The Cultural Adaptation Experiences of Chinese Higher Education Students in the American Deep South: A Comparison Across Disciplines

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THE CULTURAL ADAPTATION EXPERIENCES OF CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS IN THE AMERICAN DEEP SOUTH: A COMPARISON ACROSS DISCIPLINES

by

Xiaonan Song

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School,
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and the School of Education
at The University of Southern Mississippi
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for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

In the past decade, Chinese international students have been found as one of the largest international student groups at American institutions across the country. However, the American Deep South was not less frequently studied in the past. Due to the distinctiveness of the Deep South, the researcher conducted this qualitative research on Chinese international students studying in this historically and culturally distinctive region. Mississippi was chosen as a representative state of the Deep South in the current study. The researcher collected data from in-depth interviews from three publicly funded institutions in Mississippi. Besides reporting many common issues regarding to cultural adaptation to their institutions, which were frequently discussed in previous studies, uncommon issues due to the distinctiveness of the South were also reported. The researcher also focused on identifying adaptation issues related to the fields of study of the participants, namely, social sciences and humanities and STEM. Qualitative differences between the two groups also shed light on how fields of study have affected these participants’ experiences of adapting to their host institutions and socializing within the campus community.
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, who always gave me unconditional love and encouraged me to pursue my dreams.
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CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, the Chinese government adopted the “Open Door” policy to do business with the United States and other western countries. During this time, large numbers of Chinese students and scholars were sent to the United States to learn modern science and technology. Since that time, many Americans have traveled to China with fresh ideas, which have deeply influenced Chinese people. Many Chinese students and scholars were attracted by the different world and wanted to pursue their dreams overseas (Pang & Appleton, 2004).

Chinese families have viewed the education of their children as a top priority for thousands of years. In the past decade, China’s economic reforms led to a growth in wealth and the shrinking family size (only one child per family) have made sending children to international universities less burdensome (Chao & Hegarty, 2014). The emerging middle class families in recent decades are even able to afford or are willing to pay a heavy premium for their children to study in expensive prestigious universities (Cheung & Xu, 2015). At the same time, American higher education institutions are putting more efforts than before into recruiting international students to replace income lost by state budget cuts (Cantwell, 2015).

Chinese students think of educational attainment as more than a personal matter. In Chinese traditional culture, an individual’s personal life is a continuity of his or her parents’ lives. Many Chinese students therefore go overseas to go to college due to their parents’ wishes (Chao & Hegarty, 2014). As a result, while many Chinese students had the academic skills to study abroad, some left their country unprepared for entering a new social system and very different culture than their own. Navigating a new culture is a
major undertaking for Chinese students studying abroad.

The language barrier is the most common challenge that Chinese international students have in the United States (Li, 2016; Li & Stodolska, 2006; Liu, D. F., 2016; Liu, J., 2016; Roy, 2013; Su & Harrison, 2016; Trice, 2004; Tung, 2016; Yuan, 2011). Due to the fact that Mandarin-Chinese and English belong to different linguistic families, Chinese internationals from Mainland China are limited in terms of their ability to participate both academically and socially in the campus community (Sharif & Osterling, 2011). Even though English is required as part of the People’s Republic of China core curriculum in secondary and higher education, the English learning does not prepare students well for studying in English-speaking countries like the United States. In fact, Chinese undergraduate students were found to have difficulties in applying learned English knowledge to daily practices. Meanwhile, their English writing skills and strategies are limited, such as lack of coherence and cohesion, no sufficient and persuasive evidence to support opinions and beliefs, and unable to construct smoothly-flowing structures in English writing (Sang, 2017).

Academic writing is highly appreciated in American universities from undergraduate to graduate education. However, undergraduate education in China does not focus on academic writing skills as much as in American higher education institutions. English writing in Chinese colleges was most often integrated in English reading classes, in which English was often less of a focus than reading (Sang, 2017). Additionally, high-stakes standardized tests such as College English Test (CET) threatened the English writing education. Undergraduate students are required to pass both CET-4 and CET-6 in order to graduate from college. However, CETs focus more on
linguistic correctness rather than richness of content, so Chinese students tended to neglect the importance of providing sufficient evidence and information, which is often appreciated by American professors (Chao, 2017). Because the CETs are key requirements for graduation, training on writing skills and strategies are only limited to the extent that is needed by CET. Chinese students are often found lacking the English writing skills needed for communication, cooperation, expression, and argumentation in daily life and workplaces (Chen, 2016; Hou, 2002). Therefore, Chinese international students are likely to find themselves unprepared for the practices of intensive academic writing at American colleges and universities.

Although the increasing number of mainland Chinese international students in the United States confirmed the fact that there was an increasingly positive perception for obtaining an advanced degree in the United States among Chinese international students (Bartlett, Han, & Bartlett, 2018), many international students had very limited knowledge about American people and American life due to limited sources of information, which led to fragmented impressions about the United States. Due to some political reasons (such as censorship), unlike people from other Asian countries, Chinese people may not have a comprehensive understanding of American people and culture (Pang & Appleton, 2004).

Regardless of these challenges, many Chinese students or scholars are still very interested in attending American higher education institutions after graduating from Chinese secondary schools or colleges. In fact, many Chinese students and scholars took American higher education as an immigration path to the United States (Pang & Appleton, 2004). The interplay of push factors and pull factors in China and the United
States influenced these individual’s decision making (Cheung & Xu, 2015). One of the push factors in China is the limited higher education institutions and limited space for students, particularly for those who want to pursue a graduate degree. Nevertheless, job competition in China demanded them to pursue higher degrees. Some individuals wish to study in the United States because of their dissatisfaction with their previous life circumstances and the Chinese political system. At the same time, some pull factors from the United States attract individuals to pursue a degree in American higher education. For instance, many American research institutions are leaders in advanced technology and science, and offer programs that are not available in China (Pang & Appleton, 2004; Pang, 2001).

However, with these common issues faced by Chinese international students in American higher education, Chinese internationals did not always receive sufficient support. In a study at a university in Virginia, Sharif and Osterling (2011) found that some participants reported that their institutions did not have available academic and social support systems, which forced them to form their own support groups with their peers.

To improve the adaptation process of Chinese students to American higher education takes more than just Chinese students’ own efforts. Graduate students’ success is contingent upon actions by both the program and the students themselves (Zhou, 2014). The English curriculum taught in China, for example, should be calibrated for context-rich, communication-based teaching and learning rather than being test-driven. At the same time, American higher education institutions should provide international students with opportunities to improve their English and better understand American
culture once they arrive (Sang, 2017). For instance, specific English programs for international students can be designed based on the pedagogical practice of the American classes.

Problem statement

With a growing Chinese student population in the U.S. higher education, there are more studies focusing on students’ experiences of living and learning in American colleges and universities. However, there is limited literature dedicated to the unique experiences of Chinese students and how their experience may differ by fields of study. Also, there is limited literature that takes into account the experiences of Chinese students and how their experience may differ by the region of the United States where they live and study.

From the relatively limited number of studies focused on Chinese students experience abroad, five common themes emerged in the literature. The first theme is the cultural adaptation stages that most Chinese students had to experience when they were studying in a different country or culture (Li et al, 2012; Ye & Edwards, 2015). The second theme is factors that attracted Chinese students to study in U.S. higher education (Li Will, 2016; Tung, 2016). The third theme focuses on common issues that Chinese students face while studying abroad, such as social interaction with local students or people from different cultures (Li Will, 2016; Su & Harrison, 2016; Tong, 2014; Trice, 2004; Tung, 2016), negative impression domestic peers and professors have about Chinese students (Hsieh, 2007; Li Will, 2016; Tsai & Wong, 2012; Valdez, 2015), and language barriers (Li, 2016; Li & Stodolska, 2006; Liu, 2016; Liu, D. F., 2016; Liu, J. Z., 2016; Roy, 2013; Su & Harrison, 2016; Trice, 2004; Tung, 2016; Yuan, 2011). The
fourth theme is intercultural adaptation strategies employed by Chinese students. Their coping strategies varied depending on their attitudes toward cultural adaptation, such as assimilation, separation, marginalization, and so on (Hsieh, 2007; Gill, 2007; Tong, 2014). There is also a branch of study focused specifically on adaptations that Chinese students with regard to their learning strategies (Wu, 2015; Yue, 2010). The last theme is about solutions that host institutions of international students should consider to assist international students’ adaptation to domestic social and academic environment (Hsieh, 2007; Liu, 2016; Liu, J., 2016; Roy, 2013; Su & Harrison, 2016; Tung, 2016; Wu, 2015).

**Fields of study**

It is less common to see studies that focus on Chinese students’ cultural adaptation specifically from the perspective of academic culture such as fields of study in U.S. higher education. While Chinese international students across disciplines have been found to face similar challenges, the degree of each type of challenge may vary across disciplines. Therefore, it is necessary to explore which types of challenges may be more prevalent to Chinese students in different fields of study. Chinese internationals are more often found in departments of hard sciences (STEM), business and management (Chao, 2016) than social sciences and humanities (SSAH). As a result, findings based on previous studies may have been skewed and reflected more opinions of Chinese students in STEM than those in SSAH fields. Major challenges faced by SSAH students could vary from their peers studying in STEM fields. For instance, it was previously found that humanities professors required more English writing and syntax due to the fact that English language, along with its usage, was their main academic focus (Wang, 2002). Therefore, this study intends to shed more light on experience of Chinese students who
study in SSAH.

Location in the United States

There is also limited research comparing Chinese students studying in institutions in different regions of the United States. Campus cultural and institutional settings could vary greatly from region to region. For instance, Chinese students studying in the American South may have different adaptation experiences compared with their counterparts on the East Coast due to distinct cultural differences.

Previous studies regarding this topic were predominately conducted with qualitative research methods in which in-depth interviews were often used. Interview transcription analyses were frequently used. Therefore, the researcher conducted a qualitative study, with which the researcher aimed to achieve a more comprehensive, in-depth understanding of the experience that Chinese international students had in higher education institutions at Mississippi.

The present study

The first purpose of this study was to discover if there are different experiences and challenges that Chinese students report based on their academic areas of study. The researcher hypothesized that Chinese international students experienced cultural adaptation processes that are qualitatively different based on their academic fields of study. Specifically, this study aimed to determine if there are any experiential differences, challenges, and adaptations between Chinese students majoring in social sciences and humanities (SSAH) and those majoring in the STEM fields.

The researcher also hypothesized that Chinese internationals in both social science and humanities and STEM programs had adaptation experiences in American
higher education that are qualitatively different due to the region of the United States where they studied. For example, the American Deep South—because of its distinctive historical and political culture—is different than other regions of the United States. Thus, the researcher also intended to discover if there are different experiences, challenges, and adaptations that Chinese students report based on the location where they studied at.

Research questions

The researcher designed four research questions to guide the current study.

1. What cultural adaptation issues do Chinese international students majoring in SSAH in the Deep South report during their time of study in American colleges and universities?

2. What cultural adaptation issues do Chinese international students majoring in STEM in the Deep South report during their study in American colleges and universities?

3. Are the reported experiences about cultural adaptation of Chinese international students majoring in STEM in the Deep South qualitatively different than reported experiences about cultural adaptation of Chinese international students majoring in SSAH in the Deep South?

4. Are the reported experiences about cultural adaptation of Chinese international students studying in the Deep South qualitatively different than what the literature says about types of experiences, challenges, and adaptations that Chinese international students who undertake advanced study in other regions of the United States? Are any of these issues related to the distinctiveness from the American Deep South?

Reasons for studying Chinese internationals from different fields of study

The reason why the researcher intended to make the comparison between SSAH
and STEM is because of the high school education system in Mainland China. In Mainland China, junior high school students are required to take a variety of science subjects (chemistry, physics, and biology) in addition to history, geography, and politics (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). After transition to senior high schools, Chinese students have to choose a division (usually in their second year), either in liberal arts or in science, in order to take the College Entrance Exam (CEE). In the senior level, Chinese language, English (which is the most common foreign language option for CEE even though there are other foreign language options in some provinces), and mathematics are the three compulsory subjects for all students regardless of their division of choice. Besides these compulsory subjects, senior high school students also have to take another three optional subjects depending on their chosen division they are in. For instance, students who chose liberal arts division had to take history, geometry, and politics. In the science division, students had to take physical science, chemistry, and biology. The 3+X system has been common nation-wide in China, in which the “3” represents the three compulsory subjects, whereas the “X” represents the optional subjects based on each student’s division of choice (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). However, there are variations of this 3+X system in various provinces in China. For example, the system applied in Shandong Province is 3+X+1, in which elective subjects like music, physical education, and computer, the fine arts were also included in the College Entrance Exam held by Shandong Province.

In Hong Kong, a very similar but different high school education system is used (Leung et al., 2014). Senior high school students in Hong Kong take four core subjects: English language, Chinese language, mathematics, and liberal studies. Students also take 2-3 electives, which are used to qualify students for admission to specific university
majors after graduation from high school. These electives were divided into three categories, namely, arts and humanities, business, and science. For instance, if a student wants to be admitted by a program in the science fields, he or she has to choose the science subjects as elective courses in senior high school and take the corresponding subject examination in the region-wide Diploma of Secondary Education examination (Leung et al., 2014).

Chinese students who choose the liberal arts division will usually choose a major in the fields of social sciences and humanities. Students in the science division will choose a major in the field of STEM or other natural science fields instead. It is less common to see students choose fields of study that is different than their division in high schools. Due to the high school division system in China, the researcher wants to discover the differences during cultural adaptation process by comparing Chinese international students in social science and humanities fields with students in STEM fields. In APPENDIX E, the researcher has included a list of popular majors within each of these fields.

*Reasons for studying Chinese internationals who studied in the American South*

The mostly considered destinations in the United States for most Chinese international students are on the west coast and in the northeast. The American South is a less popular destination for Chinese students to continue their education in the United States. Because of this, the majority of studies focusing on Chinese students’ adaptations to their American higher education settings were conducted at institutions in these more popular and well-known regions. However, there is very little in the literature about the experiences of Chinese international students who study in less popular areas, including
the American South. The researcher aims to investigate the cultural adaptation experiences Chinese students studying in one representative state in the American South, Mississippi.

Definition of terms

In an effort to maximize clarity, this section provides definitions of seven terms that are central to this study.

Social science. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, social science has two definitions: 1. “a branch of science that deals with the institutions and functioning of human society and with the interpersonal relationships of individuals as members of society”; 2. “a science (such as economics or political science) dealing with a particular phase or aspect of human society” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2018). In the current study, “social science” refers to any majors that belongs to the branches of social science—economy, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and politics (Redfield, 1950).

Humanities. From the time of the early Greeks, has been an area of human concern, scholarship, and creativity. However, there does not seem to be a clear definition of humanities which scholars from different ages would agree. For the current study, the researcher has chosen the definition made by Ralph Barton Perry (1969). Perry (p. 55) defined humanities as
to embrace whatever influences conduce to freedom. ‘The Humanities’ is not to be employed as a mere class name for certain divisions of knowledge or parts of scholastic curriculum, or for certain human institutions, activities, and relationships, but to signify a certain condition of freedom which these may serve to create. The meaning of ‘the humanities’ is relative to the meaning of that
According to Perry’s criteria, the central humanistic fields are philosophy, history, and letters and arts.

Because there are some overlapped areas in the classification of social sciences and humanities, the researcher decided to treat these two fields as the same group. Individuals and interpersonal relationships are the focus of social science (Mkoren, 2011), which are very important in business and management. Therefore, the researcher has decided to treat business and management as a subgroup of social science. Both the social science and humanities are very different from hard science or STEM in this case; therefore, the researcher believes that the STEM should have more distinctions from social science and humanities respectively than the distinctions between social science and humanities. This categorization is also consistent with the division between liberal arts and science in Chinese senior high school education system.

STEM: “High-frequency STEM fields derived from educational organization definitions are mathematics, chemistry, computer science, biological sciences, physics, geometric analysis, and engineering disciplines related to computer science, electrical, chemical and mechanical engineering. These fields are more heavily focused on the mathematics and science fields” (Zhou, 2010, p. 52).

