly said, “I want to hang out with American student. But it’s a big step to...”

When asked if Americans were welcoming, Jiao complained, “They welcome, but I just think – just welcome – not so close. Cause they talk more feeling their true feeling to - - that’s my personal opinion.”

Jun said he hung out mostly with Chinese friends because of the struggles fitting into American society, “I mean, for most part, I just stay with my Chinese friends and I

find it hard to be a part of your society.” When talking about his Chinese friends Jun stated, “Even though we [Chinese] didn’t know each other, it’s easier for us to be hang out together.”

Wen said:

Socially. I found out it’s a little hard for me to get – to meet more American friends. Because, I believe in it’s sort of – because I live off campus and the - - I think it’s easy to know them, but it’s hard to get involved in their culture – because like the dancing parties – I like try - - you know Chinese guys – maybe it’s common sense for you - - Chinese guys all suck in dancing.

Wen went on to explain more challenges in making close American friends:

[There needs to be] more activities which let Chinese student and the American students involved. So, I think it’s probably that there are many Chinese students here – so it’s human nature that we just came together ...if I am Japanese and the other guy is a Chinese, and the other guy is an American student – so it’s very common for them to know each other because they are using English. But, if both of us are Chinese and the other is American student, it’s harder for us to communicate because we Chinese use the Chinese all the time, and the American student will get tired of this. And, it’s happens in my lab class and it’s us three students group and two of us Chinese student and one American student – American girl and we like communicating with us, so we decide to use English during that time and all along. But, if Chinese people are more, it’s harder to do it because it’s just human nature.

Feng said similar things:

I think ... I interact with Chinese students more. Cuz, yeah, they have the better understanding about me. But, yeah, but when related to, like academic things, cuz

we are not – Chinese students are not the professional one, so I will ask my American friends for help. So, like my Chinese friends is like talk about the life things with me. Maybe American students, we talk more about academic things. But sometimes they will tell me about the cultures of America. Like the Thanksgiving Day and the Halloween.

*Experience Subtheme: I take part in activities on campus*

Bao Yu talked about taking part in a lot of on campus activities:

I think I really like the social. Because I take part a lot of activities like the experiencing of the football game – it just be a volunteer and also I just make some American friends. Through different activities and sometimes maybe on the football game, they would just see the football team – uh, watch the football game together – yeah.

Bao Yu seemed very well adjusted and had many friends from all over the world. She attributed this to the activities she participated in:

I think maybe at first I think, maybe, I take a longer time to get used to this because I think it was fresh to me. But I think I adapt well and very soon. Because maybe by attending different activities means more friends, so you can't just withdraw in this.

Jun also talked about participating in on-campus activities and how that helped him make friends. “On-campus – just like last week was Casino in [Residence Hall] and I went there and I met a lot of Chinese friends. We didn't make appointment, but just see each other, and we spend time together.”

## **Expectation Theme: Cultural Adjustment**

### *Expectation Subtheme: American culture is much different than Chinese culture*

The participants recognized that the cultures in China and America were different and expected cultural adjustment to be an issue they would have to address. Jun had an American roommate who he had already met before the interview. Jun commented:

Their [American] culture and our life is really different. So, since I arrived here, I communicated with my roommate. We met a lot of difficulties. Since there is sports. He likes football and baseball. But in my country, they are not that popular. So, we have very little in common.

Ping also had American roommates, but had not met them yet. He speculated:

Maybe we have difference living style. Usually I am quiet and at peace. But I know some Americans like party and drinking. So, maybe that will disturb my rest or maybe I will disturb their rest, or . . . then we will confuse them. Whether we can make friends with each other. So, I prepare some gifts for them. I want to give a good first impression.

Ying stated similar thoughts about Americans, “The way people doing things and how they deal with problems. I think it’s very different.” Wen pointed out very specific cultural differences, “The culture of, like, food. What we have here we have adjusted. Like Chinese people attempt to have hot foods and what you provide are cool. That is a big problem for us.” Wen went on to say, “Price here. Agriculture products are really cheap here, but some manufacturing is very expensive”

Yong expressed his anxiety about the culture differences and how it could be a barrier in getting to know Americans:

I am just worried [that I] cannot speak with them [Americans]. If they are very interested in Chinese culture, yea I think we can talk a lot but if they do not, I do not know how to have a conversation with them. It is a very big problem. From China we watch different movies and TV shows and our culture is so different. I do not know how to just chat very easily. But if they are interested in Chinese culture and I also want to learn about American culture so we can talk a lot. It depends on American students I think.

***Expectation Subtheme: Language could be barrier***

Worries about the language differences came up again when discussing cultural adjustment. Ping and Sheng were concerned about how their English skills would be a barrier when trying to overcome cultural differences.

