COMPARING TWO GENERATIONS OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS
STUDYING IN THE UNITED STATES

A Dissertation in
Lifelong Learning and Adult Education
and Comparative and International Education

by
Xiaoqiao Zhang

© 2020 Xiaoqiao Zhang

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August 2020
The dissertation of Xiaoqiao Zhang was reviewed and approved by the following:

Adnan Qayyum  
Assistant Professor of Education  
Dissertation Co-Adviser  
Co-Chair of Committee  

Craig Campbell  
Assistant Professor of Education  
Dissertation Co-Adviser  
Co-Chair of Committee  

Wei-Fan Chen  
Associate Professor of Information Sciences and Technology  

Roger Shouse  
Associate Professor of Education Emeritus  

Susan Land  
Director of Graduate Studies  
Department of Learning and Performance Systems
ABSTRACT

This study is an exploratory multiple case study that compares two different generations of Chinese international students in the United States and describes their experiences. This research investigates three questions: How do acculturation stresses differ between the two generations of Chinese international students? How do individuals create their social networks? How do individuals learn from their social networks to cope with these acculturation stresses?

The eight participants in this study represent two generations of Chinese international students. Four of the participants were born in the 1950s, 五零后, and studied in the United States after the China economic reform policy was implemented in 1978. The other four participants were born in the 1990s, 九零后, and studied in the United States during the peak period of globalization and international education in China.

Situated learning is used to analyze and understand the path from the stressors students encounter to the final coping strategies the students deploy. The results suggest that the challenges facing participants from the two generations did not generally differ much despite differences in historical contexts, and the locations and types of universities at which the participants studied. All of the participants had difficulties with language, the U.S. education system, social support, and mental health. However, the patterns and the experiences of the stressors differed. The participants from the 1950s generation found that the language and education differences mostly emerged in academic settings. In contrast, the participants from the 1990s generation found that language challenges mainly arose during social interaction and everyday life. One surprising finding is that despite current digital technologies and tools, both generations found physical social support to be important. Likewise, for both generations the importance of communities working together was clear. Finally, for all the international students interviewed in this study, important learning happened not only in the classroom and among peers. In fact, much learning happened outside of the classroom and through various people and organizations. The communities of practice that the students created during their journeys impacted their overall growth in significant ways, both professionally and personally.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**LIST OF TABLES** ......................................................................................................................... vii  
**LIST OF FIGURES** ...................................................................................................................... viii  
**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ................................................................................................................ ix  
**Chapter 1: Coming to the Study** ................................................................................................. 1  
  
  Introduction.................................................................................................................................. 2  
  Country of Origin: China................................................................................................................. 5  
  Historical Background ..................................................................................................................... 6  
    Pre-People’s Republic of China........................................................................................................ 6  
    Post-People’s Republic of China....................................................................................................... 8  
  Coming to the Question.................................................................................................................. 10  
  Purpose of the Study....................................................................................................................... 14  
  Adult Education.............................................................................................................................. 15  
**Chapter 2: Literature Review** ...................................................................................................... 18  
  
  Introduction.................................................................................................................................. 19  
  Common Acculturation Stressors ................................................................................................. 20  
    Language................................................................................................................................. 21  
    Educational Stressors................................................................................................................. 22  
    Sociocultural Stressors............................................................................................................... 24  
    Discrimination .......................................................................................................................... 25  
    Practical Stressors...................................................................................................................... 26  
  Popular Theories........................................................................................................................... 27  
    Berry’s Acculturation Theory...................................................................................................... 28  
    Hofstede’s Cultural Theory.......................................................................................................... 28  
    Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory ...................................................................... 29  
    Lave and Wenger’s Situated Learning ....................................................................................... 30  
  Digital Technology’s Impact on Students’ Lives ........................................................................ 32  
  Social Support and Social Network Sites ..................................................................................... 33  
    Social Support.......................................................................................................................... 33  
    Social Network Sites (SNSs) ...................................................................................................... 35  
  Summary and Development of Questions .................................................................................... 38  
**Chapter 3: Methodology** ............................................................................................................. 39  
  
  Introduction.................................................................................................................................. 41  
  Research Questions....................................................................................................................... 43  
  Exploratory Multiple Case Study................................................................................................. 44  
    Researcher’s Proposition........................................................................................................... 45  
  Pilot Studies.................................................................................................................................. 46  
  Delimitations and Limitations ....................................................................................................... 49  
    Population............................................................................................................................... 49  
    Two Generations....................................................................................................................... 50
Data Collection Procedure ................................................................. 51
Recruitment ...................................................................................... 52
Meetings and Travel Arrangements .................................................. 53
Sources of Evidence ........................................................................ 56
Interviews .......................................................................................... 57
Unit of Analysis ................................................................................ 59
Anonymization of Participants .......................................................... 60

Data Analysis Procedure .................................................................... 61
Organization of the Data ................................................................... 61
Familiarization with the Data ............................................................. 62
Coding ............................................................................................... 64
Time-Series Coding ......................................................................... 66
Generating Initial Themes, Defining and Naming Themes ............... 67
Cross-Case Synthesis and Write-up .................................................. 68
Ethical Issues .................................................................................... 68

Chapter 4: Analysis ........................................................................... 70

Introduction ....................................................................................... 72

Generation 1950s 五零后 ................................................................. 73
Linda ................................................................................................. 73
John ................................................................................................. 76
Anthony ........................................................................................... 79
Peter ................................................................................................. 83

Generation 1990s 九零后 ................................................................. 86
Vanessa ............................................................................................ 86
Claire ............................................................................................... 89
Frank ............................................................................................... 92
Waverly ............................................................................................ 96

Comparison Within Generations ...................................................... 101

Generation 1950s 五零后 ................................................................. 101
Before Going to the United States (Novices) ...................................... 102
Studying in the United States (Acquiring Knowledge and Learning Through Experience) ........................................................................... 109
Reflection on the Overall Journey of Studying Abroad (Experts) ....... 121

Generation 1990s 九零后 ................................................................. 122
Before Going to the United States (Novices) ...................................... 123
Studying in the United States (Acquiring Knowledge and Learning Through Experience) ........................................................................... 130
Reflection on the Overall Journey of Studying Abroad (Experts) ....... 144

Summary .......................................................................................... 145

Chapter 5: Findings, Implementations, and Recommendations .......... 146

Introduction ....................................................................................... 148

Research Questions .......................................................................... 148
Question 1: How did the acculturation stresses differ between the generations studied? .......................................................... 149
Question 2: How did each individual create their social networks? ........................................................................... 164
Question 3: How did individuals learn from their social networks to cope with those acculturation stresses? 168

Recommendations and Implementations ............................................. 171
Micro Level – Individual .................................................................... 171
Meso Level – Host Institutions and Local Communities ................. 172
Macro Level – Government Policies and Visa Regulations ................................................................. 172
Limitations of the Study .................................................................................................................. 173
Recommendations for Future Research ....................................................................................... 176
Summary........................................................................................................................................ 177
REFERENCES ................................................................................................................................. 180
APPENDIX ...................................................................................................................................... 189
LIST OF TABLES

1. Factors Influencing Student Decision to Study Overseas.........................................................10

2. Interview Questions (Partial)..................................................................................................58

3. Participants’ Background Information.....................................................................................60

4. Coding Process.........................................................................................................................62

5. Major Challenges Experienced During LPP (1950s Participants)........................................102

6. Major Challenges Experienced During LPP (1990s Participants)........................................123
# LIST OF FIGURES

1. International Students by Academic Level ................................................................. 4  
2. First 30 Male Students Sent to the United States by the Qing Imperial Government ........ 7  
3. A Teacher Teaching an English Class at the Jingshan School in Beijing (1978) .............. 9  
4. Key Historical Moments and Acts Related to Chinese Immigration in the United States ...... 26  
5. Using a Shared Bike to Travel to Interviews .................................................................. 55  
6. First Round of Coding ................................................................................................... 64  
7. Berry’s Acculturation Theory Framework ...................................................................... 65  
8. Conceptual Framework .................................................................................................. 67  
9. Three Periods of LPP for 1950s and 1990s Generation Students ...................................... 101
Many people write their acknowledgements at the end. Yet I have been writing this part throughout my dissertation journey. I have so many people whom I wish to thank who supported me throughout this journey. Thank you all for believing in me, holding on to me when I was lost, pushing me forward when I lost confidence to continue, and cheering me on for every little step I took. I could not have finished this dissertation and my journey without my amazing friends, colleagues, supervisors, advisors, and my beloved family.

To my amazing committee, Dr. Adnan Qayyum, Dr. Craig Campbell, Dr. Weifan Chen, and Dr. Roger Shouse: you were not only my professors who guided me through this whole doctoral journey but also my biggest believers. There were many times when I began to question if I could ever finish or if I would be good enough. Thank you all for spending countless hours listening to me talk, for providing guidance, and for offering the encouragement that took me to where I am today. You all always see the strength in me even when I don’t have confidence. I am forever grateful for all of your support and trust! With all your support and guidance, I grew academically, professionally, and personally. Special thanks to my advisor, Dr. Adnan Qayyum, for spending endless hours helping me edit my work and working with my committee members to make the process so supportive and encouraging.

I want to thank Dr. Ladislaus “Ladi” Semali, my first advisor in the program who is now retired. I would not be where I am today without your support and guidance through the first part of my journey. I want to thank J. J. Wang for introducing me to this amazing program. To all of the professors I had at university, particularly within our program, I extend my thanks. I am so proud and will forever be grateful to have been a member of our ADTED program at Penn State. As a lead GA, I had the opportunity to work with every professor in our program. You all not only taught me how to be a researcher but a good citizen. I learned from so many of you the impact professors can have on a student. For your encouragement, trust, and guidance, I am forever grateful.

I cannot imagine going through the dissertation process without all my friends, colleagues, and our administration team. To Carol, Colleen, Hye-Su, and Xiaoying, you saw me through this journey, inspired me to continue, and always provided a safe space for us to share and be vulnerable. To my ABDer group, it is still my dream that someday we can walk together on that graduation stage. To Zongpei, Manyu, Nichole, Shan, and all my dear friends outside of the program, thank you all for making my life outside of school enjoyable, fruitful, and full of kindness and love. All of you made Penn State another home for me. To all my friends back in China, including Jie, Ada, Josephine, Ruby, and many more, I am forever grateful for all your love, compassion, and support.

To my roommate Heh Youn, you were part of every step of my doctoral journey. I am so grateful to have met you during my first class at Penn State. You have seen every side of me, good, bad, and ugly. That is why I am the expert on you, and you are the expert on me. We were always there for each other. I cannot thank you enough for the countless moments you picked me up and made me stronger.

To Dr. Justin Chen, thank you for everything you have done for me. In the past four years, one of the best things that has happened to me was meeting you at the NAFA conference. You have shown me what it takes to be a true leader, a mentor, and an amazing friend. You have given me countless opportunities, academically and professionally. Thank you for always believing in me. I would not be here without your trust and guidance. Thank you for welcoming
me to our Center. I am also grateful to all of our volunteers in the Center. Thank you for the countless check-ins you all did on me during this last year. Thank you for offering support whenever you could. I cannot wait to see where life may take us in the future, and I am so proud of all of you on your journeys.

To Dr. Tim Gilmore, Dr. Kent Trachte, Dr. Mike Speziale, and Mr. Mike Konopksi, thank you for always trusting me and allowing me to work for both Wilkes and Lycoming in the past. I would not have had the interest and drive to go back to school without your encouragement and support throughout this journey. You are all my inspirations and role models for me to be a better educator someday in the world of higher education.

To my American families, the Hathaways, Fioreas, Morales, Dohertys, and many more families in the United States, I am so grateful to have had you all in my life for the past 15 years. You witnessed all of my journey in the United States. Without you all, I would not have the courage, confidence, and passion for staying and being where I am today. To Mom Shawn, you have never missed any major event in my life. Thank you for always being an inspiration. You always believed the best about us and showed us what we can do and reach.

Last but certainly not least, to my beloved family in China 在这里，我希望感谢我爱的家人。感谢家人在我人生道路上对我的培养，教育和支持。感谢大家让我在一个充满爱的大家庭里长大。谢谢家人们总告诉我无论我的人生遇到什么样的困难，您们都会做我坚强的后盾。希望乔没有让大家失望。我会继续努力，为这个家增添幸福和快乐。

Two of the most important people in my life are my parents. I don’t even know where to begin to describe my gratitude to you both. I am so lucky to have been born in this family and to have two beautiful, intelligent, kind, and loving people like you two to call my parents. Thank you for always pushing me and asking me what my research questions :D. Thank you for always “yelling” at me over the phone and telling me to focus on my writing while telling me to relax. Thank you for setting such high examples that I can look up to. Thank you for showing me how to love unconditionally, have passion, always learn, and be kind to others. 这里，我希望再次用中文写给我的父母。对于你们的感谢，我无法用言语形容。感谢你们两个人一直对我无条件的爱。我觉得今生我最大的幸运，就是可以生在咱们这个家庭里。感谢你们两个对我的爱和榜样。感谢你们永远支持我的决定，永远相信我能行。感谢你们也时不时对我的敲打让我可以成长。但是也感谢你们对我的爱，让我觉得生活在这个世上每天都可以那么的幸福。如果没有你们，就不会有我。如果没有你们对我的爱和支持，我也不会走到今天。对于你们，我永远都是亏欠的。希望未来我的努力，也可以让你们感觉到骄傲和幸福。我非常的爱你们！谢谢你们！
Chapter 1: Coming to the Study

2020 marks the 16th year that I am living, studying, and working in the United States. Throughout this journey, I have mainly lived in three states: New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York. When I begin my doctoral program, I was the associate director of international admissions at a liberal arts college. By that time, I had lived in Pennsylvania for more than seven years. Having come from another country, I thought I knew what it was like to live in a new place. I thought I knew and understood the stresses international students were going through. I thought I was fully immersed in similar stresses every day. I thought I had a handle on them through reading the literature, and I felt I had enough life experience to understand my students’ lives and provide them with the help they needed. This lasted until the final year in my doctoral program when I packed up everything and moved to a brand new state, Massachusetts. A brand new city, Boston. I had yet to fully experience firsthand what my dissertation topic truly meant to my participants and to me, all of us international students.

You don’t have to move to a different country or speak another language. You don’t have to try to adjust to a brand new education system or be completely unfamiliar with a different culture. Merely moving into a new space can cause acculturation stress to occur. I realized the discomfort I felt when I found myself in the new and different situation of trying to familiarize myself with the city of Boston; trying to meet new people and build my social support network; trying to fight my fear of the unknown; and most importantly, trying to develop that crucial understanding I needed when interviewing my participants in order to be more empathetic to their situations.
This is research, through a Chinese international student’s eyes, that attempts to narrate, to understand, to share, and to analyze the stories of eight former graduate students who studied at eight universities in the United States of America.

好山好水好寂寞，好脏好乱好快活

This phrase is one of the most popular statements made by Chinese international students and new Chinese immigrants when referring to their experiences of living in the United States today. The direct translation of this expression is “Beautiful mountain, good water but lonely; super dirty, super messy but happy.” The first part of the phrase refers to Chinese students and immigrants’ experiences in the United States, and the second part refers to their experiences at home in China. At one of the most well-known academic conferences in my field, the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC), one of the scholars questioned why my colleagues and I were presenting on Asian international students’ experiences here in the United States. The scholar was surprised that we were studying this topic. He thought there were already enough scholars studying this issue; he also thought that students should have prior awareness of the types of situations they would face in a foreign country. One comment we received that led me to finalize my dissertation topic was, “I thought you Chinese people were all so happy here and wanted to stay here forever. I didn’t know there were even any issues for you guys.” Is it true that all Chinese students have positive experiences in the United States? Is it true that all of them wish to stay in the country forever? More stories need to be told, and other experiences need to be shared.

Introduction

There are millions of international students pursuing higher education abroad this year. In 2019, the number of international students studying in the United States reached an all-time high
of 1,095,299. For the tenth year in a row, China sent more students to the United States than any other country. Last year alone, 369,548 Chinese students were studying in the United States; this accounted for 33.7% of all international students. Chinese and Indian students together represent more than half of the foreign population studying in the United States (Institution of International Education [IIE], 2019). In the past, most Chinese international students who came to the United States seeking opportunities were graduates or postgraduates; however, more than 40% of the Chinese students currently studying in the United States are enrolled in undergraduate programs (Allen-Fbrahimian, 2015). Yet when looking closely at the Institution of International Education’s report (2019), one sees that since 2016, the total number of newly enrolled undergraduate and graduate students has been decreasing (Figure 1; IIE, 2019). The reason for the overall increase, though, is a relaxation of visa regulations for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) students. In particular, the U.S. government increased the time (from 12 months to 17 months in 2008, and then from 17 months to 24 months in 2016) that STEM program students are allowed to remain in the United States after graduation (IIE, 2016).
There are various motivating factors for universities around the world to seek out and recruit international students. The first motivator is financial in nature. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, international students alone contributed $44.75 billion to the U.S. economy in 2018 (IIE, 2019). In addition to making an economic impact, international students contribute to the diversity of local communities, school communities, and the nation as a whole (Leong, 2015). While the benefits international students provide are substantial, such students face unique challenges. These challenges include difficulties in communicating and integrating smoothly into a new education system, feelings of homesickness, and other cultural barriers.
Chinese students and families often view a U.S. college education as a status symbol that may provide financial benefits upon graduation, especially for students who return to China (Chen et al., 2015). However, studying in the United States may not be as glamorous as Chinese society presents. There are significant challenges facing international students due to the strong cultural differences that exist between the two countries. Colleges may overlook these transitional challenges, especially if their campuses do not have many Chinese international students. As a result of colleges’ failure to anticipate and address these challenges, many Chinese students have difficulties transitioning to college. Students experience a loss of structure, and they may suffer poor academic performance as well as increased mental health disorders (Chen et al., 2015). International students coming to the United States for the first time may experience dramatic cultural conflict, including language barriers, academic difficulties, homesickness, discrimination, culture shock, and social adjustments (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Sümer et al., 2008). In 2015, 8,000 Chinese international students were expelled from U.S. schools for violations such as cheating in school and failing classes, most of which resulted from the stresses of trying to acclimate to a new culture (“U.S. schools,” 2015). As a result, university administrators and policymakers have started focusing on the overall retention rate and monitoring student success more closely.

**Country of Origin: China**

It is difficult to characterize international students without making gross generalizations. It has been shown that Asian students face more challenges than their Western peers when studying abroad (Sakurai et al., 2016). Given the increasingly large number of Chinese international students studying in the United States today, I focus my attention on students from mainland China. As a person of Chinese descent, I had the advantage of speaking the native
language of my target population. I was thus able to provide study participants a choice of language based on their comfort level with English. This allowed the participants to use their native language to explain their feelings and experiences more fully. Moreover, with my professional experiences and personal background, I was able to gather data from the study participants with ease.

**Historical Background**

**Pre-People’s Republic of China**

The first time the United States received Chinese students was during the Qing Dynasty. The first individual who went to the United States to study was Rong Hong (Zhang, 2014). He was the first Chinese student who graduated from a U.S. university, Yale University. He did so in the late 1850s. One of his most significant contributions was sending 120 Chinese students to the United States. Figure 2 shows the first 30 male students sent to the United States by the Qing imperial government (Yan, 2017; Zhou, 2017). Many of the students in this group became the first in Chinese history to study new fields. One of them, Zhan Tianyu (詹天佑), became the founding father of China’s first railway. At the time, the Qing imperial government had clear reasons for sending students to the United States. The students were to learn mostly STEM skills that would contribute to the development of the Chinese armed forces (Yan, 2017). These students are referred to as the Self-Strengthening Movement (洋务运动; Hsu, 1975). All of their expenses, including everyday living costs, were paid by the government. The last time the Qing imperial government sent students to the United States was in 1899 after the Boxer Rebellion. Following the Boxer Rebellion, the Republic of China (中华民国) was founded. Students continued to be sent to the United States (Yan, 2017).
Records show that from the beginning of the Qing Dynasty up until its loss of power and the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1910, there were a total of 36,000 Chinese students who studied in the United States. During that time, many people who came to be influential in the history of China were students in the United States, including the highly regarded poet Xuzhi Mo (徐志摩); Liang Sicheng (梁思成), the designer of the historical monument The People’s Heroes in Beijing; and the president of Peking University and important Chinese philosopher Hushi (胡适; Zhou, 2017).
Post-People’s Republic of China

After the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, Chinese students ceased studying in the United States until 1972–1973 (IIE, 2017). During that time, the country experienced key events such as the Great Leap Forward from 1958–1961 and the Cultural Revolution from 1966–1976 (Xue, 2015). In December 1978, Deng Xiaoping introduced the policy of Chinese economic reform (改革开放). With the introduction of this policy, ideas about the necessity of reform and the opening of the country’s doors to the external world came to prevail (Naughton, 1996). Figure 3 shows a teacher teaching an English class at the Jingshan School in Beijing in 1978 (Ye, 2014). In 1980, the overall number of Chinese students studying in the United States grew dramatically. In 1981, when the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) was introduced in China, the media argued that this would be the test that changed China. In that year, 285 students took the exam. In 1990, the overall number of test takers reached 40,000 (Zhou, 2017). The motivation for most students to study abroad was that after their studies, they would return to China and rebuild and develop the new China. However, there was a small number of students whose families sponsored their studies for the purpose of self-fulfillment.
Figure 3

A Teacher Teaching an English Class at the Jingshan School in Beijing (1978)


Mazzarol and Soutar’s (2002) push and pull factors frequently have been used in understanding international students’ motivations to study in the United States. According to the researchers, the primary reason that students choose to study abroad is because they believe overseas education is superior to local education (Table 1). This reason still holds partly true when it comes to Chinese international students: It has been shown that students today who cannot be completely certain of admission to a top university in China will choose to go abroad. Given the one-child policy (Shostya, 2015), as long as parents have the means, they will do everything in their power to send their children abroad. In addition, parents will always push their children to study at a top-ranked university. Such well-known schools not only bring recognition to a family but also give a family prestige. Of course, some Chinese students and
families believe that studying in the United States can provide opportunities for students to broaden their experiences and improve their critical thinking skills (Shostya, 2015).

Table 1
Factors Influencing Student Decision to Study Overseas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage which Indicated Influencing factor was important</th>
<th>Taiwan (n = 361)</th>
<th>India (n = 152)</th>
<th>China (n = 689)</th>
<th>Indonesia (n = 404)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overseas course better than local</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to gain entry at home</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course not available at home</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better understanding of West</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention to migrate</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Because of the many changes that have taken place in China in the last decades, students’ experiences studying abroad have also necessarily changed and are continuing to evolve. Thus, the reasons why students choose to study in the United States may change, as students face different types of challenges when they come to study here.

**Coming to the Question**

I have spent my adulthood studying as an international student and working as an international recruiter and advisor for higher-education institutions in the United States. Coming
to the United States in high school was not in my original plans. When I was six years old, my father and grandfather decided that I would go to the United States to earn a graduate degree someday. However, due to an exchange-student opportunity that arose when I was in high school, I ended up coming to the United States much earlier. When I arrived in the United States in 2005 to attend high school, there were not many international students from China. I was the only foreign student studying in my small town in northern New Jersey. Prior to my arrival in the United States, I thought I knew what the country looked like and felt like and how it functioned. My English education in China began when I was six years old. I had attended many language competitions. Compared to my peers in the province, I would have been considered rather competent in English. However, this early English education provided me a false sense of confidence, as I believed that language would not be a problem in my transition. I was soon frustrated to learn, as I stepped into my first U.S. classroom, that the English I had studied was simplified textbook English. Luckily, participating in sports, having a generally outgoing personality, and having many loving friends and families locally helped my transition.

Following the completion of my master’s degree in the United States, I was hired as an international student coordinator. Initially it was exciting to work with international students, traveling around the world, seeing families, and being treated so warmly. However, the more families I worked with, the more I realized that there was a significant gap between what the families and students knew about the United States and the reality of actually living and studying here. There were certainly concerns and fears related to sending children across the world for an education. Parents sought clarity and reassurance from educational consultants, websites, friends, and family members, even looking to social media for answers.
After working with hundreds and hundreds of parents and families from China and around the world, more thoughts came to mind. In my experience, the decision to study abroad is largely influenced by the student’s whole family, particularly in Asian countries. Family members weigh in on the best choice of major. They question the safety of the area surrounding the campus, the gun regulations on campus, and drug use. Safety is a major concern, which is understandable due to the distance from home. According to CNN, in the first 21 weeks of 2018, there were 23 school shootings in which at least one person was shot (Ahmed & Walker, 2018). More recently, in a survey of 250 colleges and universities, the New York Times reported a 40% overall decrease in international student applications following the 2016 presidential election (Saul, 2017). Parents anxious about the administration and the general safety and well-being of their children shifted course to consider Canadian or Australian universities as an alternative to those in the United States. From 2014 to 2019, the number of international applications to Canadian universities increased by 73%, and Chinese students made up 24.98% percent of that overall number (ICEF, 2018).

As more and more students sought out education abroad, the job market in China quickly became saturated with U.S. degrees, which led to unexpectedly difficult times for students attempting to find employment upon returning to China (Stapleton, 2017). Because of the uncertain job prospects and the constant pressure from family and society, depression and suicide rates among Chinese international students are on the rise (Chang, 2017). Suicide is the third-leading cause of death in young adults 18–24 years old. While there are a few articles about Asian-U.S. college students and mental health, there is a dearth of research, data, and thus diagnoses for Chinese international students due to the common misconception that there are no
mental health issues in China. Language barriers also prevent students from telling their stories to U.S. school counselors and psychiatrists (Chen et al., 2015).

On December 14, 2017, China Daily announced the death of Tian Miaoxiu, an international student from Chengdu, China, who died by suicide in her apartment. Earlier that year, another Chinese international student, Tang Xiaolin, was reported missing in San Francisco, California, having told her family and friends that she was under tremendous pressure to finish her research project and find a job (Chang, 2017). In 2016, a master’s of business administration (MBA) student, Xiao Lu at the University of Chicago’s Booth School of Business, died by suicide by jumping into the ice on Lake Michigan. In 2014, Li Yangkai killed himself by jumping out of his Johns Hopkins University apartment window due to insomnia and clinical depression (Wang, 2016). Despite these public cases, many people still refuse to acknowledge the serious issues surrounding the stresses of studying abroad. Due to the stigma associated with mental health, people are discouraged from sharing feelings. This puts great pressure on students to succeed.

There is an ever-increasing uncertainty among Chinese parents regarding whether it is best for graduates to return to China or remain in the United States and seek employment. In the past, Chinese international students that went back to China were called sea turtles (海龟/归), which refers to the condition of having come back from overseas (Schott, 2009). Now another term, seaweed (海带/待), has emerged. This term refers to the condition of having come back from overseas but being in a state of waiting. 归, which is the symbol for "returning" people, means Chinese international students bring what they have learned back to China to enrich Chinese society and improve the culture. However, because many Chinese international students have chosen to study in the United States, their study-abroad status no longer provides them the
“halo” it once did. 待，the symbol for “waiting,” means those recent graduates wait for jobs and opportunities when they return home (Chen, 2016). Hao and Welch’s (2012) survey showed that more people were coming back from the United States than were leaving for the United States to study. Pressure to obtain a job and conflicting feelings about whether to stay in the United States to pursue additional degrees have increased significantly over the past few years (Xu, 2006).

**Purpose of the Study**

After reviewing the current literature about the acculturation stress of international students, I found that the majority of studies were published in the field of higher education, international student journals, and international relations (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Quan & Sloan, 2016). Most relied on similar frameworks to explain the phenomenon of acculturation stress, and a majority of them conducted research using quantitative methods (Sakurai et al., 2016; Urban & Palmer, 2016) Those studies using a qualitative approach focused on single sites, many of which were state-level research institutions.

Current research illustrates the types of stressors international students experience, the triggers for these stressors, and the general lack of support for students in managing them. However, there is a lack of research regarding the proper protocols and procedures necessary to adequately support these students. More research is needed to understand how these students learn, and through what methods, to cope with acculturation stress, as well as with whom educators should work to provide holistic support to future Chinese international students.

In reviewing the previous literature, I realized that there is a gap between theory and the actual outcomes for students. The different theories mentioned in the next chapter were mostly developed by applying a Western lens to immigrants and migrants (Ye, 2006). However, I would argue that many stressors international students have reported experiencing may be influenced by
the students’ particular cultural backgrounds. Do previous studies of push and pull factors hold true for students today? In my previous work experience, I learned that not all Chinese international students have the intention of staying in the United States long-term. Therefore, some international students perceive it to be unnecessary for them to engage with their host country and culture in order for them to be successful (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). The experience of studying in the United States may affect international students differently if the initial intentions and final goals are different for the immigrants and migrants who ground these theories.

Another gap I realized was that the majority of the studies focus on the outcomes of acculturation stress, such as the types of stressors, instead of attempting to understand the events and processes of facing and overcoming stressors and pointing out areas of inadequate support. No actual explanations of the pathway between the onset of the initial stressors and the ultimate coping strategies are provided. What factors might affect students’ overall journeys? What types of events occur during students’ journeys in the United States that lead to various stressors? How and from whom do students learn to cope with these stressors?

**Adult Education**

Adult education is directly translated as Cheng Ren Jiao Yu (成人教育). Having grown up hearing this term, I can attest that is somewhat misleading. Each June, eligible Chinese students must take the Gaokao, which is the Chinese national college entrance exam, in order to be placed at a university in China (Muthanna & Sang, 2015). Many people view the exam as an educational tool that can impact people’s social mobility (Liu & Wu, 2006). Part of adult education in China involves teaching those who never earned a college degree. The term “adult education” is also used to refer to another group of people who continue their learning for career
advancement or to acquire further skills related to their profession. The concept of learning can be very precise for Chinese learners: they value the knowledge they already possess and wish to gain additional knowledge in order to improve themselves and earn better grades. Yet when students are asked to pose challenges, question values, or reflect on their experiences, the learning becomes less straightforward (Pratt, 1998).

Chinese families have a strict view about what counts as education. The vast majority of Chinese international students who come to the United States expect to focus solely on earning excellent grades and gaining acceptance to top-ranked colleges and graduate schools. However, reflecting on my own experiences, I realized that most of the life skills and practical knowledge I acquired were via learning experiences that took place outside the classroom. As China’s education system develops, perhaps more value will be placed on learning outside the classroom, in more informal settings where critical thinking skills are often developed best.

To date, studies of Chinese international students have focused on the formal learning setting in terms of students’ academic achievement, acculturation outcomes, psychological challenges, and prevailing results, including depression and other mental health challenges. While it is important to understand the effects of acculturation stressors, I would argue that there is greater value in understanding students’ struggles in order to prevent these all-too-common negative results. It is also valuable to understand the individual factors involved in each student’s experience if the goal is to help students learn to integrate successfully into a new community and culture.

Studies on adult education have also primarily focused on race, socioeconomic class, and gender differences. Differing cultures and the challenges of international students are often overlooked. When studies do mention international students, they tend to focus on international
students as a mere subset of the larger population under consideration (Huang, 2012). In this adult education study, I compare two generations of Chinese international students. I explore and analyze how they learned to cope with the acculturation stress that resulted from their transition and how they utilized their social networks to help them do so.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

When writing my dissertation, the coronavirus broke out in China. I was there conducting my second round of research. Concerned about the virus’s spread, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a recommendation for individuals traveling from China to self-quarantine upon arrival in their destination countries. The incubation period initially suggested by the WHO was 7 days in length; this was subsequently increased to 14 days. When I arrived back in Boston, I informed my colleagues, friends, and family that I would be voluntarily self-quarantining at home for 14 days.

This was the first time I was literally staying at home: no physical human interaction (because I live alone), no plans to leave the house for meetings or visits with friends. However, for some reason, I didn’t feel alone.