The American South consists of the eleven states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia, and Tennessee.

The Deep South consists of the six states of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina (Konkle-Parker, Erlen, & Dubbert,
In the present study, the researcher has chosen Mississippi as a representative state in the Deep South.

*Social support system* refers to what degree an individual’s basic social needs are met by interacting with other individuals. Affection, sympathy, acceptance, esteem from others, advice, and information (Kaplan, Cassel, & Gore, 1977).

**Justification**

Since 2001, students from Mainland China have comprised the largest group of international students in United States doctoral education (Zhou, 2014). In 2011, the 28% of international students who received a doctoral degree are from Mainland China, of which 92% graduated from STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields (Zhou, 2014). Moreover, compared with the experience of Chinese students who study in STEM fields those in social science and humanities fields are under-represented in previous studies in terms of their experience. Although business and management has been the most popular choice for Chinese internationals (Chao, 2016), previous literature did not meet the need to understand the cultural adaptation experience of Chinese internationals in these fields. Therefore, the researcher intends to study business and management as a subgroup of social science and humanities.

The majority of Chinese international students that were studied in previous studies were those majoring in STEM. Therefore, the researcher intended to hear more voices from Chinese students in SSAH majors who lived and studied in the American South. This study found different level of urgency upon common issues experienced by Chinese international students in American higher education.
CHAPTER II - REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Background

Because of the well-known quality of the U.S. higher education system, the United States has maintained its leading position in terms of attracting international students. In the United States, the subgroup of international students is an ever-growing population, with China being the largest single source of international students studying in the United States (Chao, 2016). At one time the Chinese government had been concerned that allowing Chinese students to study in western countries would change their attitude toward the nation’s official ideology. As a result Chinese students who had studied in western countries were not encouraged to return to China due to the fear of that their westernization would corrupt others in China (Zhao & Xie, 1992).

Despite the earlier concerns of being westernized, Chinese international students at American institutions was increasing continuously. From 2003 until 2014 Chinese internationals have accounted for about two thirds of the total increase in international student enrollments in the United States. Specifically, the total number Chinese students in the United States rose from 61,765 to 274,439 during the 2003/04 to 2013/2014 period, a 344% increase, whereas the total number international students during the same period rose only 54.8% (Report of Open Door, 2015). According to data from Report of Open Door (2015), Chinese students in 2014 made up a commanding 31% of all international students in the United States.

Compared with the attention given to Chinese students’ increasing interest of earning a degree abroad, less attention was given to the cultural and academic differences between China and the host countries where Chinese students studied. For example, Trice
(2004) and Wu (2014) found that international students regardless of country were often treated as a homogeneous group, which in fact was not always the case. As Ye & Edwards (2015) have stated, international students are not homogeneous, either culturally or academically. It is less common, for example, to find studies that focus on international students from the same home country (Ward, 2017). Because of the continuous increase of Chinese students entering U.S. higher education, and the tendency for researchers to homogenize international students into one group, regardless of their country of origin, looking more closely at the cultural adaptation experiences of Chinese international students is warranted.

**Reasons to study in American higher education institutions**

Researchers sought to identify factors that motivated Chinese international students to study in the United States. The “push and pull” mechanism was frequently used to examine the decision making among international students. Push factors are defined as unfavorable conditions including political instability, high unemployment rates, and low income in home countries, which forces people to leave their home countries for a better future. Pull factors refer to the favorable conditions of the host countries which attracts people from other countries, such as high occupational income, advanced facilities for research and development (Cheung & Xu, 2015), and more satisfying social and cultural life (Altbach, 1998).

Chao and Hegarty (2014), for example, detected eight “pull” factors that attract Chinese students to study abroad. Specifically they found that 1) gaining new perspectives on China; 2) attending a better school overseas; 3) less selective admissions; 4) the influence of friends studying abroad; 5) having more available academic programs
overseas; 6) political easiness in programs abroad; 7) better living conditions (housing, eating, and environment); and 8) a more robust educational system compared to the Chinese educational system were all “pull” factors. Additionally, researchers found several “push” factors. For example, China’s 1) test-oriented education system, 2) increasing financial costs to study at Chinese institutions, 3) rigorous competition for admission to Chinese higher education, and 4) parents’ wishes for their children to study abroad are factors that pushed Chinese students to seek education abroad (Chao & Hegarty, 2014). It is also noteworthy that many parents sent their children to study abroad not only for an “easier” and more advantageous opportunities but also for “the reason of their face,” which roughly translates into reasons of “dignity” or “prestige” (Chao & Hegarty, 2014).

Cultural adaptation

The adaptation process for international students is almost always more complicated and difficult when compared to that of students who study in their home country. The degree of difficulty and challenge faced by international students in the host country varies because of the cross-cultural differences in social interaction between the students’ native culture and the host country’s culture. Cross-cultural differences in social interactions can be defined as “the degree of cultural distance between international students’ countries of origin and the host country” (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 172). The further apart the cross-cultural differences, the more likely the chances that social interactions in the foreign country will be hindered. The greater the differences in values, attitudes, and communication styles, the greater the need for international students to learn social rules and social skills (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). Gareis (2012)
found that many students from East Asia who studied in the United States reported having no American friends at all compared with students from Anglophone countries and North/Central Europe. The latter group of international students reported having multiple close American friendships. Gareis (2012) asserts that the cultural distance is the reason. In East Asian countries, people place great value on spending time with friends. If they are unable to harmonize with their friends, distress is likely to result (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Trice, 2007).

In a study on Chinese overseas doctoral students’ adaptation to a different academic, social and cultural environment, Ye & Edwards (2015) have suggested that successful international students are likely to experience and proceed through five stages: self-reflexivity, creativity, ontological identity, autonomy, and authenticity (Ye & Edwards, 2015). Self-reflexivity enables the student to question their own perspectives and show empathy towards others’ ways of thinking. Creativity safeguards their self-identity, and cope with real or perceived language problems and real or perceived discrimination. Developing an ontological self builds an identity consistent with a sense of self and rejects the ascribed, essentialized social identity imposed by the host nation. Autonomy helps an international deal with language challenges and academic study. Authenticity means that one can be true to him/herself. Those who are at this final stage are able to demand equality in intercultural communications.

Other researchers have defined cultural adaptation differently as a three-stage process, namely, difference-detecting, self-doubting (in terms of keeping one’s own native identity or not), and self-orienting (in different directions) (Li, Wu, Li, & Zhuang, 2012).
Identity formation

In earlier studies of identity formation, it was believed that identity was largely assigned rather than selected or adopted. Identity formation did not become a central focus of social psychological theorizing and research until contemporary society (Howard, 2000). Today the concept of identity means how one, along with a change in surrounding social contexts—“changes in the groups and networks in which people and their identities are embedded and in the societal structures and practices in which those networks are themselves embedded” (Howard, 2000, p. 367). In the past few decades, the concept of identity has been discussed broadly within psychology, sociology and other disciplines.

Giddens’s theory of self-identity theory. Giddens (1991) sees identity as unfixed, fragmented, socially constructed, and reflexive. First, self-identity is not something that is given, but rather is “coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives” (Giddens, 1991, p. 5). Second, an individual creates and maintains his/her self-identity through continuous self-observation and self-introspection. Third, the moral principal of authenticity governed the reflexive project of the self in order to ensure that individuals are “true” to themselves (as cited in Ye & Edwards, 2015).

Social identity theory. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) stresses that individual behavior is a reflection of the larger societal units of all individuals within the same social group. It states that people think, feel, and behave like other members of the collective groups, institutions, and cultures. An individual’s identification with the collective units guide his or her internal structures and processes (Padilla & Perez, 2003). The theory includes three main points: “(a) people are motivated to maintain a positive
self-concept, (b) the self-concept derives largely from group identification, and (c) people establish positive social identities by favorably comparing their in-group against an out-group” (as cited in Padilla & Perez, 2003, p. 43).

Self-schemas and group schemas form the cognitive schemas of an individual. Self-schemas refer to organized knowledge about one’s self, which include our characteristics, preferences, goals, and behavior patterns. “Group schemas (analogous to stereotypes) include organized information about social positions and stratification statuses, such as gender, race, age, or class” (Howard, 2000, p. 368). Cognitive schemas, along with abstract and organized packages of information, are the cognitive version of identities. Social identity theory focuses on the extent to which one identifies oneself in terms of group memberships (as cited in Howard, p. 368-369). According to this theory, individuals’ identities are defined by themselves through two dimensions: social, defined by memberships in various social groups; and personal, the idiosyncratic attributes that distinguish one from the others (Howard, 2000).

Relationship between social identity and personal identity. Individuals with similar positions and common backgrounds share similar social identities. Social identity refers to the similarity pole. It is an individual’s own perception of him- or herself as similar to others of the same background, but is also his or her perceived difference to members of other groups or categories through connections with them (Deschamps & Devos, 1998). One’s social identity is mostly determined by the identification with one group over other groups by the individual. In other words, the stronger individuals identify themselves with one group, the more significant a differentiation they perceive themselves from other groups. Personal identity is similar with social identity in that the
feeling of personal identity can only be experienced with relation to others. In Deschamps and Devos’s (1998) words, “personal identity is what makes you similar to yourself and different from others” (p. 3).

The intergroup differentiation is influenced by three classes of variables in concrete social situations (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). First, individuals’ group membership must have been internalized as an aspect of their self-concept and they must identify themselves with the relevant in-group. In other words, it is insufficient that the others define them as a group. Second, the selection and evaluation of the relevant relational attributes can only be possible when the social situations allow for inter-group comparisons. “Not all between-group differences have evaluative significance” (as cited in Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 284). Third, not every cognitively available out-group are to be compared with in-groups. Instead, the out-group must be perceived as a relevant comparison group for the in-groups to compare themselves with. Besides the relevance of the out-group, its proximity and situational salience are also among the variables to determine out-group comparability. As the comparability increase, the pressure toward in-group distinctiveness should increase as well.

Both personal identity and social identity are not stable or durable. Goffman (1956) found that an individual can play different roles for different audiences. Gergen (1965, 1982) supported this theory with his idea of fluidity of the self, which refers to the duality between the individual and the collective, or difference and similarity. The combination of similarities and difference is problematic. Choosing to belong to one group or the other is not easy because it is hard to conceive how one can feel similar and different at the same time.
Operario and Fiske (1999) pointed out that international migration influenced many aspects of the self, which required serious redefinition and reconstruction of both personal and social identities. Some changes in one’s identity is related to the membership in the host culture, and other changes are reflections of attachment to values of their heritage culture. In the new social context, newcomers formed their perceptions about expectations that members of the dominant group have of them. These perceptions are likely to affect their redefining their own identity and whether and to what extent they choose to acculturate and become a member in the host culture.

The social identities that international students had from home country and the personal identities they developed in the host country affect their social cognitions which in turn influence their behavior, such as the clothes they wear, the foods they eat, the values to which they adhere, the people they would associate with and the strategies adopted for adaptation to the new culture (Operario & Fiske, 1999).

Chinese students’ adaptation strategies

Based on their various attitudes to cultural adaptation, Chinese students chose different coping strategies, such as assimilation, separation, marginalization, etc. (Gill, 2007; Hsieh, 2007; Tong, 2014). Gill (2007) identifies the three stages of Chinese students’ intercultural learning: intercultural adaptation; developing intercultural competence; and the reconstruction of self-identity. A few adaptation skills and strategies reported by the participants are having positive and open attitude towards new encounters and experience, intrinsic motivation for change and growth, willingness to engage in different cultural and academic practices and an ongoing practice of comparison and reflection. In Tong’s (2014) study, it was found that Chinese students wanted to integrate
rather than separate from the host culture. And they were confident to integrate and adapt to host culture while maintaining the critical elements of their original culture.

International students have coping strategies that are specifically regarding to new academic environment (Yue, 2010; Wu, 2015). It was found that due to the different academic setting and learning environment, Chinese students became disoriented at the beginning of exposure to the more independent western learning environment. Despite the fact that Chinese students faced many failures during their study at American universities or colleges, failure did not seem to deter them from making continued efforts (Hau & Ho, 2010). This may be related to their connections with Confucian culture that emphasized the result of effort more than the ability to achieve success and that diligence can make up for a lack of intelligence (Li, 2003). Therefore, Chinese students believed that academic success depended on their control through diligence (Zhou, 2014). In spite of the demotivating conditions they experienced in the United States, Chinese students were found to maintain a relatively strong persistence in study.

Yue (2010) also found that although Asian students attempted to adjust to the new academic environment, at the same time, they still maintained some coping strategies from Asian cultures, such as memorization, praise of effort and willpower. Chinese international students were found taking advantage of their Chinese culture, such as persistence and family’s face, to encourage themselves to adjust to the new environment (Zhou, 2014). Chinese students tended to use their previous knowledge and skills to overcome learning conflicts (Wu, 2015). They analyzed the issues in the new academic context and allowed adoptions of new practices to neutralize the contradictions between their learning goals and abilities and external demands on themselves.
Chinese students’ decision of studying/staying in the United States depends on their attitudes toward their home country and toward American society (Liu, 2013; Yuan, 2011). Cultural adaptation did not appear to be urgent for Chinese international students when their grades were not affected or when they stayed with their ethnic community (Yuan, 2011). Liu (2013) found that many Chinese students decided to find a job in the United States after graduating from American higher education because they are no longer used to the interpersonal relationships in Chinese society because of long period of staying abroad. Instead, they prefer the interpersonal relationships in the United States and the American working atmosphere. Some common factors that attracted Chinese students to stay after graduation from United States higher education are working environment, income, personal development, and interpersonal relationships in workplaces (Liu, 2013). This factors seem to be more attractive for students studying in the fields of physical science (STEM) and social science (Cheung & Li, 2015; Zhou, 2014).

Identity and language

Objects, behaviors, and people have symbolic meanings given by people, which are developed and transmitted through interaction, in which language plays a central role (Howard, 2000). Both children and adults acquire new concepts through social or interactional means. As Brown (2014) stated, people use language as the primary symbolic tool to construct our identity. Individuals construct their identity with the use of languages. Thus, their identity is impacted by their language proficiency as perceived by themselves as well as listeners. Linguistic variations between groups can surface. For example, having an accent may lead to exclusion/discrimination when listeners,
consciously or subconsciously, become uncomfortable with an accent. In doing so they may simultaneously reject a speaker’s identity. The listeners would associate the speaker’s accent with the speaker’s race, ethnic heritage, national origin, regional affiliation, or economic class (Lippi-Green, 1997). After interviewing American college students, Li Will (2016) found that Chinese international students’ English accent also stops American students from communicating with them. Similarly, Chakraborty (2017) found that listeners’ perceptions of the non-native speakers’ accent may result in discriminatory and inflammatory consequences. Even though accent-bias is widely acknowledged as a form of discrimination, research on preventing biases against people based on their accents are relatively less common to be found (as cited in Chakraborty, 2017).

Challenges of studying overseas for Chinese students

From the moment they enter the United States, Chinese students have to deal with the language barrier (Li, 2016; Roy, 2013). Chinese international students studied at American colleges and universities often reported experiences of culture shock or academic shock in the United States. Part of this shock was due to the fact that English and Chinese are from two completely different language systems. Researchers found that Chinese students had more difficulties with learning English than those who speak languages that are closer to English (Cheng & Erben, 2012; Li & Stodolska, 2006; Liu, 2016; Liu, D. F., 2016; Liu, J., 2016; Li Will, 2016; Roy, 2013; Su & Harrison, 2016; Trice, 2004; Tung, 2016; Wang, 2002 Yuan, 2011).

Recently, this language divide may have become even more acute. As stated by Tung (2016), the expansion of Chinese higher education forced Chinese students at home
to focus more on getting higher English scores in the college entrance exams rather than better developing their English language skills, cross-cultural communication, and living skills. However, going overseas for a higher education degree requires English proficiency that students who prepare for college entrance exams have less and less time to develop. As a result, “TOEFL/IETS-exam cram schools” became commonplace (Tung, 2016). However, most of these cram schools focused on teaching students to get high scores in the English language exams. These cram schools mostly fail to teach their students how to understand the content and learn English skills. This has resulted in many Chinese students who lack necessary English proficiency for studying abroad.