Ping talked about anxiety regarding communication, “In the first several months, I think definitely communication [is an issue], because my English skill is not good. Maybe... they [Americans] don’t like to talk with me, who are not good at English.”

When asked about the challenges anticipated regarding cultural adjustment Sheng said, “Language. We can’t show our ideas exactly and we also can’t understand each other. Cultural difference is important to know each other intimately.”

**Experience Theme: Cultural Adjustment**

***Experience Subtheme: Feel adjusted***

When asked about cultural adjustment about half of the participants made a comment indicating that they felt as though they had successfully adapted to Midwestern State University (MSU). Ying said, “I think I’m very adaptive. I can easily adapt to the new culture.” Chun explained more:

I think, actually I think I've already totally adapted to here. How I expect things when I come to the United States and I think it is ok and culture things. Maybe sometimes you have culture shock, but it's not very serious- you know culture stuff?

When asked how they deal with the cultural differences, Jun said, "Just do as American guys do so I can – it's easier to adjust to the environment." Followed by, "Actually there are no big difference – I think young people around the world just have the same lifestyle nowadays." Feng went into greater detail explaining how she adapted:

Actually, I think it's...I don't think it's a problem because we – it's like globalization, because when I was in China, I know a lot of things about America, so I can – I live here comfortable. I mean, I can – yeah. I don't think there is something I should adjust to – I don't know how to say it – to like fit this kind of new environment.

Bao Yu said the people at MSU made the cultural adjustment easier:

I think the people here are very kind and I think it's more easily to maybe make a friend here, yeah. Maybe I don't know why, because they are – they have maybe some curiosity of the people from other culture and then we also maybe just have some different topics to talk. Oh, yeah, maybe one thing is about – maybe in China, we don't usually greet or just say hello to some strangers on the way – but here, maybe when the person help you open the door or maybe the cleaning woman in the dorm room, they all just say hello to us and just – say hello is very good.

*Experience Subtheme: American food causes issues*

During the experience interviews more than half of the participants brought up food. Some participants thought the food was a problem because it caused them to gain weight and others thought they had lost weight because of the food; regardless of the reason why, food seemed to be a big concern.

Yong said the biggest problem he was having was the food:

I think it's the food. Yeah. First I want to say the food here is very expensive if you want to eat better food, not just fast food like McDonalds and like Runza. If you want to go to some special restaurant, you will pay a lot. And I want to eat Chinese food at the . . . here very few Chinese restaurant. But the food in China is good... like China has so many choices, you can choose. Here you just have few chooses. So, I think food is a big problem for me. Yeah, because I'm become thinner than I was in China.

Ying stated, "And the only thing that confuses me is the food." When asked to talk more about American food, Ying simply said, "The American food. I can't tell – it just tastes not so very good. And so, I cook in my home myself Chinese food."

Jiao said food was the hardest thing to adjust to, "The food. Yeah, I eat, gain weight. I got a lot of weight since I come to here. So, it's a big problem." Wen also said the food was the hardest thing to adjust to:

Can I say there is food? [laughter] Because every time I went... I order them to toast it much. Cuz - - and the way they toast it – just heat it and not enough for me. Because I want more sauce and more hot in the winter. I - - and the other thing is ... you don't eat noodles with the soup. And, it's very tasty food in the winter – because it makes you feel warmer.



Feng acknowledged that initially she was excited about the food, but that changed over time:

The – yeah, the food is really different, because last time you interviewed me, it's just like one week or two weeks – so, I'm okay with the food, because it's fresh. Like it's the freshness – I have the freshness of the food, like we don't cook foods in this way. But, it's almost one semester and all the food – especially – like I eat in dining hall, so every weeks dishes are almost the same, so, that – I have some friends they live off-campus, so sometimes we will go to their house and cook meals. So, I think it's okay.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this research study which explored the expectations and experiences of Chinese students at an American University was to offer necessary suggestions that will lead to helping Chinese students have responsible expectations and positive experiences while studying in America. The suggestions on how American institutions can help manage Chinese students' expectations and create positive campus experiences are outlined in Chapter 5. Chapter 5 is a discussion that also addresses the possible implications of not developing programs or services for this population.