Every morning when I awakened during the quarantine, I read the world news on my phone, I received greetings and check-ins from friends and family, I read e-mails like I would at any other time during my life, and I planned my day. This routine was very much like the one I had had before the virus hit. Then and now, I can obtain the latest news updates on my phone, and I can hear how my friends are doing at home. If my friends are bored, we call or video-chat with one another. Because my mother oversees several hospitals in my hometown, every day she must go out and work with her staff to fight the virus. My mother and her staff helped to build new hospital beds and sites in my hometown. The concerns I have for my mother’s health are tremendous. Thanks to WeChat, I video-chat with her every day. A text message or a voice over the phone no longer can adequately calm my worried heart. Seeing my father and her on the video smiling is the only way they can assure me that they are truly okay.
With our phones, we can send each other pictures of meals we ate that day and joke about the things we see online. I am alone in my apartment, but in my heart, I have them around. My friend who came back with me but lives in another state in the United States found that her landlord and roommate were extremely worried; they even suggested that she not go back to the house. She was told that she should not be out of her room and if she needed something, the landlord would retrieve it for her and just leave it outside her door. In a way, it was like being in jail. It made me think: Though there was no one physically near me, I felt supported. My friend had three people in her apartment but felt alone. In terms of support for Chinese international students who are studying abroad, what resources or networks are available? Do they all have to be physically nearby? With the technology that exists today, are international students’ experiences improved?

As a Chinese international student studying and living in the United States for the past 16 years, I have witnessed how life and experiences in the United States have changed over time. Individuals’ attention spans are much shorter than before. Discussion has arisen about how online platforms and social media have changed individuals’ lives. How do these changes impact the Chinese international students living abroad?

**Introduction**

Being a Chinese international student in 2005 was a considerably different experience than being one today. In school, we used chalk to write on the blackboards. We needed to purchase paper notebooks to take notes in class. We needed to plug our extremely expensive and bulky personal computers into the wall to connect to the unstable internet or to go to the library to use the internet. The best phones available at the time were flip phones on which one could only can call, text, and take photos. The most cost-effective way for me to communicate with my
family back home at the time was through e-mail. Every weekend I was excited to write to my
parents a long e-mail about my week and wait to hear back from them. Even though calling them
was quite expensive, we still tried to set up times throughout the month to talk.

Throughout my high school and undergraduate studies, I was the only one or one of a
very few Chinese international students on campus. With the limited availability of the internet,
limited funds to call home, and limited resources to access Chinese books or news, I found that
successful and quick acculturation to the United States required a concerted effort on my part.

Chinese international students today can use smartboards to write in class; use small and
lightweight laptops and iPads to take notes; video-conference on Zoom when they cannot be
physically present; e-mail their professors to set up meetings in a very efficient manner; and go
to YouTube to check how to assemble an IKEA bed. At the same time, calling home through
FaceTime, WeChat, WhatsApp, and many other apps on the phone is free; pictures can be sent
immediately across the world so it is as if a person’s family is there with them. Communicating
with friends from every part of the world is effortless even when friends are not able to see one
another all the time. However, despite all these technological innovations, as mentioned in
Chapter 1, international students’ overall school satisfaction and completion rates are dropping,
and more news agencies are reporting students’ suicide stories. This makes me wonder: What
major acculturation stressors do international students experience when they come to the United
States? Have the stressors changed much?

**Common Acculturation Stressors**

Acculturation stress has been a serious focus of research in higher education and
psychology (Constantine et al., 2004; Hamamura & Laird, 2014; Rice et al., 2012; Sandhu &
Asrabadi, 1994). Many of these studies have focused on international students. The following
subsections address the top five challenges international students face as they integrate into a new culture. In a study conducted in 2011, Smith and Khawaja identified the five most frequently mentioned stressors international students experience: language, educational stressors, sociocultural stressors, discrimination, and practical stressors.

**Language**

When international students come to the United States to study, they are required by most universities to demonstrate proficiency in English. Most students are required to pass an English language proficiency test such as the TOEFL or International English Language Testing System (IELTS) before admission (Dao et al., 2007; Trice, 2003). With the boom in test-preparation courses, most students now focus on preparing for the test rather than improving their English proficiency to a level sufficient for participation in a U.S. classroom (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011). In order for international students to truly be successful in the U.S. education system, they must have strong written and oral communication skills and the ability to participate spontaneously in group discussions (Caplan & Stevens, 2017). Some international students struggle with accents, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, pronunciation, and writing (Andrade, 2006; Gebhard, 2012). These language challenges are directly related to their academic performance and cause psychological distress to international students, as they value their academic success (Hamamura & Laird, 2014). There is also social pressure from U.S. classmates. Chinese students often feel that their performance is judged by U.S. classmates and feel insecure when they struggle to adequately express themselves fluently in English (Kuo, 2011). A student’s language barrier might cause them to take longer to answer a question in a class discussion than a native English-speaking student would (Shostya, 2015). Leong (2015) presented a study in which
participants mentioned that the language barrier greatly affected their confidence in regard to interacting, communicating, and generally participating in class.

Language challenges are not limited to the classroom. In daily life, the cultural aspect of communication may be even more pronounced. References and jokes are culturally dependent, and for some international students, a lack of cultural knowledge can negatively affect their ability to develop relationships with Americans (Kuo, 2011). These obstacles collectively drive Chinese international students to limit their social networks to fellow Chinese international students. This separation from Americans provides a break from these stressors. By seeking out those with the same cultural background, international students are able to avoid social interaction with American students (Sümer & Grahame, 2008). Many Americans perceive Chinese international students as timid because Asian culture values subtlety and indirectness in verbal communication instead of the more forthright expressiveness often encouraged in U.S. culture (Leong, 2008). There are a number of issues facing Chinese international students, and with the cultural stigma against talking and seeking professional help, Chinese students face elevated rates of social anxiety (Hsu & Alden, 2008), a perceived lack of social support and connectedness (Poyrazli et al., 2004), and perceived prejudice (Frey & Roysircar, 2006).

**Educational Stressors**

Chinese international students’ parents are influenced by traditional cultural values and a collectivistic worldview (Sue & Sue, 2012). Many Asian international students were raised with an emphasis on the value of diligence and consider academic achievement an honor for the family (Yan & Berliner, 2009). Whereas some international students receive financial assistance from their universities and external organizations, the majority rely on their families’ monetary support to study in the United States (IIE, 2017). For example, McNeal and Yeh (1997)
described “compensation syndrome,” the phenomenon in which Chinese parents, deprived of opportunities in their youth, push their children to achieve academic success, believing it will lead to prestigious and well-paying careers for the children. Although many international students identify family support as an essential component of their success, they feel pressure to live up to familial expectations due to the financial burden their studies have inflicted on the family (Andrade, 2006; Rabia, 2017).

In addition to facing language barriers, Asian international students need to adjust to a new environment and education system (Thurber & Walton, 2012). They may have been top students in their home countries, but initial challenges, such as language and the need to navigate an unfamiliar education system, may prevent them from performing their best. This results in a discrepancy between the students’ expectations and their actual performances. For those who pride themselves on their academic performance, the initial shock and challenge of a new system can be overwhelming.

In China, since the Gaokao is the only exam that determines whether a student is accepted to or can attend college (Leong, 2015), students solely focus on test preparation. Therefore, group discussion and regular essays—common methods of evaluation in many U.S. classrooms—may be foreign to students, and they may accordingly underestimate the value of these grades in a classroom setting. Frequent class participation and the practice of challenging the professor can also increase stress since Chinese international students tend to prefer more indirect communication and have great respect for teachers (Chou & Chen, 2009). Chinese students also need teachers to remind them of due dates more often; while together, Chinese students keep each other on task and feel more comfortable studying together (Leong, 2015).
Sociocultural Stressors

Albrecht and Adelman (1987) defined social support as “verbal and nonverbal communication between recipients and providers that helps manage uncertainty about the situation, the self, and the other or the relationship and functions to enhance perception of personal control in one’s life experience” (p. 19). Social support is vital to an individual’s social and mental well-being. This support is particularly crucial for Asian international students because they tend to seek help for psychological problems from individuals in their social networks rather than mental health professionals (Heggins & Jackson, 2003). Despite all the advances in technology, Chinese students continue to feel detached from social support systems in their home country and need to develop new systems in the United States (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). It has been shown that with stronger social support, students experience less acculturation stress (Ye, 2006).

With the integration of the internet into everyday life, the perception is that the world is smaller and that one is able to access their social support group online regardless of physical distance. Although there are a significant number of studies focused on student acculturation stress and coping strategies, very few studies specifically examine the impact of social support, and in particular, how support delivered through online platforms and groups has impacted student acculturation processes (Ye, 2006).

Cultural factors influence the different levels of adjustment individuals experience when they enter a new environment. The greater the cultural gap, the more difficult the transition (Ward, 1996; Yang & Clum, 1994). For example, students from China face challenging transitions—including becoming accustomed to the foreign language, food, and social norms—
when they come to the United States for the first time, and adjusting to these complex challenges takes a considerable amount of time (Leong, 2015).

**Discrimination**

Compared to native U.S. students, Asian international students, particularly Chinese international students, struggle with discrimination within the host society (Yan & Berliner, 2013). In a case study published by Lee and Rice (2007), the authors found that cultural differences had a significant impact on the likelihood of discrimination.

As other stressors such as language, education system differences, and cultural differences already make international students self-conscious, the attitudes and behaviors of domestic students toward international students may lead to discriminatory feelings that prevent international students from opening up and feel comfortable (Jung et al., 2007). However, the history of U.S. discrimination against Chinese immigrants is nothing new. It can be traced back over 200 years (Shimpi & Zirkel, 2012). When Chinese immigrants came to the United States more than 200 years ago, they were subject to three major stereotypes: “hard-working” but “soulless”; “isolating within their own group”; and lastly, a “lack of loyalty” to the United States (Shimpi & Zirkel, 2012). That is why individuals often referred them as outsiders. The history of the Chinese immigration is shown in Figure 4.
People viewed Chinese immigrants historically mainly as “hardworking drone[s]” and “cheap labor” (Shimpi & Zirkel, 2013, p. 541). They were well-skilled, physiologically not as driven as European immigrants, and here to work and provide for their families (Shimpi & Zirkel, 2012). Many scholars view Asian Americans as the “model minority.” In other cases, Asian Americans were not differentiated in a way that honored the differences among the Asian American communities and their long histories of immigrating to the United States (Shimpi & Zirkel, 2012).

**Practical Stressors**

More Chinese parents can afford the rapidly increasing costs of college as a result of China’s one-child policy and Chinese society’s prioritization of education as a means for social mobility (McDonald, 2012). Over multiple generations, the one-child policy concentrated wealth amongst families, and as education became the conduit for social mobility, families prioritized education expenses. Yet with a significant number of Chinese international students studying in the United States today, familial financial strain and feelings of responsibility for being successful and making their families’ investment worthwhile are still stressors that Chinese international students face (Yan & Berliner, 2011). This is particularly the case for graduate
students (Yan, 2017). These students face immense pressure to succeed given all that their families have invested in their education over many years of studying abroad.

Universities have also struggled to keep up with the needs of these international students. As more and more international students choose to study in the United States, there is a naturally occurring shortage of staff members to adequately support these students. Compounding this challenge are the ever-changing visa regulations that students and administrators face (Urban & Palmer, 2016). This creates additional strain on college staff and can leave students feeling even more isolated and unsupported.

Research into the acculturation stress of Asian international students in higher education has focused on psychological strain and rates of depression (Constantine et al., 2004; Hamamura & Laird, 2014; Rice et al., 2012; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Wei et al., 2007). While researching, I was surprised to see the paradox that emerged when describing Chinese international students today. Researchers highlighted the numerous stresses that Chinese international students face, an emphasis that conflicts with perceptions in the media and among older generations that presume these same students have easy lives. Some have called the post-1980 generation of students the “strawberry generation”: pretty to look at but easily overwhelmed (Lian, 2014). It is clear that these students were not able to handle the contemporaneous stressors that they faced despite the financial support.

**Popular Theories**

International students’ acculturation stress, their feelings of loneliness, and the cultural differences they face are not a new topic of study, and the majority of the studies use similar theoretical frameworks. By conducting this study, I shed light on the differences and similarities...
in the challenges Chinese international students have experienced and are continuing to experience. I outline the three frameworks I rely on in my study.

**Berry’s Acculturation Theory**

One of the most frequently used and cited theories is Berry’s (1997) acculturation theory. In creating this theory, Berry borrowed from Redfield et al. (1936), who defined acculturation as “[the] phenomena that result when groups or individuals having different cultures come into continuous firsthand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups” (p. 149). Throughout the years, the term has been used in anthropology, psychology, cross-cultural studies, immigration and education (Brooks, 2017). With international student numbers increasing in the United States and across the world, more scholars have begun to explore student experiences, acculturation stress, and coping strategies with Berry’s acculturation framework. Fu (2015) mentioned in his literature review that acculturation was “firstly regarded as a direct unidirectional notion that supposes the acculturating subject will follow the rules and notions of the target culture” (p. 125). Berry’s acculturation theory explains in detail and maps out the complexity of internationals students’ journeys as they enter into a new culture and how numerous actors influence their overall experiences.

**Hofstede’s Cultural Theory**

Another frequently mentioned theory is Hofstede’s (1984) cultural theory. Cultural theory suggests that the larger the cultural gap is, the more stress an international student experiences (Ye, 2006). U.S. culture has traditionally been known to place great value on individualism and individualized pursuits, while China and many other East Asian nations prioritize collectivism (Leong, 2015). Using Hofstede’s (1984) cultural theory to understand today’s Chinese international students, one observes that when individuals are making decisions,
such as the decision to go abroad for college, harmony among the whole family is considered most important. Conversely, in the United States, students are raised from an early age to be independent and to challenge their superiors. Chinese students seek harmony as a method of moving forward in education, while U.S. students see debate, challenge, and confrontation as catalysts to growth. Even in issues as minor as roommate disagreements, Chinese students will seek harmony of the room over their own satisfaction. Asian students are also less likely to take risks in their studies, whereas U.S. students view taking a risk as a potential source of innovation (Hofstede, 1984).

**Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory**

The bioecological systems theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1992) has been used to explain the various issues students face, such as mental health (Kirsch et al., 2014; Pinder-Amaker & Bell, 2012), family relations (Tudge et al., 2009), and immigration issues (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). This particular theory illustrates the many different influences on students’ overall experiences. Experiences may be shaped by roommates, classrooms, school cafeterias, residential communities, and even the local mass transit system. The process of influence does not seem to unfold in a chronological order. Rather, students are engaged with these different “actors” in their lives concurrently. Some actors may be visible and others invisible. The theory helps to elucidate the students’ influences using a micro-perspective, such as a family, school, or neighborhood (Berk, 2000); a meso-perspective, such as mass media; and a macro-perspective, such as a place’s political and cultural background (Pinder-Amaker & Bell, 2012) and to consider how these interact with one another.

As I was reviewing the current theories, one particular adult learning theory came to mind: situated learning theory by Lave and Wenger (1991). I use this theory to help me explain
the process of Chinese international students’ acculturation. This learning theory helps me bridge
the gap between the stressors students face during the journey and the knowledge they acquire
and that enables them to develop ways of coping with the stressors at journey’s end.

**Lave and Wenger’s Situated Learning**

Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that “knowledge is situated, being in part a product of
activity, context, and culture in which it is developed and used” (p. 32). They developed two
elements of their situated learning theory: community of practice (CoP) and legitimate peripheral
participation (LPP). CoP suggests that individuals learn in a space where they have a shared
interest and work together towards a goal (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The authors argued that
individuals cannot learn solely through observation (Li et al., 2009) but must also make sense of
what they observe in order to learn (Hung et al., 2004).

Classroom grades are the most important factor that Chinese parents use to determine if
their children are succeeding in the United States. However, many different types of learning and
assessment can occur. Lave and Wenger (1991) indicated that learning is a situated activity and
can occur when individuals participate in events. LPP is the process by which a learner gains
knowledge through participation in shared experiences and practices. In the LPP framework, the
“L” for “legitimate” refers to the approval of the social support groups that individuals build for
themselves. This support can be through a person or organization. “P,” or “peripheral,” helps
distinguish novice Chinese international students who have never studied in the United States
from “experts” who have experienced being international students and gained knowledge. The
second “P” is participation. Lave and Wenger believe it is important for novices to learn and
participate fully in the activities in order to become experts.
Ying and Lises (1991) stated in their study, “During the learning process, while students are discovering how they may fit into the society, they initially will need to call upon people to provide support for their continued sense of self and to foster their emotional well-being. This is best supplied by the support network they have developed prior to coming to the U.S.” (p. 360). For a Chinese international student, a strong support network can determine whether they are successfully acculturated. When pressures and problems arise, students at first are likely to seek help from those with whom they have strong ties, especially family members (Wu & Guzman, 2015). However, today’s Chinese parents have never studied or lived in the United States. It is thus hard for the families to provide valid suggestions when stresses arise. Therefore, developing a new community is crucial for students, as such a community allows them to connect with others who can better empathize with their situations.

It may have held true in the past that the learning events would only take place where the student is studying and living. However, with the advent of the internet, learning is no longer limited by physical location. Influenced by LPP, I explore my participants’ experiences as they progress in the following timeline:

- **before going to the United States**, when the participants have no knowledge of what it means to be international students;
- **while studying in the United States**, when the students are in the throes of their study-abroad experiences; and
- **after completing the journey in the United States**, when the participants have acquired sufficient knowledge and may teach other future students.
Digital Technology’s Impact on Students’ Lives

Digital technology has impacted many aspects of individuals’ lives, including their educational, emotional, social, and cognitive outcomes (Bolton et al., 2013). Prior to the advent of smartphones and the various social media applications available for use today, mass media such as television, music, and movies were ways international students acquired knowledge of U.S. culture while still at home in China (Brooks, 2017). The first time I returned to China after studying in the United States, many friends asked me if life in the United States was just like the American Pie movie. Feelings of alienation arise when Western media fixates on extreme examples of differences between Western norms and the many different cultural traditions and behaviors that international students bring to university campuses. Now, a mere phone serves as a practical learning tool, allowing individuals to read and listen to different books and podcasts about their host culture while still maintaining relationships with family and friends who are back home (Aker et al., 2010). These tools provide individuals with previously nonexistent opportunities to familiarize themselves with a foreign culture, a valuable type of learning that occurs outside the traditional classroom, as Traxler (2009) pointed out. Educators are hoping to use technology to integrate their curricula into students’ daily lives, connecting classrooms, individualizing learning for students, training workers to increase productivity, and providing education to those from remote areas with limited infrastructure (Liu, 2010; Traxler, 2009).

Internet usage has shown mixed results, yielding both a positive and negative impact on students’ overall psychological well-being (Li et al., 2013). Chinese students typically arrive with some preconceived notions of what the Western world should look like, as well as how they should act, based on what they have seen on the internet and via mass media (Brooks, 2017). Most of the students with whom I have worked have shared that when they arrived in their host
country, they experienced the rupture of their perceptions, and when problems arose, they would continue to go back and refer to the internet to resolve perceived inconsistencies.

As an international student recruiter, I have worked with hundreds of parents and families from China and around the world. In addition to receiving the usual questions about the best major offered at my university, school rankings, and job opportunities, I frequently encounter questions such as the following: How safe is the United States? What is the gun control policy on campus? Do many students take drugs? How will visa regulations impact international students? Are U.S. universities still welcoming Chinese international students?

News spreads rather quickly in China through social network sites such as WeChat and Weibo. Sometimes the story is not factual, yet it still stirs the water. This made me wonder: With all the various kinds of new “news channels,” how do social media platforms impact international students’ overall experiences in the United States? In this study, I consider a new factor, social network sites (SNSs), in analyzing Chinese international students’ lives in the United States. In particular, I analyze the following: How do SNSs impact international students’ lives when they arrive in the United States? What types of SNSs are the students currently using? Are these SNSs helping or hindering the students’ overall acculturation experiences?

**Social Support and Social Network Sites**

**Social Support**

Through the internet, the world becomes smaller and participants are able to access their social support groups from afar. As previously mentioned, a significant number of studies have examined students’ acculturation stress and coping strategies. However, very few studies have specifically examined the relationship between stress and participation in online social groups and how that relationship impacts the acculturation process (Ye, 2006).
Research suggests that social networks play an especially important role in international students’ transitions. Wasserman and Frust (1994) defined a social network as “a finite set or sets of actors and the relation or relations defined on them” (p. 20). With better social networks, international students can gain additional support and increase their sense of belonging, which ultimately helps them transition to U.S. academic and social life more successfully (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016). Studies also have shown that with increased social networks, students have better self-esteem, marital satisfaction, and fewer incidents of depression stemming from stress (Li et al., 2013). Many studies have emphasized the importance of international students having friends within the host culture, which contributes to a better psychological state and helps ensure positive acceptance by the host culture (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016). I would add an additional question: What if the students’ goal is no longer to stay abroad long-term but rather to return to China? Montgomery and McDowell (2009) pointed out that it is currently unnecessary for international students to engage with the individuals and culture of their host country to be considered successful. That is why higher-education professionals have started seeing more international students beginning to build their social networks with co-nationals.

Granovetter (1983) separated social ties into two categories: strong ties, which individuals develop with those with whom they are extremely close and care about, such as family and close friends; and weak ties, which individuals develop with those with whom they are less socially and emotionally involved and are instead bonded through shared interests. There are discussions about the pros and cons between strong-tie and weak-tie social support groups. On the one hand, strong ties can provide participants with more meaningful relationships and ultimately better support and psychological outcomes; on the other hand, weak ties offer greater mobility, a naturally larger network, and more general information and resources (Forbush &
Foucault-Welles, 2015). This distinction reminds me of when my cousin came to the United States to study for the first time. She told me that she did not plan to make any close friends because she realized that four years later, they would go their separate ways and likely would never see each other again. Sometimes international students only stay in the country for the duration of their study. Therefore, strong ties with individuals from the host nation may no longer be as attractive as they were in earlier decades, and having stronger ties with co-nationals is more critical (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2015). With the development of different SNSs, international students can build their social support groups online “without walls” (Ye, 2016).

**Social Network Sites (SNSs)**

SNSs are defined as “applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 63). Students who use SNSs while studying abroad have bigger digital and in-person social networks and significantly higher levels of both social and academic adoption in the host culture compared to students who do not use SNSs (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2015). When international students move to a new country, they lose their typical social supports from home (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Therefore, SNSs help students to maintain their strong ties and weak ties while building new ones without the need to be physically present (Wu, 2014). However, just like the internet, SNSs have both positive and negative influences on individuals’ lives.

Studies have shown that students using Facebook in an educational setting actually build stronger connections with local students than students who do not use Facebook in an educational setting (McCarthy, 2013). Undergraduate students in particular like to use Facebook for receiving broader support and increasing their information gathering (Wu, 2014). However,
studies have also shown that Facebook users tend to present mostly positive content rather than sharing the hardships they may be experiencing. Viewers naturally compare aspects of their own lives with the positive aspects of friends’ lives presented on Facebook; this one-dimensional view of others’ lives unsurprisingly leads to lower levels of life satisfaction and negative psychological well-being (Chou & Edge, 2012).

As I read through these articles, I asked my cousin how she would she have felt about using SNSs, particularly Facebook, when she first came to the United States. She was shocked and told me that “Facebook is for old people.” She had set up an account but barely used it. She said there is limited access to U.S. SNSs in China so she does not bother to use them anymore. This made me wonder which types of SNSs that “younger generation” Chinese international students are using.

According to the most recent user ratings of SNSs, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and WeChat are the top five most popular platforms (Statista, 2018). However, due to Chinese censorship, known colloquially as the Great Firewall, these sites, with the exception of WeChat, are not easily utilized by those living in China. Researchers pointed out the harmful effect of Facebook for the first time in 2014 (Mullins, 2014); since then, more and more research has begun to target Chinese international students, showing the possible negative effects of SNSs such as Facebook on study participants. For example, most individuals who regularly use Facebook tend to think others’ lives are much happier than theirs despite hardly knowing one another (Wu, 2014).

Given their popularity and accessibility for individuals living in China, four of these top sites—Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger—do not have a very direct an impact on the population I am studying. Instead, I would argue that Chinese-developed sites may
have a greater effect on academic and social outcomes. These deserve a closer look. With this idea in mind, I chose to use the top five sites that Chinese individuals have access to and use frequently: WeChat, QQ, QZone, Sina Weibo, and Baidu Tieba. The top three are all run by the same company, Tencent, which is one of the largest listed Internet companies in China (Wu, 2014). The SNS that is used the most in China, WeChat, also known as Weixin, exceeded one billion accounts after the Chinese New Year in 2017 (Tencent, 2017). The app integrates features from both Facebook and WhatsApp as well as many more. It started as a mobile message app whereby users could text friends and family members using Wi-Fi. Today users can host video conference calls with multiple family members on the phone at once, providing opportunities to share their thoughts and pictures. WeChat also offers a feature called Wallet through which users can pay phone bills, hail a taxi, and pay for retail goods. In China today, a person who has a smartphone in hand does not need to carry their wallet with them wherever they go.

As for Chinese international students today, two of the popular apps that students are using are WeChat Group (微信群), where individuals join groups according to their interests or life experiences, such as studying abroad; and WeChat Public Platform (微信公共平台), where individuals can create their own platform spaces and share their stories, ideas, and fashion tips, and scholars can share their research and knowledge. While preparing to undertake my research, I wrote a short blog post about a book my advisor had given me, iGen (Twenge, 2017). The book discusses the challenges U.S. teenagers face while growing up in an age of unprecedented digital technologies. Two days after writing a short review and posting it on the WeChat Public Platform, I had over 1,000 viewer reads.

Reading the book iGen (Twenge, 2017) stimulated my interest in the topic of this dissertation. The book explores the challenges facing teens today, including difficulties making
friends, struggles with mental health, and problems communicating. Reading iGen was a wakeup call for me. Since my cousin arrived in the United States for high school three years ago, she has lived and worked with me. As she shared with me more and more of her experiences in school, I was shocked by the stress she seemed to be enduring. These stresses came from many sources, including her academic work, peer pressure, competitiveness within the school, and general social pressures to conform. As I reflected on my own move to the United States 16 years ago, I realized that the two of us had very different experiences. Was it because of our 12-year age gap? She always jokes with me that we have a generation gap. Perhaps she is right.

**Summary and Development of Questions**

Chinese international students’ experiences in the United States are complex. The acculturation process can be stressful and SNSs only make the process much more so. While many studies have been conducted on acculturation and social media’s impact on foreign students’ experiences, I continue to wonder about the challenges Chinese international students face throughout the acculturation process and the role that SNSs play in them. Knowing that age and duration of study may affect students’ overall experiences, I chose to focus my study on Chinese international students who had not previously studied in the United States. I also decided to study two different generations, one whose experience is filled with technology and another that had little involvement with technology. I investigate whether SNSs have had an impact on the younger generation’s ability to cope with the different kinds of acculturation stress they may encounter.
Chapter 3: Methodology

January 2020

January 22, 2020. I am on my way to the airport with my suitcase full of different university mugs. I am READY! I am ready to go back and tackle the second-round interviews with my participants. I planned this trip because I thought it would be a nice gesture to go back home and meet with my participants again. First of all, I want to show my appreciation for their time with a small token along with a thank-you card. Secondly, I wish to share with them some of the findings and ask if there is anything more they would like to share. Lastly and most importantly, I go to triangulate my data. I would like to gather some artifacts. I would like to look for documents they mentioned during the interviews. I would like to ask the questions I forgot to ask during the first interview, as well as those questions that I was afraid to ask.

As I step onto the plane, the flight attendant kindly asks me if I have a mask with me. A mask? For pollution? She politely informs me of the news regarding a possible new virus that is coming from Wuhan, Hubei. I remember seeing this on the news, but I thought it was not that bad! It was merely the flu. She is not so worried, either, and tells me to keep washing my hands and to avoid touching my eyes, nose, and ears. I will be okay. Yep! It is not that bad! It is just the flu! I am going home for the New Year, and I am going to get my “job” done!

January 23, 2020. The lockdown is announced by the government. No one is allowed to enter or leave a couple of cities within Hubei, where Wuhan is the capital city. The government’s new policy suggests all citizens in China try to minimize their activity, cancel New Year’s gatherings, and stay inside their houses as much as possible. A slogan from a community within my city is “不出门就是最大的孝顺,” which means that staying inside of one’s home is the biggest act of filial piety to one’s family.
As for Chinese traditions, the 15 days of New Year are celebrated in many ways. Visiting family and friends is, for sure, the most important one. Because of this virus, though, many people have lost the chance to take the train or plane to even go home; some of them are stuck because they had to work the last shift. And for some, those doctors and nurses, when the outbreak happened, most of them voluntarily left their families behind and went back to the hospital to fight this battle. Within days, the shortage of masks, the shortage of bleach, the shortage of industrial alcohol, the fear of death, the fake news, the positive and negative messages across WeChat and its Moments feature seem to have blanketed the rare clear sky of my hometown. Yes, I admit, I am affected. I am worried. I am concerned but do not know what I can do at the moment. Instead, as the government has suggested, my whole family is staying inside of the house. I am helping everyone with cooking and cleaning and am spending hours and hours talking about my life in the United States, my current research, and my goal in life. Of course, since I am a woman over 30 working on my Ph.D., marriage is also among the “important” tasks I need to complete.

January 30, 2020. The World Health Organization (WHO) declares a global health emergency. Two days before the announcement, the United States government decided to halt major flights between four Chinese cities and the United States between February 1 and February 7, and my original flight was within those dates. Because of this new policy and my mother’s wish to battle the virus from the frontlines as a doctor, my parents suggest that I leave China on an earlier date. That very day, I return to the United States safely and begin my 14 days of voluntary self-quarantine.

As a rookie researcher, I had frequently told my advisors that I could not wait for my actual fieldwork and data collection to begin. I imagined that that would be the most exciting
and, in a way, “sexy” part of my dissertation journey. You get through your proposal, you draft a research plan, and you think life will unfold the way you wish it will. My advisors had “warned” me for many years that in reality, such plans do not always pan out. Instead, you find yourself reacting to the chaos of changing events outside of your control. If one day you get through that and finish your work, you can finally call yourself a researcher.

**Introduction**

When a person travels, whether it be to a new town, a new university, a new country, a new culture, or even a new place of residence, they sometimes find it difficult to adjust (Zablon, 2010). The challenges can be especially serious for individuals who are unprepared for the new environment, particularly in the areas of language use, cultural adaptation, and even unfamiliar foods. However, with the growth of technology, the challenges become a little bit more complex in both positive and negative ways.

Examples of complexities include potential students and their families’ lack of knowledge regarding studying abroad (Baba & Hosoda, 2014); the growth in the overall number of international students (IIE, 2019); the shortage of campus support staff and advising offices (Urban & Palmer, 2016); and the stereotypes schools have of different student populations, which cause some misunderstandings between the institutions and the students (Hellstén & Prescott, 2004). With current technology, students and their families encounter even more conflicting information about U.S. culture and daily life than before. Students and their families hold many stereotypes and false beliefs about safety, education, and potential immigration opportunities in the United States. Currently most of the families whose children plan to study abroad hire an agent or a counselor to help their children apply to colleges, yet these agents might never have studied abroad themselves. Even those who have studied abroad might never
have stepped foot on the campuses of the universities to which the students that they are
counseling are applying. Yet the agents still have full confidence as they cite many
misconceptions of what education truly looks like in the United States and on those particular
campuses (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011).

Most parents and students only know about the Ivy League schools or the top 50
universities per the *U.S. News and Report* magazine. Or they only want to send their children to
school in large metropolitan cities such as New York City, Boston, Dallas, or Los Angeles,
which are the top four U.S. cities hosting international students (IIE, 2017). Most of the students
have not decided on a major, and most of them have never even visited the United States. Parents
would like their students to receive the “best” education so they can obtain good jobs once they
graduate from college. However, there are too many gaps in parents and students’ expectations
regarding the experiences the students will have while on campus.