Along with the use of TOEFL/IETS-exam cram schools, Chinese participants who knew little about the application process in American colleges and universities often sought help from agents. Private study abroad agencies are very popular in China because most Chinese applicants have little knowledge about American higher education system and limited information about application process (Zhang, 2011). According to Zhang, such agencies provided all or some of the following services: 1. choosing destination countries, institutions, and programs of study; 2. preparing application materials; 3. contacting personnel at colleges of selection (e.g. admission office, department secretary, or program advisor); 4. translating documents; 5. helping preparing visa application materials and training applicants for visa interviews; 6. training for English tests and college entrance tests.

English writing is a common issue among Chinese international students studying in English speaking countries. According to Roy (2013), Chinese, Japanese, and Korean international students often did not have sufficient English proficiency partly due to the
fact that their native languages don’t translate directly into English. This often left them with limited morphological capabilities and clues to unpack the meaning of the language. For example, some may struggle to understand lectures, idioms, jokes, colloquialisms, and slang expressions that some American professors and students frequently use.

**English education at Chinese higher education institutions**

In addition to the linguistic reasons, it appears that Chinese international students learning English in China have not received comprehensive training for English skills. The section that follows explains some of the reasons why this has occurred.

**CET development process.** According to Wang (2011), language testing has witnessed four major periods of development, namely, Pre-scientific Testing Period (before 1950s), Psychometric-Structuralist Period (1950s-1970s), Psycholinguistic-Sociolinguistic Period (1970s-1980s) and Communicative Testing Period (1980s-). As discussed earlier, the CET-4 and CET-6 were initiated in 1980s, and were subject to the influence of the three periods since 1950s (psychometric-structuralist period, psycholinguistic-sociolinguistic period, and communicative testing period) (Ma, 2014). Later, because of the influence of psycholinguistic-sociolinguistic trend in language testing, CET included some new items: cloze, compound dictation, and error correction. Recently, CET-Spoken English Test (CET-SET) and internet-based CET (IB-CET) were implemented due to the influence of communicative testing approach.

Although CET seemed to keep pace with the language testing trend, there were still some questionable components in the recent college English test system. On the one hand, as highlighted by Ma (2014), since CET was initiated, the percentage of writing on the test remained at 15% until 2013. Li (2009) noted that CET writing was only a short
argumentative passage based on given prompts on general topics. Because of the lower weight placed on of writing skills by the Ministry of Education of China, instructors and students in Chinese institutions did not report placing much effort or time on preparing for the writing test. In fact, in Li’s (2009) study, only 3.3% of freshmen and 1.6% of sophomore reported spending much time learning English writing. Chinese students in Li’s study believed it would be more worthwhile to memorize vocabulary rather than use their time on practicing writing. In a longitudinal study, Yang, Gu, and Liu (2013) found that in both 2003 and 2009, English instructors emphasized more on vocabulary than other English knowledge such as pronunciation, grammar and background knowledge. The emphasis on vocabulary grew by 10.4% from 2003 to 2009. Even though some Chinese students spent much time on learning English writing in college, the CET writing is so restrictive that it cannot be applied situations for authentic writing. A typical writing format for CET writing test, according to Li, is to follow a pre-written outline. This format, Li argues, restricts test-takers’ freedom of delivering their own ideas.

On the other hand, the CET-SET was carried out in 1999 only as a supplementary spoken English test, which was optional but not required (Ren, 2011). Only a limited number of students chose to take the CET-SET due to the low motivation to spend effort on improving spoken English by both students (Ma, 2014). Yang, Gu, and Liu (2013) reported that speaking skill became less emphasized by teachers in big English classes. Ma also pointed out that that the absence of environments in China for using English (in classes and on campus) created a low demand for improving spoken English. Ma (2014) noted that only 146 institutions carried out IB-CET since 2008, which is a relatively small number (7%) compared with the total number of 2,138 institutions. In the recently
revised IB-CET, English speaking was included which accounted for 15% of the total points. However, the required speaking skills were limited to repeating sentences, orally stating and answering brief questions.

*Impact of CET.* CET is more than an English test in Chinese institutions. Previous studies (Li, 2009; Ma, 2014; Ren, 2011; Yang, Gu, & Liu, 2013) have found that the CET influences not only the students but also the English instructors in Chinese colleges. In these studies, students’ scores in the CET were commonly used as a factor by department administrators to evaluate English instructors teaching performance. At the same time, teachers’ academic backgrounds determined their way of understanding the CET and their emphasis what is taught in college English classes. Teachers’ individual factors played a role in the quality of English education (Li, 2009). It is hard to control how instructors’ various academic backgrounds and experiences will influence their English teaching philosophy. Because college English instructors in China have diverse backgrounds, their competence of teaching college English courses is varied. Their teaching experiences along with professional training also affect their teaching outcome. For instance, only a few teachers in Li’s study felt confident to teach English writing (Li, 2009). This finding is consistent with Ren’s (2011) finding that English instructors who had less experience teaching to CET-4 rely heavily on textbooks. Thus, the teaching outcome might have varied due to each teacher’s understanding of the textbooks and their ability to teach. In fact, more English instructors used the textbooks in 2009 after the 2005 CET innovation (Yang, Gu, Liu, 2013). Yang and his colleagues also argued that teachers’ use of English, which is important for instruction, also varied based on the instructors’ previous fields of study.
In previous studies (Li, 2009; Ma, 2014; Ren, 2011; Yang, Gu, & Liu, 2013) the College English Test was found to have a strong “washback” effect on college English teaching. According to Hughes (2003), a test can create either positive or negative effects on teaching and learning. Specifically, “washback” effects can include influences on the method and content of teaching, the rate, sequence, and depth of teaching, and teachers’ and students’ attitudes to the teaching content and method (Alderson and Wall, 1993). Ren (2011) discovered in his study that CET was the strongest motive for learning English for Chinese college students. As a result, CET had a “washback” effect on English teaching and learning. CET coaching materials were integrated into college English textbooks (Li, 2009). This conclusion is also supported by Ren’s (2011) finding that about half of the teachers in his study considered the college English textbooks influenced by the rationales of CET-4. In addition, the classroom assessment for college English classes also was found to highly resemble CET-4. CET innovation also caused differences in skills emphasized and how classroom activities were organized (Yang, Gu, & Liu, 2013). Specifically, Yang and his colleagues found that speaking, reading, and writing declined sharply since the 2005 CET innovation. In terms of classroom activities, the proportions of individual activities, group discussion, and reading aloud all declined.

The goal of college English education is to enable Chinese college students to communicate effectively in English (Ma, 2014); however, most colleges in China failed to achieve this goal. Rather than facilitating college English education to achieve this goal, Ma stated that CET was an obstacle for college English reform. On the one hand, the CET passing rate will be affected, given the reform was conducted. Meanwhile, the outcome of communicative language teaching is complicated to evaluate compared to
using CET for the current teaching approach. On the other hand, students were reluctant to improve their communicative competence because of utilitarianism. In Ma’s study, students demanded that their English instructors teach to the test (CET). If instructors did not want to recalibrate their teaching plan to cater the CET, the students would not involve themselves in the class activities. Instead, these students were often found memorizing CET vocabularies and doing model tests in class. In addition, instructors also had the pressure of receiving low evaluation scores if they refused to follow students’ demand. Such dilemmas hindered English education reform at the college level (Ma, 2014).

The high-stake status of CET was also a result of employers’ attitude toward it. One’s CET score was often a factor to be considered for employment. However, there was a mismatch between employers’ expectation and the real intention of CET (Ma, 2014). CET is an achievement test, which intends to evaluate how well students have mastered the learning content in the textbooks. However, employers often regarded CET as a proficiency test. Both employers and students themselves consider CET certificates of qualification for better careers. Employers hold unrealistic expectations and make inaccurate assumptions about employees’ English proficiency. In fact, the CET has little to do with a student’s English proficiency. Even though students pass the test, their English use is still limited. Eighty-eight percent of the students in Ren’s (2011) study admitted that their English communication skills were not measured by CET nor was their sociolinguistic knowledge. Additionally, CET weighting linguistic forms failed to measure Chinese college students’ real-life language skills.

Another reason for unpreparedness due to lack of English proficiency among
Chinese students is the approach that host institutions use to address international students’ English proficiency. Wang, Li, Qu, O’Kane, Mao et al. (2015) suggested that professors in these host institutions provide international students with extra time or adjust their focus on assignments that stress learning rather than grammar or vocabulary. In the meantime, it was also recommended that American professors should take these factors into consideration when making adjustments to engage international students in class.

The language barrier not only hindered Chinese international students’ performances in academic programs, it also prevented them from interacting with their peers and professors. Outside class, many Chinese students’ social opportunities were also limited due to their low English proficiency. For instance, Wang, Martin, and Martin (2002) found that English affected Chinese international students’ communication and interaction with native speakers of English such as American classmates and professors.

*Cultural differences in teaching and learning*

Another challenge reported by most Chinese international students were the differences in education systems between the United States and China, such as teaching style (Rawlings & Sue, 2013). Although most Chinese students spoke highly of American higher educational system, some of them were still not used to it. For example, a female student felt that she learned nothing but English in her university, because she felt that her professors had no experience in the real world and the theoretical knowledge is useless for her. Rawlings and Sue (2013) analyzed how well the American teaching model in China prepared Chinese students for English communication in the United States. They recommended educators in China design or import authentic American
curriculum, because the students in their study reported being unprepared for American culture and the American classroom even though they were able to find some similarities between what they learned in China and what they experienced in the United States. Chinese international students’ poor English performance was partly due to English preparatory programs offered by Chinese international high schools. Liu (2016) found that the principals at some international high schools acknowledged that their students were not well prepared by their program. The principals admitted that more work needs to be done to prepare their students to better understand and speak English, as well as understanding American culture, even though eighty percent of the principals indicated their school utilized American curriculum.

Chinese international students were also found not used to some American professors’ informal teaching styles, such as not writing key concepts on the blackboard. Chinese international students also often became confused when the teaching was not connected to the textbook closely. They were also unfamiliar with the body language of some American professors. Finally, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean students also prefer to stay silent in class rather than having group discussions in class (Roy, 2013).

Meng and Onwuegbuzie (2015) discovered the different expectations on American professors by Chinese international students and American students, in terms of effective teaching. It was found that student-centered instruction received the highest endorsement from American students but a modest endorsement from the Chinese participants. Ethical treatment (the manner in which professors treat all students equally within and outside of class) received the highest endorsement from the Chinese participants but only a modest endorsement from American students. Open-mindness was
not appreciated by Chinese international students but was by American students (Meng & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). This probably is because the exam-driven educational system in China shaped college students’ beliefs about effective teaching. Being open-minded was not necessarily effective to prepare students for their examinations. However, in the teaching practice of American professors, open-mindedness is highly appreciated. Due to this different view, Chinese students might have drawn the conclusion that American professors’ teaching were less effective.

American social norms (rules of discourse and social engagement) were another barrier besides language for Chinese international students’ adaptation to American society (Yan & Berliner, 2013). Chinese international students had interaction problems with people from other countries (Tong, 2014). This challenge is prevalent during Chinese international students’ interaction with American students and professors because of their limited knowledge of social rules and social skills in American society. Meanwhile, due to Chinese international students’ limited morphological capability, they cannot understand lectures when colloquial expressions are used (Roy, 2013). Chinese international students’ communication strategies were also influenced by the easy access to preexisting social networks. In highly collectivistic cultures such as Chinese culture, people do not have to make special friendships, because one’s friends are predetermined by the social relationships into which one is born (Hofstede, 2001). Communication strategies such as implicit communication in China was found unhelpful for friendship initiation in the United States (Chen, 2006). The set of social skills, small talk as an example, which are necessary for establishing friendships in the United States, may not be part of international students’ repertoire and would not be internalized without regular
exposure (Trice, 2007).

Besides interaction challenges, Chinese international students often felt that American students and professors held negative impressions about them in the classroom (Li Will, 2016; Li & Stodolska, 2006). Wu (2015) found that lacking in necessary English skills was often the cause of silence in class. Also, in the Chinese cultural context, the importance of class interactivity was often downplayed. Giardelli and Patel (2016) found that Chinese students’ attitudes, norms, and perceived behavioral control/self-efficacy influenced Chinese students’ intentions to participate in class. Girardelli and Patel (2016) stated that to help Chinese students get used to the “conversational style lectures” in the American education context, instructors should reinforce Chinese students’ perceived competence to participate in class. Because of their infrequent interaction with their American peers and professors, the negative impressions on Chinese internationals remained unchanged. Chinese international students are more likely to have additional pressure from the possible negative beliefs against them when they study in the United States. Due to interaction issues, Chinese students tended to congregate with other Chinese peers, which further isolated them from the host country’s mainstream culture. For instance, Tung (2016) found conflicts in worldviews between Chinese culture and American culture (Tung, 2016).

One thing that is worth mentioning about Chinese international students’ adaptation process (especially identity development) is the learning environment to which they were exposed. The learning environment can have different effects on students’ identity changes (Du, 2015). In Du and Wei’s study (2015), American students who went to a Chinese study abroad program were enrolled in a Chinese program that was
specifically designed for them, which was less challenging to their identity development. On the other hand, Du (2015) found from previous studies that a home stay situation involved more frequent and deeper exchanges about complex topics and fundamental beliefs that may pose potential challenges to students’ identity and self-presentation (as cited in Du & Wei, 2015). Chinese international students in most American institutions were not always in a special program designed for all international students. Instead, most Chinese students were exposed to authentic American higher education classrooms, which was closer to the “homestay” situation mentioned above. Therefore, Chinese higher education students are likely to experience more challenges to their identity development in the United States.

Theoretical framework

Due to the aforementioned challenges faced by Chinese students, Chinese students have to learn to adapt to the new social environments where they find themselves. Those who are able to adapt to the new environment hold positive and open attitudes toward encounters and experiences in the United States. They rely on intrinsic motivation for change and personal growth, and actively participate in different cultural and academic practices and constantly reflect on and compare their native culture and the new culture. While some Chinese students are positive about adaptation to a foreign culture, some choose to stay with their own culture and protect their own identity. Because of the unsmooth transition and adaptation to the new social and academic environment, Chinese students are often found spending time within the Chinese community (Yuan, 2011). In order to better understand such reactions by these Chinese students, Berry’s (1997) acculturation framework is introduced.
**Berry’s (1997) acculturation framework**

In this framework, Berry highlighted the mediation effects of various factors in the acculturation process. The model (acculturation experiences $\rightarrow$ appraisal of experiences $\rightarrow$ coping strategies/resources $\rightarrow$ immediate effects or outcomes $\rightarrow$ long-term outcomes) shows that coping strategies and coping resources have mediation effects in the acculturation process. Individuals can have various immediate and long-term outcomes (Berry, 1997) depending on the coping strategies and resources that they adopted in the process. In addition, this model suggests that the length of time in the United States may also affect acculturation and outcomes (as cited in Du & Wei, 2015). Berry also created a four-fold paradigm for his acculturation model. This model is now the most prevalent one and has been used in many studies.

In 2002, Berry identified two main views underlying the concept of acculturation. Namely, whether acculturation is a mutual process that affects all groups involved and whether acculturation is one-dimensional or multidimensional (as cited in Hamid, 2007). One-dimensional acculturation is characterized by individuals or groups as a result of their exposure to another culture, moving from original ways of living to adopting the ways of the host culture. If one thinks acculturation as the psychological process and the consequences of one’s decision to acculturate or not, then acculturation must be viewed as a multidimensional construct. A multidimensional understanding of the process includes two main aspects: orientations towards one’s own culture and towards other groups (as cited in Hamid, 2007). Specifically, it means the desire to maintain one’s own heritage culture and identity, and preference to contact with and participate in the larger society. If an individual from a non-dominant group wants to interact with other cultures
and wishes to maintain their culture identity, they are choosing the assimilation strategy. If an individual, conversely, wants to hold onto their home culture and do not wish to interact with others, they are using the separation strategy. If a person is not interested in maintaining either of their heritage culture or the values of the host culture, there are using the marginalization strategy. Finally, if a person is interested in maintaining their original culture and also wants to interact and adapt to the new culture, the integration strategy is employed (as cited in Hamid, 2007).

