

Chapter 8

An Examination of Individual-Level Factors in Stress and Coping Process

As discussed in Chap. 2, Berry's (1997) "stress-coping framework" focuses on the identification of those factors that function as significant stressors and impair sojourners' adaptation to the new environment. According to Berry, both stress and coping are influenced by characteristics of the individual and the society (situation). On the group-level acculturation, migrant groups usually change substantially as a result of living with two sets of cultural influences. These macro-level changes such as economic changes, social changes, culture changes, language shifts, religious conversions, and value systems influence on an individual's stress, coping, and adaptation. On the individual level, individual variables such as age, gender, marital status, length of stay, and field of study affect the stress-coping process. Moreover, an individual's coping strategies and social support are also important factors influencing students' acculturation stress and adjustment.

This section mainly examines the individual-level variables that affect the stress-coping process of Chinese international students and how they conceptualize and adapt to their stress at an American university. The stress, coping, and adaptation are measured by individual variables such as age, gender, field of study, length of stay, expectation, knowledge and skills, acculturation style, coping strategies, and social support.

Individual-Level (Microlevel) Factors

Factors Prior to Acculturation

Age

Age has a known relationship to the acculturation process. Age has been studied as related to foreign students' academic performance and adjustment problems. The

relationships between foreign students' age and their adjustment on a foreign campus, however, are inconclusive. There are two conclusions from different studies: (1) younger students have more adjustment problems than older ones and (2) older students have more difficulties than younger ones (Ward et al. 2001). Based on the findings of the present study, however, younger and older students have different kinds of adjustment problems. Older students experienced more culture shock, job and visa concerns, and immigration pressure, while younger students were more easily subject to academic pressure and homesickness and loneliness.

Older ones often do experience substantial cross-cultural challenges and problems. For instance, a male student in his 30s expressed the stress resulting from losing familiar signs and symbols and being unable to understand American norms or customs. He stated:

It is a challenge for me to socially interact with Americans. Although I sense the need to change some of my ideas, I feel ambivalent about the possibility of change. On one hand, I know adopting American style is important to me; on the other, I want to adhere to my own style by avoiding Americans. I am unable to understand or accept the customs, values, behaviors, and systems in the United States. In my inner heart, probably I am rather backward in my ideology. I feel that I cannot overcome it any more. At this age, I cannot catch up with the fashion anymore. I am lagging behind. I am different from American people. I do not have the same opinion as these people. I do not want to communicate with them. They are very different from me. (Participant 13)

In contrast to older students, younger students lead a less restrained life. They are not as burdened by the language barrier and by culture shock. They watched American dramas and were familiar with the latest pop music while they were in China. Most of them are open-minded and thirst for adventure, longing to see the world. A 21-year-old master's student in chemistry said:

My favorite band is the "Red Hot Chili Peppers"; I am a huge fan of the Phoenix Suns [professional basketball team]; I am a hardcore supporter of Apple products. I follow every [television] episode of *Prison Break*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Desperate Housewives*.

This seems to be the generation that was born to study in America. When asked whether she experienced any difficulties interacting with Americans or cultural shock, she responded:

My parents told me that when the cross-cultural experiences start early, the process is general smooth. I think it is true. I am not sure I experienced any culture shock. I just felt everything was new, and I was excited about the change. (Participant 18)

When asked why older students have a lower level of self-esteem and experience a high level of acculturative stress, five students believed that, given the higher national status of the United States in the world, communication with Americans also carries symbolic meanings of prestige and power for older students, which make them frustrated, nervous, and anxious. A biochemistry student stated this idea clearly:

In terms of interacting with American classmates or professors, I did not sense too much difficulty. I just treat them the same. Many older [Chinese] students consider the US

standard superior to their own, which was “primitive” in the world order. Sometimes I feel sad for them, because if you consider your nationality is inferior to Americans, how can you expect others to respect you and your country. (Participant 9)