Studies have found that the most frequently encountered types of acculturation stress
international students face when coming to study in the United States are the language barrier,
academic differences, a lack of social support, ethnic and cultural discrimination, and other
practical factors (Fu, 2015). The majority of these studies were conducted once students had
already arrived in the United States, thereby overlooking the students’ experiences and
expectations before coming to the United States. Most of these studies are quantitative in nature.
However, in my work and living experiences, I have found that some of the challenges and
stresses students experience begin the moment they start to entertain thoughts of coming to the
United States. Scholars in the past have done a good job pointing out the issues surrounding
studying abroad. However, participants’ experiences may vary greatly because of familial
background, education level, age, gender, and previous life experiences. Qualitative studies are
able to go beyond the numbers to share actual stories and experiences (Yan, 2017). After reflecting on my own living and work experiences and reading through the current literature discussed in the previous chapters, I proposed three research questions.

**Research Questions**

Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggested that for students coming from collectivist cultures such as Asian cultures, the motivation for attending school is to be successful and honor the familial name and history. While working as an international student recruiter, I saw clearly that a student’s decision about which college to attend involved the family as a whole. Friends and colleagues of the family were also encouraged to contribute to the decision. When it comes to education and what it means to be successful, parents and students assume that earning a 4.0 GPA is indicative of success. Most of the families I encountered did not understand the value that the U.S. education system places on learning that takes place outside the classroom.

The disconnect among family expectations, the reality of college life, and the numerous personal and cultural stresses placed on students is magnified by the new trend of sending even younger students to the United States, especially during very formative periods of development. Students often study in the United States as the default option if they do not meet the criteria for admission to a prestigious Chinese university. However, students often complain of the loneliness they experience in their new communities and country. When issues occur, students internalize their struggles and seek help from their family, friends, and different social networks.

In recruiting and working with students and their families for more than eight years, and hearing stories from staff members and professors at different universities, I have realized that across different periods of growth, different generations, and different social structures, coping strategies and support networks may function very differently. Therefore, within this study, my
objective is to analyze and compare how two different generations of Chinese international students learned different strategies to cope with acculturation stress that drew on their social networks. To help me explain and explore the topic, I developed the following sub-questions:

1. How did acculturation stresses differ between the generations studied?
2. How did each individual create their social networks?
3. How did individuals learn from their social networks to cope with those acculturation stresses?

**Exploratory Multiple Case Study**

After carefully reviewing the current research approaches, I chose an exploratory multiple case study for this study. First, as a social constructivist, I sought to understand what has happened in my participants’ lives. In discussing social constructivism, Creswell (2013) noted, “The goal of research, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation” (p. 25). Therefore, it was important to position myself as a researcher and interpret the stories and experiences the participants share with me in order to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ life experiences and help answer the “how” and “why” regarding their challenges (Yin, 2014). Second, a study needs to be contemporary rather than historically driven (Yin, 2014). Despite including some historical research on the participants, the journeys and the processes were ongoing. The tools that international students used in the past may no longer exist in today’s society and other tools have emerged, such as the SNSs that have only become popular within the past 15 years (Bolton et al., 2013). Lastly, a case study needs to have either very little or no way to manipulate the subjects (Yin, 2014). Given the complexity of my research population, it was difficult to manipulate my sample. Even though it was difficult to
summarize my findings and generalize about Chinese international students’ experiences based on my data, my random sampling adds value to previous studies and brings the data to life.

I explored each participant’s experience studying in the United States to shed light on the existing research. After examining the existing theories, I decided that situated learning theory and other theories could guide me through the analysis process. I did not need to develop a new theory so I did not choose grounded theory. Since I was not focusing on one or more possible sets of phenomena or trying to describe or interpret a culture that is shared within a group, I did not consider phenomenology or ethnography, either. I was not interested in exploring themes through just one or a couple of participants’ stories. I was more interested in understanding how Chinese international students’ experiences have changed, how they have learned from these experiences, and how they have used social supports to overcome their struggles. In the end, I thought a case study approach would be most suitable for this study.

**Researcher’s Proposition**

As a social constructivist, my goal is to contribute to a broader and more in-depth understanding of how the world functions and how the world has changed throughout history. However, as a Chinese international student myself, I realize that it is crucial to the integrity of my study that I remain objective and not rely on my own experiences. During the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes, I was objective, ethical, and open-minded. As a researcher, my job is to present the voices of the participants as authentically as possible. Of course, as Creswell (2013) stated, “Researchers recognize that their own background shapes their interpretation, and they ‘position themselves’ in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural and historical experiences” (p. 25).
Therefore, my personal background as an international student enriched my overall analysis of the participants’ experiences.

I did many practice interviews before beginning my actual research. I sought to become comfortable asking questions, and in particular, to become comfortable asking hard questions regardless of a participant’s age, position, gender, or power dynamic. In the end, despite the practice I undertook, there were still many moments where I found myself worried about the questions I was asking or of losing “control” during the question and answer process.

**Pilot Studies**

To practice and learn more about my research, I conducted two pilot studies before beginning my actual dissertation research. In the first one, I interviewed six students at the liberal arts college where I worked. All six of the students were students whom I had recruited from China. The overall experience of the interviews was positive. Many of them shared details with me that, despite having known me for years, they had been somewhat hesitant to share with me in the past. The preliminary findings of this initial pilot study showed several themes. First, Chinese students reported having a more challenging first year than students from other Asian countries. This was mainly because other Asian student groups outnumbered the Chinese students on campus. The participants felt the few Chinese international students on campus made it hard for them to form a social circle unless they began to reach out to other non-Chinese students. However, because of the language limitation and a lack of confidence, they were slightly uncomfortable with doing so.

The pilot study revealed several important details. First, given the size of the group and the timing of the research, I realized that I needed to conduct much more in-depth research to understand Chinese international students’ challenges and compare them with those of other
Asian groups. Second, the Chinese students identified common themes that set them apart from other international students. Third, I found there are issues in generalizing about students from Asian countries as there are clearly within-group differences. Lastly, as a person of Chinese descent myself, I had the language advantage in conducting my research, so in the case of translation issues, I was able provide participants with a choice of languages based on their comfort level. Therefore, the first pilot study helped confirm my choice of population—Chinese international students—and it helped me to develop more in-depth research questions.

The literature has shown that despite some similarities among Chinese international students studying in the United States, undergraduate and graduate students may experience different types of acculturation stress (Yan, 2017). The two groups of Chinese international students I decided to study are described in more detail in a later section of Chapter 3.

Since my population’s education level was different in the main study than it was in the first pilot study, I decided to use the questions that I had developed in the first pilot study to help me conduct interviews in the second one. In the second pilot study, I chose two graduate students whom I knew only marginally through a student organization. I recruited them through word of mouth. Both of them happened to come from the same university in China and had come to the United States through the same joint program. Therefore, they had the same major, were of similar age, had similar interests, and were even roommates. However, despite so many similarities, they were from two different provinces in China, had different levels of English-language proficiency, cited varied reasons for coming to the United States, and had very different goals for their post-degree lives. The second pilot study not only helped me shaped my final research questions but also allowed me to understand the types of mistakes and issues that might arise in the field, identify situations to avoid, and recognize any biases I might have before,
during, and after an interview. Conducting the pilot interviews helped me decide not to interview people who knew each other because I might make presumptions about the other person and their experiences. I also chose not to interview students with similar family backgrounds, such as those who were from the same hometown or had attended the same university, recognizing that these factors may have affected their already established social supports. Lastly, I decided to use at least two recording devices. One of the interviews during the pilot study had to be interrupted due to a mistake in room booking; the second part of the interview was inadvertently recorded over the other conversation, and the data went missing.

During my short stay in China in May 2019, my father had a business trip on which some of his colleagues would be joining him. He helped me ask two colleagues who fit the study criteria to do test interviews with me. The interviews helped me tremendously. First of all, I was extremely nervous when talking to them for the first time. One of them I had heard about but had never spoken to before. Both of the men were very kind and supportive. However, I was nervous, and at times my mind would go blank because I was afraid of what they might think of my questions. Second, compared to individuals from the younger generation, they seemed to have many more stories to tell. One participant said to me that this project is significant, and he hopes that someday we can sit down and write out his whole journey as an adult. It was significant to me to hear that. However, the downside of it was that I was utterly caught up in in his life stories, and the interview touched on only a small part of his experience abroad. Third, I learned to use different words and tones when I drafted my recruiting messages. I used more polite titles when recruiting so that the potential student participants would feel more respected. Lastly, one interesting theme emerged from both interviews. Both of the men had sent their children abroad, and so children and family came up a lot. They believed their children had gone through more
acculturation stress than they had, which helped me consider a different project in the future that would involve interviewing their children.

After finishing my dissertation proposal and receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I went back to the pilot study reflections, discussed them with my committee members, consulted books and literature, and carefully created the final draft of interview questions. Before I left the United States to go back to China, I asked another three friends to practice with me for the last time. These friends had different majors and family backgrounds, and were of different ages, but all of them were all graduate students at my institution. I asked them to provide feedback. I used my consent form and tested different types of interview sites to determine which sites would yield the best-quality interview recordings. Then, I finalized the interview questions.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

**Population**

Yan (2017) found that even though his study’s sample was comprised entirely of Chinese international students of varying ages, common stressors affected the students differently. Younger Chinese international students between the ages of 18 and 23 showed significantly higher levels of stress and depression than the older adults (Li et al., 2013). In terms of SNS usage, it has been shown that members of younger generations are more likely to talk to strangers than members of older generations (Ahn, 2011). This may be a characteristic that empowers younger-generation students in their transition to the U.S. education system.

Researchers have begun focusing on Chinese undergraduate international students due to the undeniable financial benefit for universities. Institutions tend to spend more time, money, and effort working with undergraduate students. According to Yan (2017), graduate students face a
high level of stress, but this stress is different than undergraduates’ stress. To compare the two generations accurately, I limited the participants to those who had completed graduate school in the United States. Each of the participants I recruited needed to meet the following criteria:

1. Each participant must have been a degree-seeking student in the United States who was attending school in the United States for the first time.

2. Each participant must have graduated from a traditional Chinese high school and university. This excluded those potential participants who had attended programs or schools with a foreign partner institution.

3. Each participant must have been enrolled in a U.S. master’s or doctoral program.

Two Generations

At the beginning of my research, I used more of the Western view of generations in choosing my participant population. In the United States, generations are defined differently depending on the study. In the book *iGen*, individuals are grouped based on year of birth and are referred to as Baby-Boomers, GenX, Millennials, or iGen, depending on the period in which they were born (Twenge, 2017). Many research articles have been written about generational differences regarding social values, participation in civic life (Xu & Qi, 2014), workplace behavior (Becton et al., 2014), and peer relationship dynamics (Apugo, 2017). These differences do not truly apply to the population I sought to study, which consisted of students coming directly from China to study in the United States for the first time. I therefore chose to identify them by Chinese standards and not based upon Western value systems or social constructs.

The Chinese generation split is rather simple and is based on the decade in which one was born. I was born in the 1980s, which makes me 八零后 (1980s); my parents were born in the 1960s, and they are called 六零后 (1960s). The first group of individuals who came over to
study in the United States following the Chinese economic reform were born in the 1940s. This group had experienced some of the most important events in China, such as the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution. Their education was impacted in various ways by these events. It was difficult to interview the original group of students. However, I still wished to interview the generation of individuals who had studied abroad at about that time in order to compare them to today’s generation. Therefore, I decided to interview those Chinese students born in the 1950s (五零后) and those born in the 1990s (九零后). Both groups of individuals had studied abroad in the United States as graduate students. Yet the first came at a time when there was no internet, while the second was born and grew up with the internet enmeshed in their everyday lives.

**Data Collection Procedure**

My population was comprised of Chinese international students; as such, English was the participants’ second language. Each participant was given a choice of language to use during the interview. All eight participants chose Mandarin Chinese as their preferred language for the interview. Therefore, I transcribed all interviews in Chinese. To be as ethical and as objective as possible, I present the participants’ direct quotations in both Mandarin and English. Because the interview sessions included some sensitive comments, I alone completed all the transcriptions. Since there are not many people born in the 1950s who studied in the United States, it was imperative to protect those participants’ identities. I worked with my committee members to draft each participant’s case before presenting it. Before conducting the interview, I understood that there was a chance that a participant would wish to withdraw from the interview and not give me permission to use the data in my study. I was sure to disclose this upfront in the consent form and inform the participants that they were free to drop out of the study at any time. Luckily,
all participants went through with the study. The following planning and decisions were informed by Yin’s (2014) recommendations.

**Recruitment**

When designing my study, I hoped to use snowball sampling to recruit eight participants to interview, understanding that there might be some turnover. I intended to split the population evenly between the two generations being studied. I planned to identify potential participants with the help of friends and family, reaching out to existing contacts and introducing myself using WeChat. Once a potential participant approved my WeChat friend request, I sent them a letter of introduction (see Appendix A). WeChat was my preferred communication platform because it was likely that potential participants would have the app. Using WeChat also enabled potential participants to deny my request without feeling pressured to participate.

In reality, I began to explore and make connections for interviews during summer 2019. I thought that during the summer trip I had made tremendous progress in terms of networking and seeking out eligible participants. Through reading the literature and conducting research, I came across an organization called 欧美同学会 (Western Returned Scholars). Initially, I thought, with so many members in the organization, recruitment would be natural. The hardest part might be to get a foot in the door. Luckily, one morning when I was playing tennis with my father, I ran into one of my father’s colleagues, a fellow professor at his university. On his shirt were the words “Western Returned Scholars Association.” He happened to be the past president of the organization and would soon be retired. After telling him about my research, he kindly offered to help me reach out to members of different generations. The professional alumni organization broke down the generations into the 1950s, 1960s, 1990s, and so on, which worked out perfectly.
I told him once I received my IRB approval, I would reach out to him and start snowballing the participants.

**Meetings and Travel Arrangements**

Soon after receiving my IRB approval, I booked my travel arrangements and returned to China to conduct the interviews. The original plan was to go back to China for a maximum of two months so that I could stay within my budget. I had changed all of the interview sites to one city, Beijing, to remain within the budget and maximize my time and opportunities to meet with participants. I understood that participants from both generations might have full-time jobs and decided to plan my schedule around their availability, understanding that some times and locations might not work out. In reality, the hardest part was recruiting the actual participants.

Once in China, I reached out to my father’s colleague and requested a list of possible individuals I could contact. He provided me with a couple of names and WeChat accounts. He told me he would also reach out to people from the 1950s, and I would ask the leader of the 1990s generation group to contact individuals born in the 1990s. After days of waiting, the point person was kind enough to send me a couple of recommendations for the 1950s. When I received the detailed information, I realized that they all lived in different provinces. I went back to the message I had written to the contact person and realized I had neglected to mention the location requirement. I could have asked him to provide another list of participants. However, I was too embarrassed and worried I would be creating more work for him. Therefore, I thanked him and told him I would try my best to reach out to individuals who lived in Beijing.

Thanks to the professor, I was able to add five other organization leaders’ WeChat accounts to my contact list. All of them kindly approved my request, but only three wrote back to me. After adding them, I shared information about my research, including my research questions
and participant criteria, and asked if they could help me identify possible candidates. All three people kindly told me they would try to help, but they could not make any promises.

Two leaders directly shared my information with some of their contacts, and I was able to talk to four possible candidates. However, two were out of town at the time and introductions would thus need to be scheduled at a later time. One had studied in another country before coming to the United States. The last candidate fit most of the criteria, but he had gone to the United States only for his undergraduate studies. He mentioned he would still like to meet with me because he was very interested in my research. He told me that he was a member of his university’s alumni association and he might be able help me recruit others after learning more about my research.

One leader who was very involved with the 1980s and 1990s generations kindly added me to a chat group. He told me that I could post all of my recruitment materials there and see if anyone was interested. After different rounds of posting, there were only two people who added me, and though they were interested in my study, they did not fit the criteria.

By then, I was at the end of the first month, and I was frustrated and thinking I might end up going back to the United States with no data. I reached out to my advisors to ask for help. Due to time constraints, after receiving the approval of both of my chairs, I changed my sampling to purposeful convenience sampling.

With a limited amount of time and many rejections from participants, I reached out to my friends, family, and colleagues for support. The result was remarkable. Within two weeks, I was able to secure all the interviews and set up times and locations for all the participants.

My interviews were held at various coffee shops, an ice cream shop, a hotel lobby, and participants’ own offices. The participants chose all of the interview locations. Since I conducted
all my interviews in Beijing, where traffic congestion is well known, my main transportation methods were the subway and shared bikes (Figure 5).

Every evening before an interview, I would travel to the actual interview location to time myself and see how long it took me to get there. I would also try to find the best route in case I became lost the next day. Because two of the participants could only meet on a particular day, I had two interviews on that day. This required me to ride my bike to two locations on the same day. Luckily, they were kind enough to book the two locations close enough so that I could bike from one to the other. I checked in with my participants prior to meeting in case an emergency had arisen, which might have caused them to have to cancel or make changes. Luckily, all my interviews took place as scheduled.

Figure 5

*Using a Shared Bike to Travel to Interviews*
Sources of Evidence

I originally hoped to include four sources of evidence to support my findings. Social network mapping would be used to help participants identify their social networks and whether they had strong ties or weak ties. Semi-structured interviews would be short case study interviews, each lasting about an hour. Direct observations would be recorded with two tape recorders. I also hoped to gather physical artifacts such as family photos, dolls, or childhood objects that were sentimental to participants, having helped them through hard times or having special meaning from their school years. The time commitment for each interview included one day to prepare, a second to conduct the interview, and a third for reflection and potential follow-up questions. I stored all the finished transcriptions and field notes in a folder on my computer and backed them up on a hard drive and on Google Drive. However, when I went back to China to conduct the second round of research, COVID-19 was happening. I was not able to collect the additional sources for my triangulation. Instead, I more deeply analyzed the participants’ interviews themselves.

To increase the density of data, I adopted a narrative approach when analyzing the final data. In the next chapter, I present in detail the overall stories of the participants before performing within-generation and cross-generation analyses. Following Creswell (2013), I present each story by relating the chronological series of events each participant experienced while studying in the United States.

Each of the interviews lasted, on average, for about an hour and a half. I usually used the first 20 minutes of the interview to tell the participant about my research and some of the research questions, to read through the consent form, and to generally make them feel comfortable. After obtaining their permission, I began recording.
Interviews

Yin (2014) argued that “one of the most important sources of case study evidence is the interview” (p. 110). The interview questions I developed came from the pilot studies. These questions guided my interviews; however, they did not limit the scope or direction of the interviews. I learned to be present with the participants to make them feel comfortable and relaxed. During the interviews, the participants often strayed far off topic, meaning that I gathered more information than needed. I understood that depending on the participant, it was occasionally necessary to rephrase questions to keep the interview focused.

All of my questions were open-ended questions. After the pilot studies, I noticed that the participants indicated specific time points at which they had experienced difficulties with their host institutions or with themselves. The challenges might have occurred before they had come to the United States, right after they had come to the United States, during their first semester, or at a later period. Therefore, my questions were guided by the various time periods they had mentioned. Because of the process of LPP, the overall questions were also broken down into three bigger time periods.

Since most of my participants had never met me before, to help my participants identify me, I changed my WeChat profile picture at the time of the interviews to a professional photo so they could spot me right away. I also let them know ahead of time where I would be sitting and what I would be wearing that day. I always offered them a cup of tea or coffee or anything they might like to order before we began. I also tried to engage in small talk at first and ask about their day. Even so, there were often moments at the beginning when the participants were either shy or holding back. It was very clear to me that the 1990s group was holding back a lot more than the 1950s group.
Table 2 presents a sample of my interview questions in both Mandarin and English.

**Table 2**

*Interview Questions (Partial)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time period</th>
<th>采访问题</th>
<th>Interview questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>背景的了解 Before coming to the United States and family background</td>
<td>为何留学，如何选择学校，最终决定与准备，语言背景，对美国走前的想象与认知</td>
<td>Why study abroad? How did you choose... What made you... How did you prepare... How about your language... Did you have thoughts about the United States before...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>初到美国 After arriving in the United States</td>
<td>到达美国后最惊讶的事情，自己一人还是有朋友或家人，初入美国时的不适应或者没想象到的事情，刚去的时候，会觉得哪里不适应或者给你带来最大的挑战？还记得认识的第一个朋友么？是怎样认识的？</td>
<td>What was the most shocking... Were you here alone or... When you first arrived in the United States, what was/were the biggest challenges you faced? Do you remember the first person you called friend? How did you both...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>后来的故事--- 愿意分享一下你在那边的一些记忆犹新的故事么？美好的或者难过的？你的支持圈都在哪里？你是如何与他们保持沟通的呢？最后再遇到困难时，你的朋友圈或者家人是如何帮助你 overcome 的呢？最后--- 如果你给未来的学生或者同伴建议，你希望告诉他们什么呢？</td>
<td>Afterwards, to reflect on life after the United States... Can you share some stories, good or bad or... Who would you consider as your support? In what way... When you encountered difficulties, how did your support group help you overcome them? In what ways? Lastly, if you could give suggestions to future students, what would you tell them?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Unit of Analysis**

To prescreen the eight participants, I used the one-phrase approach (Yin, 2014). I recruited four individuals for each group, for a total of four female and four male students, split evenly between the generations. Initially, I hoped that each participant would refer another participant to join the study. Ideally they would have had different majors and family backgrounds and would have studied in different states. I hoped that the shared experience would be studying in the United States. However, with the limited time and resources available to me, I had to recruit eight participants all at once. Luckily, the end result was positive. Each participant’s background was unique. Even those participants in the same generation were rarely from the same province in China. They had attended different universities in different states. Most of them had had different majors. The precise years each participant studied in the United States were also different. I anticipated that, with the participants’ diverse socioeconomic family backgrounds, the outcomes of their overall acculturation experiences would vary. The results and themes I found show differently. Regardless of social background, hometown, place of study in the United States, and type of university and program, the participants had many major commonalities.

My participants’ demographic profiles are given in Table 3. The order of participants is based on chronology and the order in which the participants were interviewed.
Table 3

Participants’ Background Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Education level when studying in the United States</th>
<th>Location of university</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>East Coast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>East Coast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>East Coast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waverly</td>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Anonymization of Participants

During the IRB process, I stated that because this research specifically focused on participants’ personal stories and experiences, it was important for me to keep the participants as anonymous as possible. However, studies have shown that no matter how hard a researcher tries, it is impossible to have participants be completely anonymous (Saunders et al., 2015). That is why I purposely asked each participant to give me a preferred name or a letter they would like me to use in lieu of their real name. In the end, there was only one person who used an English name. To protect my participants’ identities, I decided to assign them pseudonyms. The names I chose for them had various purposes. Some pseudonyms were chosen based on an important or famous person a participant mentioned or a person the participant admired. I investigated the meanings behind the names to try to fit their personalities. Lastly, I purposely chose these pseudonyms based on the popularity of particular names during the generation in which they studied.
Particularly for the participants from the 1950s generation, who were among the few Chinese international students studying in the United States during the 1980s, I purposely left all their fields of study and jobs vague. Despite having different hometowns and family backgrounds, details that were similarly purposefully left vague, all of the participants are working in the same city in China now. It is worth acknowledging that individuals who have close ties to these participants might still recognize their identities (Saunders et al., 2015). In Chapter 4, I describe each participant in detail.

**Data Analysis Procedure**

I used the six phases of thematic analysis in organizing my data (University of Auckland, n.d.):

- familiarization with the data;
- coding;
- generating initial themes;
- reviewing themes;
- defining and naming themes; and
- write-up.

Within the process I embedded time-series coding. I chose thematic analysis as the main vehicle for analyzing my data because of the sample size and the focus of my research questions on the participants’ overall experiences (University of Auckland, n.d.). I included two specific coding recommendations in the case studies, which are explained later in this section.

**Organization of the Data**

After trying to use MAXQDA for one transcription, I realized that I would prefer to hand-code my data (Table 4). As Creswell (2013) stated, “Computer programs are most helpful
with large databases, such as 500 or more pages of tests, although they can have values for small
database as well” (p. 201). I found that as I was reading through each transcription and the notes
I took during the interview, it was useful to have a physical copy in hand. This way, I could
highlight key phrases while reading; I also was able to write notes and arrange them how I
preferred. I felt closer to my participants and their stories by doing this. Therefore, after the last
round of checking, I printed all my transcriptions and arranged a colored pen, notebooks, and a
blackboard on which to take notes.

Table 4

Coding Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Round</th>
<th>Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1     | Thematic coding  
Overall read + memo |
| 2     | Thematic coding  
Background information and overall story  
Reading (influenced by Berry’s acculturation theory) |
| 3     | Time-series coding  
Before going to the United States  
After arriving in the United States  
Reflection on the overall journey  
Social mapping (influenced by situated learning theory) |
| 4     | Within-generation comparison |
| 5     | Cross-case comparison |

Familiarization with the Data

When I began to write the analysis in Chapter 4, it had been awhile since I had read my
transcriptions. Therefore, to refresh my memory and bring myself back to the moment, I first
listened to the audio recordings one more time while I traced through each word. This time not
only was I double-checking the transcriptions, but I was also focusing on the tone of voice and pacing, such as pauses, laughs, or sighs. It surprised me that as I listened the audio, I was able to spot new things that I had not heard or noticed before. Before I began the analysis in earnest, I wrote memos on the side to draw out certain moments or stories that I wished to review.

According to Creswell (2013), sometimes it is good not to have an agenda in mind when coding a transcription. This may help the researcher understand the code and unearth small details that might surprise them. Therefore, during the first round of the analysis (Figure 6), I did not have any expectations. Rather, I simply read through the transcriptions while comparing them to the field notes I had taken. Throughout the process, I wrote memos and noted the most memorable stories for future reference in English. It was apparent to me, though, that despite trying to have an open mind while reading through the transcriptions and with an awareness of my previous literature review on stress, I was marking points that echoed the literature, and this familiarity made them much easier to spot. Yet there are also parts that were rather unique, which I present in Chapter 4 in more detail.
Coding

According to Yin (2014), for the second round of analysis, “unless there is statistical analysis, there are few fixed formulas or cookbook recipes to guide the novice. Instead, much depends on a researcher’s own style of rigorous empirical thinking, along with the sufficient prestation of evidence and careful consideration of alternative interpretations” (p. 133). Despite the limited guidelines for analyzing a case study, there are still some that researchers can use. I analyzed my data by relying on my theoretical propositions. Yin (2014) argued that “the original objectives and design of the case study presumably were based on such propositions, which in turn reflected a set of research questions, reviews of the literature, and new hypotheses or propositions” (p. 136).

In developing acculturation theory (Figure 7), Berry identified specific variables and steps that might influence someone’s overall experiences, beginning with the personal variables...
that exist prior to acculturation, such as age, gender, education status, migration status, and personality, among others. During a student’s acculturation process, there are also moderating factors, such as the length of time a student studies in the United States; their attitude and behavior towards the stress and their life as a whole; their methods of coping with the stressors; the presence of social support; and any social bias, such as prejudice or discrimination. Based on this theoretical framework, I was able to identify different variables while writing the overall descriptions of the participants in Chapter 4.

**Figure 7**

*Berry’s Acculturation Theory Framework*

Time-Series Coding

For my third round of analysis, I deployed a technique recommended by Yin (2014), the time-series analysis. Influenced by Berry’s acculturation theory along with LPP from situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), all of my initial research interview questions were guided by variables that could be defined over a large time frame: before going to the United States, after arriving in the United States for the first year, or the overall experience before moving back to China. This round, I read the transcriptions line by line and gave each small theme a code.

In Chapter 2, I presented the rationale for using adult learning theories to analyze my findings because of the missing steps between the students’ coping strategies and the ultimate overcoming of stressors. The third round of analysis followed Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of situated learning as LPP in CoPs. One important concept guiding a CoP is how a person fits in as a member of that particular community. I noticed something as I was coding for the third round that was shockingly interesting. As I was reading through each participant’s story and noting the key person for each time phase and part of the journey, a clear social map presented itself (see Chapter 4). I began to draw the maps while reading the notes, and the maps helped me visualize a much clearer story, which in turn helped me understand each participant’s CoP. I was extremely excited when the maps emerged in my mind while reading through the transcriptions.

In this study, I considered the social support group each participant formed as their CoP. I wanted to explore how, after encountering different stressors, a participant formed a CoP. I also sought to learn how, throughout their journey, each participant learned through their interaction with and participation in the CoP to cope with the stressors they experienced. The overall analytical process was influenced by the material shown in Figure 8.
During the **fourth round** of analysis, I took all the small codes and possible codes I had uncovered during the second round and grouped them into larger themes that were influenced by my literature review. I also noted themes that were worth exploring later, as some major themes emerged from my own interviews this time.

During the **fifth round** of analysis, I first compared all the common themes among the participants with those of each generation grouping. Then I wrote down the major common themes that arose within each generation group.
Cross-Case Synthesis and Write-up

In the final round, I utilized cross-case synthesis to help me compare the two generations (Yin, 2014). The goal was to identify the differences and similarities between the two generations. Chapter 4 discusses this comparison in more detail. First, I reviewed the detailed description of each participant and the major themes that emerged from their interview. Then I compared these themes within the group and identified the group’s major themes. Lastly, I examined the two generations side by side and compared the major similarities and differences.

Overall, the data collection and analysis were very time-consuming since I worked to acquire additional information and sources of evidence and I used two different analytical techniques to extract findings. However, I chose to use a case study approach for my research as I realized it would help me to explore the stories yet still provide enough guidance and strategies to keep the interviews and data analysis on track.

Ethical Issues

After my pilot studies but before going into the field, I became concerned that I would become attached to my participants and their stories. I imagined that balancing my role as researcher and sympathetic listener might be a challenge given my nature. However, the interviews all went well despite some of them having a rough beginning. It was clear that the participants all wanted their stories to be heard. Many of the participants even offered to help me arrange to interview their colleagues because they found my research so interesting.

I did find myself too nervous to ask specific questions and request artifacts, particularly from my 1950s participants. Since there were few students going abroad at the time, I wanted to make sure I protected the participants’ identities throughout the study. As Creswell stated (2013), “There is increased concern about the impact of the writing on the participants. How will they
see the write-up? Will they be marginalized because of it? Will they be offended? Will they hide their true feelings and perspectives?” (p. 215).

I really appreciated that my advisor helped me review the participants’ backgrounds and stories multiple times to ensure the participants’ identities were kept confidential but that the participants would still have their voices heard and their stories told.

COVID-19 broke out in the United States as I was finishing up my dissertation, and I realized that this might emotionally and physically affect my overall interpretation and thoughts on the data. I take a moment and acknowledge the possible bias and emotional impact the pandemic had on my writing at the beginning of the next chapter.
Chapter 4: Analysis

March 10, an announcement is made by Harvard University about moving classes online.

As my dissertation progresses, so too does the spread of COVID-19. After talking to my mother on March 6, I am very happy and optimistic about finally overcoming the “war.” The growth of cases has slowed down tremendously in China, and some of the cities have had zero confirmed cases for weeks. Throughout this dissertation process, things continue to change rapidly.

The same day, I receive an e-mail from Massachusetts General Hospital—a new battle has begun. This time, COVID-19 is here, in the United States of America. Universities like Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology have started sending multiple e-mails to students indicating that their classes and conferences have been cancelled or postponed. The anxiety among families and friends in China is also increasing tremendously. Every day, before going to bed and right after waking up, I receive text messages from friends, family, colleagues and my former students’ families about different school policies, travel plans, the current situation in the United States, and even visa updates. Former colleagues in the United States begin to worry about the shutdown of their schools and possible job loss. As I write this, I receive news that universities are suggesting that students not return to campus after spring break, and some universities are even suggesting that students go home.