Some Chinese international students disconnected themselves with other student communities to protect themselves from being “harmed,” which at the same time disconnected them with many opportunities on campus (Bertram, Poulakis, Elasser, & Kumar, 2014). For instance, Shertzer and Schuh (2004) found that international students did not commonly participate in student organizations at their institutions (Shertzer & Schuh, 2004). Without involvement in student organizations, international students lost opportunities to further develop their leadership, social, and language skills. Meanwhile, due to their silence on campus, their issues were often overlooked, and their needs were not represented by anyone.

Variables

*Fields of study*

*Business and management students.* Business and management is a popular option for Chinese students studying overseas. Based on Chao’s (2016) study, by the 2013/14 academic year, business/management (28%) became the top fields of study of Chinese students in American higher education due to the potential employment opportunities after graduation. Business and management programs are also the most popular selected
programs by Chinese international students who study in UK (China Education Online, 2014). Although this trend of Chinese internationals’ fields of study has been recognized in many non-peer-reviewed sources, only a limited number of scholarly studies were found focusing on Chinese business and management students’ learning and cultural adaptation experience in the United States.

Wang and his colleagues compared Chinese business and management major students in a private Chinese institute and a public Chinese institute from the perspectives of 1) willingness to go abroad; 2) the sources of finances; 3) the skills or competence for fulfilling the study tasks. Regardless of institution type, most Chinese students in this study have issues with their language competence, cultural difference, English communication skills, subject knowledge, and ability to adjust to the new learning and teaching environment (Wang et al, 2015).

Yang (2012) conducted a study regarding Chinese business and management major students’ intention to cheat in higher education. Yang analyzed how working experience led to Chinese business major students’ propensity to cheat. The researcher also pointed out that the intention to cheat cannot be used as a proxy, which was often found in former studies, for cheating behavior among Chinese students. Nevertheless, cultural adaptation experiences were not studied in Yang’s study as this study was conducted in China. Moore (1998) studied the differences rooted in Chinese business major students and American business major students, however, Chinese students’ learning and adaptation experience was not the focus of Moore’s study.

Only two sources about Chinese students studying in American business and management programs were found. Korn (2013) noted that business master’s programs
such as accounting and finance in University of California, Davis (UC-D), have gained the largest popularity in China with Chinese applicants representing 85% of the total applicant population. Eighty percent of the 58-student class at UC-D in 2013 was Chinese. This pattern of Chinese students flooding into American business master’s programs was also found at Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Sloan School of Management, Loyola University of Chicago’s Quinlan School and Pepperdine University. However, due to the large population from a single country, the student demographics within these programs became a concern. Although institutions have benefited from a more diverse student body, the flooding of Chinese international students may have irked local and other foreign students (Korn, 2013). To improve the situation, Loyola’s Quinlan School decided to ask international students to take courses on business communication in American classroom customs. In order to avoid similar issue happened on Harvard campus, Harvard worked on expanding their education overseas by opening programs in China, India, and Europe (Light, 2010). Harvard Business School formally opened a new center in Shanghai to mimic Harvard’s Boston campus.

**STEM students.** STEM are the second most popular fields for Chinese students, whereas Chinese students in social science only took up 8%. Previous studies have supported the researcher’s assumption that adaptation differences exist among international students from different fields of study. Specifically, it was found that professors in different programs and fields of study hold various perception on students’ English performance. The Chinese students’ English learning was therefore affected by their professors’ expectations (Cheng & Erben, 2012; Wang, 2002). Wang (2002) found
that professors in different programs had different expectations on Chinese students’ English performance. Wang discovered that humanities professors focused more on Chinese students’ English writing and syntax than science and technology professors. Wang concluded that it was due to the fact that language, and its usage, was their main academic focus. Wang also found that science professors focused more on students’ pronunciation.

Cheng and Erben (2012) focused on factors that created language anxiety among Chinese students, and found that length of residence in a foreign country, fields of study, and gender played roles in creating the language anxiety. Specifically, students with art-related majors (liberal arts and fine arts) in general experienced lower anxiety level than those in science-related majors. One explanation is that art-related majors may be more open for discussion, more tolerant to ambiguity, and more eager to share their ideas with others. Art-related major students’ anxiety level continued to drop and reached the lowest level at the end of their program. Whereas for science-related majors, their anxiety level remained stable after reaching certain point during the middle of their program. Relatively speaking, students majoring in science and technology felt more satisfied than those from the social science disciplines. The social science group tends to report more pressure and frustrations about class discussion (Yuan, 2011).

From the above evidence it is easy to understand how the same issue, language barrier, could have caused various levels of difficulties for students in different fields of study. For instance, although English is a common problem for the majority of Chinese international students, students in STEM may not experience the same level of urgency of improving English as those in social science and humanities (SSAH) programs. Due to
the concern about disciplinary differences, Chueng and Xu (2015) take the fields of study into consideration when selecting participants for interviews.

**Regional factors in the south on higher education**

Laura Ours (2014), a professor of communications and marketing, looked at the priorities and values of culture in various regions in the United States besides political lines. Ours categorized all states in the United States into two groups—tight states and loose states. In general, she found that tight states have strong norms and little tolerance for deviance, whereas the loose states have weak norms and high tolerance for deviance. According to her study, loose states are primarily located in the North East, the West Coast and some Mountain areas. Tight states are found in the American South and parts of the Midwest. Ours made the connection that state tightness-looseness is highly related with the degree of ecological and historical threats a state has faced. Compared to the “openness” of people from loose states, individuals from tight states, including states in the South, are less tolerant and curious about non-traditional values and beliefs, and do not prioritize originality. For example, Delta Chinese were categorized as a distinctive cultural group by White community due to their grocery store business (Loewen, 1983). As Kao (2012) described, Mississippi Chinese were perceived as neither Black nor White. In history, Mississippi Chinese were also found not being completely included on the campus of The University of Mississippi (Kao, 2012). Tight states, compared to loose states, are likely to be more socially stable, orderly, and are likely to be places where individuals exhibit more personal self-control. Also, tight states were found to have higher incarceration rates, greater discrimination, lower rates of creativity, and lower rates happiness (Ours, 2014). It follows, hypothetically, that international students in the
South, may experience life and academic study differently than their counterparts in loose states.

However, a study by Gareis (2012) found that international students in the South seem to have more success in making friends with Americans than their counterparts from the Northeast. In Gareis’s study, both home region and host region had significant influences on international students’ interaction with Americans. Gareis found that the host region is greatly associated with friendship numbers and satisfaction levels of international students. Specifically, within the Northeast, students in metropolitan areas were most likely to have no friends but those in non-metropolitan areas were least likely to have no friends. Students in the South have more friends than those in the Northeast. Satisfaction with their friendships was high in the South but low in the Northeast.

Sectionalism in American history. Reed (1986) stated that the South’s culture consists of a strong sense of group membership. He also stated that the regional differences from the mainstream American culture is similar to those of the immigrant ethnic groups. He concluded that Southerners are more likely than non-Southerners to be conventionally religious. Reed also pointed out that the role of the church is more important in the Southern states than in other regions. There is additional evidence that supports the notion that Southerners are qualitatively different, as a group, when compared to other Americans. For example, in contrast to other parts of the country, Grantham (1994) notes that the South has long been overwhelmingly Protestant. Southerners are also more likely than other Americans to identify closely with their own communities—“to think of themselves as ‘distinct from and preferable to other regions, states, and localities’” (Grantham, 1994, p. 333). Polls indicate that Southerners pay
greater attention to their state’s policies than to national and international affairs. Also, since the end of the Second World War, the South has attracted less foreign immigrants than other areas of the country (Grantham, 1994).

Grantham called the relationship between regional culture and local institutions a “symbiotic relation,” in which southerners choose their neighbors and family members as their “normative reference individuals” who usually have a high opinion of their home states and colleges. He also found that southerners who left the region often express regret over having left. The localistic tendency is what may distinguish southerners from the people in the rest of the nation (Grantham, 1994). According to Grantham, the most distinctive characteristic of modern southern culture was the church and the “old-time religion.” Religion has been almost as solid as its politics in Southern history. Fichter and Maddox (1965) called southern religion a belief system with “high visibility, conservatism, and emotionalism” (p. 359). Evangelical Protestantism distinguished north from south in the first half of nineteenth century. However, the gap became larger as the North changed radically in the second half of the century due to the influence of immigration and secularization. The North moved to a more pluralistic culture whereas the South remained revivalist and religiously fundamental. Even though religion is a part of American culture in the North and South, the pervasiveness and intensity of religion set the South apart. Church membership is a major element of personal identity among Southerners, they are more likely than people from other regions to attend church and to tune into worship services on radio and television (Grantham, 1994, p. 315). This region’s population is much more homogeneous in its Protestantism than that of the rest of nation.
The importance of religion in the South is also reflected by the history of higher education. Sansing’s (1990) historical study of higher education in Mississippi, for example, found that four of five faculty members in the Sharon College, founded in 1873, were ministers of the Old School Presbyterian, Cumberland Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist denominations. When the trend of secularization came to Mississippi, the state’s new Christian colleges reacted against the trend. The first president of Centenary College, Thomas C. Thornton, called for Protestant unity in higher education. “The student pool was very small in Mississippi, and competition for students so keen, that no college could afford to be sectarian and thus exclude students from other denominations” (Sansing, 1990, p. 20).

In the past, most of Mississippi’s colleges valued moral character over academic excellence due to their Christian underpinnings. This was often the case in the north as well. For example, president of Amherst College (Massachusetts) believed that the character was more consequential than intellect. The president of Denison College (Ohio) agreed and added that “at college we tend to exaggerate the importance of the intellectual” (Sansing, 1990, p. 21). Likewise in the south the president of Jefferson College (which is now referred as Historic Jefferson College in Mississippi) warned other school officials to protect their students against the “the evils of unsanctified ambition” (p. 21). The president of Jefferson College in his 1835 inaugural address declared that high literary attainments would only increase the power of doing evil if there is no moral excellence. Historic colleges tried to curtail the evils of unsanctified ambition, and to prevent young men of talent from becoming what President Charles Dubuisson of Jefferson College called, “fallen angels” (Sansing, p. 21). In historic colleges, seniors
were required to take a course on moral-philosophy taught by the presidents. Religion was important for mind-control within historic colleges (Sansing, 1990).

*Church attendance and Chinese internationals.* In a study by Yang (1998), it was found that many Chinese immigrants and internationals join a church to receive a variety of benefits, which include those that are material, spiritual, and social. Interestingly, Yang also found that many of these internationals, who attend church in the United States, indicated little interest in attending church when they were in China. The instrumental aspect of engaging in an organized religious experience is not uncommon for Chinese international students. For example, Chinese, ethnic-oriented evangelical churches make their church atmosphere as friendly and welcoming as possible to Chinese immigrants, students, and scholars. Providing dinner, transportation, and Bible study (from which Chinese immigrants might improve their English) are just a few examples of these churches’ efforts (Sun & Rhoads, 2018). Because material support has become a key facet to the conversion of immigrants, religious organizations have emerged as key sites where internationals can adapt to the customs of the host country (Cadge & Ecklund, 2007). Chinese immigrants and students chose to participate in religious activities in the United States also because of their desire to assimilate to the dominant culture of the American society. Christianity is seen as a vehicle for that. The last explanation for religious participation is that churches helped internationals meet their social needs for ethnic fellowship and ethnic belonging. In some cases, the desire ethnic fellowship have been found to outweigh affiliation for a religious purpose. A study done by Cao (2005), for example, found that some working class Chinese youth in New York’s Chinatown attended a Cantonese Christian church because the Church “plays a Chinese
family role and helps people overcome difficulties by rebuilding interpersonal relationships” (Cao, 2005, p. 190).

It is not uncommon for Chinese students to attend church and get involved in religious activities in the United States. Sun and Rhoads (2018) studied the experiences of Chinese international students’ participation in a Chinese, ethnic-based Christian Church (CCC) in the Northeast. Besides material benefits such as food, Chinese students attending CCC also gained friendship as well as fun and recreation. Some Chinese students gained personal spiritual development in CCC. Sun and Rhoads also found that many Chinese students at this school turned to CCC for help with making cultural adjustments in American colleges. Meanwhile, CCC offers activities and events that reflect American holidays and customs. This gives Chinese students an opportunity to experience American culture. Many Chinese participants see attending institution like the CCC as a way to gain additional exposure to American culture. For these internationals, their association of Christianity is understood as an association with “Americaness” (Sun & Rhoads, 2018, p. 145).

U.S. colleges’ and universities’ shortcomings to fully support Chinese international students have also pushed Chinese students to seek support from churches. For many Chinese, religious participation makes up a big portion of their lived experience in the United States. Sun and Rhoads (2018) found there was no abundant social network and institutional programs designed to address the social and living needs of the Chinese international students. Instead, local churches were the organizations that directly addressed internationals’ social and living needs.
Studies on institutional solutions

In the previous studies, some researchers also recommended solutions by host institutions to assist Chinese international students to adjust to the new environment. For example, school administrators in China should provide Chinese students with more authentic American curriculum prior their departure for the United States. Liu and Vogel (2016) also mentioned that many Chinese high school students frequently requested English and culture training. At the same time, educators in the United States were advised to be aware of international students’ special needs and challenges due to cultural differences (Hsieh, 2007; Roy, 2013; Su & Harrison, 2016; Zhao, 2013). Efforts also need to be made to facilitate international students’ adjustment to the new cultural and academic environment in the American higher education. Girardelli and Patel (2016) suggested American teachers use teaching strategies that can help build self-efficacy and improve attitudes and perspective of norms to improve Chinese students’ intention to participate. Tung (2016) suggested student service professionals think beyond the typical linguistic difficulties and cultural adjustments challenges. It is necessary for these professionals to be involved in understanding the needs of major international student groups (such as Chinese international students) and developing realistic programs and information sessions to assist international students move forward rather than treating all international students as a homogeneous group regardless of their countries of origin. They should apply their awareness of diversity into curriculum design and pedagogy (Wu, 2015). For instance, English is less of a problem for European international students, as compared to students from Asia.
Existing studies on Chinese international students and location in United States.

Among all empirical studies that the researcher identified, there are a limited number of studies that were conducted in the South (See Figure 1 and 2 below) (Cheng & Erben, 2012; Sharif & Osterling, 2011; Wang, 2002; Zhao, 2013; Zhao & Xie, 1992). The majority of the studies were found at the Northeast and West Coast of the United States (Cao, 2005; Chao, 2017; Chen, 2006; Cheung & Xu, 2015; Girardelli & Patel, 2016, etc.).

Table 1 Locations of Previous Empirical Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington D.C.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
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<td>Southwest</td>
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<td>Southeast</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>East Coast</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cincinnati</td>
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<td>Not Specified</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
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<td></td>
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</table>

Table 2 Locations by Regions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
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<tr>
<td>Outside of American South</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>American South</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep South</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER III- METHODOLOGY

Study design

Since the researcher intended to discover culture-related issues that were reported by Chinese international students studying in the American South, a qualitative research approach is the most appropriate for the current study. The qualitative approach allows the researcher to focus on the dimensions of their experiences. The interpretive nature of qualitative research allows for the analysis and description of participants’ experiences in thoughtful and comprehensive ways and illuminates the interplay of self and environment (Yao, 2014) and their effects on the cultural adaptation experiences.