In addition to the culture shock, older students experienced more visa, job, and immigration pressures than younger students did ($t = 2.17, p = 0.014 < 0.05$). The follow-up interviews confirm the quantitative findings. A male student in his early 30s stated:

Besides stress from study and new culture, I have suffered from the stress from visa and immigration issues. How much I envy those [Chinese] kids who came to the United States in their early 20s. Making a decision is so easy for them. They can choose to go back or stay here just based on what they want. Even though I do not like living in America, I have to stay here, struggling for the green card, just because my wife and my son do not want to go back China. Everything becomes complicated when it involves your family. (Participant 7)

On the other hand, both the survey findings and the interview results reveal that students whose age is below 25 also were more easily subject to the burden of homesickness and loneliness. A female student said:

I never left home before I came to the United States, so I felt lonely and homesick from time to time, even though I can get along very well with my American friends. I miss the yummy food in China and dislike the Americanized and expensive Chinese food in America. I miss my parents and friends back home. I hate the weekend, when all Americans hang out the parties, and I still have to stay at home, watching the never end *Friends* or *Sex and the City* over and over again. (Participant 18)

Gender

Both quantitative findings and qualitative results show that gender has a variable influence on the acculturation process. As for academic pressure, no significant gender differences were observed. Other stressors and concerns, however, varied across genders among the subjects. Chinese women expressed more anxiety and frustration in financial situations and dating problems ($t = 2.18, p = 0.03 < 0.05$), while men were more easily subject to the stress of future vocational achievement and immigration issues ($t = 2.93, p = 0.007 < 0.05$).

An industrial engineering student stated:

Chinese traditional culture holds different definitions of “success” for men and women. A famous Chinese saying goes, “what guys are afraid of most is being unable to land a decent job, while what women are afraid of most is being unable to find a good guy to get married.” From the very young age, I know for sure that as a guy, my parents’ critical concerns about me are competence and achievement. It is natural for Chinese women to return home, if they are unable to land a successful career. However, there is no alternative for Chinese men who screw up their careers. The unsuccessful men in career are labeled “losers” or “society dropouts.” Owing to these particular cultural factors, Chinese guys feel exceptional pressure from our families’ and our culture’s expectations to excel academically and professionally. (Participant 10)

Another male student concurred:

In China, a culture largely influenced by Confucianism, men are often regarded as the pillar or the bread winner for the family. For instance, it would be considered shameful to some degree if a man were to give up his career for the sake of family; on the contrary, if a woman were to give up her career for the sake of family, she would be regarded as a virtuous wife. Due to the cultural demand for excellence on a Chinese guy, I have suffered from stress since the day I came to the United States. As the foreigners in this land, we are particularly burdened because we start far behind in the race for success and must be exceptionally talented or fortunate to catch up. To tell you the truth, I feel stress has become a part of my life in this country, and I wonder if it will ever go away. (Participant 10)

In contrast, financial pressure and dating concerns are more severe problems for Chinese women than men. One woman student in public administration stated:

Female Chinese graduate students are more easily subject to the financial stress than male students. Research assistantships or teaching assistantships are more likely to be offered to the science and technology majors—where male Chinese students are concentrated—than in the humanities and social sciences where female Chinese students cluster. (Participant 11)

In terms of marriage and dating, a female student in mechanical engineering responded:

Men can date at any age, while women cannot. The pool is very small for women who are beyond a certain age. I turned 37 this year. My major concern is whether or not I can marry in the end. In most male [Chinese] students' minds, a good girlfriend or wife must be pretty or at least above average in appearance. Additionally, she must also be caring and virtuous. The merits possessed by most female Chinese students in America, such as independence, knowledge, and aggressiveness, are considered less important or even disadvantageous. (Participant 8)

Majors

Based on the quantitative study and the interviews, language barriers and other concerns varied across majors among Chinese students. In part, this is so because language demands vary from major to major. Generally, natural science majors do not require as much or as high a competence in English language skills as do students in the social sciences, which require a better understanding of American culture, values, and social systems. Just as a social justice student stated:

The [English] language demand is pretty high in my major. Writing research papers to the accepted standard is a huge burden for me. My papers were corrected by professors from the very start to the end. The problem was not only the grammar but also the writing style. The Chinese writing style is significantly different from the American style. My professors always criticized my essays as being filled with vague concepts without a well-defined context. Also, the hypothesis stated earlier suddenly become a theory without any verification. (Participant 5)

In addition, just as discussed earlier, students in the social sciences experience much more financial pressure than their peers in the natural sciences do, because research assistantships and teaching assistantship are offered more in the fields of

science and technology than in the humanities and social sciences. A public administration student said:

If I had been in natural science, it would have been easier for me to get a TA or RA. I will apply again for the assistantship, but I feel I will be rejected again since the budget in my department is always tight. The survival pressure is so tense, because not having an assistantship has depleted all my funds. I want more than ever to finish my study here. So, I take whatever jobs are available on campus; but the pay rate of on-campus jobs is kind of low, and what I earn does not cover my living expenses. To make the little bit left over stretch further, I have decided to cut my living expenses even more. (Participant 11)

Lastly, interview transcripts also indicate that job concerns varied across majors among Chinese students. Students whose majors have industrial applications—such as computer sciences or electrical engineering—more easily find jobs in the United States, while few students in the humanities or sciences that have no industrial applications can successfully find jobs after they graduate. A female sociology student said:

Chinese students usually restrict their major choices and are aggregated in natural science majors. It is a strategy to overcome their language barrier: they avoid majoring in the arts and humanities which weigh heavily on verbal and writing skills; they major in the technical fields where language is less of a barrier—where they do not have to deal with essays, term papers, and class discussions. On the other hand, study in the technical fields will provide entry to secure, high-status, well-paying jobs. (Participant 2)

A political science student concurred:

Most of students in the humanities and social sciences are worried about their future in the United States. Many of us could pass examinations, complete degrees, and work at temporary jobs, but we could not find real jobs after we graduated. Three of the previous Chinese international students in my department could not land a job after they graduated. Everyone knows America is a country of survival pressure. This is especially true for students in the social sciences and the humanities. When we cannot cross that threshold of finding a real job in the United States, our lives in America will become grim and cruel. (Participant 3)

Expectation

There is a relationship between the predeparture expectations and the stress-coping process. Interview transcripts indicate that Chinese students who had extremely intense or excessively high expectations about their life in the United States experienced greater stress. In contrast, students who had previous international exposure had more realistic expectations about life in the United States: their expectations matched their actual experiences, facilitated adjustment, and alleviated anxiety and stress. Greater discrepancies between expectations and experiences were associated with elevated levels of depression. An electrical engineering student related:

Before coming to America, most Chinese seem to have visualized it as a paradise with endless entertainment. After we arrive here, however, we find this paradise belongs to Americans only, not to Chinese. I think most of the Chinese students were not able to

imagine the magnitude of the difficulties they would encounter in America when they were in China. They were shocked by both the unexpected difficulties and their inability to effectively deal with those difficulties. The expectations-to-experiences mismatch heightened the unexpected stress. (Participant 7)

A female education psychology student added:

The disparity between my past expectations and the reality in the United States was much bigger than I had ever anticipated. Based on my own experiences, I would say if you are prepared to endure a variety of stresses, say, a new environment, a new culture, academic challenges, a linguistic barrier, financial pressure, long separation from family, as well as concerns over visa status, you are ready to come to the United States. If you expect to enjoy life in the United States, you'd better stay in China. (Participant 16)

In contrast, several students who had overseas experiences addressed their less stressful life in the United States. An environmental engineering student said:

I had been in Holland for 3 years before I came to the United States, so I knew how life in the Western countries differs from life in China. Also, I learned how to cope with the overseas life academically and socially during my stay in Holland. After I moved from Amsterdam to Tempe, [Arizona,] I did not expect a lot, which makes my life a lot easier. Low expectations make it so that I never whined or felt very disappointed. (Participant 14)