My topic is acculturation stress, and here I am stepping into this stressful pandemic culture. I’ve been reading the endless posts online about pharmacies and hospitals being out of masks. Stores are setting limits on the number of high-demand items customers can purchase, such as toilet paper rolls. The number of confirmed cases double, and then triple, within hours. Lastly, my cousin, the person who inspired my dissertation topic, is in crisis. Flights are booked
within hours. Parents are panicking and want to bring their children home. Trying to balance all of this while writing is not easy.

By March 13, most students have moved out. My cousin reaches out to me and tells me that her school is suggesting students move out of their dorms and go home within a week. International students are included in this. The school gives students options to come back between April and May to pick up their belongings if needed. However, how is that feasible for international students? I think about how if I were to conduct the same research years from now, my participants would definitely have stories to share from this period of their lives. So would I.

As a participant in this pandemic, I feel like I have to fight the battle TWICE. I went home to China at the start of the outbreak. I faced different challenges and began to quarantine at home. My research trip was cut short due to the travel ban from the United States. I had to self-quarantine voluntarily in my apartment for 14 days after coming back from China. Before the spread of COVID-19 in the United States, I worked with different advocacy organizations to combat the discrimination and xenophobia towards Asian and international students in general. Now I am having to play the role of a parent and help support my cousin. I am also trying to advocate and work with some of my colleagues at the Massachusetts General Hospital’s Center for Cross-Cultural Student Emotional Wellness to support local and overseas communities by providing resources and webinars.

Upon reflection, I am thankful that I can observe and be involved in this historical moment. I am lucky to be a student who is affected by different policies as the days go by. I am grateful for my cousin and my students, who help me understand how frustrating and terrifying it is for family members to live so far away from their loved ones.
I know that when I look back someday, this will be a memorable year. However, now, let’s go back in time to 1979, when the Chinese economic reform was established and the United States welcomed its first group of students from the People’s Republic of China. Let’s compare this generation of students to students now. What were the stressors for each generation during the time they studied in the United States? Were they different? Somehow, in a way, maybe things haven’t changed.

**Introduction**

The first half of this chapter provides a holistic and detailed view of each participant’s journey. The second half of the chapter presents both generations and the common themes found within each generation, as supported by the literature. Because of my personal experiences and my lens as a qualitative researcher, I realize the importance of being objective and presenting each participant’s authentic voice (Creswell, 2013). This is why for the first part of the chapter, I provide detailed information about each participant.

In reading the news and learning about individuals’ different experiences with COVID-19, I have come to realize that individuals’ coping strategies and stories may vary. This was also the case for my eight participants. Although they all had studied in the United States, each person had a unique journey. To provide more context, I describe each participant and their background.

Because I had not met the participants before conducting the interviews, it was hard for me to draw valid conclusions about their overall character. Therefore, the interpretations I present are based on the interviews themselves, the interactions I had with the participants before the interviews via WeChat or phone, the research I conducted about the participants, and the field notes I took during the interviews. I present the participants chronologically and in the order they were interviewed. As suggested by my committee members, I preserve the participants’
tones of voice. All quotations are displayed in the original Mandarin and in their English translations.

**Generation 1950s 五零后**

**Linda**

Linda earned her doctorate at a large private research institution located in the northeastern United States. She was the first person and the only female participant I interviewed from the 1950s generation. I had met her at two different events in the past. However, we had never had a private conversation. I had heard a lot of great things about her and always thought of her as a role model. I was honored when she accepted my invitation to participate in my research.

Before the interview, I was extremely nervous. I imagined all kinds of things that might go wrong and ruin the interview. I was worried about the quality of my questions and that I would leave her with a bad impression of me. Thankfully, I was just overthinking. Linda chose an ice cream shop near her house for our meeting. When she arrived, she greeted me warmly and ordered chocolate ice cream, which eased my nerves.

At first, she only wanted me to listen and take notes. However, after I explained my study, she gave me consent to begin the interview process and use direct quotations for my research. I was very thankful that she spent an hour and 40 minutes with me on this interview. She was very open and direct with her comments. In the short amount of time we spent together, I got the impression that she was a confident, tough, kind, honest, and warm person.

Unlike the other participants who had gone to the United States in the 1980s, Linda did not go to the United States to attend school. Instead, she went for a job. However, because her
husband was studying in the United States, she was able to observe different groups of Chinese international students studying abroad at that time. She called them “a group of brave souls.”

*   *   *

Linda and her husband moved to the United States shortly after the Chinese economic reform occurred. Culturally and economically, the two countries were very different.

When she and her husband decided to go to the United States, their families were not supportive. There was a lot of uncertainty regarding what the future might hold for students after they completed studying abroad. Those who had the opportunity to apply to go abroad were college students. At the time, the government guaranteed all Chinese students that they would receive jobs after graduation. Given the choice between an unknown future and a secure job, many families did not consider studying abroad the first choice for their children. What was most challenging for the students at that time was neither the fear of rejection by universities nor the procurement of a U.S. visa. The hardest part was obtaining a physical passport.

To get a visa was not difficult as long as you got the passport, took it to the U.S. embassy, and sent the application there. Immediately you got a visa. But when you applied for this passport from China, it was extremely difficult for the Chinese government to let you leave. So it’s totally different from what’s going on right now . . . Why? Because you needed to take many steps, and they might not let you go. So, as an officially sponsored student, you needed to have a verbal promise from your department. I can’t believe there weren’t any signed contracts back then. The only thing you needed was to promise you would come back and say when you would come back. So with
approval, you could get a passport. Otherwise, without approval, you would not be able to get your passport. So, the issue was never the visa.

Both Linda and her husband received full scholarships for their studies. Because Linda worked for years in the United States before deciding to begin an academic program, she was able to ease into the academic environment better than her husband. She had also observed many challenges that the early groups of Chinese students faced. She had a lot of respect for them. She mentioned that not all students successfully acculturated. Some of them returned to China immediately after graduation, some gave up halfway, and in extreme cases, some made suicide attempts.

To this day she keeps all the letters she wrote to her family. That was the most common way to communicate with those at home back then. Most of the families at that time did not have phones at home. For those who did, it was expensive to make overseas calls. One memorable moment of Linda’s was at a Chinese New Year dinner at the official embassy. Since there were only a limited number of students who were studying abroad at that time, the embassy was able to gather all the students from the surrounding area to come and celebrate together.

那时候因为人不是很多，撑死了 100 人。也就是五六十人七八十人，留学生都去，吃饭把桌子都给起掀了，抢啊。你现在能想象得到吗？就是呢，我想现在也有一个原因，一个是自己吃饭少，还有一个是这是中国的饭。然后的那个，好吃啊，还有使馆的大师傅一般都是比较好的嘛。然后一来一吃，哎呀，就拼命的吃然后就把桌子给掀了就是抢。这是我亲身经历的事情。

At that time there were not many students, at the most, say, 100. It was probably about 50 to 80 people. So all of these students would go (to the embassy dinner), they would flip the table over, it was like robbery. Can you imagine that? Though, now to think back, one reason is that everyone was rather hungry, and the other reason is this was Chinese food. And the food would taste really good because the chef at the embassy normally was a great chef from China. So when they came to eat, wow, they would eat so much that it felt like their lives depended on it, so as they were fighting over food, the table got flipped over. That is an event I experienced personally.
Money was another challenge. All of the money the students earned by working in the United States was sent back to China, and the government paid the workers abroad a set amount depending on their occupation. Even for students with full scholarships and stipends, there was barely enough money to rent apartments and pay for food. Even students who had pocket change did not have time to spend with others. They spent more time overcoming the challenges of their academic work.

Linda also observed the loneliness students experienced. Even though they had close Chinese and American friends on campus, the journey was still difficult at times. However, she said that looking back, she sees these hard moments as bumps people need to experience in life in order to grow. That is why she believed that struggles international students face today may be very different from those students faced in the past, mainly because of the cultural and historical contexts. Linda said that she believes that students today do not face the same challenges that Linda’s generation faced so the stressors and coping strategies may look different.

After living in the United States for a couple of years, both she and her husband moved back to China. They both are very successful in their fields.

**John**

John began his studies as a master’s student at a large private institution located in the central United States. I had heard about John in the news. I had also read posts online about his work. As I was preparing for the interview, reading different news articles about him, I pictured a serious, firm, even uptight type of person. I was nervous about the visit so I went to his office building the evening before the interview to make sure I knew how to get there without getting lost or being late.
On the day of the interview, I arrived at John’s office building half an hour early. I wanted to prepare notes and calm myself before meeting him. When I checked into his building, security refused to let me enter the gate unless I was escorted by someone from his office. John had scheduled an hour and half for the interview, but it took me almost 40 minutes to get a hold of someone in his office to escort me through security. Because of the interaction with the security person and the delay it caused, I was extremely upset when I walked in. I felt like my behavior was very unprofessional and I thought the meeting would be canceled.

Instead, he was very genuine and kind. He greeted me kindly at his office, offered me something to drink, and told me he could spend more time with me if needed. He even apologized for the strict security procedures downstairs. We had a really good conversation. He is a genuine, kind, hardworking, and warmhearted person. I wrote in my notes that he reminded me of Teddy Roosevelt—someone who is tall and strong and looks tough but is a warm person.

* * *

John did not originally consider studying abroad. He just knew he wanted to get a master’s degree after graduating. In order to pass the master’s program entrance exam, students needed to meet certain English-language test requirements. The year he took the exam, the government offered good students opportunities to go overseas. He mentioned the exams were essentially the same and the officials would choose the students who had best overall scores and recommend them to join the 出国预备研究生 (the graduate study-abroad preparation program).

After the students were accepted to the program, it was up to them to apply to universities. However, there was only a limited amount of information on U.S. universities at the time. Luckily, John’s university in China already had American exchange students studying there. Therefore, instead of randomly selecting schools he had heard about, he asked a friend to
provide recommendations. However, because he applied to many different schools and he believed all programs were great, the American student kindly thought he was silly.

那个留学生还在笑话我呢，说你看你说的每一个学校都是 outstanding programs. 我说我也真的不知道。

The foreign exchange student was laughing at me and said, look at you, you think every school has outstanding programs. I said to him that I truly don’t know.

Students also had opportunities to take language courses in different appointed universities in China to train them beforehand. Even though he did not earn a high test score, he was still accepted to many of the universities to which he applied.

一申就一个准儿，那时候美国没中国学生，渴望有中国学生呢，马上就给我了 offer。还给我学费奖学金。

At that time, your success rate for an application was very high, because at the time the United States didn’t have that many Chinese students, and they wanted to have more Chinese students, so they gave me an offer right away. And it included a scholarship.

The first shocking moment he had in the United States was related to food. He said when he was at home, his mother cooked meals for him. Once he enrolled at the university, he simply went to the cafeteria. Therefore, when he began his studies in the United States, he realized he did not know how to cook. Luckily, he met a Chinese student who was a student leader at their campus. At the beginning, he would go eat with this friend a lot. The first semester was the hardest semester for him; he called it the “terrible half year.” Due to the language barrier, education differences, and a lack of basic knowledge in his field, he encountered many hard moments. Luckily, he met a good group of friends from China on campus, a very kind and influential professor who changed his career and future, and many friendly people in the United States. Even with their support, there were still moments he wished to return to China. He shared that someone started the program half a year after him and actually ended up quitting. Knowing
he had been selected as one of the top students based on his exam, however, made him confident he could overcome the struggle.

我当时就想着，哎呀，那咱们国家的水平就这样，我想着我要是不行，那你派谁来也不行。我就依着这种信念，所以就坚持过来了。

Then I thought, well, this is the level our country is at. I thought if I couldn’t do it, no one whom you send would be able to do it. With this type of belief, I overcame the struggle.

He was already married before he went abroad. His wife was not with him for the first two years. The only way he was able to communicate with her was through letters. He believed that eventually having his wife with him in the United States made a huge difference. Looking back, he expressed how thankful he was for all the people he had met on his journey, especially the professor he had met during the first semester. Now, since the professor has passed away, he is unable to give back to the professor. Instead, he wishes to give back to other people similarly to how the professor gave back to him.

Currently, John is working in China while his family still lives in the United States. He often travels to the United States to visit them. One of the biggest reasons he returned to China was because he believes he should give back to the country with the knowledge he acquired overseas and provide more opportunities for future generations.

Anthony

Anthony began his doctoral studies at a large research institution located in the southwestern United States. I had heard about him for many years. He was known for being open about his experiences, whether work or personal, that could inspire others. He gave me an hour to meet at a building lobby near his office. I had gone to the building the evening before and was worried about the quality of the recording since the lobby was large and open. Thankfully, the recording turned out fine. On the day of the interview, before I started talking, he asked me a
couple of questions. He asked why I was interested in my research topic, how I had come to this topic, and what I was hoping this research would contribute to the field. Just as I expected, he was open and transparent about his journey of studying abroad. He is a direct, bold, straightforward, and humble person. His journey was a bit more complicated than the others’.

*   *   *

Anthony originally had the opportunity to study in Canada through his school’s joint program. During the early stages of studying abroad in China, students needed to pass standard exams developed by the education system and meet the recommendations from the government in order to be accepted to the 出国留学预备生 (the graduate study-abroad preparation program). Thanks to Anthony’s university president who was very focused on foreign languages, most of the students at the university were good at English. Therefore, Anthony did not have to prepare a lot for his language exam.

At the beginning of the 1980s, most of the students who studied abroad were science majors. Therefore, as a humanities and art double major, he felt fortunate that by the time he applied, the government had begun providing opportunities to candidates in other fields. With limited knowledge about other countries and limited exam preparation materials, there was a lot of guessing and self-studying involved. There was a newspaper at the time published by a group of Mandarin-speaking journalists in the United States. In this newspaper, Anthony was able to read about ideas and developments in different fields. While reading the newspaper, he developed an interest in his major and wanted to go abroad to gain knowledge firsthand. He was interested in learning how different theories could be discussed and understood in various ways rather than accepting only hard facts. He wanted to develop cross-cultural knowledge and be able to share that knowledge with colleagues in China.
Anthony was older than the other participants due to the Cultural Revolution. During the years Anthony would have normally attended college, the Cultural Revolution was going on, and attending college was not an option. Anthony, like his fellow students, was forced to work instead. Through various positions and placements, he developed different skill sets in fields such as language, management, sales, and even cooking. Therefore, while he did not have an advantage in terms of age, he was favored by the Canadian partner university because of his rich experiences. One interesting moment during his application process was his interview with a Canadian university official. Rather than interviewing him alone, the whole department sent various people to conduct the interview.

那时候面试很有趣，来参加面试的，***大学这边呢，有这个外办主任，有英语系主任，有选派学生所在系的负责研究生的副主任，还有组织。所以一面试的时候呢，他们全坐我这边。呵呵。。。那时候的观念呢就是，你就是一方啊，它是外方，你总不能坐他那边。所以那边就觉得很怪异，我这边坐一排。但是一般他们都，一般都不参与，他们就坐在旁边看着。

The interview was very interesting. The participants in the interview from my university were the foreign affairs director, the director of the English department, the associate director who was in charge of the study-abroad program, and a representative of the government. So when we began our interview, they all sat on my side, haha . . . At that time, the idea was that we were on the same side, and the interviewer represented the other side. You couldn’t sit on their side; that would be awkward. So on my side, there was a whole line of people. However, normally they did not get involved. There were some who were pleased to sit there and watch.

Despite his strong grades and his very positive feelings about the interview, Anthony was not chosen for the opportunity—mainly because with his ability, the university recommended that he stay in China to teach. It took him six years before he received the opportunity to finally go abroad. He chose to go to the United States. When he finally received the opportunity to go abroad, his journey again was more complicated than the others’. At the first university he was accepted to, the admissions person wrote down the cost of his education incorrectly. The cost did not match the amount indicated on the financial support letter Anthony provided. The amount on
the letter was only a couple dollars short of the stated cost of his education. The second university’s official wrote the incorrect cost on his scholarship acceptance letter, which was too high and they had to take the money away. In the end, he had to pay a lot of tuition out of pocket for the first semester. Thankfully, with hard work, he was able to receive a full scholarship the second semester. When I asked about his first-semester experience and if he had had any culture shock, he responded:

我们没有觉得任何 shock。因为你一开始的时候，你碰到这么多的错误，你哪儿来的及 shock 啊，你首先你先得活下来。你先需要找一个地方住下来，最便宜的，对吧？

We didn’t feel any shock, because once you got there, there were so many mistakes. Where would you find the time to be shocked? The first thing you needed to do was to live. You need to find a place and settle down, and the cheapest one, am I right?

Since he went to the United States later in life than other participants, the competition for scholarships and opportunities was also a lot higher.

从你第一次接触出国从 83 年，一直到然后到了**年，你这一段里头中国陆陆续续已经派出了不少人了，你已经不是第一波潮的了，而且呢你的竞争力也没那么强了。所以这些都是你的劣势，所以你现在要跟很多那个刚毕业，没有工作经历但是刚毕业的，但是他的记忆力要好的多的人，你得跟他竞争。跟他竞争呢其实我们不占优势，所以我那时候，托啊，G 啊考得都不如当年，状态也不如，所以考试成绩也没那么好。我也知道，所以你也不可能去考那些很顶级的学校。因为呢他要求的分数呢你达不到。

The first time I learned about the opportunity to study abroad was in 1983. From then until the year I went, through all these years, there were many students who had already been sent out. You were no longer part of the first wave of students, and you were not that competitive. So that became your weakness—those who had just graduated, with no job experience but who had just graduated, their memory was so much better than others. You needed to compete with them. So, we barely had any advantage. For me, my TOEFL and GRE [Graduate Record Examinations] ability were not as good as before. Those were my conditions. So the overall score was not that great. So, I know, you wouldn’t have applied for those top universities, because you knew you would not reach their required scores.
Anthony concluded that all the difficulties he had encountered early on in life in the end only helped him become stronger, tougher, and more appreciative of opportunities. Looking back, he realized that most of the experiences he had had only helped him finish his program strong and provided valuable life skills and skills for his work today. He returned to China and is now a renowned scholar in his field.

Peter

Peter earned his doctoral degree at a large public research institution in the northeastern United States. Peter has a legendary story about how he grew up. Compared to the other participants, Peter spent a lot of time sharing information about his early life since it had a huge impact on his life choices and his attitude towards life. However, since his story was known to many people in China, I found that keeping his identity anonymous and analyzing the transcription of his interview was a lot harder. He invited me to his office to conduct the interview.

Since Peter had shared part of his story with the media in the past, I was able to do some background research beforehand. Since Peter was the last participant I interviewed, I felt much more comfortable with my questions. He greeted me warmly in front of his office and spent a while at the beginning asking me about my experiences and my research. He was very interested in seeing how I was able to conduct a study with only eight participants since he was a quantitative type of person. Despite having experienced many hardships in his early life, he used the words “lucky”, “blessed,” and “fortunate” many times throughout his interview. I left the interview feeling inspired and motivated, and I wrote in my notes, “A perfect way to end the interview journey.” Peter is an optimistic, warm, and positive person who is full of life.

*       *       *
When Peter was applying for programs abroad, there were no doctoral programs in China. The idea of a master’s program was foreign to many students, to say nothing of the opportunity to go abroad. He felt lucky that when he was about to graduate, the country introduced opportunities for students to study abroad. At his university, though, there were limited resources. He needed to take a train for days to reach language-exam sites. Luckily, as he said, because most of the students had similar levels of English, the competition was not very stiff. Although he barely achieved the required score, he was considered for the scholarship by a government organization. He said that to have the opportunity to take the exam alone required many levels of recommendations. In addition to completing an application, providing recommendations, and overcoming the competition, students needed to pass the TOEFL and do well on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and apply by themselves.

那个时候也没有 internet, 什么信息都没有，你也不知道美国长什么样子… … 你看我们来回寄一封信，有时候长达一个月以上。一两个月，才来回一封信。有的时候也有可能寄丢，这样子所以交流成本很高，交流时间很长。

At that time there was no internet, and there was not much information. You didn’t even know what America looked like . . . You see, for us to send one letter there and back sometimes took one month or more. After one or two months, the letter would come back. And there was the possibility the letter would get lost, so the opportunity cost for communications was very high, and so was the time for communications.

Since the Gaokao was paused during the time of the Cultural Revolution and was only reintroduced in 1977, Peter had worked before attending college. Fortunately, the experience supported his future decisions when it came to choosing a major and his career path. When the government finally reintroduced the Gaokao (Wang, 2017), it was difficult for students to review the materials and take the exam. It was hard to look for study guides and practice tests. Even with very limited resources and under these challenging conditions, Peter received the highest
Gaokao score of all the students in his village. In some ways, he thought the knowledge he had gained when he was young had given him a strong foundation for his future studies.

Peter did not come from an affluent family. When he was little, because of how poor his family was, one of his brothers starved to death.

也就说我们那代人，什么苦都吃过，我就觉得我能够最后读到大学，尽管没学到医，我又能考到研究生，最后居然还可以出国。我一直觉得我怎么这么 fortunate。所以你说的 stress 我一点儿没有。因为过去的生活太贫困了… …然后我长大的时候，我在童年在 teenager 的时候，那种 tough 的 condition，作为我的一个 reference，它支撑了我后面的任何情况。但凡比那个情况好，我都觉得 fortunate。Literally I had no stress. Nothing can be worse.

So for our generation, we have been through so many tough situations, I thought, for me to be able to get into a university, even if I didn’t study medicine, I could get into a master’s degree program, and at the end was able to study abroad, too. I always thought, how could I be so fortunate? So the stress you mentioned, I didn’t experience that at all. Because the past life was just so deprived . . . Through my early years, as a teenager, the tough conditions I was living in were always a reference for me. That reference supported me with any type of situation later on in life. As long as the situation was better than before, I felt fortunate. Literally I had no stress. Nothing can be worse.

When Peter began his research to apply abroad, he utilized a textbook written by a U.S. scholar. Using the contact information he obtained from the book, he wrote a letter to the author and asked if the author would recommend a school and a professor based on Peter’s interests. Luckily, months later, the author replied to his request. Therefore, when the time came, Peter knew exactly which universities and programs to which he wanted to apply.

Overall, in addition to his positive attitude towards life, he had a good personality that helped him make a lot of good American friends. Even though he did not receive a high language test score, his oral communication skills were excellent. With his outgoing personality and engagement with the local community, he was able to have a really good experience studying in the United States and was quite popular within his program and friend groups.
Looking back, Peter said he believes that stepping outside of one’s comfort zone is very important when entering a new culture and a new country. Now he is a renowned scholar who leads many national policy efforts in China.

Situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) conceptualizes the learning process as a journey. A novice learns and acquires knowledge by participating and learning from the experts so that the novice, too, can eventually become an expert. Participants in the 1950s went abroad at the beginning of the established relationship between China and the United States. At that time, there was no internet—only expensive phone calls—and only a few Chinese international students. Despite some major hardships, they built good relationships with their friends and professors and became successful in their fields. Students born in the 1990s could gather information online and ask relatives and friends about their experiences in the 1950s.

**Generation 1990s 九零后**

**Vanessa**

Vanessa earned her master’s degree at a large public research institution in the northeastern United States. From the beginning, she was very friendly and supportive. From our limited interactions, I gathered that she is a fearless, fun, exciting, open, and talkative person. She initially offered for me to interview both her and her boyfriend so I could have more participants. However, I explained to her that this story was going to be very personal and that it was important to have a private space where she could share more. She agreed and came alone. We conducted the interview in a coffee shop near her home. Since she was the first of the eight participants I interviewed, I was somewhat nervous. However, I was very thankful she was the first one because her transcription was 18 pages long, single-spaced.

* * *
Vanessa’s family has always valued independence. Since middle school, she has lived in campus dorms. In high school, she went to a military-type school, which she believes greatly influenced her personality. She is a very talented musician. During high school, she was offered scholarships and received acceptance letters from renowned music schools in the United States. However, her family was not supportive of her studying abroad for college at such a young age. When she did not perform well on the Chinese entrance exam, she decided that rather than staying at a school she did not like, she would leave. She decided to apply for schools in Australia. When her family found out, they were furious with her. After negotiating with her family, she eventually agreed to remain in China for college. However, the thought of studying abroad never left her mind.

Vanessa experienced a very different application process and school choices than the other participants I interviewed. Most of the decisions she made were influenced by her boyfriend at the time.

然后刚好当时遇到，当时遇到了一个男朋友，然后他是在***，对，他是ABC (American-born Chinese)，他就在***大学。嘿，这个故事比较长，可以讲么？

And then I met, I met a boyfriend, and then he was in ***, yeah, he was ABC (American-born Chinese), he was in *** university. Hey, it’s a long story. Can I take the time and tell you about it?

Her boyfriend and experiences shaped most of the highs and lows of the story.

Qualitative researchers should guide the conversation and provide questions for participants. However, sometimes the story may generate richer data than initially expected (Creswell, 2013). With this in mind, I provided the space for Vanessa share her story. Vanessa met her boyfriend through a mutual friend she had met on a music tour. After receiving the final blessing from her family to study in the United States, she only thought about being near her boyfriend. She graduated in June and flew to the United States in July. This boyfriend helped her apply, move,
and become acculturated when she arrived in the United States. Without prior English-language schooling, she studied at a language school first. During the summer program, her boyfriend drove her to school, waited for her, and after class, showed her around the city. She was very comfortable and very much in love. Then, once the summer was over, she transferred to his university and picked a major with which she was not familiar.

There she encountered the first phase of stress—the language. Yet the stress was not so much with the language itself but with the actual language center. She believed the center wanted to make more money by keeping students there longer. Therefore, despite her English ability and hard work, the center increased her level only slowly and her original study plan was delayed. With the emotional support of her boyfriend and her fearless personality, she overcame these hurdles during her first year.

However, soon afterward, she experienced a second phase of hardship, the most difficult she faced during her time at university. After she had been in the United States for a year, she and her boyfriend broke up.
After the break-up, she moved out of her old apartment and left her old friend circle. Without any transportation, she had to walk to school every day, which could take up to an hour. She explained that this led to a very depressing period. Some nights she could not sleep at all, but she still went to school the subsequent day. However, even with the lack of transportation, depression, and essentially a brand new beginning, she did not back down. After a couple of months, she began to meet new friends, find new recreational activities, and slowly emerge from the dark moments of her journey.

After graduating from university, she worked and lived in another state before moving back to China. Now she is working in her hometown with her new boyfriend. Looking back, she said that she has mostly positive feelings about her experiences in the United States. Despite many hardships, she still would like to move back to the United States someday. She believes that she was able to overcome the hardships she faced because of her strong personality, her music, and her resolve to never give up.

**Claire**

Claire earned her doctorate at a large research public institution in the southwestern United States. My friend worked with her at that institution, though they were not very familiar with one another. Having only limited trust, she hesitated to participate in my interview. After many explanations over text messaging, she finally agreed to meet at a café near her campus.

When I met with her, she expressed her concerns and the reasons that she was hesitant to participate. She was worried that some of her comments and stories would make her identifiable and cause offense to others. I explained to her the importance I placed on participant confidentiality. I told her that I would not disclose any personal information that could be identified by readers. She agreed to be taped. We chatted for 20 minutes before the interview. I
read her my consent form and explained my study. I also shared with her some information about myself and my journey in the United States. The transcription shows that she became more comfortable towards the end of the interview, as her answers grew from short replies to full stories.

She is a sweet, humble, kind-hearted, and honest girl who is passionate about her research and her friends. After the interview, she kindly offered to answer any follow-up questions I might have. She also offered to introduce me to her friends so that they, too, could participate.

* * *

Claire was the only one of the participants from the 1990s generation to have received a full scholarship. The scholarship was through the Chinese government study-abroad funds. By law, she had to return to China after graduation for at least two full years. She was a smart student based on her Chinese college entrance exam results, and the school she was accepted to was in China. She was always passionate about math. In China, though, a student’s overall Gaokao score determines the universities and the departments from which the student can choose. Therefore, with her overall score, she had to choose a major within the engineering department. She was unsure whether she wanted to study abroad, but because of the influence of her surroundings, she chose a major within the department that she knew would be relatively easy to receive approval and funding for should she decide to go overseas.

Claire eventually chose a joint program run by her university in China. Within five years, she received dual doctoral degrees at her universities in both China and the United States. She had considered applying for a doctoral program in England in the past, but at the time, she was not sure.
I think I ended up not going because I am too lazy to put forth any effort. Hahaha . . . In fact, at that time I wasn’t very sure whether to go abroad.

After researching joint university programs in the United States, she discovered that the program with her university was one of the top in her field. This led to her decision to study abroad. When she moved to the United States to study, she went with three more experienced students in the program. She found this very helpful; she visited the institution for a short summer internship so she was more comfortable.

Claire was very trusting and easygoing. When she arrived in the United States, because she had failed to secure housing, within the first two months, she moved three times. The first time she stayed with a friend for a couple of days. The second time she stayed in an apartment she found through a WeChat group for half a month, although the apartment was far from her campus. Because of the distance, she had to carpool with three strangers every day to go to campus. Finally, she moved again. The third time she not only found a place she liked but she also met a good roommate who later became a good friend. Through this roommate, she expanded her social circle.

Claire joined various WeChat groups and gathered more information before she went overseas. The various groups and people helped her with her transition at the beginning.

The hardest part for Claire while studying in United States was speaking English and learning U.S. laboratory protocols that differed from Chinese ones. Because the majority of her friends outside of her laboratory were Chinese, she did not have much motivation to learn or improve her English. She had also completed all of her formal education in China and did not realize that laboratory safety and animal rights protocols were different in the two countries.
Because of the lack of information, she made a mistake in the laboratory that almost cost her the chance to continue studying and working in the United States. With the support of her friends and some internet research, she worked it out with her supervisor and learned from the experience.

Despite these conflicts, Claire’s experiences in the United States were pleasant and memorable overall. She recently returned to China to finish up her research at her university. She may someday return to the United States for a postdoctoral program or for work. She suggested that students who plan on studying abroad one day find people who are reliable and open-minded.

Frank

Frank earned his master’s degree at a large public research institution in the northeastern United States. He was the only male participant in the 1990s generation. His interview took less than an hour. At the end of the interview, he expressed concern about whether his interview would be helpful for my study since it was fairly brief. I had the same worry as well. However, after completing the transcription, I realized that his data was rich, and the reason why it did not take very long was because he talked very fast. Frank was recommended by a close friend of mine. When I met him in a coffee shop near his apartment, he realized that he actually had met me once before. We supposedly had a short conversation as well. Yet I could not recall anything. It was awkward at first because I felt bad I could not recall meeting him. I was afraid the awkwardness would influence our later conversation. However, he was very supportive and kind in acknowledging the awkwardness.

I am unsure if gender played a role in the interview. Compared to the female participants, Frank gave answers that were more direct. The overall tone of the interview could be
summarized as “Everything was just okay,” “Nah,” and “It’s fine.” Before the interview, our conversations were also direct and quick. After I explained my study to Frank through WeChat, Frank only asked a few questions and did not have any concerns. Because the conversation went so fast, especially compared to my conversations with the female participants, there was not much emotion shown. I was nervous about the quality of the interview, as mentioned in my field notes. However, after transcribing the whole conversation, I realized that there is a rich story to tell. Frank is an honest, driven, goal-oriented, direct, tough but easygoing person.

* * *

Frank grew up in a city in northern China. He had studied at a university far from home because of his Gaokao result. Based on his score, he had picked a university in a city unknown to him. The idea of studying abroad first crossed his mind when he was a sophomore in college. He made his final decision in his junior year. This decision was based mainly on his low GPA at the time. To boost his application and his chances of earning admission to the best universities, he hired an agent. Together with his agent, Frank applied to more than 50 different universities in the United States that year. The agent was only involved with six of those applications.