Phenomenology is the specific genre of research methodology used for this study. Phenomenology is defined as a study of lived experiences which allows the researcher to explore and interpret the deep meaning of participants’ experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The focus is on describing the “essence” of a phenomenon from the perspectives of individuals who have experienced it is the defining characteristics of phenomenological research (Merriam, 2002). Interviews are the primary method for collecting data as they uncover the essence and the invariant structure of what the experience means (Merriam, 2002). In this study, the researcher studied the cultural adaptation process of Chinese international students who were studying or studied in American higher education institutions in Mississippi from their own perspectives. Therefore, the phenomenological approach fits the research purpose well.

With the phenomenological approach, the researcher was able to examine the lived experiences of Chinese international students enrolled in higher education institutions in the Deep South as a way to better understand the essence of their shared
experiences within the distinctive environment.

Research questions

The researcher designed four research questions to guide the current study.

1. What cultural adaptation issues do Chinese international students majoring in SSAH in the Deep South report during their time of study in American colleges and universities?

2. What cultural adaptation issues do Chinese international students majoring in STEM in the Deep South report during their study in American colleges and universities?

3. Are the reported experiences about cultural adaptation of Chinese international students majoring in STEM in the Deep South qualitatively different than reported experiences about cultural adaptation of Chinese international students majoring in SSAH in the Deep South?

4. Are the reported experiences about cultural adaptation of Chinese international students studying in the Deep South qualitatively different than what the literature says about types of experiences, challenges, and adaptations that Chinese international students who undertake advanced study in other regions of the United States? Are any of these issues related to the distinctiveness from the American South?

Participants and settings

To ensure some variation in their educational experience, the participants were solicited and selected from three publicly funded higher education institutions in Mississippi, namely, The University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and The University of Southern Mississippi. Fourteen participants were recruited for this study. On average, five participants were recruited from each university. From the previously
mentioned distribution of Chinese students in all fields of study, students from SSAH programs were underrepresented. Therefore, during the recruitment process the researcher spent extra efforts to seek students from SSAH programs. In this study, the researcher expected to hear different opinions about adaptation experience in Mississippi from students enrolled in SSAH programs. At the end of recruitment, the researcher managed to recruit seven participants from SSAH programs and seven from STEM programs.

Mississippi is a good representative of sectionalism in the American Deep South. The researcher is currently studying at one of the institutions listed above, and believes his own experience helps with understanding and interpreting the data collected from his peers enrolled at the selected universities. The three institutions are all predominantly White institutions. However, they have different historical and cultural backgrounds. The University of Mississippi is a flagship institution in the state. Mississippi State University is one of the land grant institutions of Mississippi. The University of Southern Mississippi was formerly a teacher’s college.

During the time of data collection, The University of Southern Mississippi enrolled about 11,842 full-time students and 2,636 part-time students (USM Office of Institutional Research, 2018). About 511 were international, 244 of whom are undergraduates, with Chinese students representing the third largest group of the international student body (College Factual, 2017). Likewise, The University of Mississippi enrolled 23,610 students, of which 810 were international, with Chinese students representing the second largest group (College Factual, 2017) Mississippi State University enrolled 18,406 full time students and 2,947 part-time students of which 801 were
international (MSU Office of Institutional Research, 2017), with Chinese students representing the second largest group (College Factual, 2017).

Purposeful sampling was used for selection of participants. Purposeful sampling is often used when a researcher wants to explore and gain insight of a specific sample and must purposefully select the sample from which he or she can learn the most (Merriam, 2009). The use of purposeful sampling enables researchers to get information-rich interviews from participants (Yao, 2014). This researcher intentionally solicited Chinese international students at all levels from the three universities in Mississippi, and their fields of study were considered when selecting the participants. For instance, students from both STEM and SSAH fields were equally important to this study, so the researcher tried to maintain the balance of sampling from both groups.

In October, 2018, the researcher sent the application for approval for conducting this study to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The University of Southern Mississippi. After the IRB approved this study, with the help of international offices at the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and The University of Southern Mississippi, the participant solicitation letter was forwarded to all students who met the researcher’s required demographics for this study: Chinese international students who were born and had at least ten years of education experiences in Mainland China (See Appendix B). These participants also had to be native speakers of Mandarin Chinese. The email included information about the current study and the requirements for participants. The email also included information about the incentive for each participant, a $15 gift card to Walmart for participating in the interview. The email also included a link to an online survey through Qualtrics Survey Software. All interested students
submitted their information through the online survey. In November, 2018, the following information about each interested student was collected: full name, cell phone number, WeChat user name, email address, gender, age, field(s) of study, and length of stay in the United States, semesters enrolled at their institutions, and preferred method of contact (e.g. text message, phone call, email, or social media).

After receiving information from interested students, the researcher reached out to each student who was interested in participating in this study through their preferred method of contact. The researcher selected four participants from The University of Mississippi, five participants from The University of Southern Mississippi, and five participants from Mississippi State University. Among the recruited fourteen participants, seven participants were from SSAH fields and seven participants were from STEM fields. Fourteen participants in this current study fit within the recommendation of five to 25 individuals for phenomenological study (Creswell, 2007). It should be noted that one participant in this study did not fully meet the demographic criteria outlined above of this study. However, the researcher included her in the final sample because of her relatively long period of study and distinctive experiences in Mississippi from a young age. The researcher decided to include her to allow for more comparisons and contrasts across the sample.

All participants were interviewed between November 2018 and January 2019 based on the interview protocol (See Appendix C). After transcribing the fourteen interviews, the researcher contacted three participants individually for additional information when there was a need for clarification of meaning.

Research instrument
The primary instrument for data collection was an interview protocol designed by the researcher based on previous studies (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser, & Kumar, 2014). The GPI is based on holistic human development, which includes two theoretical perspectives: cultural development and intercultural communication. The GPI is designed for any population regardless of age, race, culture, or nationality. This instrument, which aims to understand how students think (cognitive), how they view themselves (intrapersonal), and how they relate to others who are different (interpersonal), is commonly used by colleges and universities (Research Institute for Studies in Education, 2017). Although the researcher did not use the GPI directly for data collection, the items within it helped with drafting the interview questions for the current study. Additional questions, for clarification, were derived from participants’ answers to the interview questions rather than being limited to the interview protocol.

Procedures

Data collection

A semi-structured in-depth interview was conducted with each participant and recorded with a digital voice recorder. The interview allowed the researcher to hear and record participants’ experiences. The recordings of the conversations along with the field notes by the researcher served as the major sources of raw data. The semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to gather information about participants’ experiences in their universities, while at the same time allowing for some degree of flexibility in wording and ordering of questions (Yao, 2014).

The interviews were conducted in person on the campus of each participant’s university. The date and time for each participant’s interview were decided based on the
participants’ schedule, but at least 90 minutes were set aside for the entire interview to proceed. The researcher and all fourteen participants are native Mandarin Chinese speakers. Due to concerns about meaning loss in translation, all interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. If the interviews were conducted in English, especially since miscommunication was commonly found among Chinese international students in the United States, important information may be lost. This method has been used in previous studies (Bartlett, Han, & Bartlett, 2018; Pang, 2004).

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher introduced himself briefly as part of the opening. The purpose of the study and the interview protocol were explained. Each participant was asked for permission to audio record the interview. All participants were asked to sign a consent form that assured anonymity. The consent form included all of the researcher’s contact information and a brief description of the present study. Also, data use, management, and security were explained clearly in English in the consent form (Lin, 2009). Each participant received a copy of the consent form for his or her own records. At the end of each interview, the participant were told that he or she will be contacted in the spring of 2019 for follow-up questions if needed. All data collected were stored on a password protected computer.

Data analysis

The recordings of interviews were transcribed in Mandarin immediately after the interviews. The researcher listened to each interview for several before commencing analysis. The Chinese transcripts of each interview were checked for validity and accuracy by each participant. After this process was completed, the researcher read the Chinese transcripts to identify meaning units. The meaning units were categorized and
developed into common themes with MAXQDA, a qualitative coding software. In the next cycle of coding, all categories, themes, or constructs were summarized to narrower categories. This process of refining the coding continued until the researcher felt the final codes were good representative of the participants’ lived experiences. Later these identified themes were grouped into three perspectives—pre-departure preparation, the Mississippi experience, and strategies and adaptation process, to better understand the participants’ lived experiences in Mississippi.

It should be noted that this study is an interpretive act shaped by the researcher’s subjectivity. As a Chinese international student who studied in the state of Mississippi, the researcher shared some of the participants’ struggles, and understands the significance of cultural adaptation to American universities and the society. A better understanding of the participants’ lived experiences cannot be achieved without an interpretive and cultural lens. However, the researcher is aware of the potential effect of bias by the researcher; therefore, the researcher’s experiences in Mississippi will not be a focus of this study.

**Trustworthiness and validity**

In the current study both the participants and the researcher speaks Mandarin Chinese. English is their shared foreign language. Subjective experience and language are two-way processes. Language is used to express meaning, but language influences how meaning is constructed (Nes, Abma, Jonsson, and Deeg, 2010). The trustworthiness of the data collected is not threatened if the distance between the meaning as experienced by the participants and the meaning interpreted by the researcher is as close as possible (Polkinghorne, 2007). Translation between languages involves interpretation, which requires qualitative researchers to interpret the message communicated in the source
language accurately and transfer the interpreted meaning into the target language in such a way that the receiver of the message understands what was meant. And because interpretation and understanding meanings are so important in qualitative research, language differences could generate additional challenges that might hinder the transfer of meaning and might cause loss of meaning and thus validity loss of the qualitative study (Nes, et al, 2010). Due to this concern, the researcher chose the native language (Mandarin Chinese) as the language for interviews.

The researcher minimized the loss of meaning in translation by first conducting the interviews in Mandarin Chinese, transcribing them in Mandarin Chinese, fact-checking them with each participant in Mandarin Chinese, identifying themes in Chinese, and later translating the themes into English. In addition, the Chinese transcriptions were sent to the participants for accuracy and clarification reasons. At the same time all participants were asked to choose a pseudonym in order to further minimize the concern of identification. After this final step, the researcher secured the help of a professional translator who is fluent in Mandarin Chinese and highly proficient in English. With themes of each interview in Chinese, the translator reviewed and checked accuracy of researcher’s translation. In places where there was a difference in interpretation, the researcher and professional translator discussed the difference and sought a resolution acceptable to both parties. This final step sought to minimize issues such as wrong vocabulary choice or misunderstanding of concepts due to language difference (Nes et al., 2010; Wang, 2002) and provided a modicum of inter-rater reliability. This inter-rater reliability technique has been used in similar studies that rely on translation (Pang & Appleton, 2004).
As noted above, all data collected are stored on a computer that is password protected and managed by the researcher. The data are used for the researcher’s doctoral dissertation only. The ownership of the collected data is shared by the researcher and The University of Southern Mississippi. The Chinese transcripts are owned by the researcher and the participants. Each participant received a copy of the Chinese transcript for his or her interview. However, the participant does not own the translated themes in English, instead the ownership of them is shared by the researcher and the professional translator who was invited to help with the translation process. The English themes from transcriptions are available to participants upon request.

Limitations

Like all research studies, there were limitations in this current study design. First, only five participants from each of the three institutions were recruited for interviews. The total of fourteen participants limited the representation of students from different academic backgrounds (STEM, social science, or business and management, etc.). In certain institutions, there were more social SSAH students recruited than their STEM counterparts and vice versa. Second, although the state Mississippi is representative of the American Deep South, the results of this study should be used with caution when explaining the experiences of other Chinese international students in other states in the Deep South. Besides, participants were only recruited from public institutions. Third, some loss of meaning in translation was unavoidable. Fourth, due to the concern of English proficiency, the researcher used Chinese as the main language for conducting and validating interviews in order to minimize meaning loss. The accuracy of translation was reliant on only one professional translator.
CHAPTER IV – RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this chapter, research findings of this study will be discussed based on themes discovered in data analysis. Based on previous literature and the common themes from the current study, the researcher sorted the findings into the several themes. These themes are categorized based on the three perspectives regarding to Chinese internationals’ journey of studying in American higher education institutions—pre-departure preparation, the Mississippi experience, and strategies and adaptation process. Before presenting the research findings, the background information of each Chinese international student who participated in the current study will be introduced. In order to further protect their privacy, pseudonyms were used for all participant in this study.

Background information of participants

Among all fourteen participants selected for interviews, five participants are from social science programs, one of which has a humanities background. Two participants are studying in business programs. The other seven participants are from STEM programs. Below are brief introductions of each participant’s background.

Wolin Wang is a master’s student studying Mass Communication. Previously he studied Advertising at a university in Mainland China. At the point the interview was conducted, Wolin just finished his first semester studying at his American institution. He has never been to the United States before he came to Mississippi. Wolin learned about American universities from resources provided by his former professor in his undergraduate program in China.

Anthony is an undergraduate student who came to the United States through a “2+2” cooperative program between his domestic institution in China and his host
institution in Mississippi. By taking more courses at the U.S. institution, Anthony was admitted as a regular student of the host institution. He is studying Civil Engineering in Mississippi. When he first came to Mississippi, he had to be enrolled in the Intensive English Program at his university due to unqualified TOEFL score. He was studying in Mississippi in his third semester by the time of interview. He studied in Mississippi for more than one year, but never had been studying in other states before. Anthony believes some Buddhism philosophy due to family influence, though he did not consider himself a real Buddhist.

Evan Zhu studied Forestry Resources at an institution in Mississippi for three and half years. Before coming to Mississippi, he studied Wood Science and Technology at a Chinese university. Evan has been in a post doc program within his academic department for nearly two years when we met. Evan learned about and applied for his current institution in Mississippi because of his former supervisor who gave a lecture in Evan’s university in China. He was recruited directly by his former supervisor as a research assistant.

Tian Yao graduated from college with a bachelor’s degree in Biology in China. She had a two-year experience working as a research assistant at the most prestigious institution in her field. She has been enrolled in her American institution for over one year and a half. By the time of interview being conducted, Yao just started her third semester of studying in Mississippi.

Coco came to Mississippi as a transfer student. She has studied Accounting in her university for three years by the point of data collection. Her status changed from a transfer student to regular student after she decided to continue her study in Mississippi.
She was in her fifth semester of studying in the institution when we met. She was preparing for application for a master’s program in accounting in the United States.

Ana Li began her education in Mississippi as a sixth-grader; she has been living in the same city for about ten years. She chose her first major of Polymer Science due to her previous study experience in high school in Mississippi. She was in the Advanced Program, and had the opportunity to participate in research in Polymer Science. She continued her study at the same program after she graduated from high school because of the professor she worked with. Ana Li transferred from Polymer Science program and became a Math major one and half years later due to satisfaction of her plan of study. She was in her second to last semester at her institution at the point of our interview.

Rachel came to Mississippi in 2006 after her second year in high school in China. She was studying at a private institution at Mississippi when she first arrived and she achieved her first bachelor’s degree in general study in 2011. Then she went back to China to apply for a graduate program in China, but she was not ready for the entrance exam for graduate programs in China so she returned to Mississippi in 2012. She achieved her second bachelor’s degree in Music and Psychology (double major) from another university in Mississippi. She continued her study at the second institution and achieved a Master’s degree in Music Education. She was looking for a teaching job at middle school level by the time the interview was conducted.

Xiao Ou came to the United States after high school in China. He was denied the opportunity to take the College Entrance Exam (CEE) by his high school because his teacher was concerned that his “distraction” from applying for American universities would harm his performance in the Exam, which would lower the average score of all
students at his high school. Because of such an unpleasant experience and the low quality of programs in which he is interested in China, Xiao Ou decided to chase his dream in the United States. Xiao Ou became a student in the Biochemistry department at an institution in Mississippi. By the time we met, he was at the end of his fifth semester of study. He also has a minor in Russian and Computer Science. He is also in the honor’s college. He works at the writing center at his institution as a tutor for writing. Xiao Ou became a Baptist at Mississippi. He mentioned one of his distant relative in the United States is Christian. Xiao Ou became Christian because of the relative and one of his mother’s friend in Mississippi who often invited him to the Chinese church group when he first came to Mississippi.