An organizational behavior student concurred:

I came to the United States after I finished my master's degree in England. I felt I benefited a lot from the 2 years in England. Studying and living in England provided a realistic and accurate picture of how life overseas is. After I relocated to the United States, I found my expectations were realistic and matched the experiences very much. The unmet expectations which occurred frequently to many Chinese students here never happened to me. Moreover, in some cases, the experiences are more positive than I expected. (Participant 1)

Knowledge and Skills

Culture-specific knowledge and social skills provide the foundation for effective intercultural interactions; they facilitate psychological adaptation to a new socio-cultural environment. The findings of this study reveal that students who had previously resided abroad or had international exposure, especially in international corporations, adjusted significantly better during their subsequent cross-cultural sojourns. A female MBA student said:

Before I came to the United States, I immigrated to Canada and had been there for a year. When looking back, those days in Canada were the most difficult time in my life. I had a very decent job in China. I was a project manager at IBM. I never thought that I could not even find a white-collar job in Canada. My experience in Canada made me believe that other than revolution, there was nothing like going abroad to change the social status of a Chinese so abruptly. After searching for a job three months without any luck, I had to give in. I took a job as a waitress in a local Chinese restaurant. The dish-carrying job lasted six months. I worked either from 11 am to 6 pm or 6 pm to 11 pm everyday. I could no longer

count the plates I carried or the number of guests I served. Although there is nothing disgraceful about manual labor in Canada, I felt I had to move on as soon as possible, because once you begin to rely on this cheapest mode of employment, you will become trapped in a low social stratum and never see daylight again. I applied to an MBA degree program in the United States, and luckily I was accepted by Arizona State University. I think life is fair. After I have been through all that I had suffered in Canada, I feel it is much easier to endure all kinds of stress in the United States mentally and physically; I feel strong enough to deal with any challenge. It turns out I am doing really great in the United States. (Participant 1)

A sociology student described her experience:

I worked at Bertelsmann Shanghai before I came to the United States. Seventy percent of the employees at Bertelsmann Shanghai are from Germany, America, Canada, or other Western countries. Our office was just like the United Nations, and my colleagues were from five continents. English was the working language at Bertelsmann. Due to daily exposure to the international working culture, I learned how to interact with Westerners, achieved a better understanding of Western social systems and values, and developed the expected behaviors during these interactions. Owing to this international exposure, I did not feel much culture shock after I came to the United States. (Participant 2)

A computer science student said:

Of course, to probe the New World required not only commitment and courage but also strategies and techniques. The work experiences at Intel China gave me a lot of training in self-development in an unfamiliar environment, how to interact with colleagues from other countries, how to better understand other cultural systems and social values, and how to develop the expected behaviors in a new culture. With this knowledge and skill, I did not have much difficulty adjusting to life in the United States, so I would suggest that it is better for Chinese students to work for a couple of years before they finally come to the United States. Hands-on working experience teaches you much more than what you can learn at school. (Participant 15)

Factors during Acculturation

The theme of factors during acculturation includes the subcategories of (a) length of stay, (b) acculturation strategies, (c) coping strategies, and (e) social support.

Length of Stay

How long one has been experiencing acculturation strongly affects the kind of problems and their extent. Both quantitative study and follow-up interviews indicate that newly arrived students expressed more anxiety and frustration in language barrier ($t = 2.73, p = 0.01 < 0.05$), academic challenges, and culture shock, while students who had been here longer, and thus were closer to graduation, were more

easily subject to the stress of future vocational achievement and immigration issues ($t = 2.17, p = 0.014 < 0.05$).