I would have loved to go to Stanford. Haha . . . I did apply. I even applied to Princeton. Haha . . . It was completely based on luck. It’s that once you finish your personal statement, you can just hand it in. It doesn’t take long actually . . . At the end, I could finish one application in less than 20 minutes. I just looked at the U.S. rankings, and then clicked the university’s website through the ranking, and then I found a major that was similar to my interest. As long as I thought it might work, I would apply for it.

He did not apply to one major, but five total.
I applied to the finance, statistics, economics, marketing, whatever majors, even IST.

In the end, he was admitted to two universities and chose to attend the higher-ranked one. Throughout the interview, Frank called himself “学渣” (horrible student) many times, but his Gaokao, TOEFL, and GRE scores indicate otherwise. Although he did not know much about the university he chose after the Gaokao, it was top ranked in China. His concept of what a good student is was solely based on comparisons with friends from school. His low GPA was mainly because he did not care about putting effort into his undergraduate studies.

对啊，中国大学就是很轻松的呀。很多时候你一学期，你连书都没有，就只要考试你发现这学期讲了这本书，你就先去买一本书，然后拿别人的去划重点，划重点之后你知道考什么……就60分吧，就能考及格就行。

Yes, Chinese universities are easy. A lot of times in a semester, you didn’t even need to get the book, as long as you found out what book the exam was based on that semester before the exam. You could go get the book and highlight important points from others, and after highlighting, you would know what would be on the exam . . . All I needed was a 60; I just needed to pass.

Another reason he studied abroad was because he wanted a fresh start and to gain more knowledge in his field. He felt like he had not learned a lot during his undergraduate studies.

He did not prepare or do much research before flying to the United States. Shortly after landing, he was shocked to discover the limited public transportation resources such as taxis and Ubers. As he was hesitant and not sure what to do, it was lucky that he met a couple from the local Chinese church community who ended up taking him to the hotel that evening. Through the church community, he was able to become acclimated to the new environment during his first semester.

He met his first friend during the first week of orientation. However, because he did not have many friends during the first semester, he felt lonely. Since he had not been admitted to his
dream school, which was a university located in California, he decided to take as many prerequisite classes as possible for that university in his first semester. He thought about transferring after his first year. He ended up taking six classes compared to the standard load of three. Despite his loneliness and the challenges of his coursework, he earned a 4.0 GPA during the first semester.

To make his course load more manageable, he was strategic about choosing his courses. As a graduate student, he learned that students could choose their class schedule. Rather than taking hard courses at the beginning, he chose to balance his course load with two undergraduate introductory courses. He also asked more advanced students in his program for class suggestions and professor recommendations.

Things picked up after the second semester. Frank met his girlfriend and made more friends through her social groups. After he bought a car and became more active in his church community, he felt more comfortable and spent more time with friends. English was challenging at the beginning but after becoming accustomed to the course load and the teaching styles of his professors, he was able to handle it. However, everyday English with friends was much harder for him than academic English. He mentioned many times that he is a very goal-driven person. He accomplished what he wanted, which was to earn a foreign degree and to complete the overall study-abroad experience. Since he knew he would come back to China after graduation, he finished his degree half a year earlier than his peers. He said that was the reason he was not motivated to go out of his way to meet people outside of Chinese circles.

Currently, he lives in China and has a stable job in a major city outside of his hometown. He is happy with his life and is still dating the woman he met while completing his master’s degree.
Waverly

Waverly received her master’s degree from a large private institution in the northeastern United States. Compared to the other participants, she was the most prepared for the interview. She asked me to provide a written detailed description of my research and a couple sample questions. After communicating back and forth with her on WeChat, she agreed to meet. However, due to a scheduling conflict with a participant from the 1950s, I had to change her appointment once. Luckily, her office was located close to the location where I was meeting my other participant, which meant I was able to conduct both interviews on the same day.

I was concerned about her seeing the sample questions beforehand. I wondered if that would influence her answers on the day of the interview. However, after a short conversation with me, she told me that since I had sent the questions a while ago, she could not remember them anymore. Moreover, by using her stories and comments as a guide, I was able to ask the questions differently. She was different in person than I had expected from our communication on WeChat. She is shy, polite, professional, and direct. Compared to the other participants, her answers were more professional than personal, as indicated through her tone of voice.

* * *

Her choice of major was influenced by her mother, who is an elementary school teacher. Waverly had studied at a teaching university to become a teacher as well. As she stated throughout her interview, she and her family are very close.

Waverly did not hire an education agent to apply to universities for her. Instead, her biggest partner and supporter was her father. She was surprised at how much her father helped her through the application process even though he had never studied abroad and was not deeply involved in her academics growing up. Her father was a government official, a job that required
him to move a lot for various job assignments during her childhood. Therefore, she felt that this opportunity brought her and her father much closer.

I think that was an opportunity for me to make more connections with my father. Because as before, his job required him to transfer a lot. So I was closer to my mother when I was young, and I still am. But my father was like, when I was young, it was maybe in middle school or high school, whenever I was alone with him, I wouldn’t know what to say to him. It’s a little awkward. But then because of this, because of the application process, I felt like we became closer.

She had considered studying in England. However, after comparing the length of the programs and weighing her personal preferences, she chose to study in the United States. She asked a childhood friend who was studying in the United States at the time about her experience. According to Waverly,

She said, if you get a master’s in the States, you won’t want to go back to your hometown anymore . . . And I thought, my hometown may be small, but it is okay. I didn’t say I had to stay and work in the big city, but after talking to her, I thought I should go out and have a look. Then, after a year or so of studying in the States, I decided, hm, that I really should go to the big city and work. Maybe I won’t stay in Beijing or Shanghai or anything like that in the future, but I want to work for a few years and see, that’s all.

That conversation also made her wonder what her life would be like post-graduation.

Looking back, she believes her friend was correct.

As part of Waverly’s application process, she and her father created a plan. First, they looked at university rankings. Then, because she wanted to be a teacher, they considered
programs that focused on practical training over theoretical learning. Since her father had only limited English, he suggested she create a list of universities based on his first round of research. With his help and her supporting documents, she was able to earn admission to her dream university. She thought she was very lucky.

Waverly did not have many expectations before moving to the United States. However, she knew she wanted to go to a university located in a major city. When she arrived in the city where her university was located, she was shocked to find that it was very different from New York City, which is how she thought all U.S. cities should be. She was the most prepared of all the participants, particularly with regard to personal belongings. After she was accepted, she received a checklist that her university had sent out to all accepted students. It provided a list of students in her program whom she could contact. Through that list, she found friends to travel with to her campus.

During her first year, she had three different roommates. The first roommate never moved in, and the second roommate decided to move in with her boyfriend instead after they had begun the program. Luckily, she became close friends with the third roommate she had. Compared to other participants’ universities and programs, her program had mostly Chinese students. Therefore, aside from her interactions with her professors and her internships, she did not have many opportunities to speak to native English speakers.

It was like there were more Chinese students than I thought the university would have. And I thought at least I would make one or two American friends; I would know a couple of them, of course, but I thought at least I could become close to some of them. It didn’t have to be that we were great friends, but good enough friends, that kind, even that I
didn’t have. For example, just a bit more than those you pass on the street, you see each other on the road, you say a couple sentences and nod to acknowledge each other, that type of friend. This might also be a regret I have? Well, sort of.

While telling her story, she said that she had made a close friend while studying in the United States. There were many amazing memories they shared together and she was very thankful to have had her during that part of the journey. However, as they spent more time together, the friend became very dependent on Waverly. Waverly wanted more personal space, which led to various conflicts. This became a stressor for her.

One memorable incident was a university student organization event. During the event, the university listed China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong as separate countries. Waverly had never encountered this type of ignorance when she was in China.

One of the things that shocked me about the United States were the issues regarding Taiwan and Hong Kong. I had heard of it before; that is, that Americans may not have a correct understanding of the situation. But one time we had an international student event, and that pamphlet, which was about different countries, it used the word “country,” and it listed some countries, and then there was China, there was Taiwan, there was Hong Kong. And then the activity was to have different international students set up a small table and introduce them themselves. And then first of all, the Chinese flag was painted wrong, it was printed wrong, and that was a serious problem. Then people reported it, and then the organizers said they would apologize to us. Then we said okay, but no action was taken after that. That was kind of shocking to me. And when I talked to other students, they thought it was a normal thing to do in a foreign country, and there wasn’t much they could do about it.
Nationalism and race can be unfamiliar topics to Chinese international students. As Chinese students encounter new environments, the “common sense” they had may clash with the host nationalism instincts of the students whom they meet abroad (Lee & Rice, 2007). Many students have questions and concerns; however, they are unsure how to address them.

Throughout Waverly’s journey, language was a major stressor. It was mostly stressful colloquially, less so academically. Her program required her to teach students, including native English speakers and multiracial immigrants. As a non-native English speaker, she felt stressed about preparing teaching materials, teaching her students well, and meeting her students’ expectations. Despite such a challenging experience, she was shocked that she only cried about three times. If she truly needed support, she knew that she could call her parents in China.

Waverly also shared her experiences with her local Chinese church community. She appreciated that the community supported her and other new students during their time of transition to a new city.

They didn’t force us to believe or join their religion, they just wanted to help us . . . But then after the church got our contact information, one of the problems was they would send a link every now and then, saying do you want to participate in this, do you want to participate in that. Though the interaction was mutual, which they helped us, they also wanted to expand their circle. It is understandable . . . I think it [the church community] helped me a lot . . . The first sweet watermelon I got to eat was with them.

Even though she did not continue to go to church socials, she felt welcomed and believed that the church community had helped her and other students acculturate to their new environment.
Overall, Waverly really enjoyed the two years she spent in the United States. She said that she believes an outgoing personality and good group of friends make the overall experience much better for international students. Now, as a teacher, she continues to share her experiences with her students to help prepare them for going abroad.

**Comparison Within Generations**

Based on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) LPP, the analysis was divided into three time periods: before going to the United States, studying in the United States, and reflection on the overall journey (Figure 9). In the next part of the chapter, the analysis of each generation is presented.

**Figure 9**

*Three Periods of LPP for 1950s and 1990s Generation Students*

**Generation 1950s 五零后**

The four 1950s participants attended four different universities in the United States. Some of them came earlier than others and studied different majors and went through different programs. Most of the preparation for studying abroad and addressing challenges while abroad
was rather similar. The analysis is broken down into three time periods: before going to the United States, studying in the United States, and reflection on the overall journey (Table 5).

**Table 5**

*Major Challenges Experienced During LPP (1950s Participants)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Before going to the United States**<br>(Novices) | • Unknowns and uncertainty about the future  
• Reasons to study  
• Choice of school  
• Practical challenges |
| **Studying in the United States**<br>(Acquiring knowledge and learning through experience) | • Language  
• Educational stressors  
• Sociocultural stressors  
  o Chinese friends  
  o U.S. friends  
  o Professors  
• Communication with those at home  
• Practical stressors  
• Mental well-being |
| **Reflection on the overall journey**<br>(Experts)  | • Community  
• Open-mindedness  
• Stepping outside the comfort zone |

**Before Going to the United States (Novices)**

There are four major themes that emerged when asking the participants from the 1950s generation about the time when they were preparing to go to the United States: unknowns and uncertainty about the future, reasons to study abroad, choice of school, and practical challenges.
Unknowns and Uncertainty About the Future

Studies show that uncertainties over visa statutes, possible job opportunities, and immigration opportunities influence the overall acculturation stress experienced by Chinese international students (Yan & Berliner, 2011). The four 1950s participants went to the United States right after the Chinese economic reform, so the uncertainties they faced were different and more significant than those of students today. At that time, the Chinese Gaokao had been reintroduced as well. As Peter remembered,

1977 年第一届大学生，那个时候中国只有硕士研究生，没有博士。从文革以后，恢复高考的学生，那是第一次有的考试。并且硕士对决大部分的青年人来说都是陌生的。甚至硕士那个字都不是特别的流行。

The first group of Chinese college students began their undergraduate studies in 1977. At that time China only had master’s programs. There were no Ph.D. programs. After the Cultural Revolution and the return of the Gaokao, that was when the first-year students took the exam. Master’s programs were rather foreign to many young students at the time. Even the word “master” was not that popular.

Given this sociocultural environment, there was less information about the United States available to students than there is now. Back then, only a limited number of universities had professors or students who had had experiences abroad. Moreover, as the relationship between the two countries had just been established, it was hard to know what kind of future a student might have after graduating from a U.S. university.

During that period, the limited number of college students in China meant that every student was guaranteed a job placement after graduation. Therefore, studying abroad was not the first choice for many families. Linda mentioned that both her family and her husband’s family were not very supportive of the idea of her studying abroad.

然后他的父母也不希望，觉得这个是一个非常 uncertain 的一个，一个非常不确定性的前景。你一旦离开了这个工作，你就很难在回来了，另外你去了以后，到底能不能学成，到底是否能站的住，甚至你之后是否能养的起你自己，这些都还是一个很大的 uncertain。
And his parents were not supportive of the idea, either. It felt like a very uncertain decision, a very uncertain future. Once you leave your job, it may be very hard for you to come back, and after you go overseas, if you were able to successfully graduate, would you be able to secure a position there? Even something simple like whether you could even afford to live there yourself—those concerns contributed to larger uncertainty.

Students not only had limited information about the country and their futures after graduation; they were also unfamiliar with the exam requirement itself. Today there are many exam preparation organizations and practice tests that students can use. Back then, there were limited resources and tools with which students could prepare for the language exam.

The TOEFL exam was not introduced in China until 1981 (Zhou, 2017). Though students had a basic idea of the format of the exam, in the early days, students did not know exactly which exam they were supposed to take. As Anthony described in his story, on the day of his language exam, he realized that the exam was different than he had expected.

After you got into the exam, you thought it was TOEFL, but after you got there you realized it was EPT [English Placement Test]. The biggest difference between the two... is the writing. TOEFL at the time did not require writing. It was much later when they included the writing section. So for us to prepare our pencils at the time, because we wanted to be efficient in filling in the bubbles, so we sharpened the pencils to be flat, okay? That way you could circle very fast... So we were not prepared for a writing section. There ended up being a writing section, and we were unable to use our pens to write. Luckily, the teachers were very nice at the time, so they began to help you sharpen your pencil, from flat to pointy. Because the first section on the exam happened to be writing.

Linda considered the first wave of students to be “brave souls.” There were many unknown factors and choices. However, all of the students were determined despite the risks for
the future. They wanted to take the opportunity to learn and possibly use that knowledge to contribute to their country someday.

**Reasons to Study Abroad**

All participants had unique reasons for going abroad, but one reason was common to all: to learn. As Linda said,

> 我们这一代人在那个时候就想的不是特别的深... 觉得我还是应该出去闯一闯，所以其实，尤其是 80 年到 83 年，是一批很有闯的，这个思维和勇气的人。

For our generation, we didn’t think very deeply . . . We just thought we should go out there and try. Especially between the years from 1980 to 1983, that was a group of very advanced, smart, and brave people.

Peter elaborated on how passionate the students at that time were to learn more and to study in the United States.

> 所以对我们来说，美国还是很陌生的一个环境。一切都是挺新鲜的。但是我们那个时候的心态很明确，就是在这个地方要好好的学习，对吧，这个，如饥似渴的学习，就这样子。因为出国对我们来说太稀缺了，太罕见了。

So, for us at the time, America was a very foreign environment. Everything was new. But our goal was very clear: We would study very hard in this new environment, right? It was like we were so hungry to learn more, because the opportunities to study abroad were so limited and so rare.

Anthony was much older than the other participants, and he had already worked in China for six years before he went to the United States. By the time he had decided to go abroad, he had a more definite idea of what he wanted to learn. He wanted to learn the Western views and theories in order to compare them with the Eastern ways and to think about the political, economic, and cultural influences on the overall development of China.

As the youngest participant at the time, John was the only one who did not have any work experience and went to graduate school directly after his undergraduate studies. He initially
I actually never thought about studying abroad. When I went to begin my undergrad work, I did wish to get a master’s degree. To be a master’s degree student, you need to study English and learn it well. So I tried very hard to learn English. And once I graduated, the master’s entrance exam was available. Then they said there were also opportunities for students to go abroad, so I applied for the opportunity. Based on the exam, the country would pick the best ones to send abroad. Then here I was, I went abroad.

In reading through each participant’s journey, I observed that the age of the participant when they applied for college seemed to have an influence on the overall journey. However, with the limited data set, it is hard to make this argument.

With so many university choices in the United States and limited resources, the participants needed to find ways to choose a school.

**Choice of School**

All of the participants had different ways of acquiring knowledge to help inform their choice of school, but one common theme was familiarity with the school. The participants received information from their professors, from others, and through textbooks.

John remembered when he was looking for a school. He applied randomly to many. After he passed all the exams and received the recommendation of the government, he began the search for schools.

哎呀当时就是啥都不懂，我就选了一些学校。比如说选了 George Washington University 啊，啥这个 Kansas University， Kansas State University，（笑）我选的也
不多，Northwestern，就瞎选的。然后就选了几个… … 因为咱真的是，对于美国啥样的，也不知道。

Hm, I didn't know anything at the time. I just chose a bunch of universities, such as George Washington University, Kansas University, Kansas State University [laughing]. I didn’t pick a lot, Northwestern, it was so random. And I picked couple . . . because for us, we really, truly, had no idea what the United States was like or anything about it.

Peter was much clearer on what he wished to study. In a class he had taken in college, one of the textbooks he and his classmates had read on the topic Peter wanted to study was written by a U.S. professor. He acquired the professor’s name and contact information from the textbook and wrote a letter to the editor. He did not know if he would ever hear back. He was pleasantly surprised that the professor wrote to him after months of waiting. As all of the participants mentioned, besides familiarity with the school, sufficient grades were needed to earn admission to a university.

As Anthony prepared for his language exam, he found that the process was much more difficult than the process he had undertaken as a college student to complete a joint program in Canada.

The level of your English, you had already lost the sharpness of preparation compared to when you were young, right? Because back then, you were like a full-time athlete, you could train full-time. I didn’t even need to push myself or put in too much effort before, and I could pass. Now six years later, you try to memorize these words, but you are no longer as young as you were before, and your memory is not that great, either. So the overall score is not as good as before. Also during that time, TOEFL was not the only requirement. You also needed to take the GRE, so the results were not that great, either. So to answer your question, you didn’t have many choices, because what the United States knew about Chinese students in the 1980s was mainly based on their test scores.
A critical, final deciding factor was the scholarship. There were students who were sponsored by family members who already lived abroad. When the relationship between the two countries was established, some families living abroad offered sponsorship to their relatives to study in the United States. The four 1950s participants in this study, however, went on their own. One participant used money from the government. All of the others received scholarships from their host universities.

However, receiving a scholarship and being accepted to a university were not the hardest parts of the preparation. There were other practical challenges students had to face before achieving the opportunity to go abroad.

**Practical Challenges**

The first practical challenge for a student was obtaining a passport. Unless the student had applied to study abroad immediately after their undergraduate graduation, the student usually was already working. Students needed to acquire permission from their employers, verbally agreeing that once they had completed their studies, they would return home. Without the letter and recommendation from the government and the employer, a student did not have a chance to even apply for a passport.

Not all students were able to acquire the same information or had access to the same opportunities for consideration in study-abroad programs. When Peter took the national exam, he needed to take the train for days to reach the exam location. Students from his university also did not have access to as many resources as students studying in other first-tier cities did.

我们那些地方就接触的相对少了。所以学习的本子也少。能给我们授课的老师当然也相对比较少。所以我们用那个非常有限的书本，就去赶考啊。英文又不懂，又是原文的，就慢慢的去看。所以到了之后，天晓得能不能够考的上，但是，幸运的是，大家都差不多嘛，除了北京上海的学生稍微优势一点儿哈，那大家水平都很低。所以就在地水平的这些选择了一些就这样……总之就是比较幸运。
For students from my home area, the opportunities were much more limited. Like the preparation textbooks were limited. The professors who could support us were few. So with limited preparation, we still needed to go take the exam. We didn’t have a high level of English, and some original texts were only in English, and you just needed time to read slowly. So after we arrived at the exam location, God knows if we would ever get accepted. Luckily, though, everyone was on the same level, except the students from Beijing and Shanghai who might have had a little advantage. But for most students, their level of English proficiency was rather low. So to pick from those weaker students were all their choices . . . Overall we were just lucky.

Lastly, not all good students were recommended to go abroad. For example, although Anthony had earned good grades on the exam and had very positive interview results from the Canadian school, his university recommended that he wait and teach in China for a couple of more years.

Then the teacher told me that the school wished I would stay. I said, after I complete my studies overseas, I could come back? Then the teacher said, there would be many opportunities to go abroad in the future. Most of the people cannot pass the language requirement, so every year there are many opportunities that go to waste. Because at the time most of the students didn’t have very high language ability. And for students who were good in their majors and when good language skills were even more limited, that was the situation back then.

Therefore, the teacher convinced Anthony to stay and said that there would be more opportunities in the future. In reality, without the approval and the recommendation, a student could not have gone abroad anyway. Therefore, in the end, Anthony remained in China.

**Studying in the United States (Acquiring Knowledge and Learning Through Experience)**

All of the participants mentioned that at the time they went abroad, the differences between the two countries were much more dramatic than they are today. Because of that, there were many challenges such as language, education system differences, social support, loneliness,
and mental health. In a way, the challenges were very similar to those students are going through today. However, through the participants’ stories, it became apparent that they were, in some ways, very different.

**Language**

The hardest part of the journey for the participants was the language barrier both inside and outside the classroom. All the participants mentioned that no matter how much they had studied English before going abroad, it was much different once they arrived on campus. Not only were the course materials foreign to them, but they also had to become familiar with the professors’ ways of speaking and teaching. Out of the four participants from this generation, Anthony had the most language training and school experience prior to traveling to the United States. However, he said that compared to U.S. students and students from other English-speaking countries, he still found it difficult at times.

虽然你语言已经算比较好，但到native里头，或者你跟什么印度啊，跟这些人比你还是比不了。所以有的时候还是出错啊。他们商量改考试时间，我第一次期中考试，它们改考试时间我不知道……可能课堂上说了一句，但是课堂上讲话讲的很快嘛。所以第一次进考场的时候发现已经晚了半个小时。所以那次考试呢就考得不好，而且那次考试就直接决定我是不是有奖学金。

Even though your language ability may have been better than other Chinese students, when it came to natives or students from India, you couldn’t compare. So there were still times you would make a mistake. For example, they discussed changing the exam time. This was my first midterm exam, and they decided to change the time but I didn’t know . . . Maybe it had been said once in class, but normally they would talk so fast in class. When I entered that exam, I was half an hour late, so I didn’t get a good grade on that exam, and that exam directly determined my chances for a scholarship.

As described before, due to the mistake the school official made, Anthony had to pay out of pocket for the first semester. Therefore, this exam was vital for him. Thankfully, he made up the score gap from another course in which he performed really well.
To help bridge the gap in language, many participants used tape recorders during class in order to listen to the lectures a second time. As Peter remembered,

但是对我来说，当时面对最大的问题，是 language。我去上课的时候，我基本上带上一个这么小的一个录音机，recorder，Ok？我实在是跟不上当场的一个教学，我听懂一半，都不到。我的那个 response 就是，我 record。然后晚上回来，吃完饭了一会，我在重复一遍。如果今天的课程上了三个小时，我还要花三小时来 repeat。然后听着听着再按以下，然后把它的笔记记下，才能记下完整的笔记。

The biggest issue I faced at the time was language. Whenever I went to class, I normally would take a small tape recorder like this, okay? I actually could not catch up with what was taught in class normally, maybe I could understand half, sometimes not even half. So the idea was to record the class. Then after I came home, after dinner, I would listen to it again. If the class was three hours long, I would need three more hours to repeat it. I needed to listen and repeat to fill in the gaps in my notes.

On top of the language challenges the students faced in class, they found that the materials and concepts they were taught were based on Western systems. Most of the materials they were learning were very different than the ones they had been taught in China.

Educational Stressors

Linda remembered that when she was a student, there was one class she had to take on taxation. During that time, there was no such concept in China.

有些课程你的确是不会。有些经济课程你可能就是 fail 掉，因为你从计划经济的环境中走来，然后你学一门关于自由经济的，市场经济的，老师提的一些问题，你从来就没有理解过，而且你从来也没有遇到过。我就记得我曾经后来上学的时候讲了一门那个税法，我就是一个及格。为什么呢，因为我根本就不懂税的事儿。美国的税的事儿，我哪能看得懂这个啊。

In some of the courses you truly have no idea. Like some economic classes you would just fail, because you came from a planned economy environment, then you take a course about the free market, market economy. When the professor is asking you questions related to that, you are lost because you cannot understand; it is a concept that you have never encountered in your life. I remember when I was studying at the university, there was a class regarding tax law, which I barely passed. Why? Because I had no idea about anything regarding taxes. And this was American taxes, so how would I have understood that?
Her professor was also confused about why Linda, an excellent student, struggled on this particular exam. He ended up giving her another chance. Looking back, Linda’s struggle was not because of the exam itself; it was because the content was so foreign to Chinese international students at the time. Because of the particular historical time they had lived through during their teenage years, many of the participants did not have a solid foundation for the basic courses. Anthony, who had been a professor in China before going to the United States, said that even though classes and research were not as difficult for him as for others, the format of U.S. exams was a challenge for him.

Academically speaking, it wasn’t that bad. But when you just got there, I was not used to the true and false, and to please explain, those types of question. At the beginning it was hard to adjust. Because as you see, hey! That is correct, and so be it. But with no explanation, you get a 0; without explanation, no points. If it was wrong, it was much easier to explain, but if it was right and obviously right, how were you going explain it? So later on you learn, if it was correct in a very obvious way, you just repeat and copy the whole sentence on the exam. Haha . . . How would we have known about that beforehand?

Even though the participants all overcame their struggles and moved on to a second semester, they said that there were still hard moments. The students who were given the opportunity to study abroad were the top students from each institution and each province in China. The idea of failing classes or not understanding the material was rather mentally challenging for them. Thankfully, most of them made friends and met professors during the journey to support them through these hardships.
**Sociocultural Stressors**

All the participants were already married by the time they studied abroad. Even though Linda’s husband had gone abroad simultaneously, they did not live in the same state. Therefore, most of the participants at the beginning of their study-abroad experiences were alone. There were dramatic differences economically and culturally between the two countries. Moreover, there were only a few Chinese international students at the time to provide guidance and support.

**Chinese Friends.** Before they went to their campuses, the first wave of students gathered together at the consulate in New York even though they were not studying in New York City. The consulate helped the students to contact their host institutions’ Chinese student leaders ahead of time so that the students would be supported during their transition to campus. At that time, many students were visiting other foreign students. John felt very lucky to have met a great group of Chinese students who had gone to university before him. During that first semester, they were able to support him, provide suggestions, and be mentors to him in regard to courses and materials with which he was not familiar.

[还是国内的比较亲啊] 哎呀，那绝对的。那当年去的那些人，素质都很高的。然后我也有幸跟他们交成朋友。因为那时候我去的时候很小么，他们就很大的那种，都很好。

[So the people from home you were very close to] For sure, absolutely. For people who went abroad during that time, they were a group of exceptional people. It was an honor to become their friends. I was also rather young when I went over, and they were much older, so they were very kind to me.

When Anthony arrived on campus, the embassy was no longer the contact for the student leaders. There were already enough Chinese international students on his campus to support him. Along with the students, the international student center helped students with their various needs, such as housing.
American Friends. One major theme that arose during the interviews with this generation is the number of American friends and the support they received while they were students in the United States. The literature has shown a positive correlation between establishing positive relations with Americans and international students’ overall acculturation stress (de Araujo, 2011). Linda recalled when her husband was studying at his university, there were host family programs. Local families could sign up to host different international students. She felt that even though there was a cultural difference in terms of how people became friends with one another, when they truly opened their hearts, they took international students in as real family members.

You really were able to meet and make good friends with Americans at the time, truly you could. And they were not just pretending to be your friends, or just on a basic surface level. They were truly interested and wanted to help you. They would invite you, welcome you to their home like you had gone back to your own home.

All of them mentioned the experiences of their friends inviting them home for holiday breaks. As John recalled,

I still remember our first Thanksgiving. I was invited to a local farmer’s house. That farmer was so kind to us. Hehe . . . Even though the stress and pressure from school was high and I was rather busy, I still gladly went there. I guess I forgot where the pressure was . . . Talk about culture, I found they were really nice, they were really nice to us. I always thought Americans were very nice. It’s like, once I was there, they helped me endlessly . . . Americans were like our childhood heroes. Leifeng [a famous hero in China who always helped others and put others first but passed away very young], even he
would keep a journal. These people wouldn’t even have a journal to keep. Haha . . . They
didn’t document or record what they had done.

As he continued, one time, there was a student who saw him walking to classes all the
time. Without knowing one another at all, the student gave his bike to John to use. It was
shocking to him at first. They were not classmates or friends beforehand. He was merely acting
out of kindness. From then on, they became very close friends. After John’s wife came to the
United States, when she was looking for a job and needed to practice a job talk, this friend along
with his wife would open their home to her so that she could practice. They also provided
feedback to support her.

Because of his outgoing and funny personality, Peter had many good friends from various
backgrounds on his campus.

We had a study group. It was not a formal study group . . . There was a girl named ***,
that she was an absolute local American. She and I were very close. Because we were very
close, we also invited other people to join our group. When we were together, I would
teach her math, and she would help me with the parts that I didn’t understand in English.
Yeah, just like that, she at the end became my first son’s godmother. We became close
like that, and are close even now. So I used this type of informal study group to overcome
the language barrier.

Even though he has since gone back to China, Peter is still connected with many of his
friends from the United States, particularly this person. It is visible how much such friendships
impacted these four participants’ lives while they were in the United States.

**Professors.** In addition to peers, professors were another crucial support the participants
mentioned. When Linda finished the assigned term at her job placement in the United States, she
decided to stay and continue her education. Even though her position would have paid well under normal employment circumstances, the government agreement and policies at that time meant that Linda and her colleagues were paid a set amount by the Chinese government instead of by their U.S. organizations. They also had assigned terms after which they could return to China or stay in the United States for school. The university did not know that. When she decided to turn down the offer one university gave her, the professor who recruited her was shocked. After she explained the situation, he went out of his way and advocated for her to receive a scholarship. In the end, she received a full scholarship from the university and gladly accepted the offer.

For John, after his “terrible half year,” he met a professor who changed his life. This professor was the first one to give John an A in a course. John knew at the time that his performance was lacking, but because of the A he received in this professor’s class, he found confidence within himself and believed that he could finish the program and finish strong. When he was about to graduate, the professor asked him if he wished to continue his studies. John replied that since he had not been planning on staying, he had already missed many doctoral programs’ application deadlines. This professor personally called other universities and professors to advocate for a place and scholarship for John. Ultimately, one university had a place open and was willing to give it to John.

然后录取后，我老师赶紧写一封推荐信，拿手写的！我都记得他写的！我记得他写推荐信，he is a bright young man, 然后啥的啥的写的一阵给人寄去。寄去以后就好了。人家把录取通知书发了，发了他就开一个车，把我带那儿去先参观一下，因为他呢原来在那儿教过 10 年... 那个第一个给我 A 的老师。他的书还在这儿呢你看（手指指向书的方向）。他的书，都翻成中文了。他特别有名的。

After I got accepted, my professor handwrote a recommendation letter. He wrote it by hand! I remember everything he wrote in there! I remember he wrote, “He is a bright young man,” then blah blah and sent it over. After he sent it, the school sent over my acceptance letter. Then he got in the car and drove me to the campus to visit because he had taught there for over 10 years. . . This was the first professor who gave me an A.
His book is even there, look [he pointed to the book]. His book was even translated into Chinese. He was very famous.

