

Chapter 1

Introduction: Statement of the Problem

This study investigates the sources of stress among Chinese international students in the United States. The investigator also studies how they use coping strategies and resources to manage their stress.

The research problem stemmed from my own experience as a student in an American graduate school, a mixture of the excitement of embarking on a new phase of life in a new location and the constant anxiety caused by various adjustment problems. Two years after coming to the United States, I started to reflect on the sources of my stress and my various coping mechanisms. Then I started wondering if other Chinese international students experienced similar stress and anxiety in the United States. With this question in mind, I conducted a preliminary study in the spring of 2007. Twenty Chinese students at a selected university were interviewed. I found that although these students came from different educational and professional backgrounds, had different personal and professional communities while in China and in the United States, majored in different areas and in different departments, and worked with different advisors on different research projects in different disciplines, they still expressed similar feelings toward their lives in the United States. That is, however beneficial their presence is to American higher education or however rewarding an American graduate degree is to their future, the life of Chinese students in the United States is not easy. Just as Zhao (2005) observed, their life in the U.S. “while offering excitements, surprises, joys, and freedom, it also imposes ordeals, confusions and frustration, necessitates searching and adjustment, and demands negotiations and sacrifices due to the multitude of the differences between China and America in cultural and religious belief and in political, social, and educational systems” (p. 30). The differences between China and America create immense adjustment difficulties for Chinese international students. For most students, many of these difficulties were unexpected and students were unprepared for them since these difficulties were very different from the problems they faced at Chinese universities. When they were in China, many of these Chinese students were unable to imagine the magnitude of difficulties they

would eventually encounter in America. They were shocked by both the unexpected nature of the difficulties and their inability to effectively deal with those difficulties.

Facing many difficult situations while pursuing their goals and dreams in the United States, Chinese students may become “too frustrated to maintain the aspirations that had originally motivated them to relocate to the United States” (Situ et al. 1995, p. 137). Facing the new environment, new culture, academic challenges, linguistic barriers, financial pressures, long separation from families, as well as concerns over their visa status, Chinese international students find themselves experiencing a variety of stresses. Many of them are engaged in coping with the stress of daily life. Observing the American experience of Chinese students, Klein et al. (1981) made the following statement:

The young person (Chinese students) who leaves home to study in America is in an ironic position. Ordinarily a quite well-adapted person, with achievement great enough to be eligible for study abroad, he/she moves deliberately into a position of stress and personal vulnerability. (p. 30)

The findings of my preliminary research with Chinese international students suggested a systematic examination should be undertaken in order to delineate what the most stressful aspects of their lives in the United States are, how they characterize their stress, what conditions they believe tend to account for their stress, and how they handle their stress over time. The implications of such findings might be beneficial for Chinese international students, the university administration, and others who try to help these students to live more fulfilling academic and personal lives.

Objectives

This book explores in what ways Chinese international students may suffer stress and how they conceptualize and adapt to stress in the American higher education environment. Specifically, the purpose of this study is twofold. First, it is an attempt to investigate and describe the stressors and adjustment concerns of students from People’s Republic of China who study in the United States. Second, this study seeks to expand an understanding of Chinese students’ beliefs and behaviors regarding coping and help-seeking. It is the aim of this research to contribute to the process of informing and improving services and programs for Chinese international students.

Educational Importance of This Study

This study is significant for a number of reasons. First, the issues addressed in this book concern a significant, if not critical, population. Among the international students who attend American universities, mainland Chinese students constitute

one of the largest groups (Lampton et al. 1986; Orleans 1988; Wan 2001). According to the latest statistics, the United States is the leading destination for Chinese students pursuing overseas studies, and almost one-third of all foreign students in the United States are from China. Chinese students now constitute the highest enrollment, and there were 304,040 students in the United States (Institute of International Education 2015). Today, more than ever before, increasing numbers of mainland Chinese students attend American universities. Such a fast-growing population deserve special attention, and their problems are worthy of being studied.

Secondly, the study targets a stress-ridden population. While being one of most influential foreign student forces on American campuses (Lin 1998), Chinese students, however, are also one of the international groups who experience greater challenges adapting to the American educational system (Yeh 2000). Coming from a country that is fundamentally different in language, culture, social structure, and political ideology and coming from a country that was isolated from the rest of the world for almost quarter of a century, Chinese students' cross-cultural experiences in the United States are almost always likely to be stressful for international students (Klein et al. 1981). Just as Yang and Clum (1994) argued, the more different the two countries are, the more stressful the adjustment is likely to be. Chinese students' coping experiences are likely to be more difficult compared with those students from European countries or even those students from other Asian countries, since China and the United States have been identified as having maximum cultural distance (Samovar and Porter 1991). Furthermore, research has indicated that international students who come from non-European backgrounds, less developed countries, and/or Eastern countries tend to suffer more stress in adjusting to American campus life (Perkins 1977; Lin 1998). China is all three: it is a non-European, developing, and Eastern country; thus, Chinese students may be expected to encounter to a greater extent all the challenges and the difficulties people from any one of these three backgrounds ordinarily encounter. With so many difficulties, Chinese students are expected to experience much more anxiety than other students (Sue and Zane 1985; Yeh 2000). Based on this observation, the current study intentionally chose mainland Chinese students as subjects. This study hopes to add to our understanding about how this special group defines and manages its stress.