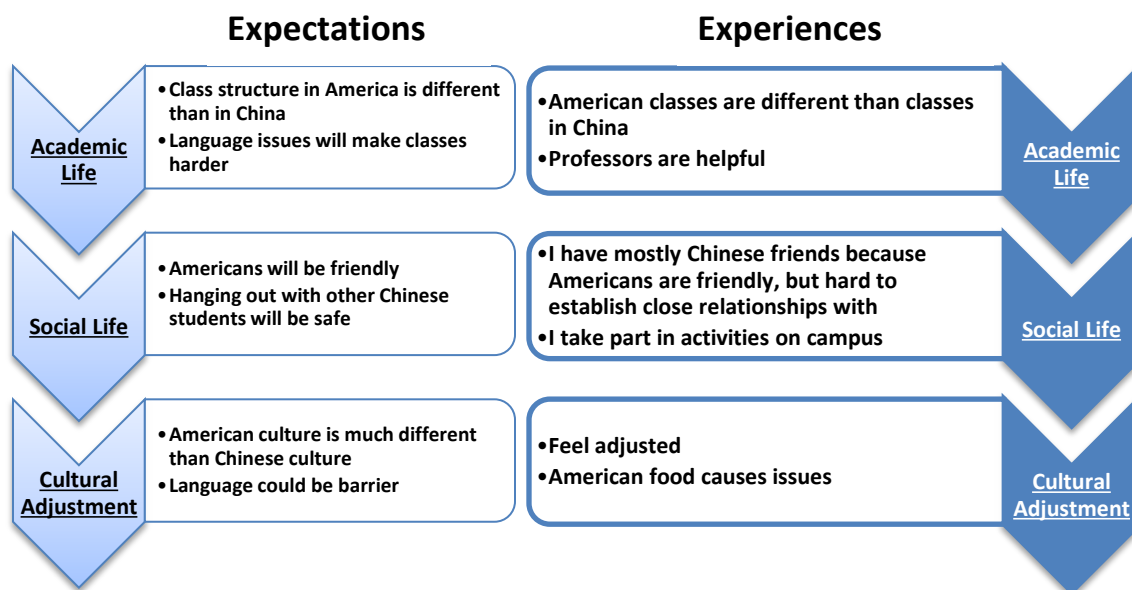
## Chapter 5

### Discussion

#### Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to explore the expectations and experiences of Chinese students studying at an American university. Two semi-structured qualitative interviews were used to access the true thoughts and feelings of ten Chinese students studying at Midwestern State University (MSU) for the first time during the 2012 Fall semester. In this chapter, the researcher summarizes the results, draws appropriate conclusions and implications, and formulates recommendations and suggestions for future research.

#### Summary of Findings



*Figure 2.* Expectation and Experience Theme/Subtheme Comparison

Above is a side-by-side comparison of the themes and subthemes from the expectation and experience interviews. It was important to see not only what participants expected and what those experiences actually were, but also to be able to compare the two. Thus, in conducting the experience interview, the researcher did not remind the participants of their previous answers, allowing the participants to approach the second interview with an open mind. The researcher discovered most participants expected the American classroom structure to be different than in China. The experience interviews supported that premise—the participants found the classroom structure to be very different. Furthermore, most participants indicated they expected to hang out with other Chinese students, and, in the experience interviews, they reported that they, in fact, did hang out mostly with other Chinese students. However, most participants expected language to be a big barrier, yet, while language was mentioned in the experience interviews, it did not appear frequently enough to be a subtheme. The experience interviews brought out at least two unexpected factors: (a) American professors were very helpful and (b) food caused more issues than anticipated.

### **Summary of Results within a Theoretical Framework**

The findings of this study supported the notion that Schlossberg et al.'s four transition stages—Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies—provided an effective theoretical framework of exploring Chinese students' expectations and experiences at an

American university. In the following paragraphs, the researcher describes how each element of the model fits in the study.

The Situation factor is specific to an event or nonevent that caused a transition. This is relatively uniform across the participants in the study as they all had recently transitioned to the United States. Therefore, transition is triggered by leaving China and traveling to America for a post-secondary education experience. Most participants had previously attended college in China, and this was the first time they had been away from their home for an extended period of time. Being an international student is a huge change from just being a student. All participants viewed the transition as positive and desired. In the expectations interviews, several Chinese students expressed excitement and optimism about their new adventure in America.

The Self factor of Schlossberg's theory is specific to each individual's personal characteristics and how such traits affect transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). These elements included demographics (e.g., gender, age, and ethnicity) and personal characteristics (e.g., ego development, commitment, values). Strengths and weaknesses emerged in the expectation interviews through the students' expressions of their fears and their sources of excitement. However, it is also important to the transition that the student knows oneself thoroughly. When the expectation interviews were conducted, most participants indicated that they had not yet thought about what their experiences would be like.

The Support factor of Schlossberg's theory is key to students' handling of stressful situations. If the students are not supported, and no one asks them about their

experiences, they will likely have difficulty handling trying situations. Several of the participants indicated they spent much of their social time with other Chinese students. For students, it was good to feel comfortable with their friends, but to not have supportive student services is an injustice for the students. Language can cause a lot of anxiety and if Chinese students were only hanging out together, they were probably not practicing English.