A physics student recalled his 4 years of experience in the United States:

When I first came, I had a greater desire to make friends. Everything was new. I felt very lonely. My life was just like solitary confinement, with no one to talk with on campus and no car to leave campus. My English was awkward, and I felt the language barrier was difficult to overcome. Studying was very hard and I had a lot of frustrations. Now 4 years later, my need for emotional communication and social interaction is much lower than it was during my first semester. My desire to make friends has waned now, and my life is much less stressful. (Participant 13)

A political science doctoral student who had been in the United States for 4 years concurred:

I do not care so much now. The longer I stay here, the less I care. The surprising is not surprising anymore once you see it many times. There are still times I worry, but at least I do not feel the sky will collapse on me anymore. Since I am going to graduate next year, I am now more concerned about how to deal with visa issues, future job opportunities, and immigration things. (Participant 3)

Acculturation Strategies

Acculturation strategies have been shown to be strongly associated with positive adaptation: integration is usually the most successful, while marginalization is the least successful, and assimilation and separation are moderately successful. For the present study, quantitative study indicates that marginalization is the only significant contributor to Chinese students' appraisal of their overall pressure ($t = 2.57, p = 0.01 < 0.05$). Students who identified themselves as more marginalized were much more stressed than those students who perceived themselves as less marginalized. The other three acculturation strategies (integration, assimilation, and separation) are not significantly related to the students' evaluation of their overall pressure in the United States.

Gender differences are observed regarding the marginalization strategy. Student women easily identified themselves as marginal between Chinese and American cultures, while student men less so ($t = 3.12, p = 0.003$). This suggests that women in this study vacillated more between Chinese and American cultures, identifying with neither, nor being accepted by either, for that matter. An education psychology student clarified her identity conflict:

I do not have any American friends, nor do I have any interaction with Chinese students here. I live an isolated life in the United States with few friends around. I celebrate neither Chinese holidays nor any American holidays. American people think I am a Chinese, while people in China think I am not a pure Chinese anymore, but an Americanized Chinese. Sometimes I cannot help but wonder who I am: American, Chinese, or Chinese American. (Participant 16)

Based on the quantitative study, most Chinese students adopt integration as their acculturation strategy and chose to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily

interaction with Americans ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.09$). The follow-up qualitative study, however, reveals that although most Chinese students displayed a willingness to adopt the integration strategy, their actual behavior did not support such an inclination. For instance, the interview transcripts show most of the engineering and natural science students tended to assume the separation strategy, withdrawing from social activities and confining their interaction within their own community. As a consequence, they were further isolated from American culture which hindered cultural understanding. In contrast, students in the business school tried to adopt the assimilation strategy, explicitly claiming that they wanted to “assimilate as soon as possible.” An accounting doctoral student stated:

I do not have any Chinese friends here, because I really want to be an American. By that, I mean I want to speak English without an accent, be courteous and respectful to others, and enjoy life to the best of my ability. I speak American English fluently and am capable of using the latest fashionable words and phrases. I meet Americans, visit their homes, and learn their lifestyles. Different from most Chinese who rent an apartment in Chinatown, I share a house with two American guys. I do not contact any Chinese students in my department, and I can sense they do not like me either, because they feel I am kind of whitewashed. But I really do not care what they think about me. (Participant 6)

Coping Strategies

Related to acculturation strategies are the coping strategies. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) have identified two general coping strategies: problem-focused (attempting to change or solve the problem) and emotion-focused coping (attempting to regulate the emotions associated with the problem). More recently, Endler and Parker (1990) have identified a third: avoidance-oriented coping.

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), a typical Western perspective of creative problem solving is an example of problem-focused coping. In contrast, Chinese people prefer to deal with stress by employing emotional coping strategies. The present quantitative study found that there is no significant difference among three coping strategies. Chinese students engage in a wide range of coping strategies to cope with their stress. The interview transcripts, however, confirm previous studies' findings that Chinese students typically prefer using emotion-coping strategies. A mechanical engineering student argued:

As sojourners here, most of us are powerless to change entire cultures or external environments, and in many cases, we have limited resources for changing the troublesome features of the stress-provoking environment. In these instances, emotion-focused coping may be more effective than problem-focused coping in reducing stress. (Participant 8)

A bioengineering student concurred:

I preferred to take direct actions when I was in China. In contrast, here [in America] I most often try changing my perceptions or appraisal of stressful events. In many cases, there is nothing we can do about the stressful environment or external culture. What we can do is change our perceptions and regulate our emotions to suit the environment. (Participant 17)

When employing emotion-coping strategies such as endurance, there is a significant difference between single and married students ($t = 2.488$, $p = 0.016 < 0.05$). Single students ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.11$) use endurance to cope with their daily stress more than married students do ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.21$).