While the professor has since passed, he had such an impact on John that John indicated he is forever grateful. The day that professor took John for the campus visit, the professor gave John an English name to use. The professor felt that would help others pronounce his name more easily. John did not use the name his professor had suggested for him, however. Instead, he gave his first son that name in honor of this professor. As John was telling this story about the professor, the warmth he felt towards his professor, as well as his sadness that the professor is no longer is here, was palpable.

Communication with Those at Home

All of the participants were married when they came to study in the United States, and the only way they could communicate with their loved ones was through letters. Linda mentioned that she has held on to the letters that her parents wrote to her. Fortunately, because of her employer’s mail system, the letters reached their destination more quickly than others at the time. Still, it could take up to two weeks for letters to be received. She and her parents would need to refer to previous letters to determine what they had spoken about and respond accordingly. Since face-to-face conversations were impossible, the letters served the role of updating each person on the other’s life. For other students who had to send their letters through the normal mail system, it could take up to a month for the letters to be received. The participants all agreed that whenever they received a letter from home, it was a great moment. As John recalled,

要能收到家里的信就很高兴。信不贵，8 分钱。就是我们那个时候都是省钱，都是买的一张纸的，然后一张纸，然后里头写上字，然后一折就成信封了。
When you would receive a letter from home, you would be very happy. It wasn’t expensive, maybe about 8 cents. To save money at the time we would buy a piece of paper, and on that piece of paper you would fill it with words and fold it like an envelope.

He was very proud of his letter-folding skills. He was able to write the maximum number of words on one page each time.

**Practical Stressors**

Money was one of the major sources of stress for the participants of this generation. Even though all of them ultimately received full scholarships with stipends, most of them also worked part-time jobs, often cleaning dishes. As Linda recalled,

那时候的留学生，十有八九，就算你是全额奖学金，都有去打工的经历，都是洗盘子。大部分都是。因为那个时候学校的work study是不许的，那必须要有一个work permit, 对。然后呢，他们洗盘子呢一个好处是什么呢？就是洗完盘子可以免费吃，足吃! 就是你吃多少都行。所以他们有几个人，在那儿住了三个月之后，一下就胖了。哈哈哈。。。跟吹似的! 一顿饭能喝好几大杯牛奶，吃好几个面包，然后那个肉就足吃，你想那个，那人它能不胖么？

For international students then, most of them, even if you had a full scholarship, there would be the experience of working on the side. Most of the students were washing dishes. At that time, work-study was not allowed, as most students needed to have a work permit, yes. So, washing dishes there was a good deal, as after you finished the dishes, you could eat there for free! Whatever you like! So, there were a couple students back then, after living there for three months, they all got fat. Haha . . . They were like balloons! In one meal they would drink many glasses of milk, eat lots of bread, and for meat, they would eat until it was completely gone. Can you imagine? How could they not get fat?

Anthony had a tough beginning because of the mistake the officials at his university had made. By way of negotiation, he had received a working permit. He was the only one of the participants to have this. However, because of his academic performance in the first semester, he was able to receive the full scholarship after all. Therefore, he did not have to work outside of school as much. His roommate at the time had to work, but not cleaning dishes. Instead, the roommate applied to work as a cook even though the roommate barely had any experience cooking. However, Anthony had experience from when he was younger and was supporting the
People’s Commune during the Great Leap period in China. As part of the People’s Commune, the members of a community came together to eat meals provided by the central kitchen within the community. With practice, he had developed excellent cooking skills. His roommate always loved his cooking. However, he remembered one time when his roommate had come home after work:

Because at the time we had no ability to go out to eat. We couldn’t even afford fast food; most of us would cook at home. One time I made my roommate noodles. In the past he would have absolutely loved it. Every time I would make noodles he was so happy. But that day he told me he had no appetite because he was too full, way too full. He was applying to be the chef for fried rice, right? For his job interview, he had to cook while tasting. Others would use a spoon to taste; he used a bowl. Haha . . . Of course he would be too full, right? Hehe . . . After making a couple rounds, just like the comedian Chenpeisi in his skit, one bowl after the other, how could you eat anything else at night? That is what poverty is like.

There were so many other stories from each participant that were unique in their own ways. However, all of those led to another theme, which was the participants’ strong minds. They were shaped by their childhoods, the events they had experienced, and the sociocultural environments in which they had lived before coming to the United States.

**Mental Well-being**

All of the study’s participants shared stories about students quitting halfway through their programs due to the hardships they had to endure once they arrived in the United States. It was challenging for individuals to go from an academic setting in which they were the best students to an academic setting in which they were uncertain of themselves. The pressure of making their country proud and not letting the opportunity to study abroad go to waste was extremely high. As
Linda mentioned, some students felt the pressure of their country’s and parents’ expectations very deeply. Some of them had never failed before, so they did not have any resilience when it came to facing and overcoming setbacks. While all of the participants I interviewed had experienced these stresses, they all ultimately overcame them.

Many of them mentioned the reason they overcame these stresses was their upbringing and early life experiences. They all mentioned they had experienced tougher situations in the past. For them, the challenges of studying abroad were not an issue. Peter recalled his first apartment in the United States, which was located in a basement.

尽管第一学期的生活，我告诉你，我租的房子是 basement。地下室，很小一间。但我觉得那个 basement 虽然小，是 basement，to me，that’s the best apartment I ever had。因我在中国是几个人住一间对不对，那个地方起码是个 single room。尽管剩下的 shared space with other people，但是 I had my single room... 我还是觉得，this is great, this is cool。然后呢，这个吃东西，到超市去买东西以后，我发现最好的就是，那个时候中国吃不到那种什么蛋糕啊，当然现在看是 junk food。我就买了个长长的，那个时候超级的甜，幸好那个时候年轻不怕，现在不行了，会有糖尿病。我就买那个这么长的蛋糕，当时还折价从两块钱变一块钱。然后就甜食买了很多，又有牛奶，又有什么可乐，又有水。然后就说，哇，这个生活好。你知道，他帮我做了两件特别好的事儿。一件就是，当那个时候我在中国的时候，因为贫穷，因为在农村待过，所以 occasionally 我会 smoke。但是到了美国以后我发现那个 cigarette 很贵。Haha。。。it’s quite expensive。而且我发现在我住的那个地方，他们都不吸烟。所以我一下就在那种 financially 和 environmentally 就，我就 forget about the cigarette。所以它当时帮我戒掉了香烟。

For my first semester, I’m telling you, the place I rented was in a basement, a very tiny place. Even though it was a small basement, to me, that was the best apartment I ever had. Because in China at that time, there were many students living in one dorm room, right? That at least was a single room; even though I shared a space with other people, I had my single room... I still felt, this is great, this is cool. And for food, once I got to the supermarket, the best thing to me was the sweets. In China you can’t eat that type of cake, and now looking back, I realize they are junk food, but I just bought those long and super sweet cakes. Thankfully I was young then. I can’t do that anymore; I would get diabetes. I would buy those long cakes, and sometimes they were half off, from two dollars to one dollar. So, you would buy many sweets, you have milk, you have Coke, you have water. Then I thought, wow, this life is good. You know, this helped me with two things. One was, when I was in China, though I was so poor and lived in the countryside, occasionally I would smoke. But after I got to the United States, I realized cigarettes were too expensive. Haha ... It’s quite expensive. And in the place I lived,
smoking was forbidden. So, under those conditions, financially and environmentally, I forgot about the cigarettes. It helped me quit smoking cigarettes.

All of the participants also shared many challenging moments their friends had experienced. As they shared their experiences, it became clear that those setbacks and hurdles were only part of the journeys that were their lives. There might have been moments they had self-doubt and wondered whether they were making the right choices. To look back now, however, such moments were just a part of their self-growth.

**Reflection on the Overall Journey of Studying Abroad (Experts)**

The study’s participants from the 1950s generation generally thought it would be hard for them to give advice to today’s international students because the time periods are so different and the gap between the two countries is currently much smaller. Because of globalization, students today have many more opportunities and much more information at their fingertips than students had in the past. However, the participants did want to share these stories with students to help them learn and acquire useful skills as a means of supporting themselves.

There was one common theme all the participants felt future students should keep in mind: the importance of community. The participants thought that it would be good for students to find a local community by becoming involved, for example, in Chinese student organizations. However, they all felt that it is also important for students to be brave and step outside their comfort zones to try new things. This might mean meeting people from different backgrounds or trying majors that are related to their disciplines. Students should also not be afraid to fail and be patient with setbacks. The participants all agreed that their previous experiences had a significant impact on where they are today. Other people played a huge role in their journeys, and they said they believe that having a good sense of community and being open-minded about the new culture is important in order to have a positive and smooth transition to the host country.
Having analyzed the stories of the 1950s generation participants, I turn my attention to the 1990s generation. Despite 30 to 40 years’ difference in age, the 1990s generation participants described moments of their journeys that were rather similar to those described by participants of the earlier generation. They also described big differences.

**Generation 1990s 九零后**

The four participants in my study who were born in the 1990s went to the United States in different years. They completed different programs and lived in different states. However, through the transcription process, I found that there were many common themes that emerged as they described their experiences. The analysis is broken down into three time periods: before going to the United States, studying in the United States, and reflection on the overall journey (Table 6).
Table 6

Major Challenges Experienced During LPP (1990s Participants)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase (Novices)</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Before going to the United States</strong></td>
<td>• Personality and family background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Family involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reasons to go to the United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Education stressors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sociocultural stressors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o The individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Relationship challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Loneliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Chinese church community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mental well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Studying in the United States</strong> (Acquiring knowledge and learning through experience)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Community (before and after arriving)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Willingness to reach out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Stepping outside of the comfort zone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before Going to the United States (Novices)

There were three major themes that emerged related to the participants’ preparation to go to the United States: personality and family background, family involvement, and the reasons for going to the United States.

**Personality and Family Background**

The first major theme that came out of the interviews with the participants from the 1990s generation was the role of personality and family influence. The participants’ upbringing and their relationships with their families had a significant impact on their overall decision-making processes about whether to study abroad, which school to attend, how to build their
social circles, and how to cope with stresses. Even though each participant had their own unique personality, the participants shared the personality trait of independence. Some of them were more outgoing than others, but overall, they were very independent, and when stressors occurred, they were able to overcome them.

Vanessa was confident, stood up for her beliefs, and did not give up easily. Even when times were hard, she found ways to overcome. Despite the limited time that she had lived in the United States, and the challenge of her broken English, she was able to negotiate her language placement during the first year.

That was just unfair, because with the result I got on my exam, I didn’t think I was a third level . . . I ended up beginning at the fourth level because I refused to start with the third . . . At that time I was using my limited language skills along with my body language to negotiate. Maybe also I have a firm belief about defending myself. I thought, what am I afraid of!

That was not the only time she had to stand up for herself at the language center. Even she did not “win the battle” and had to repeat the course, she always asserted herself. During that time, she had her boyfriend and firm support. Unlike Vanessa, neither Frank nor Waverly knew anyone in the United States before they came.

Waverly considered herself very shy and thought she might get homesick often. However, the experience made her realize how independent she actually was.

这个比我想的要好的多。因为我我自己在出发之前就觉得我是一个很恋家的人，我好像没有离开我爸妈超过一周以上……大学除外，因为大学离家也挺近的，就一个月就回去一次，所以就一个月吧…… 然后呢我就以为我会很想家，但其实一点也没有想家。诶，也不能说没有一点，反正就是没有怎么想家…… 我觉得可能一个比较新鲜，一个是的内心比我自己想的要强大一些了，我没那么弱吧。
The reality was so much better than I had expected. Before I left home, I thought I would be a person who would be homesick all the time, because I had never left my parents for more than a week... except for college. But because college was close to home, I got to go home at least once a month... So I thought I would miss home a lot, but instead it didn’t happen at all. Well, I can’t say not at all, but it wasn’t that bad... I thought one reason was because it was new and exciting; another reason might be I was lot tougher than I expected that I would be. I’m not that weak after all.

Claire described herself as a laidback type of person. When she decided to go to the United States, she knew that she would be going with three other more experienced students in the program. This gave her a false sense of security and she did not prepare for her arrival well. Within the first two months, she had to move three times. However, she was not worried or stressed. The second place she had to stay was far away from campus, and she had to carpool with people she did not know. This shows she is very trusting of others.

Then I went there and found out that I had to drive to school. It was too far. It’s not bad if you can go straight through, but we lived on the hill... Then there was a driver over there, so we could carpool. There was a set price per month and we would go together. But it was still inconvenient because you had to wait all the time. Because all four people needed to be in the car, so you had to consider each person’s schedule, and sometimes that was inconvenient. So, after staying there for two weeks I looked for another place.

Many of the participants mentioned that family members were not very involved in their lives when they were growing up. However, they believe that this enabled them to be more independent. Even though some participants mentioned their families were more involved than others, family involvement was clearly very important in the decision to study abroad.

**Family Involvement**

Going to study in the United States can often be a group decision for families, especially for individuals in collectivist cultures (Hofstede, 1984). When the one-child policy was enacted,
more families became careful about their children’s decisions to study abroad. Therefore, families have different ways of being involved in the journey. The involvement can both be positive and negative at times. Vanessa’s family was very involved in her decision to study abroad, though they were not always supportive of the idea. When she was accepted to Australian universities after high school, which she had applied to on her own without discussing the decision with her family, her parents were so mad that they refused to talk to her. The whole family gathered for meetings in an effort to convince her not to go.

然后家里所有人，就所有人就轮翻出论战说不要让我出国，不让我出国。就认为我小小一只啊，就又自己在国外的话，因为当时家里在国外并没有亲戚在，就觉得无依无靠的你不行的，就不太同意。

Then everyone in the family, literally everyone, they all took turns and described why they did not want me to go abroad. They thought I was too small in terms of stature. If I went to a foreign country alone and without any relatives nearby, they thought I would not survive, so they did not agree with this idea.

Because of the disapproval of older family members, Vanessa stayed in China for her undergraduate studies, but she was very unhappy. She brought up the idea again in her junior year of college. Since she was older and already knew other people in United States, the family finally approved.

Waverly’s family, on the other hand, was very involved in her application process and the whole journey. The idea of studying abroad actually came from her father. Rather than hiring an agent to help her with the process, she and her father worked as a team. Her father first looked at the university rankings. He then picked programs that were focused on practical training rather than on theory. Because of her father’s language limitations, Waverly took the list of universities her father had researched and visited the official school websites on her own to do more research. With his help and her supporting documents, she was ultimately able to earn admission to her dream school.
我觉得我爸可以给我的 support 特别多，就不管从学业上，还是怎么说心的支持。

I felt my father gave me a lot of support both academically and emotionally.

Regardless of the level of family involvement, the 1990s participants all had various reasons for studying abroad. There was one reason they all had common, though, and that was to broaden their horizons and see what education in the United States was like. Some of them also considered studying in other countries such as Australia, Singapore, and England.

**Reasons to Go to the United States**

Before the participants went to the United States, they all had different ideas about what the education experience might bring for them. One belief was common, though, and that was the belief that studying abroad would have a positive outcome on their future. Going to the United States had always been a dream of Vanessa’s. As a musician, she had traveled to other European countries to perform. She liked the music scenes in other countries.

我当的出国是因为，因为是一个不能算是一个情结，就是我一直就有一个想法，一个，梦想，我想，我喜欢国外的环境。是因为我从小学乐器，然后我跟着乐团到各个国家去演出，所以我很喜欢国外的那个环境，那个人文环境非常的舒服。因为你去演出的时候，你是那种 artist 的那种感觉。过去以后会被大家 respect。会被接受，而且国外的那种对艺术的接受程度比国内的普及程度要好很多，所以我当时是觉得，很舒服。然后大家都很 thankful，都很 appreciate，都很 friendly to one another。因为在国内，大家都很 keep distance。No one gona smile at you。如果有人对你奇怪的笑，你会觉得，oh~creepy。

Originally, I wanted to study abroad because of my belief, or an idea, or a, a dream I always had. I thought, I liked the environment abroad. Because I have played my instrument since I was young, and then I followed the band to perform in various countries, I came to like foreign environments. I found the humanities environment very comfortable. Because when you went to a show, you were treated as a true artist. People respected you. You were accepted. I thought musicians were much more accepted abroad than at home, so I felt comfortable when traveling. And then everybody was thankful, they all appreciated you and were friendly to one another. When you are at home, everyone keeps a certain distance. No one is going to smile at you. If someone gives you a smile randomly, you are like, oh, creepy.
Waverly went abroad because of her major. As an English major, she wished to go to an English-speaking country to see what it was like to study there. She considered going to England. However, based on what she had seen on television, the abbreviated one-year timeline for a master’s program in England, and her own personal bias, she chose to study in the United States.

So I thought as an English major, then, I should go to an English-speaking country to learn . . . I did think about going to the United States or England, but in England the study program would be shorter. So then I thought United States would be much more receptive and welcoming. Maybe that was a stereotype, but I thought England would be very firm, very strict, that type of feeling, so I would be a little scared. And I also liked the American accent, maybe because of the American dramas I watched more than Korean or British shows, so I thought, in the end I will go to the United States.

Frank was very goal-oriented with his decision. Due to his low grades in college and the few opportunities available to him directly out of college, he thought studying abroad would provide better opportunities for him in the future.

The reason was quite simple: because I didn’t have a good grades, there was no guaranteed seat for me in a master’s program, and if I prepared and took the exam, it would be too tiresome. And I couldn’t get a good job after just getting a bachelor’s degree. Even I could have gotten a job, it would be one of those uninteresting types of jobs, or I would just have gone home, gotten a job, or done something random. So going abroad was to try to get myself polished, and also I wasn’t ready to get a job right after college.
Many Chinese students thought that earning a degree in the United States would somehow help them gain opportunities, both socially and economically (Yan & Berliner, 2011). Claire was the only participant who was not sure at first if she wanted to study abroad. She thought about staying in China to continue her education or applying to programs in England. However, after much research, or as she said, due to her laziness, she ultimately chose the joint program her university offered.

Still wanting to go abroad, I felt certain that a foreign education would be better. And our *** university is top-ranked in the world, and with that *** university, they were ranked first or second in the world, particularly the department I was interested in studying in. The condition of the labs and the majors of study would, in general, be better. So, if you have an opportunity to go, it would be good.

When the participants were asked about their overall expectations of the United States before they went, their answers varied greatly. The following were cited as perceptions that the participants held of the United States before traveling there: American people are more free-spirited people; the cities may not be as fancy as New York, but they are close enough; they could make friends from different backgrounds; and gaining diverse knowledge would expand their horizons. The 1990s participants all had different levels of preparation as well. Types of preparation included taking in-person or online language exam training courses; finding contacts through WeChat that might be in the same degree program; making checklists of items to pack; and simply obtaining a SIM card to call home. They all agreed, though, that preparation helped with the overall experience. However, regardless of prior expectations, no level of planning fully prepared them for what came their way when they finally arrived in the United States.
Studying in the United States (Acquiring Knowledge and Learning Through Experience)

There are four major issues that emerged during the time that these participants studied in the United States. The issues are similar to the top five acculturation stressors described in Chapter 2. However, the participants’ stories show that a single stressor can be manifested in many different ways. The participants’ sharing of these stories and experiences could help educators and students to understand the different stressors that international students face.

Language

The language barrier facing students who are studying abroad is one of the most commonly studied stressors (de Araujo, 2011). With the exception of Vanessa, all of the participants had taken language courses in China and passed a language requirement test such as the TOEFL or GRE. However, all of them still struggled with communication initially, particularly during their first semester. All of them agreed, though, that language was much more manageable in an academic setting than it was in everyday life.

Claire spent most of her time in her research laboratory. The experiments and textbooks were not hard for her to handle, but the everyday conversations she had to have with her laboratory mates were.

I think there was a little bit of pressure on language, because I when I was in the laboratory, I couldn’t communicate well with my colleagues, and I was the only one who was Chinese. [long pause] This had an effect. For example, there are many problems that can be discussed with others, but I would discuss less with others. If I had felt that there were no problems with the language barrier, we might have discussed more.

There were also laboratory retreats during which the students would go out together to have a beer. She thought if her English verbal skills had been better, she would have been able to
interact with others more frequently rather than just conducting research and doing laboratory work together.

All four participants shared that they had struggles in everyday life, such as everyday conversations, discussion with friends, or simply ordering food. Vanessa mentioned that since her boyfriend was a native speaker, she sometimes felt pressure even when they went out to eat. She shared a memorable experience she had with ordering food. This experience took place at Subway.

I hate Subway. It’s not that I don’t like eat Subway; I think it’s fast and healthy. It was just that I don’t know how to pronounce those words [speechless emotion]. When you go order Subway, they make the food from scratch. And I was like, okay, choose the bread . . . Hm . . . [I can copy] just like what he asked . . . And then ingredients, you can’t copy anymore. And then it all started, hm . . . tomato . . . cucumber . . . Haha . . . And then it was awkward! Until I was like, okay, to challenge myself, I have to go back and start memorizing those words! I told myself no! I will learn HOW TO ORDER SUBWAY! Haha . . . Then when I finally memorized those vegetables, then I began the struggle with CHEESE . . . When you finally learned all the types of cheeses, the other day we went to the Subway again, to finish everything, you had all kinds of sauces, and I was like . . . And then finally one day I order Subway and I’m like, okay, I got this! Haha . . . It’s funny! So you do realize, the hardest words are actually those in supermarkets.

More and more students are trained in exam-based courses, yet they overlook that non-academic language may impact their overall confidence level with social communications (Yan & Berliner, 2011). Vanessa happened to be the only one who had studied at a language school.
Despite many conflicts with the language center, she believes the year prepared her
tremendously for her future studies.

我真的认为语言学校是让我能够更好的融入的一个方式。因为很多人不愿意去读
语言学校，他觉得语言学校就是说学习不好，说明你成绩差，你考不好托福啊或者
怎么样……我也有去偷偷的听那些 under 的课，也有跑去听他们的课。我就发
现……他不敢张嘴……考 120 他都不太敢去跟人家沟通……他的写作很高，他的
grammar 非常棒，但是就是但是他不敢去说……可能很多人都是去录音，然后因
为你的那个教科书试的口语和老师真正讲台上讲课完全不一样，老师们也可能有口
音，他的语速完全不是那个语速，所以有很多人就听不懂，也说不出。

I really think that language school was a way for me to fit in better. Because a lot of
people do not want to go to the language school, they think the language school means
that they are bad students, or it means that their grades are poor, or that they cannot get a
good TOEFL score . . . I also observed some undergraduate classes. I realized . . .
Chinese students do not dare to open their mouths . . . They were afraid to communicate
with others . . . Their writing skills might be strong, their grammar might be good, but
they can’t speak . . . Maybe a lot of people are going to record the class, but because the
verbal practice tool at home is completely different from the teacher’s real lecture at the
front of the room. For example, the teacher may have an accent. Their speed of talking
might be different, too. So a lot of people don’t understand the class nor can they
participate during it.

She believed that since most of her classmates were also English as a Second Language
(ESL) students, she was prevented from feeling ashamed of her language ability or accent. She
felt the international students in her program were much more welcoming than students outside
of her ESL program and the professors in the program were very open and encouraging. During
the year of training, the students in the language center had more practice in class participation
and preparation for presentations. She believed all these exercises helped her gain more
confidence and prepared her for her master’s program.

When the participants were asked about the actions they had taken to overcome the
language barrier, their answers indicated that this barrier was rather difficult to overcome. Most
of them were surrounded by Chinese students or speakers. Others thought about coming back to
China after the program, so there was no motivation to overcome the struggle.
**Educational Stressors**

It was interesting that two students changed their majors after going to the United States. Vanessa chose a major that she did not have any prior experience in. She chose the major based on its reputation at the school. Frank, on the other hand, applied for many different majors and decided on a major in which he did not have much basic knowledge.

其实我的基础知识一点儿也不够。我去了以后其实都是现学的。其实我那个金融工程里面包含统计，但是我本科没怎么学习，其实我啥也不会，然后我去美国其实全部都是现学的。但是问题是啥呢，就是那些课其实都特别简单，所以就是都非常基础的课，就是从0开始教的那种感觉，所以后来全学会了。

Actually, I barely had any basic knowledge of the major. When I went over to the United States, most of my knowledge was acquired there. Even though my finance engineer major did include statistics, as I mentioned, I had barely studied in my undergrad, so I actually didn’t know anything. So when I went to the United States, I had to relearn everything. But the issue was, all these classes were rather easy. It was mostly basic intro classes. It was like learning from zero. So I got to learn and master the knowledge after all.

All of them mentioned that despite the language differences, and at times the need to start their education from scratch, academic work was never a stressor for them. Even though Vanessa did not like or take an interest in her major, she still found ways to ask for support, and she passed all her classes. All of the participants were students who had never had any education outside of China. Most, if not all, of their formal education training was done the Chinese way. As products of the Chinese education system, many students found it stressful to adjust to a new education system (Yan & Berliner, 2009) and its norms. Some of the challenges were different laboratory protocol standards and practical training requirements for students.

Claire’s major required her to work in laboratories a great deal. One of the most memorable events and stresses for her was an incident that happened in her laboratory. One of her experiments required her to work with rats. However, as a student who had had most of her
training in China, she found that the lab protocols were different and stricter in the United States. Yet she was not aware of that beforehand.

In China, animal testing regulations are, very weak. There is not much concern for animal protections. Well, then over there, they demanded strict compliance with the protocol. For example... I just needed to implant something in a rat’s brain... If I dropped that experiment implant, it would be fine in China... But in the United States, if it fell, the rat needed to be euthanized right away... Then there was one time I did drop the experiment implant. When I reported it to my boss and my advisor, he asked me if I had euthanized it right away. I said no, and then the teacher was very angry, so angry that he couldn’t speak, you know? He later asked someone, another classmate, to tell me... that this was really serious, and then he told me to stop doing experiments for a while and not do any experiments on animals. And that it was better for me not to come to the lab, so I didn’t come to the lab for a week.

She was rather scared at first, but after days of thinking, researching information online, and asking more experienced students about the protocol, she realized this was a serious issue. She drafted a long e-mail and requested a meeting with her advisor in which she told him what she had learned from this mistake. A day later, the professor emailed her and kindly informed her what should be done in the future. He also recognized how much stress this incident likely had caused for her. Yet she thought the reaction of her advisor was understandable.

Later on Claire discovered that she was not the only person to have done this. Due to the different protocol standards between countries and a lack of knowledge, students in the past had made similar mistakes. In one instance, the whole laboratory was shut down for half a year,
which caused tremendous damage. Therefore, Claire understood why her advisor had been so mad at her.

Waverly’s program required her to student-teach for two semesters. Her internship site included not only students for whom English was a second language but also native speakers who were returning for literature courses. When she had to teach classes for the advanced students, she felt it was rather challenging.

One, because of the language itself. They were native speakers so their language skills were better than ours. So at times, we would have discussions, and because this was a higher-level class, the discussions would be more complex. During discussion, they would have more knowledge than us, or it’s not more knowledge, but at least a wider range of expression than we had. And whenever they would say things that I didn’t understand due to the language barrier, I couldn’t ask them to repeat themselves, right? So I would just blurt out and skip through. At times like these, I would be rather sad.

Therefore, there were challenges with the new education system for students when they studied in a new environment. However, most of these were based on cultural differences and a lack of local knowledge. The students had been trained in China their whole lives and had limited awareness of the host country’s cultural norms and standards, such as laboratory protocol (Yan & Berliner, 2009). This lack of knowledge led to increased hardship for these students.

When hard moments arose, all of them had sought answers from friends they had made in the United States.

Sociocultural Stressors

This theme stood out as the most significant among the participants’ study-abroad experiences. As the literature indicates, social support or the lack thereof is a key contributor to
international students’ overall acculturation stress (de Araujo, 2011), whether it be positive or negative. All the participants talked about the many people they had met while studying in the United States, and these anecdotes were interwoven throughout their stories. Ironically, the people they met during their studies sometimes were supporters and stressors simultaneously. One interesting aspect of the generation is that most of their social supports, if not all, were international students or faculty members from China.

**The Person.** One common theme among the participants was the idea of “the person.” All the participants stated that their overall experiences improved once they met the first person whom they could call a friend or someone they trusted. As Waverly said,

感觉在那边就算是有一个人都会觉得挺好的。

It feels like even if you have one person over there, things are much better.

Though Claire went to the United States with three other students, her experience improved after she moved into her final apartment during the first semester. The improvement was mainly because of the roommate she met while living there. This roommate had already been living there for more than six months and, through her, Claire joined a bigger circle.

就是，其中就是我和一个室友，她已经来了半年了。她在那边认识了一群朋友，所以就是很欢乐… … 很快就融入了小圈… … 主要就是因为我到了那个我住的房子嘛。而且那个室友就是，就是可以把大家的气氛啊，关系啊,搞得特别好，然后就挺好的。

Yes, among them was one of my roommates. She had been there for half a year. She already had a bunch of friends over there, so it was just fun . . . I immersed myself in a little circle very quickly . . . Mainly because I got to the house where I live. And that roommate could make everybody's environment, relationships, she could make them extremely positive. Vanessa had her person, her boyfriend at the time, even before she came to the United States. He set up everything for her. She did not need to make any preparations. She just joined his world, his town, his school, and his friend circle. Therefore, she was very comfortable during
the first semester when she was there. After they broke up, though, she had to go through a very tough time that entailed readjusting and rebuilding her social circles. Thankfully, she met a girl from China in her program. This helped her tremendously in getting back on her feet.

Then I met a Chinese girl. She was about the same age as me, okay. Then I held on to her like my life depended on it. I stuck with her every single day.

However, having that one person led to stress for the participants as well.

**Relationship Challenges.** When Vanessa arrived in the United States, her boyfriend was there to help her with everything. He picked her up at the airport, introduced her to his friends, drove her around after school, and almost always had meals with her. However, after they broke up, she had to start all over.

It hit me really, really hard . . . I needed to restart, and even had to move out of my house. I had to leave my whole social network, and then people may feel embarrassed, and the whole social network is going to be embarrassed, and you wonder, this circle, are they going to talk to you or talk to him? Yeah, it’s awkward.

Waverly had a similar experience, though hers was with a close friend she had met during school.

We were very close at first. Then she became much more needy, and I prefer more personal space. So later, she felt I wasn’t reaching out to her often, but I wasn’t the type of person who liked to reach out. That was my problem. But as I then tried to reach out to
her more, she thought that wasn’t enough. So as the time went by, this issue slowly built up.

As Waverly continued to tell her story, she described how she came back to this friendship and how she felt conflicted in her feelings towards this friendship. She said this friendship was truly meaningful to her, but she does not know what she could have done to make things better. After a while, their friendship no longer was close like it was before. She still wishes she had had the chance to solve the misunderstanding with her friend.

Claire also somewhat regretted being unable to solve a conflict she had had with a friend.

我从小大大就会让我觉得有压力的都是人际关系，或者感情问题啊什么的。就不会是学业啊什么之类的。

From a very young age, the things that made me feel stressed were people or relationship issues. It was never about school or anything.

She had a friend she met through the Chinese church community in her town. A conflict early on in their friendship severed the trust between them. Despite her friend’s efforts to reconcile, it was hard for Claire to like her again. Claire wanted to fix the issue, but they never did.

就从理论来讲，理智上面来讲，我应该是跟她处好关系的，也没什么矛盾什么的，但是就是不知道为什么就是就是做不到……她这样其实也没什么错，我觉得都是性格和习惯而已，但是可能就是自己不喜欢这样的。

Theoretically speaking, intellectually speaking, I should have been in a good relationship with her. There was no contradiction or anything. I don’t know why, but I just couldn’t do it . . . There was nothing wrong with her. I think it was just her personality and habits, but maybe because I just didn’t like the way she did things.