A major key component to Support is time spent with faculty, both inside and outside the classroom. The experience interviews indicated that many of the participants were spending a substantial time talking to their professors. They agreed that their professors were generally helpful and friendly.

Some of the Chinese students that participated in the research study had met a representative (teacher or student) from MSU while they were still in China. These participants did indicate that this connection helped them feel more comfortable not only coming to America, but also because these people served as support systems once they were here.

Support also is available in the form of activities and organizations. Bao Yu, for example, put herself in situations to be involved in campus activities. By doing this she indicated she felt as though she was held accountable and could not “just withdraw.” Bao Yu also reported being a part of a group called Connect. By being involved in this organization, she made other international friends but also American friends.

Nevertheless, most participants did not indicate that they were involved in campus organizations; when asked which campus resources they used; only one person said the

Career Services Center or the Writing Center. More than half of the participants said they used the library on campus; these students appeared to feel comfortable using the campus library, but they reported using it to study only.

Strategies, the last Schlossberg factor are the techniques students use to cope. Most of the participants emphasized academic achievement as the number one priority. This information linked strongly to the reported facts that participants often talked to their professors. Participants also pointed out that the campus resources they used were places like the library or study rooms in the dorms. This behavior reflected a strategic belief-- in order to achieve academic goals; they focused on studying and feedback from professors.

Participants did not report information that indicated they had concrete Strategies to deal with their obstacles in social life or academic adjustment.

### **Significance of Study**

In Chapter 2, the researcher reported on studies that examined international students' experiences and their challenges that accompany these experiences. Results of this thesis inquiry brings a new perspective to the field through an explicit inquiry with a specific group of international students, Chinese, and what they expected of their experiences and what their actual experiences were. The interview protocol was purposeful in that participants were asked open ended questions revolving around key elements of being a student (academics, social life, and cultural adjustment).

The findings of the study indicated two areas in which there was agreement between expectations of an experience and the actual experience reported by the

participants. For example, most expected the class structure of America to differ from that in China; the experience interviews drew that exact conclusion. This was representative of Mori's (2000) research in which the author stressed the importance of educating international students about the American educational system in order to help them acculturate better. According to Mori (2000), factors to be stressed in educating international students include "student-teacher relationships, academic credits, grading scales, class attendance, class discussion, types and frequency of quizzes, examinations, presentations, and assignments" (p. 142). In Mori's study, when students were more aware of these things they could then focus their energies elsewhere.

Second, participants in the expectation interviews said they knew hanging out with other Chinese students would be the safe option; in the experience interviews most students claimed to socialize mostly with other Chinese students. This may be an issue for further exploration. Peterson et al. (1999) expressed a concern that "international ghettos may develop if comfort and friendship are found solely with others sharing the common experience of adjusting to American behavior" (p.72). Suggestions for institutions include intentional planning and programs so "meaningful interaction between domestic and international students" can occur (p.72).

Alternatively, however, there were elements of the expectation interviews that did not arise in the experience interviews. For instance, language was a subtheme twice in the expectation interviews. Several participants stressed that (a) English-language ability caused them anxiety and (b) they were nervous about how that might affect academics

and cultural adjustment. In the experience interviews, language as a concern did not arise as often.

In the expectation interviews, participants said that they felt as though Americans would be friendly and they were excited to be friends with Americans. Contrarily, in the experience interviews, the Chinese students said that while they found Americans generally friendly, they were not able to easily develop friendships with the Americans. This seemed to be a very troubling factor for the participants. Participants expressed much of their disappointment that there was no good way to meet Americans.

Another area mentioned in the experience interview but not emphasized in the expectation interviews was the issue of food. Food may seem like a trivial thing to most people and it was only brought up in the expectation interviews by only one participant. However in the experience interviews, food repeatedly was mentioned as being “confusing” or an “issue.” Students that lived on-campus explained that the dining halls only offered limited ethnic cuisine and that it was the same food every day. All of the participants who lived off-campus also said that food was an issue.

### **Implications for Student Affairs at Midwestern State University**

American colleges and universities need to provide international students with thorough pre-arrival information. When the expectation interviews took place, most participants said they had never thought about what their experience would be like. Midwestern State University (MSU) should try to engage students before they ever step on campus, especially when there may be drastic cultural differences.



In 2012/13, upon arriving at MSU international students were required to attend a brief International Student Check-In that outlined the basic immigration requirements. They were also encouraged to attend a one-day orientation and see an academic advisor. There were optional first-year foundation courses and campus activities in which international students could participate. However, no international students were required to check in with anyone after the first week of classes. How is MSU supposed to help international students if no one is asking them about their experience?