Social Support

Social support has been viewed as a major resource in the stress and coping literature and as a significant factor in predicting the psychological adjustment during cross-cultural transitions. Based on interview transcripts, for Chinese students, social support may arise from a variety of sources, including family, friends, church, and professional counseling.

Support from Family

Parents and family members are the most important resources for students when they are in crisis. When seeking help from others, Chinese international students tend to look first to their family. When ranking the four sources of support—family, friends, church, and professional counseling—most of the students identified family as the preferred help resource. This result reflects the Chinese cultural emphasis on family ties. Another factor accounting for their unwillingness to request outside help for emotional concerns might be the need to “save face” and preserve the family name.

Support from Friends

Conational Support (Support from the Chinese Student Community)

When it comes to *conational* support—support from fellow citizens from the same home country, in this case, the Chinese student community—participants indicated that conationals provide necessary support when needed, but these relationships tend to contribute to the Chinese students’ social isolation from American society and culture. On one hand, the interviews indicate that Chinese friends not only offer knowledge-based resources and share information about coping with a new environment but also provide emotional support. Because most Chinese students have experienced varieties of stress in the American educational settings, conational friends are an important source of emotional support. Although Chinese students do not usually or easily reveal their thoughts and feelings to others, it is not uncommon for them to share their sufferings or pressure. A male computer science student confided:

To me, my [Chinese] friends here are the most preferred source of help for solving adjustment problems. They not only give me lots of information about how to adjust to

the new environment but also encourage me when I am stressed, depressed, or frustrated. (Participant 15)

A political science student stated:

I need to feel I belong, especially on weekends. Walking home carrying my backpack, I saw cars passing by, each one loaded with American students laughing and screaming on their way to parties. I felt so sad. Then, three Chinese friends and I decided to get together every Friday night. Whenever I am with my [Chinese] friends, I am relaxed and happy. (Participant 3)

Although acknowledging that the cultural enclave enhances their psychological security, self-esteem, and sense of belonging, as well as alleviating their stress and anxiety, Chinese students also realize that dependence on their conationals pressures them to withdraw from social activities and thereby impedes their culture learning. An industrial engineering student complained:

Going abroad is supposed to provide an opportunity for broadening a person's perspective; however, it turns out that most Chinese international students here confine their lives to a small circle of friends and activities. Frequently, we live in the same place for several years. On campus, we meet the same people, say the same things, and buy the same things from the same stores. During holidays, the same friends take turns hosting get-togethers. (Participant 10)

A finance student added:

A small circle of Chinese friends is just like a besieged fortress. It seems no one inside the besieged fortress really cares what is going on outside. The monotony life within the circle makes what we are concerned with become increasingly trivial, such as how to get a good deal on eBay or Dealsea, who was supposed to host the dinner on the coming weekend, and the most important issue in life was how to get an H-1 visa or a green card. I feel I am becoming increasingly parochial, bored, and passive, when my social life is confined to two or three good friends. I want to escape this besieged fortress and have some real interactions with Americans. (Participant 16)

While they display a willingness to get to know more Americans and make friends, their actual behavior does not support such inclination. A sociology student said:

Somehow, I feel I need to make American friends, because I know the more I interact with Americans, the more I can learn about American society and culture; however, I only made the effort and took the initiative when I first got here. Later on, I went back to my small circle of Chinese friends again, since it is natural for people to take things easy and avoid difficult situations. Believe it or not, it is easier and more enjoyable to chat in your native language. (Participant 2)

