

Chapter 6

Chinese International Students' Stressors in the United States

This chapter mainly examines what the most stressful aspects of Chinese students' personal, social, and academic lives in the United States are, how they characterize their stress, and what conditions they believe tend to account for their stress. The interview results are reported according to themes that emerged during data analysis. Excerpts of respondents' statements are used to illustrate the results.

Interview Results

Settings of the Study

The interviews were conducted with Chinese international students who attended a large, public university, in the southwestern United States, with a Chinese international student enrollment of approximately 1500, representing almost 3% of the total enrollment. Graduate students represent 90% of Chinese international students, undergraduates represent 9% of Chinese international students, and 1% of Chinese international students are engaged in other nondegree programs. The Chinese international student population is approximately three-fourths male and one-fourth female.

Nineteen Chinese international students participated in this study. The participants attended a large, public university, in the southwestern United States, with a Chinese international student enrollment of approximately 1500, representing almost 3% of the total enrollment. The interviewees were master's or doctoral students in liberal arts, applied science, engineering, social science, business, and education. There were ten females and eight males in this study. Their ages ranged from 22 to 38, and their length of residence in the United States ranged from 2 to 8 years. Thirteen were not married at the time of being interviewed; the six married respondents resided with their spouses.

Participants

Participant 1: A single, female, master's student in her early 30s. She was enrolled in the business administration department. She had been in the United States for 2 years. She lived in Canada for a year before coming to the United States.

Participant 2: A single, female, doctoral student in her late 20s. She was enrolled in the sociology department. She had been in the United States for 3 years and a half.

Participant 3: A single, female, doctoral student in her late 20s. She was enrolled in the political science department. She had been in the United States for 4 years.

Participant 4: A married, female, doctoral student in her early 30s. She was enrolled in the department of finance. She had been in the United States for 6 years.

Participant 5: A married, female, doctoral student in her late 20s. She was enrolled in the social justice department. She had been in the United States for 2 years and a half.

Participant 6: A single, male, doctoral student in his late 20s. He was enrolled in the accounting department. He had been in the United States for 5 years and a half.

Participant 7: A married, male, doctoral student in his late 20s. He was enrolled in the electrical engineering department. He had been in the United States for 5 years.

Participant 8: A single, female, doctoral student in her late 30s. She was enrolled in the mechanical engineering department.

Participant 9: A married, male, master student in his early 20s. He was enrolled in the biochemistry department. He had been in the United States for a year.

Participant 10: A single, male, doctoral student in his late 20s. He was enrolled in the industry engineering department.

Participant 11: A single, female, doctoral student in her mid-20s. She was enrolled in the public administration department. She had been in the United States for 1 year and a half.

Participant 12: A single, female, master student in her mid-20s. She was enrolled in the music department. She had been in the United States for 2 years and a half.

Participant 13: A male, doctoral student in his early 30s. He was enrolled in the physics department. He had been in the United States for 6 years.

Participant 14: A single, female, doctoral student in her early 30s. She was enrolled in the environment engineering department. She had previously lived in Holland for 2 years before coming to the United States.

Participant 15: A married, male, doctoral student in his mid-30s. He was enrolled in the computer science department. He had been in the United States for 2 years.

Participant 16: A female, doctoral student in her early 30s. She was enrolled in the educational psychology department. She had been in the United States for 5 years and a half.

Participant 17: A single male, doctoral student in his early 30s. He was enrolled in the bioengineering department. He had been in the United States for 6 years.

Participant 18: A single female, doctoral student in her early 20s. She was enrolled in the chemistry department. She had been in the United States for 3 months.

Participant 19: A married female, doctoral student in her late 20s. She was enrolled in the organization behavior department. She had been in the United States for 1 year and a half. She lived in England for several years before coming to the United States.

Interview Results

To meet the objectives of this study, interview questions were formulated to elicit responses regarding the stressors, coping strategies, and behaviors of Chinese international students. Grouping of the data obtained from interviews revealed five categories which reflected five broad themes: (1) personal concerns, (2) socio-cultural stress, (3) academic pressure, (4) coping strategies, and (5) coping beliefs. Data is presented under each of these broad themes, grouped by subcategories. Examples of respondent's statements illustrate each theme. Students' real names are not given, neither is any identifying information, in order to protect their confidentiality.

Personal Concerns

The theme of personal concerns includes the subcategories of (a) loneliness and homesickness, (b) pressure from dating or marriage, (c) job opportunities and visa problems, and (d) financial pressure.

Loneliness and Homesickness

Students identified being away from family and friends, and missing familiar signs of China as contributing to feelings of loneliness and homesickness. The loneliness and homesickness was basically caused by the long period of separation from their loved ones.

A female music student stated:

I missed my parents in China so much. I have so many friends in China, but here I am alone. I do not have anyone to discuss what happened to me, what I saw, or how I felt. I am the only student in my department, and there are no other Chinese students around. It is difficult for me to concentrate whenever my homesickness is so intense. Many times, my stress is so high that I cannot focus myself well. I just sit and my brain goes blank. (Participant 12)

Partially responsible for this separation were some policies and regulations formulated by the American government. In recent years, there has been increasing

tendency for the American government to reduce the number of entrance visas issued to spouses and other family numbers of Chinese students studying in the United States (Cao 1997). An education psychology student commented:

Visa issues become a salient problem when it comes to paying a short visit. I hope my parents can get a visa to visit me this year, but they have been rejected [by the visa officers] in Beijing again and again. I cried to myself when I felt lonely and helpless. (Participant 16)

When asked why do not go back to China during the summer or winter break, an engineering student explained:

I dare not to go back to China because I am afraid [I] cannot go back the United States again due to the security checks. Last winter, my friend in the chemistry department visited his family in China. His visa application got rejected for several times. Finally, he was too tired to give another try. He decided not to come back to the United States. We all felt pity for him. (Participant 7)

Many Chinese students in the United States dare not to go back to China because they are afraid that they cannot get visas to return once they are in China. Such concern is especially critical for those Chinese students who are majored in engineering, computer programming, biochemistry, and other technology-oriented subjects. As America has increased visa checks, security-type checks, after 9/11, many of them worried that the sensitivity of their majors was a barrier to their visa processing and decided not to go back. It is not uncommon for Chinese students to be able to unable to reunite with parents, husbands, or wives in China during the 3 or 4 years of their sojourn. The long separation from their families poses severe challenges to Chinese students.

Apart from the long separation from the loved ones, respondents' failure to make connections in the new environment also results in their loneliness and homesickness. A biochemistry student stated:

The first semester was extremely challenging. Worst of all, I did not know anyone with whom I could reduce my stress and frustration. I was the only Asian student in my department when I first got here. I shared an apartment with a French guy who was busy and no time or interest to talk to me. My wife was in China and did not really understand how her once confident husband would suddenly have so much pain in school. Friends in China, oh, no. Emotionally I was at my historical lowest point during the first three months. I felt my life was just like solitary confinement, with no one to talk with on campus and no car to leave campus. (Participant 9)

Pressure from Dating or Marriage

Most Chinese in America are in their late 20s and early 30s. Usually, this is the traditional age range when most first marriages occur. However, Chinese students expressed the anxiety and frustration in finding a Chinese boyfriend/girlfriend or husband/wife among the limited number of candidates. Female students who would have preferentially involved themselves with Chinese men were not able to do so because the Chinese men failed to take the initiative. A female PhD candidate in her late 30s said:

Chinese men were socially isolated, spent most of their time studying, and had few other interests or recreations. They had few friends and dated very little. They are very shy and reticent. I would like to date a Chinese man, but I am unable to do so because they fail to take the initiative. I certainly can date a Caucasian man but I do not want to do so, because coming from different culture, we have nothing in common. I feel even more stressed as I become older. Believe it or not, age is really problem in the marriage market. (Participant 8)

Different from female students, most Chinese male students were frustrated that they could not find a dream girl in the United States. In most male students' minds, a good girlfriend or wife would be pretty or at least above the ordinary. Additionally, she must be caring and submissive. From the perspective of Chinese male students, most female students in the United States were academically oriented and too manly. A 32-year old male student said:

I feel very frustrated and anxious about the fact that I cannot find my Ms. Right and settle down at this age. As you know, under the pressure of parents and public in China, most Chinese males got married before 30. My parents pushed me to get married as soon as possible, but I cannot find my dream girl here. I feel female students in America are too manly. They bury themselves in the lab or papers, do not know how to cook, rarely dressed up, and always think they should be dominant. Sometimes they are even emotionally stronger and mentally smarter than men are. I would rather bear the loneliness than get married to a female student here. Dating and marriage makes me so frustrated and depressed here. At every night, I asked myself, "Will I be alone till the end of life in America?" (Participant 17)

Differing from those who were still struggling to find their other half, five of the respondents were stressed because of the breakups of their long-distance relationships. A physics student talked about his divorce painfully:

Nothing is secure in America. Life is not secure, work is not secure, [and] family is not secure. My wife broke up [with me] 6 years ago when I first got here. I did not want to quit my doctoral program here which fits my research interest very much, while my wife did not want to give up her decent job in China and stable life to fly over the Pacific Ocean to reunite with me. We both tried hard to persuade each other to give in, but neither side wanted to compromise. I tried my best to keep our marriage, but there was nothing left for us. It was very frustrating for me to feel so hopeless with our marriage. Marriage struggles bring me lots of emotional stress including the lack of concentration, emotional instability, continuous anxiety, and lack of patience. At last, I felt divorce seemed best for us, because I was physically exhausted and emotionally distraught with so much happening. (Participant 13)

In many cases, the life of a student studying abroad is like a survival test for long-distance relationship or marriage. If both sides have designed a similar blueprint for their future, or either side would like to compromise, love or marriage will likely continue; however, if neither side can comprise, the relationship or marriage will likely fall apart.

An MBA student shared her story:

I had a boyfriend in China, and we have been together more than 4 years. We had even been engaged before I came to the United States. One day, he suddenly gave me a call and said that he is unable to bear the long-distance relationship anymore and he wanted to end it. I do not know how to describe my feelings at the moment I heard his words. I felt the sky in my world had collapsed. For many days, I did not eat, drink, or talk to anyone, but lay in the bed

staring at the ceiling crying all day and all night. I was so depressed and frustrated that I almost lost 20 pounds within 1 month. I could not fully describe how I spent those blue days. (Participant 1)

For most Chinese students, the love or marriage in America is difficult to achieve and easily falls apart. Long-time separation, long distance, limited candidates, and over academic-oriented and less socially involved characters are all contributing factors.

Job Opportunities and Visa Problems

Chinese international students identified job opportunities and visa problems as being among their greatest concerns. All of the respondents viewed their F1 student visa as a barrier for their future employment in the United States. Most of them exhibited substantial stress when it came to job opportunities or visa problems. The stress seemed to derive from the anxiety over their future in the United States after graduation.

Based on the transcripts, the F1 visa placed Chinese students in lower and disadvantaged positions of society. They were frustrated about their foreigner identity because, even though they were members of this country, they did not have the status of citizens and lacked those benefits given to permanent residents. A newly arrived student claimed:

Most of us are not sure if we will be able to find jobs, since the immigration regulations really limit our opportunities in many ways, including limited hours for on-campus work and limited work permits after graduation. Of course, we are unable to receive many social services since we are not US citizens or permanent residents of the United States. I just feel that we are in a disadvantaged position for being Chinese foreign students in this country. (Participant 18)

Compared to the worries of newcomers, the pain was more than real for those who had entered the job market. A male student spoke more directly about the pressure he felt to find a job:

As you know, Chinese students are required by immigration regulations to be full-time students in order to maintain our "F" visa (student visa). There are very limited opportunities for us to switch from "F" visa to "H" visa [worker visa]. The only possibility for this switch is to be employed by the federal government as having expertise under the "technical immigrant quota" system. However, few companies would like to support "H" visa for international students, since the process is money consuming. I already sent out more than five hundred resumes in the last five months, but only got two phone interviews. They never contacted me again, after they knew my status is "F1." (Participant 7)

A finance student talked about her stressful and painful experiences:

It has been a frustrating journey in terms of job searching. No one can feel my stress unless one has gone through the same or similar struggle. Six years ago, when I got my master's degree in environmental engineering, I figured I really could do something in the United States with all the formal training I'd received both in China and in the United States. Unexpectedly, I could not even land a job in 2002 when American job market was so tight

that even lot of American lost their jobs, [let alone] a foreigner. To keep my F1 status, I had no choice but to go back to the university again. I changed my major to economics because I was lured by the stories of quick employment and fast money. [I] got my second master's degree in 2004 and jumped into the job market again. However, I found a master's degree in economics was nothing at that moment, especially for a student who came from China without any hands-on working experiences in economic area. Facing being rejected again and again, I felt confused, surprised, depressed, anxious, and strained. I could not fall asleep every night because there was so much on my mind to worry about such as: Can I find my a job before my visa (OPT) expires? Will any company support an H1 visa? What if the technical quota has been used up when a company finally decides to support an H1 for me? I had no choice but began to apply for master degree in statistics, given that statistics was regarded as most prosperous at that time and Americans are relatively underrepresented in this major. I hope this might help me maximize the opportunity for future employment in the United States. I graduated with the third master degree in statistics in 2006. Disappointedly again, statistics degrees have swamped the job market. I knew this time I could at least got a job if I lowered my salary goal. But I did not want to do so, because I felt I am not given credit for the expense and hardships I endured to get my education. My hard work did not pay off. So, I decided to pursue my PhD in finance and got accepted in 2006. I hope this is my final degree. I am already over 30 and really tired of schooling. (Participant 4)

In addition to difficulties in finding a job and changing F1 visas to H1, some Chinese students had to change their majors frequently or delay their graduation dates again and again in order to maintain an F1 status. A physics student said:

I think I would have graduated two years ago if I were an American or had a green card in hand. Because no one would like to support an H1 visa, I am unable to land a job. Then I had to postpone my graduation again and again in order to maintain my F1 visa. I feel so depressed and frustrated about the fact that I have been here for seven years for my PhD degree. I am ashamed of myself. I am a loser. (Participant 13)

Seeing and hearing about people unable to find a job or losing their jobs, most Chinese students in this study demonstrated a strong feeling of insecurity. An environmental engineering student claimed:

My most critical concern is whether there is a future for a Chinese international student in this society. I do not know why I have always felt very insecure since the first day of my arrival in the United States. There are no guarantees and anything is possible: Say, you can lose everything and be deprived of legal status overnight. (Participant 14)

Comparing China and the United States, students attributed their insecurity to the uncertainty and fear of this unknown country. A sociology student said:

I had never such a feeling in China where I knew at least I could get a decent job and make a middle class living as long as I got an advanced degree. At home, we know where the bottom line is. However, I cannot predict or know exactly how bad my future is when it comes to my life in the United States. To make things even worse, we do not have any resources to back us up or assist us when bad things happen. (Participant 2)

An organizational behavior student said:

The stress, here, let's say, mainly resulted from the feelings of insecurity. You know, the jobs when we are back in China may not have been challenging or high paying or even not what we had been trained for, but at least they were secure, low in demand and often relaxing. Life back there may not have been really exciting, but it was, after all, easy and

carefree. Here in the United States, however, things are totally different. There are no longer secure jobs or homes. (Participant 12)

Financial Pressure

Ten of my respondents identified that financial concern is a continuing severe problem. A social justice student in stated:

A big problem is financial concern. I did not get any financial support from my department. I lived on the edge each day with so much fear and stress. I have so many things to worry. Do I have enough money to pay the rent? Do I have money to buy the food, books, clothes, and groceries, etc.? My stress level increased as the bills piled up. I felt so stressed sometimes that I wanted to buy a one-way ticket to go back to China without finishing my doctoral study here. But I cannot even afford the airfare to return to China. (Participant 19)