Zhao Cheng is of Korean Ethnicity in China, grew up speaking Korean and Mandarin Chinese. He attended a college within his province to study English, but he was not happy with the teaching quality so he dropped out from that college. After working for a few years in companies with English speakers, he decided to continue his education. Because of his former interest in psychology and reputation of psychology programs in the United States, Cheng applied for an undergraduate program in the United States. He was admitted by an institution in Minnesota. After five years of study at Minnesota, Cheng decided to continue his education in Mississippi. He was first enrolled in the Mississippi institution as a master’s student in Counseling Psychology program. Due to dissatisfaction with his former program, he then transferred to the Brain and Behavior Ph.D. Program. He works as a graduate assistant in his department.

Xin Qiji studied Chemistry in a Chinese university before he came to Mississippi. He is studying Polymer science in Mississippi. He just finished his first semester at his
institution when we met for the interview. He chose to study abroad because many students within his previous department in China chose to study abroad after graduation. Program quality is the other reason why he chose America for his graduate study.

Kobe has already achieved a doctoral degree in Management Science and Engineering in China before he entered the Ph.D. program in Mississippi. Kobe made his decision to pursue a Ph.D. degree because of his previous experience as a visiting scholar in New Mexico. He liked the research atmosphere in the United States. He chose the institution in Mississippi mainly because his supervisor in New Mexico has connections with his current supervisor in Mississippi. He was at the beginning of second semester in Mississippi at the point of data collection.

Zhang Min worked as a reporter in China for several years after she graduated from a master’s program in China. Studying in the United States used to be her dream when she was in college. She decided to pursue her dream again after ten years after working in the field for ten years in Shanghai. Although her dream institution is in Maryland, the institution in Mississippi was the only one that offered her a graduate assistantship so she accepted the offer and became a Ph.D. student in Communication Study. Min became Christian when she was in China, so she is very active in Church-related activities in Mississippi.

Ding Fei was previously studying food science with an emphasis in Enology in China in the most prestigious institution of her field. She met her current supervisor at a lecture given by her supervisor at her domestic institution. She learned about the Horticulture Ph.D. program from her supervisor and therefore applied for the program. She has been enrolled in her institution for three semesters when we met. In Mississippi,
her focus switched from wine production to tea plantation.

Jiahua received her master’s degree in TESOL in United Kingdom before she pursued her Ph.D. degree in the United States. She was previously an English professor in a Chinese higher education institution. She felt the need to achieve a doctoral degree eventually to work in higher education so she decided to continue her education after she received her master’s degree. She is majoring in Curriculum and Instruction. By the time we met, she has been in her program for four years and four months and was working on her doctoral dissertation. She was employed as a research assistant by her department.

Table 3 Summary of Participants’ Background Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Current Field</th>
<th>Previous Field</th>
<th>Length of stay in Mississippi</th>
<th>Semesters enrolled</th>
<th>Adaptation strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xiao Ou</td>
<td>The University of Mississippi</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>Biochemistry</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coco</td>
<td>The University of Mississippi</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>SSAH</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>The University of Mississippi</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>Civil Engineering</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Separation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>The University of Mississippi</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>SSAH</td>
<td>Music Education</td>
<td>Music and Psychology</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhang Min</td>
<td>The University of Southern Mississippi</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>SSAH</td>
<td>Communication Study</td>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolin Wang</td>
<td>The University of Southern Mississippi</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>SSAH</td>
<td>Mass Communication</td>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xin Qiji</td>
<td>The University of Southern Mississippi</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>Polymer Science</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>5 months</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Separation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana Li</td>
<td>The University of Southern Mississippi</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Assimilation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhao Cheng</td>
<td>The University of Southern Mississippi</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>SSAH</td>
<td>Brain and Behavior</td>
<td>Counseling Psychology</td>
<td>3.5 years*</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Separation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kobe</td>
<td>Mississippi State University</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>SSAH</td>
<td>Business Information System</td>
<td>Management Science and Engineering</td>
<td>5 months*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Separation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiahua</td>
<td>Mississippi State University</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>SSAH</td>
<td>Curriculum and Instruction</td>
<td>TESOL</td>
<td>4 years, 3 months</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tian Yao</td>
<td>Mississippi State University</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Separation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan Zhu</td>
<td>Mississippi State University</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>Forestry Resources</td>
<td>Wood Science and Technology</td>
<td>3.5 years</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Separation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ding Fei</td>
<td>Mississippi State University</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>Horticulture</td>
<td>Food Science</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Integration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Two participants in this study previously stayed in other states of the United States. Kobe studied in New Mexico for one year. Zhao Cheng studied in Minnesota for five years.
Table 4 Information of Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>City (population)</th>
<th>Total Enrollment</th>
<th>Number of International Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The University of Mississippi</td>
<td>Oxford (23,639)</td>
<td>23,610</td>
<td>810 (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Southern Mississippi</td>
<td>Hattiesburg (46,377)</td>
<td>14,478</td>
<td>511 (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi State University</td>
<td>Starkville (25,352)</td>
<td>18,406</td>
<td>801 (2017)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data from World Population Review (2018) and College Factual (2017)

Research findings

Pre-departure preparation

Although the focus of the current study was to learn about Chinese international students’ experiences in the Mississippi, during data collection and data analysis the researcher realized the need to highlight these students’ pre-departure experiences in order to better explain the situations they met in Mississippi. While comparing each participant’s background, the researcher noticed some factors that led to different experiences in the United States.

One reason why Chinese international students’ experiences varied across disciplines is the method they used to obtain the information about academic programs in American universities. Five participants applied for their programs with the help through direct or indirect personal connections with individuals working in the field of higher education. For instance, Rachel learned about the undergraduate program from her mother who was a music professor working at a local university in her home city at the point when she came to United States. Rachel’s first college in Mississippi wanted to recruit Chinese international students from the university where her mother worked. Her mother encouraged Rachel and her sister to attend college in the United States. Because the opportunity “came all of a sudden”, Rachel and her sister did not hesitate to prepare for attending that university. Before they heard about the opportunity, they had no plan to go to college in another country, so they did not search any information about American
institutions. Later Rachel went to another university in Mississippi of which she researched the information and completed the application all by herself. Kobe applied to four institutions, he learned about by communicating with faculty members from each institution. He applied for his current institution because of his previous supervisor at New Mexico. Both Ding Fei and Evan Zhu met their current supervisors and learned about their programs when their supervisors gave lectures at their previous institutions in China. Yao learned about a position opening by directly contacting a professor in her department who later became her supervisor at her institution.

In comparison, the remaining participants applied for their programs without support and without communicating with any employees at the universities they applied. In this study, previously-built relationships with current supervisors or academic advisors were proved to influence international students’ learning and working experiences in the United States significantly. However, it is interesting to see that the most common reasons for participants coming to Mississippi for higher education are faculty recruitment or institutional cooperative programs. Only five participants chose their universities without institutional or faculty reason. Four of the five participants came to Mississippi because of financial aid.

Among the fourteen participants, those who applied without any connections prior to departure received little assistance beside information from the office of international student services and their academic departments. Wolin Wang applied his program with indirect personal connections received some information before departure; however, he did not receive any additional help after he entered United States. Those who built personal connections with their supervisors/advisors prior to departure received the most
help pre-departure and after arriving Mississippi. Frequent communication helped the student and his or her supervisor or advisor to know each other better, so these supervisors or advisors helped these students more sufficiently and efficiently. Previous communication with supervisors helped participants to know their supervisor’s expectations and preferences better. In some cases of this study, such connection also helped with the interactions between the students and their supervisors or advisors, which fostered a deeper personal connections to form. Deeper personal connections have been proved to have a great impact on their experiences in the United States. The participants who established deep connections admitted that they received additional help on their study and life in the United States, except for two who claimed having a negative experience working with their supervisors.

The researcher learned that in the selected universities participants from STEM programs and business and finance programs were more often recruited personally by faculty members partly due to the research grant faculty members had. Faculty members with research grants seemed to have bigger influence on the students they want to recruit. Multiple participants from the STEM programs mentioned that their academic and research background is a big reason why they were recruited for their specific program or research projects.

Reasons to study overseas is another theme found in current study. The most common reasons among these participants to study in the U.S were due to their previous unsatisfying educational and research experience. Most participants believe that American higher education can provide them with a better educational or research experience. When being asked why she chose America after achieving a degree from
United Kingdom, Jiahua said “Because American’s education is still at the leading position, world-wise as well. In addition, there are more universities or colleges in the United States, so there are more options.” Some participants decided to study overseas mainly because they are interested in experiencing and learning another country’s culture and higher education system. Half of the participants mentioned experiencing peer pressures to study abroad.

It is interesting to discover that none of the participants applied to the Mississippian institutions with direct help by agents. Although two participants acquired information regarding to application process in American institutions, neither of them used the agents directly for application. Meanwhile, neither agent recommended Mississippi as the destination for their higher education. Tian Yao said “the agent asked me to retake the tests (TOEFL and GRE) and they promised me that they can apply a super good school for me. But at that point, I was so tired of dealing with the application, so I decided to wait [to enroll in her current institution Mississippi].” Instead, having some kind of connection with the institutions was the main reason why these participants eventually chose Mississippi as their destination for higher education.

This finding confirmed Tung’s (2016) statement that many cram schools only taught students how to get high scores in English tests rather than equip them with capabilities of understanding English contents and English skills. In the current study, only four participants went to “cram schools” for testing scores required for admission to American institutions. All four participant admitted that these training programs helped them get qualified test scores for admissions. However, as Wolin Wang mentioned, although he achieved a similar TOEFL score to Zhang Min’s score, he considered his
skills of clearly expressing himself in English insufficient compared with Zhang Min whose real English proficiency is higher than him. Tian Yao mentioned that the training programs had not help her score at the beginning as she had little foundational knowledge and skills of English, which highlighted the impact of previous English level on score increase. This implied that the strategies taught by most “cram schools” only works when the learner has decent English knowledge and skills, with which these strategies will work effectively. In other words, such programs did not train or improve the learner’s actual English ability.

*Things that prepared Chinese students for study in Mississippi.* Previous research or publication experiences prepared some participants for their study in Mississippi. For some majors such as polymer science and business, and forestry product, the previously learned knowledge at Chinese institutions helps their understanding the content taught in their American programs. A few participants mentioned that they can rely on previous knowledge and learning strategies to solve the problems they ran into when studying in the United States. Even when English became an obstacle in class learning, they can still rely on a third language to understand it. For example, Anthony indicated that “it does not matter whether I understand what he was talking about or not. Because engineering is that kind of thing of which teaching relies on a third language-formula. As long as I master’s the third language, I should be fine.” The other participants from forestry resources and polymer science agreed on Anthony’s point. However, participants from social sciences were not able to rely too much on previous knowledge, instead they reported having more stress to learn new knowledge in the United States.

*The Mississippi experience*
Perceptions about American higher education. All Chinese participants in this study felt that American professors in class did not teach as much as their former professors in China. In general, all participants agreed the amount of assignments and tests for each course are too much. They felt having to do a lot independently to explore answers, which they found both overwhelming and beneficial at the same time. However, Xiao Ou did not appreciate the American way of instruction. “Some professors did not bring anything, relying on his knowledge to teach. … I think professor like this are relatively incompetent.” These participants started to appreciate more of the thought-provoking method of teaching by their American professors as they studied longer in the American universities. Participants felt they learned more knowledge in American universities. Jiahua said, “Here you are given all resources and tools, you have to figure out, to do it. So during the process of finding answers, you might have learned more things. But in China teachers taught you everything, feels mostly feeding you. … so here, the ability of independent learning is improved quickly.” Kobe was not very used to having to ask questions in American classes as he was not encouraged to do so in China. Zhao Cheng appreciated this challenging class requirement and preferred the norm of asking questions in classes. Even though he felt one of his classes was challenging he later appreciated his professor’s high expectation of his work in that class. “I built my dissertation foundation based on that class project … if he did not push me, I may [not be sure about] what I will do for my dissertation.” In terms of learning content, two participants from STEM programs and one student from a business program thought the learning contents were not completely new to them. They could take advantage of their previous knowledge. Despite the concerns about low-intervention but high-freedom
education philosophy, all participants considered their learning experiences in Mississippi beneficial to improve their independent learning ability and to prepare them as qualified graduates for careers in their fields. They also enjoyed the easy and equal access to educational resources at their institutions.

Participants with American supervisors are satisfied with their relationships with their supervisors. They think American professors are more approachable and friendly than their Chinese professors. Kobe felt he was valued and respected more by his American supervisor than his former supervisor in China. In comparison, both Ding Fei and Evan Zhu, who were assigned to work with Chinese faculty members, expressed their frustration of working with Chinese supervisors. It is interesting to find that although both participants have only worked with Chinese professors in China before they came to Mississippi, they both appreciated the American-style relationships with supervisors more. They both felt uncomfortable and unwilling to having to do things in the Chinese way in the context of American higher education.

Besides the American teaching style and interactions with American faculty members, participants also commented on the education resources they received in their host institutions at Mississippi. Zhang Min spoke highly of her institution, calling it “underestimated.”

Chinese people hold prejudices against institutions like this. Many people didn't even hear about this institution before, all they know are Princeton, Harvard, Yale, Ivy League institutions.” She thinks that the American higher education system is advanced in its distribution of educational resources. “Unlike China, where educational resources are concentrated in developed cities, Beijing,
Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. That’s why people all went to those places. But it is not so in the United States, every state has its own state institution, all of which, to be honest, are not bad. America’s educational resources are evenly distributed. … it’s not like Chinese people’s prejudices, only Yale is prestigious institutions, all other institutions are not good. It’s actually not the case. She thinks her institution provides high-quality education with lower cost, even though it is located in an underdeveloped state.

*Patterns of social interactions.* Similar to the researcher’s observation and own experience of studying in Mississippi, the composition of friends or acquaintances influenced international’s adaptation experience and their coping strategies. Therefore, this section will begin with describing Chinese international students’ social interaction with Chinese peers, local people and other international students. Based on the interviews, the participants’ socialization patterns can be categorized into four different patterns. These patterns are labeled as “predominantly co-nationals”, “predominantly Americans”, “diversified socialization”, and “limited socialization.”

The first pattern is socializing with predominantly Chinese peers. Seven participants admitted that they interact mostly with Chinese peers, such as other Chinese students in the same department, or Chinese students living in the same neighborhood. This pattern appeared mostly at the beginning and the end of adaptation stage. This pattern is possible under two different situations. First, there are other Chinese students in the same program or department, which is found to be the most common social interaction situations where friendships happens. Such cases is more common in STEM programs than SSAH programs. However, there is an exception in SSAH group, which is
the business programs. Both Kobe from the business information system program and Coco from the accounting program mentioned that there are a large percentage of Chinese international students. They interacted with other Chinese international students in many situations like taking classes together and working on class projects or preparing for exams together. The large percentage of Chinese international students within one program or department increases the chances of building co-national relationships, exposure to native culture and more frequent use of native language in the United States. Interacting with co-nationals seemed to give Chinese internationals an easy start and they can help each other on coursework and their living circumstances. However, as Evan mentioned that his English skills were not sufficient, and he was not involved in the American society very well due to the fact he interacted with a Chinese supervisor speaking only Chinese.

Second, interacting with predominantly co-nationals also happened at the end of their adaptation process. In the predominantly co-national group, from the beginning to the ending stage of adaptation, these Chinese students were relatively active to interact and attempted to seek a relationship with people from different cultural backgrounds. This is when Chinese internationals became either encouraged or discouraged by their attempts to establish high-quality relationships with people with another culture. After listening to all participants categorized as co-national group, their interactions with individuals who were not co-national were neither long-lasting nor high-quality. Except for Jiahua who did claim that she had a steady and beneficial relationship with one faculty and one staff member within in her department. But this was the only case of having high-quality relationship with among the participants who interacted
predominantly with co-nationals. The majority of this group were frustrated with their previous interaction, unsatisfied with or having difficulty maintaining their existing relationships with people who are not Chinese, which caused all participants including Jiahua to become more satisfied with their relationships with their Chinese peers on campus. This finding shows that high-quality and high-quantity of social interaction are what lead to long-lasting relationships.