Orientation should be offered on multiple days and it should continue throughout the semester. Having a reoccurring orientation would allow students— with questions regarding services, culture, or policies— a place to have those questions addressed. If the participants in this study were not engaging with the researcher it is very possible that no one at MSU would have ever inquired about their experience and how they felt about it.

This ongoing support is an absolute must for international students. Academic advisors generally advise on academics and may not be trained to help international students. Immigration specialists are often only responsible for helping students fulfill their immigration obligations. Having people on campus who specialize in providing support services for international students would give students a place to ask questions, talk about concerns, and connect with Americans.

MSU currently offers a first-semester foundation course for international students. However, students are not required to participate and many do not see the need to participate as it does not fulfill any academic requirements. This researcher believes it would be beneficial to require all incoming international students to participate in a first-

semester seminar course. This could address their expectations and help them process their experiences; thus, supporting their transition according to Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) Four S's—Self, Situation, Support, and Strategies.

If Midwestern State University (MSU) wants international students to have successful adaptation they need to develop a mission statement that addresses how the school wants to treat international students. To help develop this they could draw upon the work of Anderson (1994) and Heggins and Jackson (2003). Anderson (1994) stated that cross-cultural adaptation includes adjustment, but is not limited to that, and she developed a model describing six principles of cross-cultural adjustment: (a) it involves adjustments, (b) it implies learning, (c) it implies a stranger-host relationship, (d) it is cyclical, continuous, and interactive, (e) it is relative, and (f) it implies personal development. The Chinese student participants indicated that they were overall adjusted and learning, however the institution should be more intentional providing “cyclical, continuous, and interactive” personal development.

Heggins and Jackson (2003) developed the following list of topics that must be explored to help the enculturation of Asian students in to an American setting:

- the socialization of Asian international students;
- the concerns and feelings of Asian international students;
- the acculturation to the campus environment;
- preferences of student services for Asian international students; and
- the role of educational achievement for Asian international students. (p. 380)

This researcher believed the most important one for MSU to focus on is number four: “preferences of student services for Asian international students.” By asking Chinese students about their experiences, this study confirmed that there is a need for student services for Chinese students and probably all international students. Sherry, Thomas, & Hong Chui (2009) found “the receptiveness of the University community in particular to international students” (p. 37) is one topic that international students acknowledge as being important. Universities need to make intentional efforts to show international students that they are asking, listening, and acting on the suggestions of international students.

The present study has convinced the researcher that institutions recruiting international students must start asking themselves the questions presented by Hudzik and Briggs (2012):

- Are we chasing money versus chasing the best?
- Do we value diversity in international students?
- Can we avoid or manage being hostage to “events”?
- Are we ready for the new international student “consumer”?
- Is domestic “backlash” likely to be an issue?
- Are we prepared to meet international students’ needs once here?

Once these questions are addressed, institutions can start setting clear objectives to enhance how they recruit international students and how they treat those students once they are on their campuses.

## **Future Research**

The results and observations presented in this thesis are only a piece of the puzzle. There is a need for more diverse and extensive research regarding Chinese students and all international students. The following topics are ideas that have arisen from the interview process or are topics that the researcher has considered:

- How does the recruitment experience affect Chinese students' expectations?
- Are Chinese students who have an agency representing them at an advantage/disadvantage?
- How do Chinese students develop expectations regarding their experiences at American universities?
- How much do TV programs/movies affect Chinese students' expectations of their American experience?
- If Chinese students meet a teacher/student from an American university are they likely to have a better experience at that university?
- Does having an American roommate help/hinder the experiences of Chinese students?
- Is it important to force American ideas of "success" on to Chinese students?
- What are the experiences of Chinese students after 1 year/2 years/3 years/4 years+ and how does it change from year to year?

Exploration of these topics will provide institutions of higher education with a better understanding of expectations of Chinese students a more definitive picture of the actual experiences associated in their time studying at the institution. Most of these topics require a qualitative methodology in order to gather quality information that explains Chinese students' thoughts and feelings and gives them voice.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to better understand Chinese students' expectations when they arrived at MSU and then explore their actual experiences during their first semester at MSU. The researcher gave voice to the Chinese students while gaining insight on how MSU can better serve the population. The findings provided evidence of a strong link between Chinese students' expectations and actual experiences: American class structure is different than the Chinese class structure, American students are friendly, and Chinese students mostly socialize with other Chinese students. The findings also showed Chinese students do expect difficulties with the English language. The findings also indicated that students experienced friendly professors, a lack of fulfilling relationships with Americans, and issues with food availability and preparation. Using Schlossberg' theory as a framework, the transition, adaptation and development of the Chinese students could be further explored. Finally, the research results offered suggestions for student affairs professionals and provided ideas for future research as people desire to help Chinese students adapt to life at American universities. The most important take away for MSU and institutions like MSU is this: institutions have a responsibility for the development of all students they bring to campus. The proper research, preparation, and execution must happen if institutions want to continue to have students from around the globe study at their institutions.