The project is important for a third reason. Although studies demonstrated that Chinese students experience more acute distress and stress than other students in the United States (Bourne 1975; Klein et al. 1981; Yang and Clum 1994; Yeh 2000), their stress and their management of that stress, however, have rarely been the subject of a systematic and empirical research. On one hand, general perceptions of mainland Chinese students' educational achievements may make it difficult to perceive their stress and adaptation levels, and thus there is a failure to pay attention to them (Sue and Zane 1985; Yeh 2000). Because grade point average and graduation statistics are generally relied upon as the sole indicators of academic success (Sue and Zane 1985), Chinese students' educational achievements overshadow their adjustment problems and psychological stress. On the other hand, signs of

Chinese students' stress may not be visible to outsiders as their cultural background tends to camouflage this (Chuang 1988). Chinese parents, traditionally, have taught their children to be quiet, to be studious, and not to draw attention to themselves. Furthermore, cultural factors, such as the shame and disgrace associated with admitting to having emotional problems, as well as the handling of problems within the family rather than relying on outside resources, prevent Chinese students from seeking outside help. Therefore, a better understanding of how Chinese international students conceptualize and adapt to stress will bridge this research gap and thus enrich the broad literature on international students' adjustment in foreign countries.

Fourth, this study relates to a practical problem. On a day-to-day basis, how can American institutions maintain higher levels of student satisfaction or contentment? To the extent that a portion of a student body is anxiety ridden, dissatisfied, or disruptive, the campus suffers. Although American universities have kept their doors wide open and encouraged Chinese students to come, not all educational institutions are prepared to satisfy the special needs of these students (Lin 1998). It is the aim of this research to contribute to the process of informing and improving services and programs for Chinese international students.

Finally, the design of this study itself includes some unique features. For most of the previous studies on cross-cultural adjustment, researchers have used quantitative methods as the major method of investigations. The weakness of such designs is that researchers often fail to further explore their quantitative findings. To alleviate such limitations, I add qualitative study as a follow-up procedure to examine the quantitative findings in more detail and find out more about participants' individual experiences. The application of this mixed-method approach makes the findings of my study more valid.

Definitions

1. Chinese students: Those students who are from mainland China with a valid nonimmigrant student status authorization.
2. Acculturation: A change as a result of continuous, firsthand contact between two distinct cultural groups. Acculturation was originally understood to be a group experience but is now recognized also as an individual-level phenomenon (Berry 1997).
3. Stress: Cognitive and psychological reactions to a series of challenges not only from academic study and language adjustment but also very diverse social conditions. Stress reactions include feelings of deprivation, loss, rejection, confusion, surprise, anxiety, and impotency (Oberg 1960). It is natural for Chinese students to feel anxious and strained when they are aware of the cultural differences and the need to make the effort to adapt to unfamiliar environments. They also have feelings of impotence or powerlessness on many occasions (in situations of linguistic and academic adjustment, cultural

deficiency and social isolation, financial burden, visa, job, and immigration concerns) due to their perceived inability to cope with the new environment. Confusion in roles, expectations, and values is also expected when losing all familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. Students feel estrangement, and social isolation is accordingly developed when they are unable to understand, control, or predict the behavior of those around them.

4. Stressors (sources of stress): Any cultural, social, financial, linguistic, or academic factors which account for Chinese students' stress.
5. Coping: Has been defined as an attempt to master or manage any stressful, threatening, and frustrating situation and to adapt to difficult conditions (Lazarus and Folkman 1984).
6. Coping strategies: Any strategies used by Chinese students attempting to alleviate problems, challenges, and stress in the United States.
7. Academic pressure: Stress resulting from Chinese students' academic courses and research.
8. Financial pressure: Stress resulting from Chinese students' financial conditions in the United States.
9. Sociocultural pressure: Stress resulting from social interaction with host nationals or from the inability to understand or accept the customs, values, behaviors, and systems in the United States.
10. Visa, immigration, and job pressure: Stress resulting from visa status, immigration concerns, or the problems of job hunting in the United States.
11. Linguistic pressure: Stress resulting from linguistic difficulties in speaking, writing, listening, and understanding English.