The second pattern is predominantly socializing with Americans. Only two participants had such socialization pattern. Min said that the students in her program were predominantly American students and she was the only Asian student in her program. She was very satisfied with the demographics of students in her program since she can be immersed in American culture even though she appreciate the importance of diversity. Rachel was provided with an immersion environment of American culture as well, but her immersion was to a much more comprehensive extent. Rachel and her sister were the first two Chinese students in the history to attending her first institution (the private religious institution), so they were immersed in the American culture and interacted with almost entirely with Americans because there was not many international students by the time when they first attended the university. But both Rachel and her sister appreciated the predominantly American environment on campus and admitted that the experience helped their adaptation and English learning. When Rachel went to the university in Oxford, Mississippi, the demographics of student population over there was very different. There were not only more international students but also with a much bigger Chinese international student community on campus. She made some Chinese friends when she was at Oxford, but she felt that her interaction with Chinese peers was also
limited to those who were in the same program or living in the same neighborhood.

Like my neighbors, they all took classes in the same department, so they probably hang out a lot. But I chose psychology courses where there are relatively less Chinese students …my friends are more foreigners. But if we went to hang out during the day, [I would] still ask some Chinese friends [to go with us].

The third pattern is socializing with people from a diverse background including co-nationals, local and other internationals. This pattern is also relatively uncommon in this study, only two Chinese students showed this pattern of socialization. The researcher noticed that these two participants have something in common to have such a diverse composition of socialization pattern. First, both of them have a steady and frequent interaction with their co-national peers. In Xiao Ou’s case, he lived with another two Chinese international students who studied at the same university. He also went to a Chinese religious group every Friday. In Xin Qiji’s case, he also lived with a Chinese student from his university. At the same time, he had interaction with other Chinese neighbors and mentioned hanging out with senior Chinese students within his department. What makes these two cases unique to the other two patterns is the combination of frequent exposure to American or foreign culture and steady relationships with co-nationals. Xiao Ou works at the writing center where all of his coworkers and supervisors are Americans or students from other countries. He has also been taking Russian classes where he made some friends from East Europe. Xiao Ou described his socialization pattern as 40% Chinese, 30% American, and 30% East European. In Xin Qiji’s experience, although there were many Chinese students within his department, none of them were in the same year with him, so Xin Qiji did not have any Chinese
office-mates or classmates. He interacted with all Americans in the office and took classes with mainly Americans. Although language was a concern reported by Qiji himself, his office-mates were very understanding and inviting him to hang out with them, so unlike other Chinese international students who had limited interaction with Americans, Qiji was lucky to have more interactions with American peers and more exposure to their culture.

And the last pattern is having very limited socialization with Chinese and people of a different culture. All three participants in this group had one thing in common which is having no Chinese classmates or office-mates within their program, and not enough interaction with peers from the United States or other countries. Their limited interaction with people outside the Chinese community is partly due to their personality or their tight schedule. In Wolin’s case, transportation was also a reason for limited socialization. In Ding Fei’s case, she has a few American friends. One is her office mate and the other is an American couple who were both faculty members at her university. But her interaction with her office-mate was more frequent and multidimensional. Wolin said he mainly interacted with Min, who was in the same department but different program from his. Ana Li mainly interacted with an Asian American friend. All three participants in this group reported having less than two friends including Chinese and non-Chinese who they would meet frequently.

Regardless of the current composition of their social networks, all participants mentioned that they tried to interact and build relationships with Americans as well as other international students. However, only in very rare cases were these relationships maintained. Language barriers and cultural differences stopped these relationships from
further developing. Socializing with peers within the same department or academic program or within the same neighborhood seem to be a very common tendency of social interaction no matter which friendship pattern the participants currently have. Time available for socialization appears to be a shared concern among all Chinese international students to interact with people from another country. Multiple participants believed that in order to maintain an international relationship, they would have to spend more time and efforts for the relationships. “Living in the United States, I feel comfortable to stay within the Chinese community, and I do not refuse to have American friends, but I also do not want to sacrifice too much time [to learn about their culture and maintaining the relationships].”

All participants considered their Chinese peers an important part of their social networks, but they did not seem to care much about other Chinese international students outside of their social networks. Based on their descriptions, Chinese international students tended to group together due to reasons such as studying together in the same department, working in the same office, living in the same neighborhood. Chinese international students who had limited interactions are not likely to develop any long-lasting relationships. Instead, Chinese internationals were found cliquing with their Chinese co-majors, coworkers, or neighbors. For example, Xiao Ou mentioned that although he often helped Chinese students with their writing in the writing center, their social connection did not happen beyond the tutoring experience. When being asked about the Chinese International Students and Scholars Association (CISSA) in their institution, none of these participants thought their CISSA had done enough work in terms of helping and uniting the Chinese internationals on campus, neither had they
organized enough high-quality get-together events. Among the participants who commented on the CISSA on their campus, they considered the assistance that they received from CISSA was minimal.

*Ways of socialization and relationships.* In the current study, classmates or office-mates are the ones with who the participants communicated the most often. Interaction with classmates or coworkers are often limited to work and study. Academic level also played a role in international students’ social networking. Interactions with American classmates would decrease as the academic level raises.

Back then there were a lot [of interactions with classmates], I mean undergraduate. But I felt after becoming a graduate student, relatively lonely, because everybody were working by themselves, unless we were assigned the same project. Like you two have to work on this article and you have to present together. If it was like this, maybe we would meet up and talk about which part each of us will be responsible for.

However, participants who stayed in Mississippi longer more often reported having a meaningful interaction beyond work and study. Jiahua, for instance, had a steady friendship with the secretary in her department. They often talked about Chinese culture and tradition since this secretary liked Chinese culture and was married to a Chinese. The secretary also shared personal life with Jiahua. For instance, the secretary brought her newborn baby to Jiahua’s apartment to let Jiahua see the baby. Rachel had a study group in her class, in which she knew some new classmates, and they often reviewed together after class. She also mentioned that her working experience as a residence assistant helped her making friends with American students who also worked at the front desk of a
residence hall. They would hang out together and have parties after work.

Roommates were another group that participants often interacted with. The majority of participants lived in off-campus apartments with Chinese roommates (except Zhao Cheng who lived by himself). Living with Chinese roommates or Chinese neighbors allowed these participants to build a familiar social environment. High-quality social connection were built. Compared with those who lived with roommates from another country, these participants had an easier time interacting with the co-national peers within their living area. Having dinner together and hanging out in each other’s place happened relatively often. However, the researcher noticed that living with co-nationals could also hinder their cultural adaptation to the mainstream environment because they had high quality social interactions and received satisfying help from Chinese peers. For instance, Evan felt comfortable staying with his own Chinese social network, although he also admitted the predominantly-Chinese environment in his department and living area prevented him from learning more about American people and American culture. By living closely with co-national peers, these participants sacrificed the opportunity of immersion in a diverse environment.

Five participants had experiences of living in residence halls on campus. Xiao Ou had an American roommate whose parent was originally from Columbia, who he did not get along well with due to different life style and daily schedule. “I and my [former] roommate were in ‘cold war’. He is Columbian, South American, his personality is very different.” Zhao Cheng had an American roommate when he was a freshman in Minnesota. His relationship with that roommate was good. Although Cheng did not have any conflict with his American roommate, Cheng thinks that social distance did exist
between them. Cheng thinks that Confucius Asian’s (e.g. Chinese and Korean) perception about “relationship” is different from American’s. Zhao Cheng made the following comment when he was describing his relationship with his former roommate: It “still is different from my relationships with Chinese and Korean friends. Relationship in American’s mind is a completely different concept than the ‘relationship’ in Asian culture. The kind of relationship that we refer to is very close, their relationship (is close but) still keep independency of oneself, a relationship with that prerequisite. Though our relationship was very good, but it was not like the very close feeling. But compared with other Americans, he was relatively close [to me].” (Coco did not have a close relationship with her former Japanese roommate in residence hall, nor did she have any conflicts with that roommate. Their communication with each other was very limited, so no actual relationship was established.

Besides interaction with roommates and neighbors, participants also reported having friendships with people who they shared common interests with. For instance, common hobbies in sports, like badminton, basketball, biking, or hiking are some examples. In terms of the variety and frequency of extracurricular activities, most participants especially those who had studied in other states were unsatisfied with their extracurricular activities in Mississippi. Kobe felt that there were not many options on campus. He mentioned having more diverse extracurricular experiences in New Mexico. Zhao Cheng agreed with Kobe by commenting on his previous experience in Minnesota that “It is the availability (that matters), when I want to go, I can find people just like me. And there are all kinds of entertainment activities out there” as he talked about his experience of studying in Minnesota. Extracurricular activities is another path of knowing
new friends. Activities available at the three selected Mississippian institutions are mainly organized by student groups on campus, which limited their interaction with local people and hindered their exposure to American society.

Interacting with people with a different background helped Chinese participants’ adaptation to the new environment and improved their capability of cross-cultural communication. However, it was the interaction with American peers that facilitated their adaptation and involvement in the American society. Multiple participants believed the culture and people they knew were somewhat homogeneous and they implied a willingness to have more opportunities to be involved in the American’s communities when they mentioned about not having enough interactions the local communities. Not having enough exposure to the authentic American culture has prevented Chinese international students from furthering their cultural adaptation to their institution. Participants who have graduated or were close to their graduation expressed their concern of not having enough knowledge about American society and not knowing how to interact with Americans appropriately. Limited access to the local society indeed hindered Chinese students’ future development in the United States.

Jiahua mentioned that her life was relatively simple at the beginning, and she did not have much interaction with other Americans outside campus, and knew little about the authentic American culture. But her life changed since her elder daughter started going to elementary school in Mississippi. She experienced a lot of cultural shock and conflicts because she had to interact with Americans outside her institution. Unavoidably, she was exposed to local culture more often. Rachel was also immersed in American culture much more than average Chinese international students. When Rachel and her
sister first went to her undergraduate university, they were offered a host family, which later they spent a lot of time with. Rachel appreciated the host family experience that allowed them know more about American’s family culture. And because there was no other Chinese international students besides Rachel and her sister, they can only interact with other students in English, which facilitated their English learning and culture learning.

Student organizations were another place available to international students, but less common than activities by international student office or BSU among participants in this study. Coco joined the Beta Alpha Psi group on her campus mainly because many of her American classmates joined that group. She made some friends within the student organization. She said she also gained some skills such as public speaking by presenting at professional conferences for accounting. Although they were presenting as a group, standing and speaking in front of so many people was definitely a challenge at first. She feels she became braver and more confident ever since she had that experience and believes it prepared her more for her study in the United States.

SSAH participants who did not have off-campus recourses or personal connections like Jiahua, Rachel and Zhang Min had, tried to create opportunities to increase interaction with Americans on campus. Such patterns were more often reported during their earlier stage of cultural adaptation to their institution. Participating in activities organized by the international student office or Baptist Student Union (BSU) on campus are the most common options available to all international students on campus. Although the participants appreciated such opportunities, the majority of these participants stopped taking advantage of the opportunities to know new friends mainly
because that they found it difficult to maintain the relationships they had established during early interactions with Americans or internationals from other countries. Evan made some American friends with whom he was not able to keep a relationship for very long.

I should say it was good, but we did not hang out very often. We only interacted like friends for some period of time, then they all graduated [and lost contact] … I think it was a good opportunity to know [new friends], and then they had one-on-one conversation. I thought I was able to learn something about America, and make some friends to quickly involve myself in this environment. But in fact, you have to do a lot, you do it proactively. Then I stopped going.

Wolin knew some American students from BSU because he wanted to learn about Baptist culture but he stopped going mainly because he thinks it took him too much time to attend activities at BSU. Other participants stopped going because they disliked the activities BSU had for each meeting.

*Obstacles of intercultural interactions.* Participants’ English proficiency is the most frequently mentioned issue to communicate with Americans and international students from other countries. In this study, seven of fourteen participants mentioned that English was more or less an obstacle to interact with peers from another country. The language issue could be due to low proficiency in language skills, such as listening and speaking. It could also be a result of accent of the speakers, or did not understand the implied meaning. Besides the language issue, participants also mentioned other obstacles that stopped them from having high-quality interaction with people with different cultures from theirs.
First, culture is the most common issue next to language. Because language is a reflection of culture, so those who have issues with English are also likely to have difficulty with understanding American culture correctly. Six participants mentioned having trouble getting American’s points when they can understand the English Americans used. Cultural difference also appeared in the perceptions of relationship. For instance, Chinese have a different understanding about relationships, and ways to maintain the relationships. Three participants felt it is difficult to maintain a proper distance with American peers. Zhao Cheng explained that Chinese expect a closer and less private relationship with friends; however Americans prefer to maintain some privacy in a relationship. Zhao Cheng said, “Compared to Americans, my boundary are lower, so communicating with Americans alone would not give a sense of satisfaction. Not gaining much satisfaction form the social connection.” Non-verbal clues is another example of cultural differences. Wolin has trouble understanding Americans’ body language when they are talking. Anthony mentioned that he perceived American humor as “offensive” at the beginning of his stay in Mississippi. Different values and interests also made Chinese and their American peers lose motivation to continue interaction with each other. Misunderstanding could also happen due to different knowledge base of American culture. History, politics, popular culture and so on are all examples of such differences. Zhao Cheng indicated, “Cultural factors are inside, for example, they grew up watching sesame street, Simpson, wrestling, baseball, football, the expressions, the concepts generated from these specific context. You might have some difficulty understanding them and feel unable to chat with them.”

Second, intercultural competency of both parties also influenced the quality of
interaction. Zhao Cheng mentioned that when he could not express his meaning correctly in English, the understanding depends on the listener’s intercultural competency. Those who are culturally competent can understand their meaning better than those who are not culturally competent. He shared an experience in Minnesota, “I worked in the international office, so more time were spent with personnel who have received professional training on how to serve international students. They knows you very well, and will not do something harmless but causing you feel uncomfortable.” Three participants’ experiences showed that they were not culturally competent nor were their listeners. They had problems with understanding each other’s culture. As Ana Li highlighted “Because I was not an interesting person in their mind, your joke is not funny, but this is cultural differences. I didn’t know what humor is in American culture. Neither did I know what American likes, how to hang out with them to make them think you are an interesting person, and want to make friends with you. So I think this is not an issue of race, only because that I did not know them, and they did not know me. So we couldn’t get well along.”

Third, time availability was another reason of low frequency and/or low quality in social interaction. All international students have to be enrolled full-time (at least 9 credit hours each semester) to maintain their F-1 visa status. The tight schedules and heavy workloads from class assignments caused Chinese international students unable to afford more time on social networking. “I usually study hard, so more time are spent on study. Like some activities in my dorm … like Halloween, I wasn’t able to participate.”

Church and religion. Church and religion is a big component of people living in the South. International students’ life cannot be avoided being influenced by local
churches. The participants in this study all reported having experiences of attending churches, especially at the beginning of their study at Mississippi. According to these participants’ description, the churches in Oxford, Starkville and Hattiesburg have something in common. Most participants’ first interaction with people from local Chinese churches was due to the help those churches provided. The Chinese churches in these three cities provide pick-up service at the airport. Because international students usually do not have cars in the first few semesters, people from the church would offer to take new international students to run errands such as grocery shopping. The second strategy that churches used to attract new international students is providing free lunch during the weekend. After lunches, Chinese churches usually give lectures about Christianity. However, once Chinese international students realized the purpose of these services church provided, most international student without religious beliefs stopped going. Lack of interest, inappropriate way of delivering Christian messages, and tight schedule were found to be the common obstacles of Chinese international students to participate more frequently in Church activities. Most Chinese international students feel uncomfortable and uninterested in the content of the lectures. “I do not like the Chinese churches giving lectures after lunch. It lasted very long, then I felt very tired. I went there to relax, but I ended up being more exhausted than working.”