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**Appendix A**

**ADMISSIONS RECRUITMENT E-MAIL**

My name is Sarah Barg and I am a graduate student in the Educational Administration Department at the [REDACTED]. I recently traveled to China to study the Chinese education and family systems. I had a wonderful experience as I explored the cities of Beijing and Boading. Everyone treated me with such kindness and respect. I came back to America with the desire to make sure all Chinese students who came to [REDACTED] had the best experience possible.

Now I am currently conducting research for a master's thesis and I need your help! The topic being studied is to better understand the expectations and actual experiences Chinese students have during their first semester when they come to UNL to study. You were selected because you are a Chinese student coming to [REDACTED] to study during the fall 2012 semester.

Three one-on-one interviews that will last about 15 minutes each will be conducted in order to describe your expectations and experiences at [REDACTED]. All information shared in the interviews will be strictly confidential and your personal identity will not be revealed. The interviews will take place in an agreed upon location such as the [REDACTED]. If you agree to participate you will be asked to sign a consent form prior to the first interview. A copy of the consent form is attached.

If you would like to help make [REDACTED] a better place for Chinese students to study, please consider being a part of this study!

E-mail me at [REDACTED] or if you are more comfortable call me on my cell phone at [REDACTED]. I will also be helping with International Student Check-In in the International Students and Scholars Services Office (ISSO) and will be willing to discuss the research with you further.

Thank you for considering this opportunity.

Sarah Barg  
Graduate Student  
Educational Administration

**Appendix B**

**REMINDER E-MAIL TO PARTICIPANTS**

Dear

This e-mail is a reminder that you have an interview coming up. Your interview date, time, and location are:

TIME

DATE

LOCATION

Please contact me at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] if you have any questions. I am excited to discuss your expectations and experiences at [REDACTED].

Best,

Sarah Barg  
Graduate Student  
Educational Administration

**Appendix C**

**SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

**Expectation Interview Protocol**

Why did you decide to come to America to study?

Why did you decide to come to [REDACTED] to study?

What do you anticipate your experience with the academics at [REDACTED] to be like?

What do you anticipate your experience socially at [REDACTED] to be like?

What concerns do you have regarding cultural adjustment to [REDACTED]?

What, if any, campus resources do you anticipate you'll use the most?

Do you think you'll interact more with Chinese students, American students or other International students? Why?

**Experience Interview Protocol**

What has your experience with the academics at [REDACTED] to been like?

What has your experience socially at [REDACTED] to been like?

What has the cultural adjustment to [REDACTED] been like?

What, if any, campus resources have you used the most?

Have you interacted more with Chinese students, American students or other International students? Why?



**Appendix D**  
**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**




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OFFICE OF THE VICE CHANCELLOR FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS

**Informed Consent Form**

*Purpose of Research*

This is a study to better understand Chinese students' expectations when they arrive at an American Midwestern University and compare those to their actual experiences during their first semester at the University. You were invited as a possible participant because you are a Chinese student coming to study at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln during the fall 2012 semester. The research will be conducted between August 2012 and December 2012, and will form the basis for Sarah Barg's master's thesis, which should be completed by April 2012.

*Procedures*

Three one-on-one interviews will be conducted with you in order to describe your experiences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Each interview will be audio taped and will last about 15 minutes in an agreed upon location.

*Risks and/or Discomforts*

There are no known risks involved in this research

*Benefits*

The interviews will allow you to talk about your experiences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. This research will be used to improve of the services offered to international students at UNL.

*Confidentiality*

The information you provide during your interview will be used by the primary investigator to write a master's thesis. The results may be published in professional publications or potentially presented at professional conferences. Your name and information will be kept confidential; a pseudonym will be assigned in the thesis in order to maintain your confidentiality.

Also, the observations made by the primary investigator during the interviews may be used to describe findings in the research. The data will be stored on the primary investigator's personal computers and will be deleted following completion of the project in May 2013.

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Participant Initials




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OFFICE OF THE VICE CHANCELLOR FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS

*Opportunity to ask Questions*

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study by contacting the investigators at the numbers listed below. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Research Compliance Service Office at 402-472-6965 or [irb@unl.edu](mailto:irb@unl.edu); or the thesis advisor, Dr. James Griesen at 402.472.3725.

*Freedom to Withdraw*

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time throughout the interview. You can also withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

*Consent, Right to Receive a Copy*

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. Also, that you meet the 19 years of age or older age requirement to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_ Initial if you agree to be audio recorded during the interview.