An industrial engineering student talked about his anxiety and frustration because of the sudden financial nightmare:

I received full financial support in the United States from my advisor. But my boss told me she will be unable to support me any longer at the beginning of this semester due to the budget cut. This resulted in a sudden financial nightmare. My temper was bad and my emotion was very unstable. I would be quiet and suddenly yell at others. I would feel that it was easy for me to lose my temper, and I also felt blue, worried, and stressed. I tried my best to seek assistantships from other professors but in vain. I calculated all the money I have, which is barely enough to go through this semester, let alone one more. So, I decided to graduate earlier. This means I will take four courses this semester and finish up my dissertation by this summer. I buried myself between these two responsibilities. It is very hard to go through this financial struggle. (Participant 10)

Unable to secure an assistantship or scholarship, respondents in current study either choose to finish their study as soon as possible, or seek an off-campus job, even if it is illegal to do so. An electrical engineering student talked about his gloomy experiences:

I did not get any financial support in the first year when I got here. I slept on the floor of my friend's room, looking out of the window into the gray sky, my mind [went] a total blank. My luggage remained packed, because I was planning on moving out in 2 days. I had been searching for a job around the campus and had even walked as many blocks as I could, asking whether they need a waiter, [but] all in vain. They all needed a work permit, which I do not have. I had also searched for a cheap place to live, but the rent was so high that I could not afford. All the money I had in my pocket was not even for two weeks' rent. Besides, I had to pay the tuition for the coming semester. I desperately need money. This desperate need for money kept torturing me until I located a job in a local Chinese restaurant. However, the restaurant owner paid me very low, because he knew I am an illegal worker. (Participant 7)

Due to limited financial resources, many Chinese students live a modest life. They often fail to purchase adequate health and automobile insurance. Consequently, they are in a desperate situation in the event of illness or accident. A political science student said:

I tried to save each penny for the tuition and rent. I only eat vegetables and rice to avoid expensive food that has more balanced nutrition. Studies, daily stress, and malnutrition eventually resulted in my sickness. If I get a serious disease without medical insurance in the United States, it will be just like the end of world for me. (Participant 3)

Financial problems were of the greatest concern for Chinese students. Respondents in my study all indicated that they chose a university based on how much financial aid they could receive rather than on the academic reputation of the particular institution. When asked what they would do if their current programs did not have any financial support, twelve of them responded that they would consider changing their majors to another where financial aid was available, regardless of the relevance of the new major to their personal research interests or background. A chemistry student said:

How much I envy American students who can freely choose the major they liked. As a Chinese international student, all I can do is to choose those major wherever financial aid is available. I cannot change to a major like electrical engineering or computer science which I like so much, because I cannot find any financial support in those majors. Money is everything here. (Participant 18)

A bioengineering student supported:

Life here is really hard, especially for Chinese students. The only way out here is to get and secure the financial aid from the department or the professors. For most of the Chinese students, the availability of the financial support rather than the academic reputation is the first concern while choosing American universities and programs to study. In many cases, people come and go simply because of the financial aid. (Participant 17)

Sociocultural Concerns

Sociocultural concerns include the following categories: (a) interactions with Americans, (b) language deficiency, and (c) value clash.

Interactions with Americans

Although a majority of the respondents agreed that most Americans were nice and friendly, quite a few indicated that the friendliness was somewhat superficial. It was difficult for them to develop a “close friendship” with an American, because they always kept a distance between friends. A computer science student claimed:

I felt that the friends here were not as “iron” as the friends in China. In China, in the circle of “iron brothers,” we always look after one another and do “special” favors for each other. Also, as friends, we know what occurred in each other’s life. There is not any secret among Chinese friends. In America, things go totally different. It seems to me that Americans emphasize privacy, and, even among the best friends, the distance is kept. (Participant 15)

A female student echoed:

You can feel that your American colleagues are polite and friendly to you, and you are trying to respond in the same way. But no matter how hard you try, you still feel somehow there's something missing in that polite and friendly atmosphere around you that makes you feel the distance. There seems to be something that stands between you and everybody else, and it prevents you from becoming one of them. You may have many friends, but few "true" friends. (Participant 4)

From Chinese students' opinions, American people tend to be much more individualistic. Their emphasis on privacy often prevents them from establishing intimate friendships. In most Chinese students' minds, the concept of "friendship" referred to two things. On the one hand, friends are supposed to do something special for each other; on the other hand, friends should know each other's business. The Chinese concept of "friendship" is closely related to "connections" or "*guanxi*" (Frank 2000). To Chinese, the "friends' network" is very reliable and effective when help is needed. In contrast to the Chinese concept of friendship, Americans hold quite different expectations regarding what friends should do. To Americans, friendship is not typically based on exchanging favors. Because Americans did not treat friends in the same way as Chinese do, Chinese students might not have gotten the help they expected from their American friends. They were confused, frustrated, and depressed. An industrial engineering student complained:

I know an American guy. He is my neighbor. I think we got along very well. [We] watched football, played tennis, went to bar, things like that. I treated him like my buddy. Last semester, I needed to have someone proofread my term paper. So I asked him for help. His response made me shocked. He said "Wow, 15 pages! Well, buddy, each page, five dollars. The total is 75. I can give you a discount: 50 bucks." I am kind of speechless at that moment. In China, when we do our friends a favor, we never look for money, because the friendship is much more important than money. However, it seems to me that Americans do not easily offer help without monetary gain or other interests. In their minds, friends are friends, but business is business. (Participant 10)

Besides differences in their concepts of friendship, interpersonal relations in America also posed a challenge for most of the respondents. Chinese students came from a more hierarchical society and were sensitive to others' evaluations of them. Chinese students' sense of self-esteem faced a great challenge, because American people were much more direct in asserting their opinions. An educational psychology student talked to me about her unpleasant experience as a teaching assistant:

I feel it is hard to be accepted totally in this society because of my appearance and foreign accent. I have a prominent accent, and some American students cannot bear my accent. I can sense that some of them do not like me at all. When they were forced to listen to my lecture, they showed annoyed or irritated faces. I felt humiliated, embarrassed, and stressed. I cannot change my accent or my appearance. I feel it will not be an easy task for me to be accepted in this country. (Participant 16)

In China, indirectness is known as one of the major Confucian virtues. Growing up in China, these Chinese students inevitably acquired these traditional values. Most of them had learned to be careful and considerate in what they said or how

they spoke to others. Direct confrontation should be avoided at all costs. Therefore, when facing Americans' direct criticism, Chinese students were frustrated, stressed, and confused. One sociology graduate student described a clash between her and an American faculty member:

I have faced a lot of pressure from my coursework, and I feel even more stress because of my experience in the department. Before I came here, all of my information about America was from Hollywood movies, which had a tendency to over-idealize American society. I felt very frustrated and disheartened when I found the disparity between my expectation and the reality. For instance, when I first got here, my department assigned me work as a research assistant for a professor. I thought I already did my best, but she seemed not very satisfied. She did not talk to me directly but wrote a letter to my department chair and my advisor suggesting the department should not support me anymore, because she thought I was not qualified. I was shocked when my advisor told me what she did to me. I do not know how to describe my feelings, embarrassed, humiliated, insecure, frustrated, and anxious. Later on, I found out she had a reputation for being mean to students in my department. So, most of students did not take her words seriously. But back then, I felt my future in America would be ended by what she did. I was so stressed that I cried at night. (Participant 2)

A music graduate student concurred:

I live with an old American lady in her house. We do not get along very well. I have to wash my clothes by myself, because the washer and dryer could ruin my dress. You know, since my major is piano performance, lots of my professional dress is so expensive and I do not want to take the risk. However, my landlord hates me using water to wash clothes. She said she has to pay extra money for water I used. Many times, she is so angry when she saw I washed my clothes. I feel so guilty although I paid the half rent. I dare not to wash my clothes when she is at home as well. (Participant 12)

Owing to the different cultural norms and their lack of English proficiency, most respondents felt great difficulty in interacting with American people. Eight participants indicated that they did not have any social contact or sense of friendship with Americans. They mentioned that most American people with whom they interacted were elderly people, such as landladies, missionaries and Christians, or their host family. They felt frustrated that they had very few or no "peer" American friends. As one student pointed out, "Although I have ample opportunities to see Americans on campus, actual communication with them is rather rare" (Participant 9). Ties with the home world were lost, and new ones were difficult to make. They felt lonely, isolated, and anxious because of the lack of social effectiveness.