Host National Support

Compared to the conational support, *host national* support—from domestic friends and colleagues in the country, international students are visiting, in this case,

Americans—is used much less by Chinese students, although research indicates that host national support is the single best predictor of successful adjustment (Brein and David 1971). It is widely recognized that host national contact facilitates the learning of culture-specific skills for life in a new cultural milieu. Comfort and satisfaction with local contacts have been associated with greater general satisfaction in foreign students, including both academic and nonacademic aspects of international students' overseas experiences. An accounting student commented:

My American friends help me a lot. When I first got here, my roommate, Michael—a nice American guy—picked me up from the airport and drove me to the supermarket. He also taught me how to drive and gave me lots of information and suggestions when I bought a car. Another American lady, Tamara, who is the instructor of English writing, helped me a lot with my grammar and sentences. We have even kept in contact, although I took her class 5 years ago. She still tells me which word or usage is not authentic and what the correct word should be when we exchange e-mails. Julie, a professional, is working on Wall Street. We met at an accounting conference 2 years ago, and since then we have become good friends. She treats me like a family member and invites me to her family reunion every summer. We really have a good time when we get together. She also gave me academic help. When writing my dissertation, I needed to analyze several large companies' annual stock data; but it is too expensive for an individual to purchase or install such a huge database. I really could not afford it. When Julie heard about my problem, she told me she could download every year's corporate stock data set for me from her company. She spent a lot of time and energy compiling that data for me. With her help, I successfully finished the data collection part [of my research]. I feel I am so lucky to have good American friends. They are part of my life in America. (Participant 6)

Host nationals provide information as well as material and social support. The relationship between the frequency of contact with locals and international students' stress, however, is inconclusive. There are two conclusions from different studies: (a) extensive contact with host nationals facilitates the international students' psychological adjustment and (b) more extensive host national contact increases psychological distress (Ward et al. 2001). We found that the discrepancies between their actual and desired contact with Americans correlated with their stress. A chemistry student reported:

In China, I imagined that I could interact with Americans very often and my English would improve a lot if I could pursue my studies in America. After I got here, I found things are not what I expected. It seems like I am still in China. The people I interact with very frequently are all Chinese: my advisor is Chinese, all of my four lab mates are students from China, and my roommate is a Chinese girl as well. During the week, other than two classes when I get the chance to listen to American professors lecture in English, I do not talk in or listen to English at all. This makes me very stressed. It will be embarrassing if I still speak English awkwardly, or use a lot of Chinglish expressions, after I graduate and go back to China in 4 years. (Participant 18)

In contrast, a social justice student feels that a lot of interaction with Americans is overwhelming. She stated:

Being the only foreign student in the department where all of my professors and classmates are either Americans or from [other] Western countries, I feel like a baby in an adult world—or a person who does not know how to swim, but is forced into a pool. I have to start everything from scratch. My English is not as good as an American. A lot of cultural

subtleties I do not understand. The more I interact with Americans, the more I feel intimidated, stressed, nervous, and lost. Sometimes, I feel life would be much easier if there were another Chinese student in my department. At least, we could share our feelings and encourage each other. I am not sure if this is because of my shy personality or my broken English, or both. Or if it is simply because I am not ready psychologically to be in this environment where Americans are overrepresented and English is the predominant language. (Participant 5)

Support from Church

Previous studies indicate that when it comes to coping with their stress, Chinese students rarely choose to go to church for religious comfort (Sun and Chen 1997; Frank 2000); the quantitative study confirms this result ($M = 1.55$, $SD = 1.03$). The interview transcripts, however, reveal that church is increasingly becoming a place for providing emotional or instrumental support. Most Chinese students acknowledged that church is an important place for forming and building friendships and a good source of local community information. As one student claimed:

Although most of us are not Christians in China, we attend a Chinese or American church to interact with people from different backgrounds. I go to a Chinese Christian church every Sunday: it has become a routine in my life. One benefit of going to church is that it affords me the chance to meet very friendly and open-minded people. Another benefit is that I get lots of useful information at church. Whenever I encounter a problem such as how to buy a car, how to find a job, and even how to apply for [an H1B work] visa, the brothers and sisters at church are always available to answer my questions. Their information and suggestions are very helpful and make my life in the United States much easier. (Participant 4)

In addition, church gives the Chinese students who are accustomed to a collective life and the care of their institutions a feeling of belonging. A computer science student said:

Everybody needs to feel they belong. This is especially true for us Chinese international students in the United States. In China, in school and at the workplace we get used to a collective lifestyle; however, few places or institutions like the church in the United States can provide [such a community that] can satisfy our need to belong, since American people tend to be much more individualistic. I think that is why more and more Chinese students—whether because of religious belief or for other reasons—take up institutionalized religion in America. A classmate of mine who was active in group activities in college became a devoted Christian after living in America for several years. (Participant 15)

Besides emotional support, church is also instrumental in helping Chinese students in their daily lives. A biochemistry student recalled:

Even though I am not a Christian, I really appreciate everything the church did for me. I cannot imagine how I would have handled life in the United States without the church's help, especially during the first several weeks. When I first got here, the person who picked me up from the airport was a volunteer from church. For the first 2 weeks, a nice lady in the church kindly offered me temporary lodging at her house. Given most students did not have a car their first semester, the church brothers took us shopping every weekend. (Participant 9)

Professional Support from Counseling

The quantitative study revealed that Chinese students' highest preferences for seeking help were family members ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.37$) and friends ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.11$). Counselors and professional psychologists ($M = 1.31$, $SD = 0.62$) were the least mentioned resources. When asked why they rarely seek professional help when they experience psychological depression, interview transcripts indicate that the interviewees have varied beliefs about why this is so. They may be prone to the culturally derived causes of underutilization, namely, the stigma associated with psychological difficulties. A chemistry student explained why she had a hard time telling counselors about her personal problems:

You know, the Chinese culture teaches us not to share our personal problems with outsiders. Talking to a counselor about psychological problems or admitting emotional difficulties is viewed as bringing disgrace and shame to the family. As such, we usually turn to our family or other Chinese students for help when we are in crisis or trouble. (Participant 18)

Different from those students who attribute underutilization to the culturally derived factors, some students believed that the underutilization of the counseling service is mainly due to Chinese students not knowing how counseling services work. Unsure if their problem warranted professional counseling, they were unfamiliar with how to access these services.

Chinese students who come to the United States bring with them a lack of familiarity with Western notions of mental health and counseling services. We do not make the connection between our personal problems and receiving professional help. (Participant 12)

My study also revealed that it is much easier for Chinese students in the business school to accept the American concept of counseling and to use a counseling service. Out of 18 respondents, only two students had used counseling services, and both of them were from the business school.

Summary

Since the late 1970s, sending students abroad has been a central part of the Chinese government's policy. "Almost overnight, [Chinese] perceptions of America underwent a global change, from the decadent capitalist country to the land of gold and freedom" (Wang 1992, p. 10). Attracted by educational opportunities and the so-called American dream, China's educated population vied for opportunities to go to the United States, despite the great uncertainties involved. Swept away by the fever of foreign study, most of them failed to think about the potential danger and difficulty of going abroad. As illustrated by the interview transcripts, the majority of participants were unsure about the exact goal of their upcoming sojourn when they left China.

Study abroad offers greater opportunities, but like life itself, it is full of stress and difficulty. As the analysis presented here shows, Chinese students' stress coping and adaptation are not only influenced by group-level acculturation factors (e.g., society, culture, economics, and employment), but they are also influenced by individual-level factors (e.g., age, gender, major, marital status, expectations, predeparture knowledge, and skills). As a mature adult, before making a final decision about studying abroad, one should not only look at the overall picture of Chinese students' group acculturation in the United States but also take careful consideration of the individual factors to determine whether one is personally ready for the inevitable stressors and difficulties.