*Signature of Participant:*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature of Research Participant*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

*Name and Phone number of investigator(s)*

Primary investigator

Sarah Barg

[vcsa-sbarg@unl.edu](mailto:vcsa-sbarg@unl.edu)

712.898.7516

Secondary investigator

Dr. James Griesen

[igriesen1@unl.edu](mailto:igriesen1@unl.edu)

402.472.3725

**Appendix E**  
**EXAMPLE OF CODES**

	<b><u>Keywords</u></b>
<b>Interview 1</b>	think hard nice good friend people comfortable Chinese American food expensive study lifestyle off-campus living girls grades
<b>Interview 2</b>	smoothly
	nice
	understanding
	good
	Chinese
	off-campus living
	American
	talk
	adapt
	food
	study
	peaceful
	activities

**Appendix F**

**MATRIX OF INTERVIEW SUMMARY**

Participants	Reason for coming to America to Study	Reasons for coming to --- to study
Interview 1	2+2 program, practice English, new culture, make friends (20-22)	safe place, teacher from --- in China was friendly (connection 28-30)
Interview 2	new environment, different culture, different people, business (10-11)	2+2 program, teacher from --- in China was friendly (24-26)
Interview 3	young, different experience, like Americans	safe, nice people
Interview 4	new experience, challenge, learn (10-11)	2+2 program
Interview 5	2+2 program (10-12)	middle America, friendly, steak (17-18)
Interview 6	education is better in America (11-12)	2+2 program, lots of friends did program, hard working people here
Interview 7	better education, computer science major (10)	2+2 program
Interview 8	communication, technology	2+2 program (15-19)

**Appendix G**

**EXAMPLE OF TRANSCRIPTS**



- 64 Q: With anyone. What do you think it will be like making new friends?  
65
- 66 INT #2: It's true that the students come Asia makes me feel safe. But, I'm - - I have met  
67 some really, really kind local students and they helped a lot. So, I think I can  
68 know much more American students. So . . . yeh.  
69
- 70 Q: Do you think there will be any challenges?  
71
- 72 INT #2: Uh, much better than having class I think. Because make new friends - it just  
73 agreed and - yeh, I think that's okay.  
74
- 75 Q: Okay. What concerns do you have about the cultural adjustment?  
76
- 77 INT #2: Oh. Um . . . uh, cultural adjustment . . . just cuz these days we know much  
78 information on the internet. So, we - I can - I know something about American  
79 cultural through the internet. So, I think it won't be a very, very hard for me -  
80 yeh. I can . . . - otherwise, if I am - - if I make some American students they may  
81 love to help me about to adjust to the culture difference.  
82
- 83 Q: Okay. What if any campus resources do you think you'll use?  
84
- 85 INT #2: Campus resources. I didn't know much of them. The Union and the Residence  
86 Hall, the Health Center and you have the International students and the local  
87 students connection - that's kind of . . . yeh. And, that's what I know.  
88
- 89 Q: Okay. Do you think you'll interact more with Chinese students, American  
90 students or other students from other foreign countries? While you're here. Who  
91 do you think you'll interact more with. Who do you think you'll be around more  
92 and who do you want to be around more?  
93

**Appendix H**  
**FINAL SUMMARY OF CODES**

**Experiences**

Experiences with academics	professors/TAs very helpful, nice talk to professors a lot classes are easy class structure much different than in China	
Experience Socially	living situation has a lot to do with thoughts on social life some say making American friends some are not making many American friends	
Cultural Adjustment	Food is a big issue and hard to adjust to Communicating with Americans is difficult for some some find adapting well	
Campus resources	almost all use library or a campus study room	
Chinese/American/Other	Almost all said Chinese Working with and/or living with say American Most want more American student interactions	
Experience been what was expected?	experience is different than thought because of: Hanging out with Americans is harder than thought because of: more independent/less scary	<p><b>Updated Themes</b></p> <p>Academics American classes are different than in China Professors are helpful</p> <p>Social life Mostly Asian friends, know a few Americans Americans are friendly, but it is hard to establish close relationships Take part in activities on campus</p> <p>Cultural Adjustment feel mostly adjusted because young people all over world are the same American food causes issues communication can be an issue</p>
Other thoughts	Lincoln is a quiet, peaceful town (not a lot to do) some view this as good and others not so much want more interactions set up with Americans live off campus to cook (b/c food is an issue), but wish lived on campus for interactions with Americans a few bad experiences make students feel unwanted	

**Appendix I**  
**Themes and Subthemes**

Expectation Theme: Academic Life

Subtheme: Class structure in America is different than in China

Subtheme: Language issues will make classes harder

Experience Theme: Academic Life

Subtheme: American classes are different than classes in China

Subtheme: Professors are helpful

Expectation Theme: Social Life

Subtheme: Americans will be friendly

Subtheme: Hanging out with other Chinese students will be safe

Experience Theme: Social Life

Subtheme: I have mostly Chinese friends because Americans are friendly, but hard to establish close relationships with

Subtheme: I take part in activities on campus

Expectation Theme: Cultural Adjustment

Subtheme: American culture is much different than Chinese culture

Subtheme: Language could be barrier

Expectation Theme: Cultural Adjustment

Subtheme: Feel adjusted

Subtheme: American food causes issues

**Appendix J**  
**EXTERNAL AUDIT ATTESTATION**

External Audit Attestation  
Christine K. Timm, Ph.D.