Language and Culture Deficiency

Chinese students identified language problems as a major adjustment problem. Two areas were identified by Chinese students as providing the most difficulties: listening comprehension and oral communication. As for listening comprehension, especially when they first arrived in the United States, the majority of the respondents felt that Americans spoke so fast that it was impossible for them to follow. An

accounting student recalled how he felt about American speaking when he first got here:

Americans rush everywhere, they rush in their talking too, and so have little patience to wait for me to understand, or do not adjust their speaking so I may follow conversation. (Participant 6)

Apart from high-speed talking, a public administration student attributed the listening problems to a “cultural deficiency”:

You know, somehow, I feel it is hard for Chinese students to fit into American society. It is okay for us to study or work here, because academic and working settings are kind of standard environments; people do not use slang very often. For me, I think I can handle classroom discussions, but I do feel stressful when I chat with my American friends. I am overwhelmed by the rich and living English idioms and slang. Because of lack of contextual knowledge, I [am] frequently lost in their talking. There are lots of subtleties I cannot understand. (Participant 11)

Lack of background knowledge impaired the ability of Chinese students to fully understand their American friends' topics of conversation. A male bioengineering student stated:

In many cases, I think [my listening] problem was not always due to the language itself. You know, the most frustrating thing [is that] I know every word being said, but do not have any clue about what the speaker meant. I can give you an example. I was working on my master's degree at the University of Chicago, and I used to live in the area known for its poverty, chaos, and murder. Several of my friends warned me that they were robbed when they returned to their apartments at night. I was kind of scared when walking alone at night. One day, after I watched a football game at the campus stadium, it was so late at night that nobody was on the road. I was in a good mood that night, because our school team won. So I even forgot what my friend told me until a Black guy suddenly approached me. He looked very excited and said, “Hi, buddy, give me five.” I was so scared at that moment that I found five dollars and handed it to him. The guy looked sort of astonished and did not accept the five bucks. He smiled and ran away. Later on, I realized there is a big difference between “give me five” and “give me five dollars.” However, at that moment, although I knew each word “give,” “me,” and “five,” I had no clue about what “give me five” meant. (Participant 17)

Most of the respondents indicated that they had little knowledge about American people, culture, society, and their way of life. Therefore, they had difficulties understanding conversations when it came to topics such as sports, movies, TV dramas comedies, and pop music. A biochemistry student commented:

Since I had never watched a football or baseball game in China, I had no way of knowing its rules. I looked dumb when my American friends talked about sports. Since American people assume us Chinese students understand the terms, events, and places in the same way as normal Americans do, they refer to a lot of things without explanation. However, what is presumably common knowledge to American people is pretty new to me. Just as a newborn baby, I got lost very often in this new environment. I do not know how many years it will take me to reach their standard in terms of background knowledge. It is so tough. (Participant 9)

In terms of speaking, there typically were three problems associated with Chinese students. They include accurately pronouncing English words, using appropriate words, and speaking English fluently. An MBA student said:

To me, English was a big hurdle. I had a strong accent, which makes American people unable to understand what I said. When I talked to American people, they often misunderstood. It was okay when people could not fully understand me in daily conversations. However, a strong accent was a big hurdle to me when I was doing a telephone interview with a potential employer. Most of them felt it was difficult to communicate with me in English, and therefore I was kicked off even in the first round by most of interviewers. [I am] so frustrated about this. I do not know how long it will take me to get rid of my accent. (Participant 1)

Besides their accent, some of the respondents found it difficult to find an appropriate word or formulate a correct sentence, which inhibited effective communication with Americans. As a social justice student stated:

It is difficult for me to find appropriate words to express myself when it comes to topics such as arts, philosophy, movies, and humanities. Some words I want to say, I cannot remember. Or I do not know the real translation of the word or how to express that meaning. For instance, I remembered an American classmate once asked me what *feng shui* is. As all Chinese know, *feng shui* is sort of traditional Chinese term. It took me 1 h to explain *feng shui* to him, but he still seemed confused. His confusion largely resulted from my awkward oral communication. The same thing happened when I was asked to explain the difference between two philosophy traditions, Confucian and Taoism. (Participant 5)

For most of the respondents, the reason for their poor listening and oral communication skills was thought to be directly related to the language environment in China where people rarely get the opportunity to interact with people whose native language is English.

Values Clash

Aggressiveness Versus Humbleness

One area where there was a clash in values regards aggressiveness versus humbleness. In China, preserving the social harmony is the foremost goal of society. Obedience, patience, restraint, and forbearance are all considered virtuous characteristics for an individual to have. Efforts to achieve individual goals are often regarded as inappropriate, and attempts to show off a person's capabilities or importance normally perceived as presumptuous or arrogant (Li 1993). Humbleness and modesty are stressed repeatedly in the Chinese way of life. However, once they were in American land, students found their habitual humbleness and modesty sometimes brought them undesirable consequences. A bioengineering student disclosed:

I think Chinese traditional values, such as humbleness, restraint, or forbearance, have no use here. Americans will look down upon you, if you do that. Last semester, I wanted to take a course, and I talked to the professor who taught the course. When we met, he asked: "How good are you in bacteriology?" "Just so-so," I responded in a Chinese traditional humble manner. He then added, "My course is very difficult and only super smart students can pass it. I think you'd better not take it, otherwise, you might get C or D in my class." I do not know why he perceived me as so lacking of talented and incapable. You know I never took his class before. Later on, I think it might be because of my low-profile

personality and humble attitude, which is so valued in China but does not work in America. However, back then, I was unable to figure out why I, an overachiever through years, had become a stupid person in an American professor's eyes. I felt so hurt, painful, and frustrated. I cried the whole night. I insisted on taking this course, but I felt so stressed and I experienced emotional instability during that semester. I was haunted by his words. In many instances, I went to bed and I could not fall asleep once I thought that I might get C or D in this course. It was a terrible experience, even though I got an A in the end. (Participant 17)

The influence of traditional Chinese values produced another problem for Chinese students when it came to job searching—that is, how to sell themselves. Ten of the respondents indicated that in America, where one has to sell oneself largely on one's own, individuals have to depart from traditional humbleness and be more aggressive. An MBA student revealed:

In China, we have no experience in selling ourselves. Chinese culture does not encourage people do the “selling.” Anyone who openly publicizes his or her personal achievement would be considered overaggressive, whereas, in America, you have to be aggressive and show all you have to convince the employer you are the best among all the candidates. I learned this from my own internship experiences at IBM. When I did my internship at IBM last summer, I was assigned to collaborate on a project with another intern from India. To tell the truth, this Indian guy did not contribute a lot to our project. He neither showed up on time when we met, nor completed the part he was supposed to finish. Since the deadline was coming, I could not wait for him but finished the project largely on my own. What he did only accounted for 10 percent of the final project. However, when we presented our project to those managers in charge, the Indian guy suddenly changed to a totally different person: active, aggressive, capable, you name it. He bragged about what he did this and that in this project, how he went all out to get through this project. He tried his best to convince IBM managers that he contributed a lot in this project, that he knew everything about this project, and that he would be the best candidate if there was an opening. In a 1-hour presentation, he talked about 50 min and left me only 10 min. The way he pretended to be the main contributor in this project really pissed me off. However, a month later, I found out he beat me and finally won the IBM position. I learned a lot from him. He might not be a good employee, but he definitely knew how to sell himself. As a Chinese, I am taught that a real knowledgeable person would only show 50%, if he or she has 100%. However, in America, I think that you should show all you have, even brag some about what you could do in order to get a potential position. Otherwise, people take your humbleness as lack of capabilities, lack of talent, lack of confidence, or lack of communication skills. (Participant 1)

Manual Labor Versus Mental Intellectuals

Another area where there was a clash in values regards manual labor versus mental intellectuals. For well-educated Western youths, experiences with low-paid, part-time jobs can be associated with economic independence. However, manual labor is totally uncustomary and unpleasant for many well-educated Chinese students. In America, facing financial difficulties, Chinese students, especially those self-funded Chinese students, had to work to support their studies. However, finding a decent job in America was anything but easy for Chinese students. Chinese students encountered two major problems. On the one hand, as discussed earlier, because the US government regulations did not allow international students to seek off-campus employment, law-abiding employers dared not hire Chinese students; on the other

hand, Chinese students' limited communication could not convince potential on-campus employers that they were right for the job. Circumscribed by these factors, most Chinese students generally settled for the low-paying manual jobs. Many of these jobs were undesirable or unwanted by American workers. Most of them ended up taking jobs as waiters or waitresses in Chinese restaurants.