The only male 1990s participant, Frank, reported having barely any conflict with friends. However, he believes this lack of conflict was because of his personality. He said that it takes time for him to warm up to others and make close friends. Therefore, he felt very lonely during the first semester.
Loneliness. Loneliness was one indicator of students’ general feelings of satisfaction with their overall experiences studying in United States (Bertram et al., 2014). Frank was not satisfied with his university at first, so he thought about transferring. He ended up taking six classes in the first semester. In addition to feeling busy and tired at times, he sometimes felt bored and lonely.

有时候确实有点儿孤独，但是吧，就是你孤独你就去学校嘛，你就去图书馆待会儿，也就没事了。就是其实孤独就是你那会儿时间你要是把时间给用出去了就好了。第一学期是非常累的，然后就整体都 ok，然后第二学期就轻松了，玩了也多了。当时还买了个车，去克里夫兰看球，看 NBA 比赛，然后就开车出去。就开车以后整体就感觉好多了。

It was a little lonely, but then, if you felt lonely, you just went to school, or you could sit in a library for a bit, and then things would be all better. It was when I was feeling alone that I just used the time to go outside, that’s all. The first semester was very tiring, but overall it was okay. The second semester was much more relaxed, and you had more things to enjoy. I even got a car. I would drive to Cleveland to go to NBA games. Once I was able to drive places, things became much better overall.

He mentioned that when he was bored during the first semester, he would play video games with his friends back home. Because of the time differences and class schedules, he would wake up very early just so they could play at the same time.

Most of the participants called friends or family members in China during their first semester due to the lack of friends they had at school. For Vanessa, the feeling of loneliness came over her in her second year. There were days after the break-up when she could not sleep and was in bad health. She did not want to worry her family, so instead she turned to her friends in China for support.

当时就给我国内的朋友打电话。那时候就打出了天价的电话费，就是一定要，就是走在路上，我不是走着去上学嘛，就我不能让自己有一个时候是自己，就不能接受这个状况。就一定要，talking to someone。然后如果有时候网络不行了，就用手机打，打电话长途。就一定要在讲话，就一定要跟人家聊天，就一定要跟人家聊，聊什么无所谓，但是我一定要这个时候有个声音在我身边。因为没有人在我身边，那我就要有一个声音在我身边，对。
During that time, I would call my friends back home frequently. I accrued some sky-high phone bills. I just couldn’t be alone when I walked to school and other times. I couldn’t accept this situation. I needed to be sure to talk to someone. And then if the internet wasn’t working, I would just use my phone to make direct international calls. I had to talk, I had to talk to someone. I had to talk to people, no matter what. I had to have a voice around me at that time. Because I had no one then, so I needed a voice near me, yes.

Thinking back, she said she feels a bit childish about what she did during that time and that in a way, she sees herself as weak. At the time, though, talking on the phone was the only thing she could do to make herself feel less lonely and as if she had someone there.

Although she was taken care of and had everything prepared for her during her first year, she later had to face many things alone while building her new life.

I was alone then, and there was no water. So I would have to go and buy water and carry it home. Then, if I wanted to cook something for myself, I would have to walk for about 40 minutes. I carried dozens of pounds of stuff, and I brought it back, and I walked. I was wearing flip-flops because my shoes were had been lost with my suitcases. I had lost my luggage completely, so I ended up with nothing. I was left only with what I had from the previous apartment. That’s all. I just needed to start all over.

Even though she felt she had to leave her old friend circle after the break-up, Vanessa found that some of them were still supportive of her on the rare occasion that she did spend time with them. However, after school started again, she begin to form a new support system, a new friend circle, and her new life.

Another theme emerged as the participants talked about their friends and support systems in the United States, and that was the role of local Chinese church communities in the university towns where they had studied.
**Chinese church communities.** Research has shown that Chinese international students are becoming increasingly involved in their local church communities not for religious reasons, but as a way to gain emotional and social support (Yan & Berliner, 2011). Having done limited research beforehand, Frank arrived at the airport near his university and was shocked to find that there were no Ubers or taxis available.

When I landed and disembarked from the plane, it was around past midnight. I thought I could just grab a taxi, but who knew there would be no taxi! There was a big American guy asking me if I wanted a taxi, but I was too afraid to get in! Haha... Then I met a group of people from the Chinese church community. The church people were just sitting there, so then they took me to the university.

Since Frank had arrived on campus almost three weeks before the new student orientation, he had to stay in a hotel. He could not yet move into his rented apartment. After he did move into the new place, the local Chinese community helped him to shop, invited him to different church events, and introduced him to similarly aged students. He mentioned that when he became lonely, he sometimes participated in church events or played basketball with friends at the church.

The first time Waverly went to shop for essential items, she was similarly supported by the local Chinese church community near campus. After students were accepted to the university, they were added to a WeChat group by other more experienced students who were members of the church. Through WeChat, the Chinese church community provided a sign-up list for students be picked up to go shopping. Though she did not continue to go to the church, she felt thankful for the warmth the church community members had provided for her when she first arrived.
The Chinese church community became one of the essential groups that Claire participated in throughout her time at school. After she moved into her new apartment, one of her roommates invited her to participate in a Friday night church gathering. She had always been curious about religion, so she happily accepted the invitation.

I had no contact, so I really wanted to learn. When I was an undergraduate, I had taken a course that did a comparison between Chinese and Western cultures. It was one of the more popular courses, and it discussed religion. When the teacher talked about religion, he said, in fact, he leaned more towards Buddhism, which he thought was very good. And then he explained all the different religions, and when he got to Christianity, he said, well, he thought Christianity was particularly bad. He thought Christianity was particularly scary because Christianity rejects other religions. But Christian people are happy, he said. And I’m like, happy? It’s nice to be happy. So, I wanted to find ways to learn more about it. Then after I had gone to a few parties, I thought it was great.

After Claire joined the church community, she felt very welcomed and loved by the group. They took part in different activities together throughout the week and on weekends. When they studied late at night, they cooked in groups and supported one another by sending meals to each other’s laboratories or study rooms. Combined with her time in the laboratory, the church community filled most of her spare time.

All of the 1990s study participants said that the church communities in their towns were friendly and not pushy. It was up to each student whether they wished to join the church or simply gather for food and company. Many of them, when asked to reflect their journeys, remembered that it was hard, but they felt that they were tough and that they could overcome it.

This leads to the last major theme, which is participants’ overall mental well-being.
**Mental Well-being**

All of the participants mentioned loneliness, depression, and other types of mental health disorders. Rather than seeking professional help, they either turned to their family or friends (Yan & Berliner, 2011) or kept these feelings to themselves until they passed, even when those feelings were quite severe. Claire spent very little time during the interview talking about the boy she had dated for two months. Even though the relationship had only lasted two months, it took her almost two years to overcome the stress.

我就觉得，那段时间会觉得自己很抑郁什么的。

I thought, you know, I was depressed at that time or something.

As for Vanessa, the break-up led to the darkest days of her journey.

然后每天看着天花板，我现在想想，就那个时候就是完全没有办法睡着，就可能那个时候 depression 很严重。整个人就水肿起来，然后跟自己较劲…… hum 可以说就是（long pause）特别 struggling 的那个时间。对，然后就开始一点一点的自己走……我就想让自己冷静下来，就想让自己坚持下去，就不想就 quit 了嘛。然后我家里人当时也心想要么就回去吧，因为看到状态太差了……然后我就每天走着上学，走一个小时，山路……大概是这样子。后来就坚持下来了。坚持下来后就之后就开始上学了，就开始上课了之后就开始构建自己的小的 circle。然后慢慢慢慢的就好起来了。大概是这样。

Every day I just looked up at the ceiling. To think back, I just could not sleep at all back then. I went through a very bad period of depression. My whole body would swallow up. I was fighting with myself . . . hm, maybe you could say [long pause] a very difficult time. Yes. And just beginning to take one step at a time . . . I just wanted to calm myself down. I wanted to continue; I didn’t want just quiet. And my family thought, why didn’t I just go back, because my condition was just terrible . . . Then I would walk to school, about an hour, over the hills . . . That was the life I had then. But slowly I overcame. After I survived, school began. After classes started, I began to build my little circle. And slowly, I became better. Just like that.

When Frank felt lonely, he coped by simply going to the library or sitting with people or playing video games with friends back home. Waverly mentioned during her interview that to this day, she does not know why one time she began to cry.
就有一个点我自己都想不明白啊，就是，去了可能有几天吧，然后就跟我在国内的一个朋友视频，视频还是打电话？就跟她打电话吧，然后呢打完之后我的内心是没有什么波澜的，我也没有想她，我也没有想家，但是我就哭了。我一边哭一边纳闷，我哭什么呀。因为我很认真的想了一下，我是想家了？还是我刚在这儿，生活习惯？对，然后我认真的想了一圈，没有啊。特别好。我为什么哭呢？我不知道，我是真的不知道。

There was one moment that I still can’t understand. It was after being in the United States for a couple of days. I was video-chatting with my friend back in China, video or call? I can’t remember. Let’s say I was calling her. After talking to her, there was not much feeling in my heart. It wasn’t that I missed her, or maybe I missed home, but I just started crying. Wow, I was crying, and I remember thinking. Why am I crying? I sincerely thought about it. Is it because I miss home? Is it because I just got here and I can’t get used to the life here? Yup, I thought for a long time, nope! If everything is good here, then why am I crying? I didn’t know, I really didn’t know.

Though there are many similarities among the participants’ experiences, there are also unique major events that happened to each one, whether it was a court experience Vanessa had that had almost cost her opportunity to study in the United States or a surgery Frank had had to go through alone during his first Thanksgiving break. All of them mentioned that when times became hard, they knew they would overcome them. Yet this requires further discussion about supporting students emotionally when they encounter hard moments like those mentioned.

**Reflection on the Overall Journey of Studying Abroad (Experts)**

When I asked the participants to reflect on their overall journeys, I found that the most significant theme that emerged was the importance of trustworthy and caring people in their lives. They all agreed that when entering a new environment, it is important to find ways to meet people. They suggested different ways of going about this, such as participating in social media platforms, attending university events at the beginning of the semester, trying out different church communities, or simply inviting people to go out for meals together. They all agreed that positive outcomes do not unfold naturally. Most often, people need to put in effort to enable
change. However, by having a stable group or just one close relationship with a trustworthy person, a person can experience positive changes that affect their overall experience.

Summary

It is interesting to see the similarities and differences in major themes that arose between the two generations. One major factor to consider with regarding to these themes is the historical context surrounding the participants’ decision-making about studying abroad and the nature of the programs themselves. Many of the stressors felt by each generation were significantly influenced by the historical moments during which the participants lived.

In the next chapter, I expand on the historical contexts surrounding both sets of students’ study-abroad experiences. I discuss how these contexts may have influenced the students’ overall reactions and end results in relation to the stressors. I also consider the two generations alongside one another and use my analysis to answer my three research questions. By offering a detailed description of each participant’s story, I shed light on the types of stressors students encounter during their studies and how those stressors may vary from person to person.
Chapter 5: Findings, Implementations, and Recommendations

As I am wrapping up Chapter 4, the pandemic is continuing. People have moved from being unsure, to feeling anger, to blaming, to being stressed out and sad, and now acting more sympathetic towards one another. Unfortunately and fortunately, I have also gone through all of these stages of emotion as someone affected by the pandemic.

During my comprehensive exam, I was asked by my committee why there was sufficient data and literature on various acculturation stressors but limited information on discrimination. As stated in Chapter 1, when reflecting on the 16 years that I have lived, worked, and studied in the United States, I can barely recall any discrimination being directed towards me. In the past, Americans portrayed Asian-Americans as the “model minority” (Chou & Feagin, 2015). Recently, though, we have gone from being called the “model minority” to being called “THE VIRUS,” I am reading posts on social media about anti-Asian racist comments, being yelled at in the supermarket because I am wearing a mask, and having people whisper and point at me because I am Asian. One time a person who saw me walking towards her ran to the other side of the street. Honestly, for the first time in my life, I am worried, I am scared, and I think that maybe this place is no longer welcoming to people like me. It has impacted me greatly in regard to my views and feelings about being an international student during this time. After a while, though, I have come to realize that rather than focusing on others’ negative reactions and my own uncertainty about the future, I should instead turn my focus to how we can use some of the stories that the study’s participants have shared to identify ways to help and support future Chinese international students.

With the continuing uncertainty surrounding COVID-19, international students have experienced different levels of stress: being provided a limited number of days to pack up their
belongings and move off campus; facing continuously changing travel restrictions and policies, including limitations on the number of flights families can book; having graduation ceremonies replaced by virtual events; facing uncertainty regarding visa regulations and ways of teaching for the fall 2020 semester. All of these factors and uncertainties contribute to greater stress for students. In facing these challenges, students experience differing levels of stress and anxiety.

Many universities and organizations have begun to provide resources and online classes to support students during this uncertain time, and counseling centers are among these. However, studies have shown that mental health and mental health treatment have always been stigmatized among Asian students and within Asian communities. When hardship arises, students seek support from people they trust and can relate to rather than professionals (Vogel et al., 2007). As an Asian international student myself, I am not passive. Instead, I decide to take some actions to support this vulnerable group during this time.

To bring a voice to international students, I write up a proposal to present to my university asking for support for international students. Within two weeks, a meeting is called with 15 other university officials from five different departments. Attending the meeting, I gain a greater understanding of and appreciation for professionals working together to help students during this time. I understand the complexities involved in having many different departments work together to support even just one population on campus. As a sister, I have come to appreciate that we also need to find ways to support students that make use of their friend groups, their families back home, and different social media channels. Interestingly, these experiences reflect my own findings in conducting this study and the recommendations that arose from analyzing the data gleaned from the interviews. The student participants in my study may not have been aware of the learning and growth processes that occurred while they were
experiencing stress. However, through the friends they made, the professors whose classes they took, the orientations they completed, and the conflicted feelings they had during their journeys, they developed useful coping strategies to overcome the stresses in their lives. These strategies helped them not only while studying in the United States but also after their education abroad was completed.

Introduction

The first part of this chapter presents the key findings as well as a detailed discussion of each research question that was proposed in Chapter 3. In presenting the findings, I include commonalities as well as themes that surprised me. The second part of the chapter provides my recommendations for supporting future Chinese international students and methods for implementing them. In the final section of this chapter, I include the limitations and delimitations of this study and recommendations for future studies.

Research Questions

After reading literature reviews and conducting pilot studies, I proposed three research questions. These questions were presented in Chapter 3. The goal of these questions was to help establish the importance of the social supports that the study’s participants benefited from while studying in the United States, as well as to capture how they were able to learn from others and to describe their overall experiences. The first question was asked to gain a greater understanding of the participants’ experiences and determine if there were differences in stressors between the two generations. The second and third questions led to the main reason for conducting this research. As stated in Chapter 2, Berry’s acculturation theory focuses on the overall journey, the stressors, and the ultimate coping strategies. However, there seemed to be a step missing between the stressors and the coping strategies. The second and third research questions guided
me in using adult learning theories to understand the formation of students’ social supports (CoPs) and how they developed these strategies through their experiences (stressors) and overall journeys in the United States.

**Question 1: How did the acculturation stresses differ between the generations studied?**

Previous studies have indicated that the top five types of acculturation stress students experience when they study abroad are the language barrier, education system differences, sociocultural stressors, discrimination and prejudice, and practical stressors such as finances and visa limitations. In analyzing the two generations, I found that most of these previously identified stressors were experienced by both generations, though some stressors were not as significant or as strong for one generation or another. Moreover, the patterns and the experiences of the stressors differed between generations.

**Language**

The language barrier was one of the top stressors for both generations, as shown in Chapter 2. Neither generation of participants in this study expressed difficulty with language when it came to class discussion, participation, or negative psychological distress, as seen in previous literature (Andrade, 2006; Gebhard, 2012; Hamamura & Laird, 2014). The stressor manifested itself differently between the two generations. For the 1990s generation, even though the participants had had language training for years and professional test preparation before going abroad, the participants viewed language as the greatest stressor for them to overcome. For them, language stress was more apparent in everyday conversation than it was in the academic setting, a finding that contrasts with previous literature. This everyday usage included conversations with friends, participation in class discussions (Sümer & Grahame, 2008), ordering food in a restaurant, and engaging in conversations during a social gathering.
As the participants from the 1990s generation explained, a lack of cultural knowledge hindered their overall ability and experience when connecting with their American peers (Kuo, 2011). Many of the participants were hesitant to have casual conversations with classmates or friends. The participants shared that they found it hard to understand and relate to conversation regarding topics such as sports, cultural norms, jokes, and even just small talk over a casual drink.

So if your friend is a white person, first of all, there is an age gap. Secondly, the social network also has a gap in between. They would say, do you want a beer? Or I will buy you a beer? and that kind of stuff. Do you want to go out and have a drink? And I would be like [freeze], because you don’t understand, so it’s very hard to step into their circles.

However, most were not motivated to break through this language barrier. This was largely because the participants had already decided to go back to China after finishing their studies or they were surrounded by Chinese friends.

The increasing number of Chinese students living in the United States in the past ten years has led to corresponding influxes of Chinese students on university campuses (IIE, 2018). Even if the 1990s participants wished to have more interaction with American students, the host environment made it hard for them to do so. Language was also one of the top stressors for the 1950s generation, though the struggles they described were both academical and cultural. As John reflected,

我就跟着人家上。开始的时候很难嘛，那困难不是一点儿。那当年的英语又不好，经济学等于0，没学过。咱学着马克思，人家那边不理这个。然后人家那边都是高等数学，我们在这儿没学过高等数学。等于啥都没有，那种压力那大的很。那时候基础一点儿都没有，不像现在的学生。现在的学生他去啥都知道了。学的跟人家也一样，数学也好，英语也好。那我们当年过去，一张白纸。
I just trying to follow them. At the beginning it was very hard; the difficulty was not insignificant. Your English was not good, your knowledge about the economy was zero, you had never learned. We learned about Marxism, and they had nothing to do with it. What they learned was calculus, but we had never learned calculus. So basically, you had nothing. That type of pressure was tremendous. Because you had no foundation, not like students today. When Chinese students today study abroad, they already have the mental knowledge. Their math is good, their English language skills are good, unlike us when we went over. It was just like a blank piece of paper.

To try to bridge the gap, he asked other Chinese students for advice. He also used tape recorders to record his class lectures and listen to them at night. Compared to the 1990s generation students, students of the 1950s generation believed they had no choice but to overcome the language barrier. First of all, there were only a handful of Chinese international students studying in the United States then, so there were a limited number of people with whom they could speak Chinese. Secondly, most of them had had only a limited amount of training in English before going abroad. For example, John said that he had had only one month of language preparation at a language university before going abroad. Lastly, the courses were challenging to them since they did not have a very strong awareness of the cultural context or any academic knowledge of the material. Therefore, the material itself and the cultural gap between the two countries at the time became another major stressor for the 1950s generation.

**Educational Stressors**

Education differences were one of the biggest stressors for participants from both generations (Thurber & Walton, 2012). The 1990s generation did not find managing the course load or mastering the education materials very stressful. All of them expressed that their schoolwork was rather easy to handle. However, as Claire and Waverly mentioned in their interviews, different standards such as laboratory protocols and cultural norms during class discussion were the hardest part of education for them.
As a TESOL student, Waverly’s program required her to student-teach for two semesters.

Her internship site not only catered to students for whom English was a second language but also attracted native speakers who had gone back to take basic courses. When she had to teach classes for advanced students, she found it rather challenging.

一个就是它们本身的语言水平在我们之上，所以有的时候，我们又有很多讨论嘛，因为毕竟这个 level 比较高，所以对讨论比较多。那讨论的时候呐，那就他们的知识面比我们，也不能说我们吧，至少比我要广一些。然后有的时候他们说到些什么东西我不明白，然后呢又没听没明白，那我也不知道一直让人家重复吧，那我就打哈哈哈的就过去了。然后那个时候就比较不开心。

One, because of the language itself, they were native speakers so they were more proficient than us, so at times, when we would have discussion, because this was a higher-level class, the discussion would be a lot more advanced. During discussions, they would have more knowledge than us, or not more knowledge, but at least a wider range of language skills than we had. And whenever they would say things that I didn’t understand because of gaps in my English, I couldn’t ask them to repeat themselves, right? So I would just skip ahead, so at times like those, I would be rather sad.

All of the generation 1950s participants mentioned that the first semester or the first year was the hardest time period for them during their journeys in the United States. This was mostly because of a lack of English language preparation as well as a lack of basic knowledge in their majors. Much of the course material was based on Western scholarly thought and the United States’ cultural, political, and economic circumstances.

As Chapter 4 explained in detail, because of their limited knowledge of the United States and the absence of the Chinese Gaokao when they were preparing to study abroad, the 1950s generation participants did not have a solid foundation or continuing education training before they came to the United States. Foundational classes such as economic or calculus were unfamiliar to them. When they took classes such as business law, U.S. tax law, or marketing, they found it hard to wrap their minds around the concepts presented in class. When hard
moments arose, participants from both generations sought academic and emotional support from people close by.

**Sociocultural Stressors**

The most prominent common theme in both generations was the importance of the social support they received during their journeys in the United States. Even though the 1950s generation participants did not state directly the importance of such people, all the participants’ stories and shared stressors always involved them. In examining the transcriptions of their interviews, I observed that different people from different time periods had an impact on various stressors. Regardless of the generation, when issues arose, the participants sought support from those in their own social networks (Heggins & Jackson, 2003).

In comparing the two generations, I found similarities and significant differences in the ways that the participants explained their stress. One of the key components in all the stories was the people they had met along their journeys.

**Chinese Friends.** One major similarity was the importance of students and friends they met once they arrived in the United States. All students said that their first friend or the first group they had contact with was Chinese. For the 1950s generation, given the limited number of Chinese students in the United States at the time, the embassy helped students to connect with other Chinese students on their host campuses. As Linda reflected on her journey, she said,

去了以后那个朋友圈吧，还是中国人。为什么呢？只有中国人才能感同身受，大家就这门课的老师怎么样？第二门课的老师怎么样？真正的朋友还是中国人.

After you got there, your circle of friends was still Chinese. Why? Because only Chinese students could understand what you were going through. Such as the professor for this class? Or the other class? Most of your real friends were still Chinese.

The other participants from the 1950s also recalled that most of their close friends were Chinese, whether they were roommates, classmates supporting one another through schoolwork,
or friends cooking meals together. Other Chinese students and Chinese social groups were very important elements for the participants during their time in the United States.

The same was true for the 1990s generation participants, even though the overall language and academic preparation of students from this generation was much better than it had been for students from earlier generations. When it came to a new environment, participants said that they first approached people who had similar backgrounds to theirs. When Vanessa rebuilt her friend circle in her second year, the first person she found was a Chinese classmate. She then went to a research laboratory within her department and offered to help with others’ research. The first point of contact she made in the laboratory was also from China. After Frank landed at the airport, even though he did not know the couple from the local Chinese community church, they offered to take him to his hotel. Since they were Chinese, he felt more comfortable with them than he did with the non-Chinese taxi driver he met at the airport.

Trust and similar family backgrounds are two of the key factors influencing whom international students seek out for support during difficult times (Lee & Rice, 2007). When issues arose, the participants felt more comfortable with peers who came from the same culture and spoke the same language as them than they did with peers who were less similar to them.

Communications and Technology. One of the main goals of this study was to examine whether international students today have less stress than students in the previous generation who studied abroad when there was no internet. The study explored whether online social platforms and groups play a role. In analyzing the eight participants’ experiences and stories, I found that the internet and social media platforms did not play essential roles in their overall experiences. Most of the participants from the 1950s generation had the same assumption. Linda stated,
沟通的那个方式一般还是写信。我觉得一直到90年代，这种情况才有所改变。然后就开始出现那个邮件，电邮，e-mail。然后用e-mail联络，真正到比如说打电话开始很便宜这都应该到，我觉得都应该是90年代末了。然后这个，到现在你看有微信了……所以说起来现在比较那个时候和现在比较，我觉得真的不太好比。为什么呢，你整个社会背景，经济条件，社会环境和个人所经历的那些事儿，和现在的年轻人所遇到的……但是交通通讯方面，几乎是可以是随时，没有什么，没有什么时差的问题。然后在有呢，就是这个小孩对父母的那种期望值，和我们那个时候的期望值，完全两回事儿。

Communication was still through letters. I think it was all the way up to the ’90s, then communication methods changed a bit. And since then, there has been email. So you start to communicate through email. To really to be able to call internationally and have it be affordable did not happen until the end of the ’90s, I would say. And look at now, you have WeChat . . . So, to compare now and then, I think it’s very hard to compare. Why? The whole social context, economic ability, social environment, and students’ prior cultural experiences, compared to what young people are going through right now . . . and for transportation and communications, it can be instant, there is no difference or time zone difference. And also, the expectations of young people by their parents today compared to the expectations we had for family were totally different.

However, the data gathered from the 1990s participants shows otherwise. The stories the participants shared indicated that they did use technology to help them learn and prepare for the trip abroad beforehand. Compared to the participants from the 1950s generation, the participants from the 1990s generation were able to access information online about university programs, housing, and overall U.S. culture in a much more immediate way. When asked about their social supports and social ties, however, the participants still mentioned that the strongest social ties they had were with the friends and people they had met in the United States.

Most of the 1990s generation study participants shared the importance of their Chinese friends back home during their first semester of study. However, as time passed and they met more people in the United States, they became closer and built much stronger bonds with friends in closer proximity. Claire mentioned that she felt much closer to the friends she had met in the United States than those she had in China.
Because the social circle was not that big, everyone was very close with one another. But coming back to Beijing, though, you don’t have as many struggles you go through with other people to build a close relationship or connect that often.

Therefore, social media did not seem to play a major role in the participants’ overall experiences of studying in the United States. Because the COVID-19 outbreak is continuing to spread globally, however, people are being forced to stay a healthy distance apart. They are being encouraged to connect with their friends and loved ones through social media and technological platforms. As studies have shown, an increasing number of educators are hoping to embed technology into students’ everyday lives (Liu, 2010; Traxler, 2009). With the continuation of the pandemic, institutions have had no choice but to implement technology into their curricula. How will students learn? What will be their overall experience? These questions will be interesting to explore in the near future, particularly for Chinese international students.

**Family Involvement.** Another assumption I held was about the importance of strong ties based on family support once students arrived in the United States. I assumed that with easier access to technology, students of the 1990s would have more contact with their families. However, the 1990s generation participants did not interact with their families more than the 1950s generation participants. Most of them shared that they only contacted their families to share positive news. When hardships arose, they sought support from friends locally and avoided worrying their families back home. After her break-up and before the beginning of her second year in the United States, Vanessa had a very hard transition. However, to keep her family from worrying, she instead turned to her friends.

---

Family Involvement. Another assumption I held was about the importance of strong ties based on family support once students arrived in the United States. I assumed that with easier access to technology, students of the 1990s would have more contact with their families. However, the 1990s generation participants did not interact with their families more than the 1950s generation participants. Most of them shared that they only contacted their families to share positive news. When hardships arose, they sought support from friends locally and avoided worrying their families back home. After her break-up and before the beginning of her second year in the United States, Vanessa had a very hard transition. However, to keep her family from worrying, she instead turned to her friends.
Maybe because I had always been in boarding school, I got used to not sharing my worries with my family. I would only share happy events. Also, once things were okay again, I would share with them. In the second year, they would video-chat with me a lot more; it was like every day they wanted to chat with me. But my condition was not in a place that I could be ready every day and be in a good condition for them to video-chat with me. So I would tell them that I was very busy. And I was very busy. Because I wanted to be so busy so I didn’t have time to think. So the condition during that time, it was very hard. So I would call home to talk to my close friends in China.

Waverly mentioned that even though she was very close with her parents and her phone plan allowed her to call her family in China for unlimited minutes, she spent more time with friends nearby than she did calling her parents.

While communication took longer for the participants from the 1950s generation, the participants indicated that they always felt so comforted when they received letters from home. All of them were married while they were studying abroad. Some of them, though, spent years apart before reuniting with their partners. Therefore, despite the advanced technology that exists today, students are still interested in building relationships with people who are physically close to them.

**Host Communities.** Another major difference that emerged between the two generations was involvement in local communities. After coming to the United States, generation 1990s participants developed most of their strong ties with co-nationals, just as Forbush and Foucault-Welles (2015) showed in their study. It was interesting to see that the generation 1950s participants developed stronger ties with host-nationals as well. Most of the participants from the 1990s generation mentioned that the friends they met in the United States were mainly from China. Vanessa was the only person who mentioned a friend circle outside of the Chinese community. The friends with whom she felt comfortable were still mainly from Asian countries.
Because no matter if it was our Chinese friends, Korean friends, Japanese friends, it would be very similar, because we were all Asian. Including some Indian friends, they would be, they would be nice.

Though the 1950s generation participants still felt close to their classmates from China, they also received significant support from individuals in their local communities, such as American students and professors. In a way, these supports from the local communities shaped the values and ways of life for this generation. Many of them mentioned the importance of giving back, the significance of community, and the traits of kindness to others and open-mindedness to new cultures.

Even looking only at the limited data shown here, it is clear to see the feelings of missed opportunities and experiences for the 1990s generation. Waverly mentioned that she wished there had been more of a chance for her to have more American friends.

It could be because of the participants’ personalities. It could be the limited time allotted for the interviews. The participants from the 1990s generation barely mentioned receiving social support from their American peers or other people in their host communities. However, it was apparent that these welcoming moments with American students and professors left a strong impression on and provided fond memories for the 1950s generation participants.

**Final Pathway.** Another prediction I had was related to the outcomes of international education today compared to decades ago. As indicated in Chapter 2’s discussion of the push and pull factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), the reasons that most of the participants originally decided to study abroad were the average quality of education overseas and the desire to gain a better understanding of the West. Comparing these two generations, I found that the 1990s participants had strong ideas about the expected outcomes of their experiences and degrees. The
1950s generation participants, however, had more uncertain futures and a lack of prior information. For them, the main reasons for studying abroad were to learn, acquire knowledge and a better understanding of the United States, and possibly bring the knowledge back to China to improve their fields and the quality of education.

Another factor (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) was the intention to migrate. Even though most of the participants indicated they did not intend to stay in the United States after graduation, most of them either stayed or wanted to stay for a short period of time. According to the 2018 *Chinese Students Overseas Study White Paper* published by New Oriental, a large educational organization in China, 46% of students have no intention of staying after graduation. This percentage has increased over the years (as cited in Wang, 2018). All of the 1950s generation participants finished their degrees and worked in the United States for many years afterward. However, although they grew their families in the United States, they all moved back and contributed to China as they had initially planned.

With one exception, all of the 1990s generation participants finished their degrees and went back to China right away. The one participant who stayed wished she could have stayed for longer. As a report conducted by ICEF (2018), another well-known educational organization, showed, more and more Chinese international students return home after they complete their studies in the United States. It would be worth exploring the push and pull factors for future Chinese international students who choose to earn their degrees in the United States.

**Discrimination**

Similar to my own experiences in the United States, the experiences of some of the participants were marked by discrimination. One participant from each generation shared an
incident during which they experienced discrimination. All of the others said that they never felt any discomfort or discrimination during their time studying and living in the United States.

Vanessa told me a story about a car accident she had had after purchasing her car. Since she already had a driver’s license in China, along with all translations and government-certified papers, legally she should have been able to drive with this license for three months. However, on her way to the local Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) branch, someone rear-ended her car. After Vanessa and the person in the other car exchanged insurance information, the police let the other person leave but pulled Vanessa over. Despite having all the official documents with her and her permit, Vanessa was given a ticket for driving without a license. She was rather furious with the decision.

I was like, why? Because I am an Asian? 我当时就是感觉，就是是歧视，因为 no reason，就是那种, no f*#*ing way you give me this ticket.

I was like, why? Because I am an Asian? I felt at that moment, that is totally discrimination, because there is no reason, it’s like, no f*#*ing way you give me this ticket.