Audit Attestation

Sarah Barg requested that I complete a methodological audit of her qualitative case study thesis entitled “Expectations v. Reality: A study about Chinese students’ expectations and actual experience at a Midwestern University in America.” The audit was conducted in February and March of 2013. The purpose of the audit was to determine the extent to which the results of the study are trustworthy.

The audit was based on materials that Sarah provided for review. These materials provided evidence for the research process and were the basis for determining the extent to which the thesis findings were supported by the data. The following materials were provided primarily via email:

- IRB protocol submission
- Electronic media files of participant interviews, each labeled with participant number.
- Printed transcriptions of all participants, each labeled with the corresponding media file, and with handwritten researcher notes and emerging themes
- Documents indicating codes and themes derived from interviews
- Draft version of thesis chapters one through three
- Complete version of thesis chapters one through five, references and appendices
- Printed and signed copies of informed consent documents

Audit Procedure

The audit consisted of the following steps:

1. Initial meeting to discuss project and possible audit role
2. Receipt of requested files as noted above
3. Review of IRB protocol submission
4. Review of random sample of transcriptions with independent coding to note possible emerging themes
5. Listen to media files to ascertain accuracy to print transcriptions and note possible emerging themes
6. Read first draft of thesis manuscript with special attention to the consistency in purpose, questions and methods between the IRB proposal.
7. Review of researcher identified themes and comparison to themes from auditor review and coding
8. Read final version of complete thesis.
9. Write and submit the signed attestation to the researcher.

The below information details the auditor procedure and findings.

#### *Initial meeting*

Sarah was a graduate assistant at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Career Services office from August 2011 to May 2012 and worked under my supervision. We had general conversations regarding her thesis progress. In January 2013, we met specifically to discuss the thesis and her interest in an external audit. In early February 2013, we made arrangements to conduct the actual audit and to deliver the research materials.

#### *Review of proposal*

The IRB protocol submission was reviewed to gain an understanding of the original intention of the study and to later compare against the actual methods used in the study. The research was conducted as described in the protocol submission, with the only exception being the final research was with fewer participants and two interviews per participant instead of three. The researcher explained this change in the thesis manuscript.

#### *Raw Data*

Transcriptions. The auditor reviewed files containing transcriptions from the recorded interviews of all participants. The transcriptions noted the interactions between the researcher and the participants. The auditor randomly selected four transcriptions from the first “expectations” interviews and four transcriptions of the second “experience” interviews and independently noted codes and emerging themes on a separate document while reading each transcription.

Audio-files. The auditor listened to the audio files of eight participant interviews and compared the content to the printed transcription. The transcriptions accurately reflected the interview content.

Coding documents. The researcher submitted a summary document of codes, themes, and subthemes. She also submitted her copies of the transcriptions with written codes and reflections of emerging themes.

#### *Identification of Themes*

The researcher’s identified themes were compared to the coding by the auditor. The themes were consistent.

#### *Thesis Manuscript*

The thesis manuscript was reviewed to ensure that each chapter consistently noted the purpose of the study, that the methodology was consistent with the informed consent, and that the findings were supported by literature and participant statements. The manuscript was well supported by documentation and followed consistent processes.



### Conclusion

Having reviewed the materials outlined in this audit, I submit the following conclusions regarding the process that was used and the product that was produced:

*Process.* It is the auditor's opinion that the process of the study was consistent with accepted qualitative research practices. The researcher fully described her process, noted study limitations, and established a basis of understanding allowing others to replicate this study. The focus of the study remained consistent with the proposed focus. The stated purpose and major questions remained consistent.

*Product.* It is the auditor's assessment that the trustworthiness of the study can be established. The findings are supported by the data. The researcher carefully designed the study and employed several verification strategies. (peer review, clarification of researcher bias, and external review). The researcher provided a background of each of the participants and a context as to their selection and involvement in this study. After recoding the transcript, I conclude there is support from the data for the themes presented.

Attested to by Christine K. Timm this 3 day of April 2013.



Christine K. Timm, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
Interim Director, Career Services  
Courtesy Faculty/Assistant Professor, Educational Psychology Department