Respondents described their physical and psychological stress of working in Chinese restaurants. A political science student said:

You cannot imagine how unbearable [working in Chinese restaurant is] if you did not go through it yourself. Since the restaurant owner knew Chinese students needed money and had to work illegally, they treat us like slaves and make us work to our full limit. The owner told me that I should not stop working for a minute as long as I was in the restaurant. My major responsibility is to cut vegetables and slice meat. I had to cut up all the vegetables and slice the meat when the cook needs them. Once the cutting job was done, I needed to make thousands of dumplings. We had only 30 min for lunch. Except for these 30 min, I have to keep working and running like a machine. By the time I got home, I could not even raise my arms. My back was in such pain and I could not even lie down in the bed. (Participant 3)

To some extent, physical pain is something to which one can adjust with relative ease. What is hard for Chinese students to bear is the psychological pressure resulting from social status loss and intellectual worthlessness. A public administration student said:

I worked in a restaurant on the weekends last year. Recalling those days, there was a lot of pressure in my life. In China, I worked as a journalist for a well-known newspaper. I had a fairly high social status. But here, I feel I am at the bottom of society. Most of my coworkers were uneducated illegal immigrants. The things they talked about were vulgar. Being with these people made me feel inferior too. When I worked in a small darkened kitchen and heard dirty jokes, I felt devastated and hopeless. Besides the loss of social status, I felt doing the job was a waste of time. I am supposed to come to the United States to pursue my doctoral degree, not to work as a waitress. When I was cutting veggies, or washing dishes, I felt empty and disappointed. I dared not tell my parents where I worked. They would lose their minds. (Participant 11)

In China, it was believed that educated people should not engage in any physical jobs. An educated person should use his mind not his body. In Chinese culture, only those uneducated have to do manual labor to make a living. The ancient doctrine had, consciously or unconsciously, influenced many Chinese students' views. For many of them, working outside an educational setting was commonly considered physically and psychologically unpleasant, intellectually worthless, and even socially demeaning.

The reactions toward manual labors were not all negative. Especially when they looked back, most of them saw the positive aspects of doing manual labors to support their study. Just as a student stated:

I did not feel much survival pressure when I was in China, since I was always taken care of by my parents. However, my parents were unable to support me financially anymore once I came to the United States, due to the wide gap between the income level of China and that of the United States and also as the result of low exchange rate of Chinese *Yuan* to the US dollar. Without any backup resources, I have to depend on myself to make a living. After

tasting the difficulty in landing a job, I began to take a second look at my ability to survive and how much I am worth. I began to realize that being a nerd bookworm in an ivory tower is not enough for an adult. How to increase your market value and achieve financial independence should be given high priority as well. Accompanying this, my attitude toward life changed as well. I realized that I was too aloof and conceited before. I did not value what I got and complained a lot. After doing the manual labors in America, I know life is not easy at all. When each dollar you pay is earned by yourself, you know how to appreciate life. You feel grateful for what you have. (Participant 10)

Academic Concerns

There are three subcategories to the academic concerns: (a) language, (b) achievement, and (c) interaction with faculty.

Language

Students spoke about the added pressure that being a nonnative English speaker placed on them. A male accounting student recalled his first year's stressful experiences:

When I first came here, I could not follow what the professors were saying in the seminar. During 3 h of the seminar, I did not know what to do or what to say, just like a retarded person. After each class, I had to borrow my classmates' notes to catch up. I had so many things on my mind. There was no way for me to go out and relax. I had to stay at home to work on those materials I missed in class and try to learn by myself what the professor taught that day. The language pressure was so heavy in that first semester that my hair fell out frequently. (Participant 6)

A social justice student concurred:

Since my major is social justice, we have a lot of class discussions and presentations. I truly had difficulty speaking in class because of the language barrier. I am not good at speaking English. It was not easy for me to participate in the discussion. I felt stressed before class and frustrated and depressed after class. No one can understand how I felt sitting in class unable to say anything. I dared not to open my mouth except once because of the encouragement of the professor. I tried to make it clear but it seems no one understood what I was trying to talk about. All of my classmates looked so confused. At that moment, I felt so embarrassed and humiliated that I wished I could escape from the classroom immediately. There was so much stress, frustration, and sorrow. So many times, I cried like a crybaby at home. I felt so helpless and powerless. (Participant 5)

Besides listening and speaking problems, academic papers also pose a problem especially for those students whose majors are in the humanities and social sciences. An organizational behavior student commented:

In the department where I study, graduate students need to write tons of papers: memos, term papers, presentation papers, and final papers. If this is a lot of work for American students, it almost makes me lose my breath. As you know, unlike informal speaking where the usage of words does not have to be precise, academic writing requires words and

sentences to be used in the exact way they should be. Since most of my papers were going to be read by professors who are normally very critical, I could hardly ever get away with mistakes. Many times, what I got from my professors is just, “please redo it” or “your writing is so confusing and I did not get what you want to say.” Even after I revised a paper, I dared not to give my professors, because I was afraid of being rejected again. I could not count how many times I grabbed my paper and cried in the bedroom. I was so sad, stressed, frustrated, and depressed. (Participant 19)

A public administration student reported:

I concentrated as much as I could on my coursework, but it was much harder than I expected since my native language is not English. Several of my course professors told me to find a tutor and have them correct my papers. I was so sad because it took me many nights working on my reports. It was not easy for me to face this kind of frustration since I had always been a remarkable student. I did spend more days on the next assignment, but my professors gave me the same suggestion. I was sad, fearful and did not know what to do because I worried that professors would tell me the same things. I could not share my feelings to my parents in China. They would think I did not try my best. I just swallowed everything and became very depressed. My papers simply were not good enough. I continued to receive B or C grades. I also began to perform poorly on exams for fear of failure and extreme nervousness. (Participant 11)

In terms of those factors leading to their language barrier, three of my respondents indicated that they habitually organize in Chinese and then translate it to English with little consideration of how the Americans would express the same idea. Just as a student stated:

Chinglish expressions are frequently used in my writing and professors feel my papers are very awkward. I do not know how to get rid of Chinglish expressions. (Participant 16)

Four of my respondents attributed their language barrier to the lack of training in China. A female student stated:

The language training most of us once accepted often failed to adequately help us to meet the academic demands of our programs. Other than a relatively small portion of students whose major was English in Chinese universities, most Chinese students have little systematic training in the English language, especially in speaking and writing in the language. While in China, a non-English-speaking environment, the preparation for English academic writing for most Chinese students was obviously inadequate. Furthermore, once Chinese students arrived in the United States, most of us started our graduate programs immediately without any additional training in speaking or writing in English. (Participant 3)

Chinese students usually worry that their actual performances on all kinds of tests will be crippled by their English proficiency. A biochemistry student recalled his extremely stressful experience of preparing for a speaking test in order to become a TA:

Since I am not a native speaker, I must pass the speaking test to work as a teaching assistant. It only has been 3 months since I was here, and I am still not confident about my spoken English. The preparation for the speaking test, and the fear of failure, resulted in high level of anxiety and stress. Many nights, I could not sleep at all. I have so many things to worry about. What if I could not get the question raised by the tester? What if the tester is unable to understand my Chinglish? What if I fail this exam? I could not afford to fail the exam,

because there was no chance to make it up until the next semester. I frequently woke up in the middle of the night from nightmares. I dreamed that I failed the speak test and had to drop out of the program due to lack of financial support. I cannot fully describe my fear and stress to you. (Participant 9)

Achievement

Nearly all of my respondents believe that high academic stress is mainly due to Chinese students themselves who are highly motivated to achieve. Chinese students' critical concerns about academic excellence are rooted in Chinese traditional cultural values, which emphasize education and hard work. Confucian philosophy views education as important for the improvement of job prospects and even more important as a means for building one's character. Influenced by this philosophy, Chinese family values and socialization experiences emphasize the need to succeed educationally. Chinese parents typically attach great importance to their children's academic achievement. Academic success of the child brings a sense of pride and joy to the entire family, while academic failure is perceived as letting one's family down and causing them to lose face (Hui 1988; Stiglar et al. 1985). Growing up in this culture, Chinese students internalized these positive educational values (cultural demand for educational excellence) and take personal responsibility for their own learning. They always strive to succeed in order to make their family happy and proud of them. Even after they come to United States, the pressure to achieve still is firmly retained by Chinese students. Just as an industrial engineering student claimed:

Just like most Chinese students here, I was taught very early in life to work hard and achieve excellence in education. Achievement through effort, hard work, and endurance is highly emphasized both in my family and at school. My parents believe that academic success will ensure a better and more prosperous future and thereby set an extremely high standard for me. They dedicated numerous time, money, and energy to my study. To make my parents happy and proud, I work very hard to ensure I always perform to the best of my abilities on all exams. As a result, I always feel stressed out, especially after I came to United States. I am not sure if I can do as well as before in such a totally unfamiliar academic environment. (Participant 10)

A female student added:

My parents worked very hard and sacrificed much to get me here to continue my higher education in the United States. I owe them so much. The only way I can honor my parents is to study hard and get excellent grades. Hence, I feel exceptional pressure not to fail. (Participant 1)

An electrical engineering student stated:

I studied very hard and devoted most of my time to pursuing degrees in the United States. To me, degrees from American universities not only bring honor to my family at home but also can allow me to have good future job opportunities in the United States or in China. I deeply believe that academic excellence is a requirement for attaining a US degree. I have devoted myself to earning as many As as possible even though some courses are difficult

for foreign students. It is important for me to have an excellent GPA since I believe that a very good GPA is a critical factor for future job hunting in the United States. (Participant 7)

An accounting student concurred:

It is obvious that every Chinese student here knows that education is his or her only hope for social acceptance and financial security. As a result, many of us feel anxiety and stress. With the pressure to excel academically, almost all of us spend endless hours studying. When comparing myself with other Chinese students in terms of educational achievement, I feel even more stressed. (Participant 6)

An educational psychology student stated:

I am overly concerned with my academic performance. If I am accidentally unable to get an "A" in a quiz or a test, I feel overstressed, frustrated, depressed, like it is the end of the world. (Participant 16)

Chinese students are socialized to value education and often consider school work as part of their filial duty (Wilson and Pusey 1982; Stevenson et al. 1986). High parental expectations, the constant pressure to do well in schools, and the fear of failure create extreme feelings of stress and anxiety for Chinese students. In addition, concerns about upward mobility through education also contribute to the high level of stress. A mechanical engineering student summarized:

My academic stress comes from the expectation of my parents, as well as my own demand to look forward to a better tomorrow in America. I hope to have a good career in the United States, and I must maintain a record of academic excellence for my future. (Participant 8)

Facing the strain of language and academic problems, Chinese students feel even more stress if they fail. Because attaining an advanced degree is a major way for Chinese students to achieve higher status in China, or to pursue their dreams in the United States, the potential negative consequences of academic failure are considerable. A female doctoral student in finance stated:

I carried all hopes and expectations from the family and relatives in my hometown to the United States. I told myself that I would bring more honor to my family and to the people who support me. It was the most stressful summer in my life, preparing for the qualifying exam. I studied very hard but still worried so much about whether I would pass. I could not sleep well at night. I was so nervous the first day of my qualifying exams that I sat in the room without being able to write. I felt my brain was a blank even though I had studied hard for months. I tried to push myself to force out some answers for the qualifier questions, but I could not do it. The more I pushed myself, the more my brain turned blank. (Participant 4)

A bioengineering student said:

As a student in a science major, I have to publish three papers in peer-reviewed journals before I get the degree. Otherwise, my job prospects in this country will be bleak. I usually spend at least 12 h each day in the lab to run my experiments. All day and all night, the lab is my home. It takes endless patience to work in the lab. However, the more concerned about my experiment results, the more I become impatient. I get mad very easily after hours of working in the lab. I have no choices. I need to work hard to be able to collect enough data for my papers. However, an experiment is an experiment. There is no guarantee that each experiment will be successful. It is so frustrating when you work 3 months without obtaining any results. I did not smoke at all in China, but I am a heavy smoker right now. I found smoking can make my mind a little bit

peaceful. I hope I will not get sick before finishing the current project, because I feel my breathing becoming more difficult recently. (Participant 17)

A social justice student claimed:

Study stress is a part of life here. Especially for us social science students, life will always be stressful before getting the degree and finding a stable full-time position in the United States. To make myself more competitive in the future job market, I chose to apply to law school, besides pursuing my current PhD study in social justice. As you might know, I have to take LSAT test before I apply. LSAT is so challenging that even American students get headaches about it. Last fall, I spent 3 months preparing for it. I did learn a lot but the stress to get a decent grade is so overwhelming. My current program of study, my teaching assistant duty, and the preparation for the LSAT have given me a lot of stress. It is my hope to finish my schoolwork and TA duties soon to allow myself time to stay at home to focus on preparing for the LSAT. I have spent many sleepless nights preparing for the test and also worrying about what happens if I fail. I feel an emotional drought and physical exhaustion. (Participant 5)

High motivation translates to high standards and high expectations on their academic performance, which accordingly increase stress about their academic life. Furthermore, in order to maintain their previously acquired strong GPAs, students have to work even harder. This makes them even more stressed.

Interactions with Faculties

Being able to approach professors was identified as very important. This was confirmed by previous research on international students' cross-cultural adjustment. Zimmermann (1996), for instance, argued that international students' academic success depends to a great extent on their interaction with their native instructors. However, intercultural communication is usually inherently problematic and thereby dysfunctional. Four problems were identified by my respondents as factors handicapping their effective interactions with American faculty. They were language insufficiency, lack of initiative and autonomy, verbal passiveness, and indirect mode of communication.

Language Insufficiency

Interview transcriptions reveal that Chinese students' language insufficiency handicaps their effective communication with their advisors. Just as a public administration student stated:

I felt very stressed talking to my advisor. On one hand, due to limited command of English, I had no idea what topics are appropriate to talk about, how to make some jokes or show a sense of humor like American students do, or how to talk informally yet appropriately; on the other hand, I have difficulty understanding my advisor's jokes or off-topic conversations. I was worried about that my slow responses might make him think that I lacked talent. However, the more I wanted to speak fluently and act smartly, the more awkward and nervous I looked as I talked to him. As a result of overstress, I could not even speak English the way I normally could. (Participant 11)

Due to the language insufficiency, four of my respondents thought that they tend to converse less and even avoid the interaction with their advisors. As a result of insufficient interaction, it is difficult for them to establish a good rapport with their advisors.