At first, she was merely upset and angry; however, after she Googled the situation, she discovered that this ticket meant she had committed a crime. The consequence might be deportation. She began to worry and went to her advisor in the international student office for help. Thanks to her advisor and the lawyer she hired, she was able to win the case. The only explanation she could come up with to make sense of this case was that she had received a ticket because she was an international student.

Linda described an incident of discrimination that occurred one day as she was leaving the gym. As she was pushing open the doors, the person who was coming in whispered, “Go home.” She remembered the incident very clearly, but it took her awhile to understand and
reflect on what that person might have meant. She said that compared to race discrimination at the time, gender discrimination was much more visible.

**Practical Stressors**

The 1950s generation participants indicated that many of their stressors were practical. These stressors included acquiring their passports, obtaining approval for their study-abroad programs, and qualifying for scholarships. Money was one of the main factors in their decisions regarding which school to attend, how to cover everyday living expenses, and whether to have their spouse join them, among others. Most of them had experience working in restaurants or cafeterias waiting tables. As Peter remembered,

我第二年也去打过工，我也晚上去洗过碗，因为我是希望支持我的太太到美国去跟我一起这个团聚。所以我不希望这个花国家给我的那个钱，我觉得太不忍心去花那个钱。所以我就通过那个暑期的那个周末我去打工… 就是在 table 上只负责擦桌子的那个, waiter 是那个端菜的。Anyway，就是那个我去做那个擦桌子的。这个到晚上 12 点的时候你知道，下午三四点中上班，到晚上 12 点，也不是很累，但是脚很痛。哇~ 那个针扎一样的呀！（安静一会儿）总之我做了好几个月，就打够了一张机票钱。

I worked in the second year; I washed dishes in the evening. Because I wanted to support my wife to come to the United States to reunite with me. I didn’t want to use the money the government had given me to do that. So I used the summer and weekends to work… My job was wiping tables, a waiter carries dishes. Anyway, my job was to wipe tables. Sometimes you worked until midnight, you know? From 3:00 or 4:00 o’clock in the afternoon to midnight. Though it was not very tiring, my feet were in so much pain. Wow, it was like stepping on needles! [long pause] Anyway, I worked for a couple months, and I got enough money for one plane ticket.

However, it was different for the 1990s generation participants. Even though money was no longer an issue for the 1990s generation, the limited job opportunities were a big stressor for them. It is interesting that although all of the participants went back to China, most of them had thought about staying in the United States or going back to the United States someday. The main reason they cited for this was the way of life in the United States. However, given the increasing
number of international students coming to the United States, the competition to obtain a job after graduation, and the limited number of H-1B visas available, many students had no choice but go back. As Vanessa reflected,

其实我就呆了四年半。研究生结束了之后就工作了一段时间，然后呃，然后当时那边比较多的government work嘛，然后要求绿卡。然后我没有嘛，就非常的非常的伤心，就比较失望。对，就希望留下来。因为我就比较喜欢那个环境。

I did stay there for about four and a half years. After graduating with my master’s degree, I did work a little. Then, hm . . . Most of the jobs over there at the time were government-related work, and it required a green card. I didn’t have one, so I was really, really sad, and rather disappointed. Yes, because I did wish to stay. Because I did like the living environment very much.

Yan’s (2017) study indicated that romantic relationships were one of the stressors for graduate students, particularly for female participants. Based on this finding, I asked the participants if relationships were a stressor. The 1950s generation participants all agreed that once their partners came over, life became much better. Eventually, some of their parents came over as well. Among the 1990s generation participants, the women were much more emotional than the men and romantic break-ups had a big impact on their overall stress. When asked about pressure to start a family, they all mentioned their families did not have any expectation that they would be married anytime soon.

Mental Well-being

Lastly, one interesting theme that emerged in all of the participants’ responses was mental well-being. The participants all mentioned various difficult moments when they thought about giving up or even in extreme cases became physically sick. As John remembered,

那时候倒是有录音机呢，但是我好像也录过音啥的，但好像不管用反正是。还得自学。哎呀，每天都是。哎呀，很累。每天起来就，这个哎呀人生啊，今天又会是很痛苦的一天。哈哈哈。。。又要开始了。都是那样，晚上也学的很久。就是那样，很累。一度还老流鼻血。着急啊！而且睡不好，睡得少。那很痛苦的。那我想很少
I had a tape recorder and recorded the lectures before, but it wasn’t very useful. You still have to self-study. My goodness, every day. Ugh . . . very tiring. Every day it was like, my goodness, this life, today is going to be another terrible day. Haha . . . It was going to be the same long hours of work all over again. Just like that, you had to study so long at night. Just like that, very tired. There were times that I would have a bloody nose all the time. Because you were just frustrated! You also couldn’t sleep well, you slept less. It was really tough. I thought there were not many people, maybe there were, people similar to me. But not many people today would be like us in the past; back then it was difficult. Because you had no foundation.

Most of the participants from both generations either opted to handle their emotions on their own, found friends to whom they could vent, or simply fought through the emotions until they went away. Some even used terms such as depression, being depressed, or feeling anxiety, but they indicated that they did not seek help from a professional. There were comments made by participants from both generations indicating that the concepts of mental health and counseling were rather foreign to them. Given the current limited data on this particular topic, it is hard to identify the rationale behind their decisions. Yet there are enough studies that show that Asian students have a hard time seeking the help of mental health professionals for support because of the cultural stigma, a lack of knowledge, and the limited availability of counselors who have similar backgrounds to them (Han & Pong, 2015).

**Historical Moment**

Since 1979, the overall number of Chinese international students has increased more than 6000%, leaping from 55 students in 1979 to more than 369,548 in 2019 (IIE, 2019). It is interesting to note that the two generations of students discussed in this research mark the beginning of the establishment of a relationship between China and the United States and the peak of globalization for international students. As stated in Chapter 2, despite the fact that the media once portrayed Chinese Americans as the “model minority,” many historical events and
policies have discriminated against Chinese immigrants to the United States. However, as the eight participants’ experiences show, discrimination was not a key stressor for the participants in general. As COVID-19 continues, more conversations and webinars are taking place that are focused on the history of Chinese immigrants in the United States. As noted in the webinar “Anti-Asian Racism During the COVID-19 Pandemic” (Liu et al., 2020), it is quite a foreign concept to consider discrimination against Chinese immigrants and international students today. The model minority concept was introduced in the 1950s, right around the time the participants from the 1950s generation were born. After 1978, a relationship between the two countries was established. People were excited to learn from one another. According to Mckenna (2015), the globalization of U.S. colleges in 2015, which is the time that most of the 1990s participants were studying in the United States, led to a cultural and economic context that supported these students in their unique living conditions. Most of the students were able to pay for their education with family funds, meaning that there were fewer practical issues such as money. However, their overall experiences were hindered due to the overall increasing number of students from their home country. It would be interesting to study this current generation after the historical moment of COVID-19 passes. How will U.S. society treat Chinese international students, and how many students will change their minds about studying abroad after this pandemic?

**Question 2: How did each individual create their social networks?**

This research intended to contribute to a better understanding of how students develop strategies for coping with the aforementioned stressors. As the data shows, the people the students met while abroad became one of the most important factors in helping them cope with
stress. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning and the formation of CoP guided my analysis of both generations.

As indicated in the previous question, all participants from both generations shared various experiences with their friends or with people whom they had met in the United States. Most of these memories were created through shared hardships and life experiences. For the 1990s generation participants, even though they felt close to their friends back in China, they experienced practical challenges when seeking them out for support. These challenges included time zone differences that required them to wake up at odd hours and financial challenges such as expensive phone bills. Moreover, as some stated, there was a loss of context, as some of the challenges the participants faced were not understood or considered valid by their friends back in China. Therefore, as they met more friends nearby, the participants found that their lives became better and more enjoyable. However, there seemed to be a pattern in building these supports.

**Through Organizations**

All of the participants mentioned the importance of organizations, whether the organization was a Chinese student scholar association, the international student office, an orientation group, a Chinese student WeChat group, or a local Chinese church community. All of the participants believed it was important these groups existed for them to begin the process of acculturation.

The participants from the 1990s generation reflected on how, since there are many more Chinese students on campus now, if students were shy or introverted, it would be hard for them to step outside of their comfort zone to initiate a friendship. It would be more challenging on a personal level, in addition to the challenges of language and the new environment. Therefore, having an organized event or activity would increase the chance that students would build their
social networks. The 1950s generation participants felt the same way. Once they arrived in the United States, the participants were aided by the embassy in connecting with the Chinese student organizations on their campuses. Even later on, when the embassy stopped gathering all the students at the beginning of their study-abroad programs, the international student offices on their campuses still referred incoming students to the student organizations.

*Through One Person*

Another important way that students built their CoPs was by meeting a trusted fellow Chinese person, as stated in Question 1. This person did not need to be the student’s best friend. However, by having just one person, the student came to feel more confident. Through this one contact, the student also had more ways of reaching out to a wide range of people. For the 1950s generation participants, the Chinese embassy helped forge the first points of contact. When the participants arrived on their campuses, they met people who could help them in navigating and setting up everything.

All of the study participants remembered their first points of contact during their journeys. After rebuilding her friend circle in her second year, Vanessa concluded,

> 对，还是人是核心。从这个人开始，开始辐射出去，然后开始接触到更多更多的……然后慢慢慢慢自己发现自己身边的人越来越多，就不会感觉说那么，就慢慢的缓过来了吧……

> Yes, people are the core. From this person, you expand out, and you are able to meet more and more people . . . and then slowly you realize there are more people around you, so you won’t be as lonely, slowly you will overcome (the sadness or loneliness).

*Through Stressors*

Since there were a limited number of students studying abroad at the time, the 1950s generation participants felt very close with one another. Due to the initial financial hardships most of them faced, the students would help each other by cooking together or moving in
together to save money. Moreover, since the course content was very challenging for new students, the participants would look for students who had studied there before to ask for support. Not only did these more experienced students speak the same language, but most of them also had already gone through similar challenges. They were able to provide guidance in the participants’ native language and provide the needed cultural context in regard to the stressor.

The 1990s generation described similar experiences. When the participants were new to their environment, without support and essential personal items, the more experienced students the participants met could serve as a resource to support them in this transition, whether by driving them to the supermarket, helping them with course content, sharing past stories, or simply gathering together for meals during finals or difficult periods during the school year.

Because of all the struggles they faced and experienced such as language barriers, class challenges, loneliness, and hardships at school, the participants turned to people near them for help and support.

*Through Common Interests*

Lastly, it was very clear that the way the participants built their CoPs was by connecting with others who had the same beliefs, similar backgrounds, or common interests. Participants in both generations described looking for people who shared the same interests such as academic majors, sports, a love of cooking or teaching, or a particular religious faith. Therefore, common interests were another key element in the students’ development of coping mechanisms.

The 1990s generation participants described how they would first look for students online and try and find someone who attended the same school or program that they did. They would also look for student organizations or online social groups of students who had already studied in the United States in order to acquire knowledge about studying and living in the United States.
Since there were a limited number of students at the time they studied abroad, the 1950s generation participants gathered at the embassy beforehand. In some cases, they already knew all the Chinese students studying on their campuses.

Because of these various ways of building social support groups, I would argue that rather than thinking of CoPs as communities of practice, as suggested by situated learning, scholars should consider *communities of practitioners*. The study’s participants developed various CoPs based on their stressors. Many of them had not one support group but multiple. Most of them were based on various stresses or needs. However, it is helpful to use CoPs as a guide to understand these participants’ experiences.

**Question 3: How did individuals learn from their social networks to cope with those acculturation stresses?**

Drawing on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning theory, I categorized the eight participants in my study before they went abroad as novices. All of the experiences and stressors they faced after arriving in the United States were new to them regardless of the exact year of their arrival. Their main motivation for studying in the United States was to earn a degree and increase their knowledge. All of the study’s participants agreed that their learning happened not only at school but also through the everyday life experiences they had. These experiences had more impact on their overall lives than what they learned in the classroom.

**Learning Through Experiences**

As situated learning suggests, through full participation in their study-abroad experiences, the participants developed from novices to experts. This theory truly applies to the eight participants’ experiences. Regardless of the amount of prior preparation they had received, they found that they could never be fully prepared. All eight participants studied in the United States
at different times and at different institutions. Only two participants were in the same state. Regardless of the size of the institution, major, or the location of the university, the participants went through many similar experiences, as indicated in Chapter 4. Even though their stories varied, many stressors held constant regardless of other factors. However, as they reflected on their experiences, the participants suggested that they overcame these challenges because they had gone through them and learned from the people who had come before them.

Both generations shared details of experiences during which they asked more advanced students which classes to take, which professors to take, where to live, and how to navigate public transportation, among other questions. In a way, they were learning from “experts” who had already undertaken the journey as new students. These experts gave suggestions and shared their experiences with the new students. Many of them also met new friends through mutual friends or a point of contact. By expanding their social support circles, the students were able to acquire new knowledge and new ways of coping with the stressors they had during the time.

**Learning Through Stressors**

In addition to forming social support groups based on shared stressors, the participants learned through these stressors. When having difficulty with classes, participants from both generations sought out and built social groups of peers who studied together. As students with language issues, some formed study groups outside of class to support each other in various projects while practicing English; others simply identified conversation partners as a way of learning each other’s languages. When having difficulty in forming friend circles, students sought out ways to become more involved through various activities and social groups.

Berry (1997) proposed four different coping strategies that individuals use when they acculturate to a new environment: assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration.
Assimilation is when individuals are accepted by the host culture yet lose their own culture completely; separation is when individuals make no effort to be accepted by the host culture or to adopt the new culture; marginalization is when individuals are confused and do not want to belong to either their own culture or the host culture; and lastly, integration is when individuals are accepted by and adapt to the new culture while still maintaining part of their own culture. Based on this study and its findings, I was able to understand the possible influences on these coping strategies.

In regard to the two generations, first of all, the different historical contexts had a significant impact on decision-making regarding studying abroad. As more and more Chinese international students began to come to the United States for school, the number of job opportunities fell and this impacted the students’ original plans regarding going back to China. Students may not have had as much motivation to integrate into the new culture. Secondly, as is shown in the two generations’ reactions towards their local communities, the 1950s generation participants all stayed in the United States after they graduated from school. Most of them had good friends and support from their local communities. Most of the 1990s generation participants’ friends were all from China, however, and most of them returned when their studies concluded. While the limited data makes it hard to draw a definitive conclusion, the participants did not seem to feel a very strong sense of community. This may have had an impact on the coping strategies for the generation 1990s participants. Lastly, it was clear that participants’ unique personal backgrounds, historical contexts, social environments, and personalities influenced their final decisions about creating social groups and where to go after graduation. This study was able to shed light on some of the factors that may have influenced the students’ ultimate coping strategies.
Recommendations and Implementations

It is clear from the research that communities of practitioners are important for Chinese international students in overcoming their stressors when they arrive to study in the United States. Given the continued uncertainty of COVID-19, international students as a whole may continue experiencing different stressors. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner’s (1992) bioecological systems theory, along with the findings of this study, I provide the following recommendations and implementation recommendations at the micro, meso, and macro levels.

Micro Level – Individual

On the micro level, as stated before, Chinese international students tend to seek support from peers and their immediate support groups, such as friends back home, friends they meet in the United States, professors, parents, and people in their immediate environment. Parents who are beginning to play a crucial role in supporting children through decision-making and the overall journey would benefit from understanding some of the challenges and hardships their children may face. Having someone to provide support may increase the overall confidence and comfort level of students. It would also be good for students to seek out opportunities within the host country and network with some of the more senior students before going abroad.

Based on the findings of this research, direct practitioners working with Chinese international students, such as advisors and professors, would do well to provide students with basic support and time at least within the first semester of study. Regardless of a student’s academic ability or level of language proficiency, the student may still need time to overcome acculturation stress and adjust to the new environment. Support from advisors and professors had a significant impact on the overall experiences of participants from the 1950s generation.
Meso Level – Host Institutions and Local Communities

On the meso level, host institutions should provide students who are coming to the United States with a series of videos or a checklist with basic information about coming to campus, such as transportation to and from campus, public transportation services, and items to bring. Though many universities already provide these, ensuring these are available in different languages may increase the comfort level of students and provide ways for their families back home to stay informed.

As the data shows, many local organizations such as the Chinese church communities already have established programs to support international students. Rather than reinventing the wheel, host institutions can reach out to these support groups and collaborate with them in supporting the transition of incoming or returning groups of students.

The 1950s study participants shared that many local families signed up to be host families. Many of the participants felt that this was a great way for them to be welcomed into the host society. Institutions today can work with local communities and families to create various events and outreach. However, given the increasing number of international students, there may be challenges with this effort. The presence of such options may still increase the sense of welcome and belonging for international students.

Macro Level – Government Policies and Visa Regulations

It was clear that the increase in the overall number of Chinese international students happened as a result of the new visa regulations and optional practical training (OPT) initiatives following the Obama administration. For students in the sciences, being able to work in the United States for up to 36 months following graduation has increased not only enrollment but also the contribution that these students make to the United States. However, it is hard to predict
the policies that may be implemented after COVID-19 is over. As the participants indicated in their responses, the overall number of job opportunities, visa opportunities, and immigration opportunities had a significant impact on their overall experiences and stressors.

**Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study are also a reflection of its strengths. As suggested in Chapter 1, many studies in the past have used quantitative approaches to study the international student population. However, as the findings of this study suggest, though the stressors may be similar across categories, the stories themselves reveal so much more. By making connections with the participants and taking the time to listen to their stories, I was able to bring to life the collective experience of foreign students in the United States.

Many practical challenges such as time constraints, life events (COVID-19), possible committee member changes, and personal stresses as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19 all had an impact on the overall study. However, some of these challenges ultimately had positive influences on the study.

Writing this dissertation during the COVID-19 pandemic helped me realized so many stressors that I might have missed. It helped me to clarify my thoughts and suggestions on how to utilize this rich data to support future Chinese international students. Having a set timeline for the defense helped me to rethink the recruitment process and realize the importance of relationships to Chinese culture, as Guanxi (or relationships) is one of the most important factors when doing things in China (Inkson et al., 2007). It made me realize that recruiting without the help of a trusted recommender or referral does not work, especially in a collectivist culture.

Because many participants were unsure about sharing their personal stories and feared the potential disclosure of their identities, the participants may have held back details about certain
experiences and stressors. It is also possible that, after learning about my topic, the participants shared experiences they believed would be relevant to this study, as many of them did ask me at the end of their interviews if their stories and answers would help me with my study.

Not knowing the participants ahead of time may have led to more natural responses during the interviews. However, it may also have limited the richness of the data. Compared to the pilot studies, it was apparent that participants I knew on a personal level felt less vulnerable and more willing to share hard moments of their journey. I was very thankful that despite the limited interactions between my participants and me, the participants were so open and willing to share so many personal stories. I believe the mutual friend and trusted recommender played a significant role in that. However, it made me wonder whether my inability to conduct a second round of interviews due to COVID-19 and the many travel restrictions resulted in the exclusion of other possible stories and experiences that may have enriched the overall findings.

This study was focused on individuals who moved back to China after their studies. Most of them have been back in China for a while, particularly the participants from the 1950s generation. In asking participants to reflect on their experiences, I realized that there was a chance that the participants would not remember events clearly. One of them did share this as part of their responses. There was also the possibility that a participant changed their story and did not tell it exactly as it actually happened, though that would just be human nature.

In reality, more Chinese international students today are using education agents and organizations when applying for universities abroad (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011). However, all four of my participants from the 1990s generation either applied on their own or through a joint program. According to the data from the ICEF (2018), more Chinese international students return home today than they did in the past. The U.S. degree no longer holds the prestige it once
did. Around 40–47% of the ICEF participants felt a negative impact such as a lack of understanding of the domestic employment situation or unfamiliarity with the domestic market. However, all of the participants I interviewed not only had jobs but had rather good jobs as well.

This result may because of the limited recruiting time I had, my recommenders’ stature, and the number of participants I had. Therefore, I am not able to generalize from these experiences to broader outcomes. However, as a qualitative researcher, I hope that by telling the participants’ stories, I am contributing to a deeper understanding of these experiences that can be further investigated by scholars in the future.

Lastly, there is the limitation of my own bias, my own personal experience, my own stress of writing the dissertation, and my limited experience as a researcher. As we learned in class, the researcher is one major instrument in a qualitative study. We must be as authentic as we can in order to provide the true voices of the participants. However, as an international student, a practitioner, and a member of a society confronting a pandemic, I recognize that my assumptions and experiences may have had an impact on my reflections regarding the overall responses from the participants. One bias I may have had due to the current pandemic is related to the overall social-cultural environment both in the United States and on social media. It was hard at moments to make sense of the xenophobic comments towards the Asian population in the United States. It helped me understand other possible moments of discrimination in history. Likewise, the challenges current international students are facing, along with the many uncertainties of the institutions and host communities, helped me realize the importance of overall community support in relation to the various stresses and struggles international students may have. Rather than excuse the bias and ignore the possible impact on the overall analysis, I have included my own voice and my journey in writing this dissertation to promote transparency.
Recommendations for Future Research

Despite having only eight participants, I identified many interesting themes that emerged from the dataset and that are worth exploring in the future. Immediate suggestions for future research focus on the unique circumstances of COVID-19. As this study sheds light on two different generations of students and the stressors they faced, I am curious to know what stressors may arise during and after COVID-19. It would be interesting for researchers to interview and follow students who are going through the current pandemic.

Other research might focus on social support and the impact that communities of practitioners are having during this pandemic. One surprising finding from this dissertation is that technology and social media did not have a major impact on the participants’ strong ties. However, with the social distancing guidelines put in place by health organizations, students, schools, families, and even companies now have no choice but to move activity online. How will these students’ experiences change in terms of having support online during this uncertain time?

Other suggestions for future studies include focusing on the learning itself. Many Chinese international students, as data has shown, are currently living in the United States. Given the new stressors and possible supports, how have students developed different ways coping with these stressors? Do the students rely on their families? Friends? Or various media channels? As face-to-face social interactions are limited, what are the new ways of learning that are occurring and that have helped students to overcome the challenges of this pandemic?

As the findings of this dissertation indicate, there are factors students need to be aware of before they come to the United States. Will the uncertainty regarding visas, standard exam limitations, travel limitations, changing governmental policies that are less welcoming to students, and the social media environment have an impact on families and their students’
decisions to study abroad? Will these have an impact on incoming students as well as returning students, and will these become stressors?

As one of the differences between the two generations, the importance of family involvement to the students’ overall experiences became increasingly apparent. However, through the pandemic, family has become a stressor for students as well as a support. A study focusing on parents and their stress during this pandemic and their possible ways of coping, as well as their communities of practitioners, also merits conducting.

Lastly, as the COVID-19 outbreak continues to unfold, many schools and universities are involved in discussions about when they might open again for residential instruction. As one professor from Peking University has said, the golden era for Chinese students studying abroad may be ending. How will this pandemic change the current internationalizing trend for students studying abroad in the United States? Will their lives be the same? How will communities, schools, and educational organizations “recover” from COVID-19, and how will it impact their continuing efforts to support international students? Will there be differences going forward? I would suggest that future researchers use this study and resulting data as a basis for understanding the two time periods during which students have studied in the United States and compare those to future students’ experiences.

Finally, after reflecting on the whole research journey, I feel a longitudinal study is necessary to help elucidate what students are currently going through and how the historical context may be impacting their overall experiences.

**Summary**

As the COVID-19 outbreak continues to have impacts on all segments of society across the globe, there are many uncertainties about the near future. What will globalization look like
after this pandemic? What will international education look like after this pandemic? Will the stressors be different for future Chinese international students? This study focused on two different generations of Chinese international students and their acculturation stresses while studying in the United States. Using adult learning theories, I was able to shed light on how participants formed their supports (CoPs) and how they learned from these supports to develop coping strategies to overcome the stressors they encountered. The findings make it clear that one of the major impacts on students’ overall experiences are the historical moments during which they travel and study abroad. Whether it was right after the formation of a relationship between China and the United States or at the peak moment of globalization, the historical context shaped the students’ experiences and the students themselves in a significant way.

In this study, all the people whom the participants met during their studies influenced the participants’ overall experiences. They could be either supports or stressors for the participants. The experiences themselves shaped these participants’ overall impressions of the United States, their worldviews, and their ways of living.

Despite their age gaps and distinct historical moments, the participants experienced some of the same stresses. Each student had their own unique way of reacting to the stresses, and the stresses manifested themselves in different ways. Though there were hard moments, all of the participants shared their overall positive impressions of their journeys and feelings towards the United States. As the 1990s generation participants shared, if opportunities were to arise in the future, they would want to come back to the United States.

In conclusion, school has its way of educating people by providing skills and knowledge. However, as this research has shown, learning occurs everywhere, both inside of the classroom and outside. It takes a community of practitioners cooperating with one another to realize the full
breadth of learning. As more and more people come to view education as a community and perceive a degree as a ticket to a successful future, we educators should reflect on these participants’ experiences and the generational differences to see how we can support and assist future international students in their lifelong learning processes. Maybe this pandemic will allow us to pause and reflect on future ways to educate and support students.

I started this chapter with a famous saying in the Chinese international students’ community. There is also a famous poem written at the time that the People’s Republic of China was first founded that many people share on the internet:

从前的日色变得慢
车，马，邮件都慢
一生只够爱一个人”
    - 木心 《从前慢》

This poem is translated as, “Back then; the day seemed longer, the sky changed more slowly as the day went by. Cars, horses, and mail were much slower (than today). In your whole life, you only have the time to love one person.” When the poet passed away, many people rediscovered this poem. It resonates with them because they believe that society has become too focused on how fast things should be and how hard life has become. However, for us now, everything is on hold. People have more time and opportunities to reflect on how to utilize different resources and become a part of the community of practitioners who support the learning that occurs when Chinese international students are growing through the stressors they encounter.

This pandemic is, indeed, a global crisis. In Chinese, the word for crisis is comprised of 危机: 危 means danger, and 机 means opportunities. Maybe this can be a moment for us international educators to reflect on, reexamine, and renew our ideas about ways to improve the education of international students in the future.


APPENDIX

Dear XXX ('50s),

My name is Xiaoqiao Zhang, a fourth year education doctoral student from the Pennsylvania State University in State College, PA. I was introduced by XXX to reach out to you regarding to possibly participate in my dissertation research.

As a Chinese international student, I have studied and worked in the United States for over 13 years. I came over to the U.S. as early as in high school. Later on, I became an international student admissions counselor and advisor. Through my working life, I have realized that many Chinese international students today are encounter different types of acculturation stress when they come to the U.S. to study. With more and more students having issues, I wish to find ways to better help and support them once they come and study.

I will like to conduct a case study that understand how do your generation and the current generation learned different types of strategies to cope with the different types of acculturation stresses through your own social network at the time. With this research, I wish to understand what happened before and tell the stories to more practitioner both in China and the U.S. This e-mail is simply act as an introduction of myself and a little bit about my study. If you have any questions about my study, I will be more than happy to chat with you over the phone for more detailed information.

Thank you so much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Xiaoqiao Zhang
尊敬的 XXX (Translation),

您好，我的名字叫张晓乔，是宾夕法尼亚州州立大学教育学院四年级的在读博士生。您的朋友 XXX 把您介绍给我，认为您的故事可以帮助到我现在所做的研究。

作为一名中国留学生，我已经在美国学习和工作了 13 年多。我早在高中的时候就来到了美国。后来，我成为了一名国际学生招生官和辅导员。通过我多年的工作和生活，我意识到现在很多中国留学生来到美国学习时，都面临着不同类型的压力。随着越来越多的学生有问题，我希望找到更好的方法来帮助和支持他们的留学之路。

我的论文会是一个案例研究，希望通过了解和比较您这一代人和现在的新留学生是如何通过自己的社交网络来学习不同类型的策略来应对不同类型的压力。通过这项研究，我希望了解曾经作为留学生的您们当时所需要面对的事情，并将这些故事告诉更多现在在中国和美国的同学们，他们的家人还有与留学有关的教育工作者，以更好地支持现在还有未来有可能来美国留学的留学生。这封邮件只是简单的介绍一下我自己和我的学习情况。如果您对我的学习有任何问题，我将非常乐意与您通过电话进行更详细的了解。

非常感谢您抽出您宝贵的时间来读我的这封邮件。

祝好

张晓乔
Dear XXX (’90s),

My name is Xiaoqiao Zhang, a fourth year education doctoral student from the Pennsylvania State University in State College, PA. I was introduced by XXX to reach out to you regarding to possibly participate in my dissertation research.

As a Chinese international student, I have studied and worked in the United States for over 13 years. I came over to the U.S. as early as in high school. Later on, I became an international student admissions counselor and advisor. Through my working life, I have realized that many Chinese international students today are encounter different types of acculturation stress when they come to the U.S. to study. With more and more students having issues, I wish to find ways to better help and support them once they come and study.

I will like to conduct a case study that understand how do your generation and the older generation learned different types of strategies to cope with the different types of acculturation stresses through your own social network. With this research, I wish to understand what is happening now and tell the stories to more practitioner both in China and the U.S. to better support student like you and me. This e-mail is simply act as an introduction of myself and a little bit about my study. If you have any questions about my study, I will be more than happy to chat with you over the phone for more detailed information.

Thank you so much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Xiaoqiao Zhang
亲爱的 XXX (Translation),

你好，我的名字叫张晓乔，是宾夕法尼亚州州立大学教育学院四年级的在读博士生。你的朋友 XXX 把你的信息给我，认为你会对我的论文产生帮助。

作为一名中国留学生，我已经在美国学习和工作了 13 年多。我早在高中的时候就来到了美国。后来，我成为了一名国际学生招生官和辅导员。通过我多年的工作和生活，我意识到现在很多中国留学生来到美国学习时，都面临着不同类型的压力。随着越来越多的学生有问题，我希望找到更好的方法来帮助和支持他们的留学之路。

我想做一个案例研究，了解你们这一代人和老一辈是如何通过自己的社交网络来学习不同类型的策略来应对不同类型的压力。通过这项研究，我希望了解现在作为里学生你们每天需要面对的事情，并将这些故事告诉更多在中国和美国的教育者和家人，以更好地支持像你我这样的留学生。这封邮件只是简单的介绍一下我自己和我的学习情况。如果您对我的学习有任何问题，我将非常乐意与您通过电话进行更详细的了解。

非常感谢。

祝好

张晓乔
Xiaoqiao Zhang

Education

EDUCATION

Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
August 2015–August 2020
Ph.D., Lifelong Learning and Adult Education/Comparative International Education Dual-Title
Dissertation: *Comparing Two Generations of Chinese International Students Studying in the United States*

Columbia University, New York, NY
August 2011–May 2012
M.S. School of Social Work

New York University, New York, NY
August 2010–May 2011
M.S. School of Social Work (Transferred)

Phi Alpha National Honor Society

Wilkes University, Wilkes-Barre, PA
August 2006–May 2010
B.A. in Communication Studies

Dean’s List 2006 to 2010; All-American Academic Honors; Department mentor; All-American women’s Tennis; Women’s tennis team captain

Publications


Work Experience

MGH Center for Cross-Cultural Student Emotional Wellness

Director of International Outreach

Boston, MA
March 2017–Present

Build relationships with cross-cultural populations across a variety of organizations including non-profits, the private business sector, public and private higher education, and K-12 education in both China and the United States as part of this nonprofit volunteer-operated organization affiliated with Massachusetts General Hospital. Travel with the Center to various institutions throughout the United States delivering talks and faculty trainings relevant to international students’ experience and challenges. Spearhead a new volunteer process for the Center. Recruit and work with volunteers directly. Co-organize five webinars supporting Asian and Asian American students and families during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Presentation Experience

International ACAC

Cross-cultural approaches to mental health among international students today: The Chinese example

London, Ontario, Canada
July 11, 2019

AERC Annual Conference – Asian Pre-conference

Immersing in a digital world: How digital media changes adult learners’ ways of learning in contemporary society

Victoria, Canada
June 7, 2018