Several of my respondents also indicated that their actual academic capability has been crippled by their English proficiency. Due to language deficiency, they failed to produce high-quality research papers, which made their advisors doubt their research abilities. An educational psychology student recalled:

The limited command of English negatively affects my academic performance. The first semester, my advisor even suggested that I quit the doctoral program. He said that he did not see any potential from my papers. He also mentioned that I lack the English language skills necessary to function effectively in the doctoral program. I could not fall asleep at night for a week after he talked to me. I was so stressed, anxious, and frustrated. Everybody knows what it means when your advisor perceives you as incapable of writing a research paper. What he said was just like claiming me to be an academic loser. On the other hand, I felt helpless, powerless, and constrained in the situation. All of my talents and marvelous research ideas were crippled by my poor English. My advisor could not fully understand what I wanted to express, let alone appreciate. In his eyes, I am a student without research talent. I cannot fully describe how hard it was to get through that semester. (Participant 16)

Taken together, lack of language proficiency leads to students' concerns about whether or not their advisors understand them and whether or not their communication is appropriate in the context. In addition, they want their advisors to acknowledge their actual academic capabilities, but they believe it to be crippled by their language deficiency.

Teacher's Guidance Versus Self-Directedness

Transcriptions reveal that Chinese students' lack of initiative and autonomy makes it difficult for them to effectively communicate with their advisors. Participants said that a large portion of the challenge that university education in the United States poses for them was the need to develop considerable self-management and self-discipline. They argued that for most Chinese students who are accustomed to being given strict direction and rigorous discipline in their studies, university education in America definitely presents problems. Just as a sociology student stated:

I feel everything was specified very clearly in China, and rigorous discipline was usually available. However, on American campus it was not very clear what one exactly needed to do or how to proceed step by step to achieve the academic goals. And when I conversed with my advisor about "what my academic future would be" or "how long will I take to complete this doctoral program," the common response is "it is up to you", or "it depends on you." Facing such unclear answers, I felt overwhelmed and stressed because there were so many choices for me which just made me feel lost. Especially the first semester, I wandered around aimlessly without any goal or direction. (Participant 2)

In the American educational system, blind discipline is devalued, and self-directedness is encouraged. Emphasis on individual autonomy accordingly trivializes the relationship between mentors and students (Lieberman 1994; Jin and

Cortazzi 1991). Just as Liberman (1994) observed, "American students are reluctant to be directed by their professors" (p. 180). Or like Weber (1946) who commented, "No young American would think of having the teacher sell him a *Weltanschauung* or a code of conduct" (p. 149). However, this academic culture and mentor-student relationship is certainly not what Chinese students expect. Jin and Cortazzi's study (1991) indicated that students coming from China usually have very high expectations of their advisors (instructors).

They seek guidance from their teachers, who are expected to be moral leaders and social leaders, experts who know everything in their specific area and who can plan for and instruct students. The crucial relationship is that between teacher and student, which is seen in paternalistic terms. The teacher should tell students what is what and how to proceed. The teacher should be sensitive to any student problems and should be helpful in social and everyday issues arising out of daily living. Like a parent, the teacher should care for students academically and socially. (p. 86)

When these Chinese students, well trained in traditional communication styles and teacher-student interaction patterns, come to the United States, they bring this heritage with them onto the American campus, and communication problems occur. Just as a political science student described:

I am not sure what is wrong between my advisor and me. Probably because I was too "Chinese" a Chinese student in an American educational setting, I was accustomed to rely on advisors determining research topics and professional futures, which apparently contradicted with what my advisor thought. Last semester, I needed to determine my dissertation topic and was not sure what to do. So, I kept making appointments with my advisor with the hope to discuss with him. I think this is quite normal and reasonable in China. However, suddenly one day I got his e-mail saying he felt very uncomfortable with my frequent appointments. I was so confused that I could not help ask him why. He told me that a doctoral student is supposed to take initiative in research topic instead of relying on an advisor. Later on, although I had chosen the research topic largely on my own, I was still struggling with how to interact with my advisor. I am still not sure what is appropriate and proper in American communication style and what is not. (Participant 3)

Regarding the independence learning and self-directedness valued in American academic culture, most of my respondents indicated that they are either not trained to learn on their own or do not feel comfortable doing so. In the Chinese system for years, most of my respondents were more or less accustomed to the "authoritarian instruction" of Chinese professors and had a hard time adjusting to the style of lectures by American professors and independent learning style. Just as a bioengineering student claimed:

According to my own observation, students in American universities are expected to study on their own to develop their ability to study independently. Following this educational philosophy, for a majority of American professors, there is no need to include in a lecture everything students are supposed to learn. Or, in some cases, the teacher talks something in class, but you cannot find it in textbook. And you do not know which book to read and where to find the book. The professor does not explain too much to you, and he does not tell you how to study. Most of us Chinese, however, were more or less accustomed to relying on the very detailed lecture style of Chinese professors. As a result, we felt exceptional pressure in adjusting to the independent learning style. (Participant 17)

Acknowledging their lack of initiative and autonomy during their interactions with their advisors, many of participants still expressed a desire for more faculty guidance in the process of socialization into their future profession but were not sure how to initiate a career-related topic or how to approach their advisors. An educational psychology student commented:

As foreign students, we know a little about this country and our future profession. Also, we are prone to misunderstanding and social isolation from Americans. We hope we can get much guidance from faculties regarding the institution and profession. However, we do not know how to initiate a topic or what is the best way to approach an advisor. (Participant 16)

Thus, for Chinese students in this study, enrolling in American universities means not only the nonexistence of their accustomed mentor-student relationship but also unprecedented challenges they have to encounter. That is, to organize their academic work independently and determine their own academic or career future by themselves. Such challenges accordingly bring a sense of being overwhelmed, because they were trained to totally rely on external guidance and discipline for almost 20 years before coming to the United States.

A computer science student summarized their feelings while providing a comparison. He said:

There is a popular comparison to describe the difference between Chinese educational system and its American counterpart. That is, students walk on the earth when studying in China, while they fly in the sky in America. It is true that we get much more freedom once we are enrolled in American system, just as we can enjoy more freedom when flying than walking. However, the psychological trade-off of the academic autonomy and freedom is the constant insecurity and enormous pressure. Most of us Chinese feel overwhelming stress all the time, because everybody knows that it is okay you stop or fall on the ground when you are walking, but you can never afford to stop or fall while flying in the sky. (Participant 15)

Silent Learner Versus Active Learner

Eleven of the Chinese students believe that their habitual silence or culturally verbal passivity, exemplified by a lack of class participation, an avoidance of raising questions, and an avoidance of interaction with faculty, handicapped them in relating to their professors.

Chinese students find it difficult and challenging to adjust to the classroom discussion required in American academia. They are stressed because, on one hand, they are unprepared for the interactive nature of classroom communication and have problems interacting in an American academic setting and, on the other hand, they come from a more hierarchical society and are sensitive to professors' evaluations of them. Chinese students' sense of self-esteem faces a great challenge after they come to the United States. A female finance student stated:

As a typical Chinese student, I do not talk too much in class. However, I found my low-profile personality and humble attitude, which is so valued in Chinese classroom, has been taken by American professors as a lack of talent and an inability in many cases. This makes me feel frustrated, depressed, and stressed. (Participant 5)

Chinese students' silence in the classroom and reluctance to participate in class discussions conflict with American teachers' expectations. In China, as the dispenser of knowledge, the teacher controls the classroom and does not expect student participation or interaction. Educated under the Chinese educational system for many years, students are used to keeping silent and are reluctant to express their opinions publicly. However, the extreme silence that most Chinese students regard as normal classroom behavior is "weird" to American instructional approaches that emphasize the development of students' individual expression, since the typical role of the American teacher is to facilitate rather than to dispense knowledge. Therefore, miscommunication certainly occurs when the conflicting communicative norms clash in the classroom. Such miscommunication heightens the level of stress among most Chinese students, especially when they realize their status as "isolated" or "marginalized" during class discussions. They are afraid that their role as "outsiders" will leave a bad impression on the instructor. As an MBA student claimed:

Probably because I got used to the teacher-centered schema, I really would like to keep silent and do not want to participate in the discussion. However, I feel stressed, since I know my silence probably will hurt my final grade which is decided by our American instructors who usually expect students to open their mouths in class. (Participant 1)

A sociology student agreed:

In China, the student's role is to absorb knowledge, and the expected stance is passivity. Chinese teachers will praise us for our silence in classrooms. American instructors, in contrast, take silence and passivity as lack of initiative or lack of passion to learn. They value self-expression and self-confidence so much that students who don't participate in the discussions are not welcomed. Observing this makes me feel nervous and anxious all the time in the classroom, because I am bad at speaking up, but it seems that I have to push myself to do so just to make a good impression. (Participant 2)

Miscommunication occurs as well when it comes to raising questions. On one hand, American professors rely heavily upon students' questions as an instructional medium. It was thought that by asking questions, students can better understand the subject matter. On the other hand, Chinese students are accustomed to following the Chinese practice of attempting to think about problems on their own instead of asking professors in the classroom. Typical Chinese students' perceptions on "raising questions" are quoted below. A chemistry student mentioned:

What is important for Chinese students in classroom is that the learners master the content, through diligence and patience, without questioning or challenging what is presented by teachers. Indeed, in China, questioning by students is quite often seen to be disruptive to the instruction process and not respectful of the teacher. (Participant 18)

A physics student stated:

Chinese students usually work out a problem by themselves. If we still could not figure out how to solve it even though we tried hard, we would choose to ask other Chinese students instead of approaching professors with problems by taking advantage of office hours. This is because we do not want to suggest that the instructor had not been very clear. (Participant 13)

Inhibited by their habitual thinking, Chinese students are usually reluctant to raise questions in class, which is far beyond the expectation of American instructors. In most cases, American professors regard Chinese students' passivity as lacking motivation to learn or lacking ability to think independently. On the other hand, Chinese students can't help feeling stressed, when seeing their behavior is out of place in the classroom or conflicts with the teachers' expectation. As a public administration student disclosed:

You can imagine how stressed I am, when various professors asked me the same question, "how come you keep extremely silent in the seminar and never raise questions? Are you not very interested with my topic or does my class bore you?" Facing this question for millions of times, I realized the instructors regard me as an "outsider." This negative impression would definitely hurt my GPA. (Participant 11)

To sum up, habitual silence or verbal passiveness is the manifestation of Chinese students' education socialization in Chinese culture, which emphasizes the authority or social harmony. Trained in this type of education socialization, Chinese students experienced considerable stress when it comes to oral presentation, discussion participation, or even raise questions.

Indirectness Versus Directness

Most of my respondents indicated that they were inclined to be indirect in order to preserve harmony in interactions with their professors or advisors. Following traditional Chinese communicative rules, they tend to use vague language, rich in hints, and indirect requests when communicating with their professors. They never demand, refuse, or criticize their professors in a straightforward manner. They found, however, that in some cases, their indirectness hindered their relationship with American advisors or supervisors. Just as a biochemistry student commented:

I found sometimes, our habitual indirectness might leave advisors the impression that we are incapable of being well organized or getting to the point. (Participant 9)

An organizational behavior student concurred this by offering her own experience:

At the beginning of this semester, my advisor assigned me a project which needed some advanced statistics skills. To tell the truth, I did not know how to do it, but I dared not to tell him at that moment but just asked him several small questions. You know, in Chinese culture, everything the professors assigned us is reasonable, and we are not supposed to refuse. I tried my best to work on it, but I failed to figure it out. I did not make any progress in 2 months. One day, he asked me how far I went with this project. I had no choice but tell him that I am not good at statistics and I probably need to take some courses first in order to finish the project. He was so mad and said: "why do not you tell me earlier and now we waste a lot of time. I am serious. Next time, tell me if you have any problems with the job and don't beating around the bush." (Participant 19)

Another engineering student had similar experience:

I have been highly stressed lately because I am worried I am going to lose my current RA position. My boss sent me an e-mail several days ago saying he was very disappointed with

my job progress and he is considering taking my assistantship away and giving it to a more capable student. I dared not to tell him that I am not very sure what he wanted me to do from the very beginning when he assigned this job. I pretended to know what he meant when, actually, I did not. I had thought to just figure it out myself rather than ask my professor, my boss, for assistance. I tried hard indeed but eventually screwed everything up. It is stressful to think that he will fire me. (Participant 17)

Due to Chinese students' indirectness, miscommunication frequently happens during the work interaction between Chinese TA or RA and their American supervisors (advisors). The typical scenario is just as an accounting student summarized:

On one hand, professors assign us projects and never give detailed instructions. On the other hand, most Chinese students rarely ask for clarification with the faculty in spite of encountering many problems in their TA or RA jobs. (Participant 6)

When asked the reason for Chinese students' unwillingness to present problems to their advisors, most of respondents attribute to the Chinese culture which values those workers with fewer problems as more intelligent and hardworking. Chinese students' willingness to demonstrate their effort and devotion to work, however, has exactly the opposite effect on their supervisors.

The indirect communication style also influences the degree of Chinese students' acceptance of open and direct criticism. Most of them perceived explicit criticism to be associated with low capability, insufficient effort, or failure. Clashes occur especially when Chinese students are unable to complete their task as neat as expected by American supervisors due to their lack of preliminary knowledge of working procedures. On one hand, American faculty are unaware of the very serious obstacles encountered by Chinese students who strive to efficiently perform and therefore perceive the inefficiency as lack of cooperation or lack of work ethic. On the other hand, Chinese students think they are already trying their best to work, while their supervisors seem far from satisfied. Due to this failure to communicate, professors get upset or even sometimes express their criticism directly. Such criticism consequently makes Chinese students feel difficult to accept. A mechanical engineering student complained:

To avoid bothering my boss, I tried my best to complete my job relying on myself. I never told her how many problems I met and how tough this job is. However, she still is very picky and always criticizes me as inefficient and ineffective and totally ignores the effort that I devoted to this job. Her inconsideration and overdemanding make me highly stressful. (Participant 8)

Since "culture is largely responsible for the construction of our individual social realities and for our individual repertoires of communicative behaviors and meanings" (Porter and Samovar 1994, p. 348), Chinese students' indirect mode of communication frequently clashes with American faculties' directive mode, and miscommunication occurs when Chinese students do not conform to pragmatic and linguistic expectations as defined by majority group norms.

Summary of Stressors

Interview participants identified their stressors come mainly from three areas: (1) personal concerns, (2) sociocultural stress, and (3) academic pressure.

Their personal stress sources are mainly from dating or marriage problems; visa status, job opportunities, or immigration concerns; financial strain; and homesickness and loneliness. They are frustrated and depressed about their foreign student visa status, which not only puts them in a disadvantageous position in many ways while being students but also gives them substantial stress when it comes to their future job opportunities and immigration in America. Regarding the marriage or relationship, they feel impotent about the fact that the love or marriage in America easily falls apart and is difficult to achieve due to the factors such as long-distance relationship, long-time separation, limited candidates, over-high expectations, and more academic-oriented and less extroverted characters. Financial strains give students a lot of restraints socially and academically. Socially, they have to live a frugal life. Academically, financial aid limits students' choices, and they have to give the highest priority to the assistantships rather than personal interests when it comes to choosing universities or majors. Marginal syndrome, accompanied by loneliness and longing for home and identity, is pervasive among Chinese students and make their sojourn painful.

As for sociocultural stressors, students are concerned about the difficulty in interacting, communicating, and building friendships with Americans. According to students, their social deficiency is caused either by their own cultural or language deficiencies or by the conflicting values between America and China.

Academic stress is extremely high for most students in this study, because they are highly motivated to achieve academic success. Facing the strain of language and academic problems, they feel even more stressed if they fail. Because attaining an advanced degree is a major way for Chinese students to achieve higher status in China, or to pursue their dreams in the United States, the potential negative consequences of academic failure are considerable. Also, interactions with American faculty pose severe challenges for most Chinese students. Culture and education disparities between China and America, together with Chinese students' language deficiencies, contribute to their difficulty in having effective communications with American faculty members.

The next two sections discuss Chinese students' coping strategies which they use to deal with their stressors. Chinese students' perceptions toward coping, help-seeking, and counseling concepts and services are explored as well. Their expectations and suggestions on the counseling are included at the end of the discussion.