Meeting friends, practicing English, and learning American culture are the main motivations of going to churches at the beginning. But as they became used to the new environment, or felt not having a satisfying interactions with people in the churches they stopped going to churches. Ana mentioned an interesting experience with churches, she said “when I first came to American, my mom forced me to go to Sunday school, not for
religious reasons, she wanted me to learn English, because at Sunday school, they would preach, they will talk about the Bible, then you can learn some English.”

The participants’ interactions with churches were mostly limited to Chinese churches, so most of them had little experiences interacting with people from American churches. The culture within Chinese churches could explain why some Chinese internationals did not accept churches. Jiahua stopped going to Chinese churches because there was no day care service for her children. In comparison, Jiahua enjoyed the white church that she went to. She usually sent her children to the day care and sat at a resting area to read and work on her school work. When she felt stuck in writing, she usually went to a service to get some inspiration. She still brings her children to the White church every Sunday. Cheng, who is Christian, has been to the Korean and Chinese churches before and still actively participates in activities by Korean churches in Hattiesburg a few times each month. He thinks the preachers at a local Chinese church are incapable of deliver the right message in an appropriate way. He commented: “I listened to their service, it’s not that good. … it is pouring the message to you, it’s not that he understand the Bible well enough. [The preacher] himself did not follow what the Bible said. … he is not a good example …” In comparison, he thought the preacher at the Korean church that he usually went to has a much better understanding of the Bible; Cheng enjoyed listening to his talk and would communicate with the Korean preacher often about his life in Mississippi. He believes the preacher to be his good friend as well as his mentor.

The four participants who believe Christianity, found attending churches helpful and it made their life better. Jiahua believed that going to all kinds of churches helped her learn about American’s beliefs and values. Going to churches made her adaptation to the
society pleasant. Going to churches allowed Cheng to make friends at Minnesota. Though he did not have as many friends in Mississippi as in Minnesota, he did build a connection with a Korean preacher who he considered to be his mentor. Min believed that religion introduced her to American culture and she made American friends because of religion. Xiao Ou was another example who claimed to be benefited from religion. He made some Chinese friends at the local Chinese church and enjoyed going to churches to meet friends. He admitted receiving mental support from American friends at the church by making conversation about the Bible and his daily life. He mentioned building a personal relationship with Chinese faculty members from his institutions.

Religion’s influence are also visible on campus. Baptist Student Unions (BSU) were found to collaborate with their institutions’ international student service offices to hold international students events on campus. Based on the participants’ experiences, the religious messages were still overwhelming for them to accept. Local churches also are active in holding Chinese cultural events which they could invite more Chinese international students to attend. “Mid-autumn festival is a good idea … but they didn’t talk about the traditions, nor its origin either? Instead [they] talked only about God, it’s so fictionary, so intangible. … I think the problem cannot be solved by just believing God. … tried so hard to spread the good message, I’m so speechless about them.” Rachel thinks that the people in Mississippi spread religion so radically that it scared many international student in her previous institution, which is a private religious institution. But she believed the situation was much better in public institutions.

Interactions with supervisors/advisors and faculty members. According to previous study (Jairam and Kahl, 2012; Ngyyen, 2013), faculty members’ support can
influence international students’ experience in American institutions either positively or negatively. Findings from this study support the fact that faculty members have a significant impact on Chinese international students’ experience in American universities. STEM programs differ from social science and humanities programs in terms of numbers of faculty members from China. Participants in STEM programs have more interactions with Chinese faculty members. Three participants in STEM programs have had a Chinese supervisor. In comparison, no participant in the SSAH have had a Chinese supervisor or advisor. Jiahua mentioned that there is only one Chinese professor in the curriculum and instruction program who became a committee member of her dissertation committee. Kobe mentioned there was no Chinese professors in his program in Mississippi but worked with a Chinese professor when he was a visiting scholar in New Mexico. Two of the three participants who were assigned to Chinese supervisors mentioned that the Chinese culture of professor and student relationship in Chinese culture impacted their learning and working experience greatly. Both positive and negative social support by Chinese faculty members were found in this study. It was also found that Chinese faculty members all chose to do things in the Chinese way and expected their supervisees to follow the Chinese rule as well. There are some benefits of having a Chinese supervisor or advisor, such as having little language issue, understanding professor better, and receiving information specifically helpful to Chinese students. However, interactions with Chinese supervisors or advisors are therefore likely to keep Chinese international students immersed in Chinese culture and hinders Chinese international students’ adaptation to American academic environment and American society. Such interaction will not be beneficial for their future development in the United States.
Evan Zhu felt that he cannot help but feel obligated to do more than the contract stated job duties for a graduate assistant. He often felt he was doing jobs that is beyond the written requirements for his position. He described the difference he felt between American supervisors and Chinese supervisors “America is all about contract. You are my supervisor, I should respect your opinion at work, but it is equally important that you follow the rule. As long as you respect your supervisor within a range, you are fine to have your own opinion. … But with Chinese supervisors, I tend to follow your rule, I’d like to listen to you about your opinion. Because I think this is the rule [for Chinese], you are the professor.” Because his supervisor is also Evan’s dissertation committee chair, his advisor was very involved in Evan’s whole dissertation process, from selecting research topic to choosing committee chair as well as what Evan is allowed to communicate with other committee members. When talking about the amount of pressure his supervisor put on him, Evan mentioned “He just want to do something new, something he had never done before. He believes this direction, is a hot topic, so he wants me to do it, which wasn’t in his research expertise, so I had to explore on myself. Because he thought it is a hot topic, he did not want me to share the idea and results. So he did not want me to communicate with other committee [members].” Evan does not think his doctoral study process was smooth even though he admits that his supervisor had provided great help during his study. Evan added that because of the close personal relationship between the Chinese students and professors, Chinese students tend to expect more and rely more on help from their supervisors or advisors, which he does not believe is a reasonable expectation on American supervisors or advisors. Ding Fei mentioned that she was asked to deal with her supervisor’s personal business so frequently that caused her mentally and
physically exhausted. “She is not considerate, like on very hot days, maybe 80-90 degrees outside. She would let you stay outside to work, not giving you time to rest. She would not consider for you, and she does not know to encourage people. … she is very stubborn, if she thinks the thing is right then it is right, no matter what you say, she would not think you are right. So you don’t feel any sense of achievement no matter what you have done. … at the beginning I tried to argue with her [about the problems], but later I just accept what she said. ” Interaction with her Chinese supervisor gave her a hard time and she considered quitting in her third semester.

Tian Yao gave some positive comments on her Chinese supervisor as very proactive to help her from study to adaptation to the new environment. For instance, Tian Yao’s supervisor would share journal articles with Yao to help her learn about a topic. Tian Yao appreciated the kind of help and considered it much more efficient than just being required to read a certain amount of journal articles each week. By the time of the interview, Yao was in her second year of master’s program, but she expressed her willingness to continue working with her current supervisor in the same doctoral program. Yao admitted that her supervisor was the biggest reason that she considered to continue her education in her university.

Interactions with American faculty members are mostly satisfying from both SSAH and STEM participants. However, misunderstanding between participants and the faculty did exist in some circumstances. Jiahua shared how her relationship with one of her supervisors changed dramatically. In the first semester, Jiahua took her first course with her current supervisor, she remembered doing poorly in class in their first class meeting. Jiahua did not finish her in-class assignment so she wanted to tell her supervisor
that she was still getting used to the environment. But her supervisor told Jiahua that she should transfer to another university because there were no classes that fit Jiahua’s previous education background. Jiahua considered her supervisor very rude in their first encounter. It took a long time for their relationship to become better until they both became new mothers. Jiahua said she felt her supervisor finally could understand her as a mother, and because their daughters went to the same kindergarten they have some common topics beyond work. As their relationship has gotten closer, they care and talk more about each other’s life. The changes in the relationship with her supervisor also resulted in changes in her supervisor’s attitudes to Jiahua’s academic work. The supervisor became more supportive and provided more direct help upon her request since they had the new personal connection.

Coco gave another example of misunderstanding between her and her advisor. When Coco was a new student, she did not understand the appointment system in the United States. She often walked by her advisor’s office without appointment she did not know why her advisor was not friendly at the beginning until she found out later that her advisor was busy and preferred a scheduled appointment for her visit. Ever since then Coco would make an appointment before she goes to her advisor’s office. Evan agreed on Coco’s experience by commenting on the appointment system that “it seemed to be a very slow when you used it for the first time, but when you get used to doing so, you felt it is actually very efficient.”

In this study, the researcher found that participants from SSAH programs and STEM programs have some common challenges but these challenges varied in some degrees across the two groups.
Academic writing. American institutions hold a higher standard for academic writing across all levels, namely undergraduate, master’s and doctor’s programs. Various degrees of previous experiences with academic writing makes a difference in terms of challenges that Chinese students receive in American higher education. Participants with a master’s degree more or less have some experience in research and academic writing, which helped them complete writing and research assignments in American institutions. Those who came to American universities right after graduation from high schools in China, received training for academic writing as a common requirement for undergraduate students in their institutions. Such writing courses helped undergraduate participants get familiar with academic writing quickly and enabled them to complete writing assignments in other courses. Ana Li recalled her experience of being pushed in her writing class, and that helped her writing to improve. “I remember after I took the English 102 class, my English writing advanced rapidly. I can start writing on a topic right after I read it.”

However, it was found that participants who came to American universities or colleges after receiving their undergraduate degrees from Chinese institutions were subject to more academic shock compared to their peers in another two levels. Unlike undergraduate Chinese internationals who are like blank paper, Chinese master’s students have some knowledge about what higher education is in China, but were challenged by the new settings and practices in American higher education. At the same time, according to the participants in this study, none of the master’s students were required to take any kind of academic writing training, which left them confused and struggling with writing assignments in their courses. Wolin Wang mentioned an unforgettable experience in a
class. In one of his proposal assignment, he was required to write the ‘research problem’ and ‘research question’ at the beginning of his proposal. However, in Chinese both ‘problem’ and ‘question’ can be translated to the same Chinese phrase “问题 (wen ti)” which means ‘problem’ or ‘question’. Wolin thought these two sections should be the same thing, so he did not write the research question, which cost him to lose 10 points in his final project. Although the demands of academic writing in American institutions are also challenging for Chinese doctoral students who have little study experience in the United States, their previous research and publication experiences helped them to learn and adapt to the new demanding academic environment.

*English proficiency*. English was a common challenge for the participants to study in American universities. Although participants struggled with different aspects of English, it was most often found that English writing skill was considered the most common challenging among the participants from both SSAH group and STEM group, with speaking being the second most challenging skill for both group. According to the five-level scale of English Language Proficiency Standards for Adult Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), English proficiency level of five participants (including Xiao Ou, who worked at the writing center) is at least level 4. English writing was no exceptional a big challenge for these five participants, though their perceived challenge of writing in English may come from higher-end English problems. The between-group difference lies in listening and reading. Two participants from the SSAH programs think reading is a challenge, but none from the STEM programs thinks it as an issue. However, two participants from the STEM programs think listening is a challenge. In comparison, only one from SSAH considers that listening is a challenge.
After further analysis, it was found that the total length of staying in the U.S or other English-speaking countries along with their current overall English proficiency level affects participants’ perceptions about their own language skills. Jiahua started learning English when she was four years old. She studied English during undergraduate study and became an English instructor after graduation. Later she achieved her master’s degree in TESOL from the United Kingdom. According to Jiahua’s own comments and the researcher’s observation of her English proficiency level, her English level was at advanced level. Although she thought that writing was an issue, the problems she described mainly existed in choosing the best sentence structures in academic writing. Jiahua said, “The difference between me and my supervisor is that the sentence structures she used have an academic feeling. I might be able to use the right vocabulary, but my sentence structures are still very simple.”

Complexity of disclosure and demands on producing native-like English expressions also influenced participants’ self-perception about their language skills. Both Zhang Min and Zhao Cheng who taught at their department as teaching assistants, both considered speaking a difficult task. But it is partly due to the high demand of English speaking while teaching. Cheng mentioned that sometimes he could not produce native-like sentences when he speaks English with others, although he did not consider speaking an obstacle of communication. Complexity of the conversation influences speakers’ perception about their speaking skill. Wolin Wang admits that although he achieved similar scores in TOEFL and GRE with Zhang Min, his English expression was less complex and less fluent compared to Zhang Min. Zhao Cheng thinks he had little problem discussing familiar topics about his major but he encountered some problems.
with expressing his point when discussing about random topics. Xin Qiji and Anthony think they had little problem understanding terminologies in text-books but not so for topics they have not learned in China.

Two participants who have stayed in the United States for longer than four years expressed their concern about advanced writing skills. For instance, Ana Li, who came to the United States since sixth grade, thinks writing was a challenge before she took the English writing class in college. She still thinks choosing the right vocabulary and phrasing sometimes causes trouble in her writing. Jiahua thinks her phrasing needs some improvement as well.

Grammar was only mentioned by Jiahua as an issue; however, she thinks her grammar issue has been improved and no longer a big concern. This result might be due to the grammar-centered instruction commonly found in Chinese English classes. However, Jiahua’s comment on her grammar knowledge might be due to her high standard for herself due to her goal of writing academically like her American professors.

*Academic demands for background knowledge about America.* Participants in SSAH programs, such as mass communication, communication study, and curriculum and instruction, expressed their interest and pressure to learn about the American society and its culture. Zhang Min made a good point that represents these participants’ attitudes to the new environment and new culture. “I think because we are studying social sciences, this thing [society and culture] is required more by many aspects. And on the other hand, this is the reason why you come.” Wolin Wang from the Mass Communication program felt the same way in regards to understanding American society and culture. Unlike Zhang Min, Wolin Wang did not receive much help from his
American classmates, nor did he have any teaching experience in his program. He mainly relied on class discussions and the internet to learn about American society and culture. In contrast, STEM participants hardly recall occasions when their classes called for knowledge about American society.

*Perceived importance for knowledge about American society and culture.* The attitudes of participants, who have stayed in the United States for a longer period (greater than four years), to American culture and society vary depending on their fields of study. In social sciences and humanities, participants felt obligated to or intentionally learned more about American society and its culture of which they achieved a better understanding. As Zhao Cheng stated, “You need to know something about America. And recently I became interested in fake news … I follow all kinds of news. If I do not follow these things, but it’s necessary to follow this. It is very necessary. If you do not know, your research is going to be disconnected from reality.” Zhang Min thinks her teaching job put her in a position where she has to learn more about hot topics in American’s today and past.

In terms of teaching, American students’ thinking are very active. Like the public speaking class that I taught, a very useful course. It requires the instructor to have advanced speaking skills and a good knowledge [about American culture]. … Controversial topics like abortion, gun control, medical-use marihuana, and prostitution are often chosen. In China, such topics would not be allowed to be talked about in the public. But American students can choose these, also including age for drinking, these are all differences. You as the instructor, if you are not open-minded … if you can’t handle topics like this, you cannot give students
guidance. So I think I learned a lot, open-mindness to all kinds of culture. LGBT is another hot topic. When students proposed on such topics, I felt that American students are indeed different.

When he mentioned about this guy’s name, he is a black boy from Mississippi. … This event caused American’s civil movements. In my study, when this name is mentioned, my American classes all know what’s going on, but I don’t know that. I grew up in China, there is no way I had followed on American black’s civil movements. To me, my brain was blank on that. There is an example of a lesbian … who caused people’s attention to LGBTQ. All American students knew it, but I don’t, this is cultural differences that I met. I had to Google them, to make up on my background knowledge, so I can understand what my professor is talking about. I often had such issues in this class. I have another visual communication [class]. It is an image, then you had to explain its rhetoric. But this image makes immediate sense to Americans, but I’m a foreigner, I can’t understand.

Knowledge of American society and culture is crucial to their attitude change to the new environment. However, because STEM students tend to have more Chinese peers (faculty and students) in their departments, they are less likely to see an urgent need to learn about the American society and culture, instead, they feel sufficient and comfortable staying with the Chinese social networking. Their current understanding and assumptions about American society and its culture did not hinder their study and research. Kobe mentioned that knowing about American people and their culture are not necessary for doing research in his field, and actually he would prefer not to taking the risks. “We may not
focus on practical things [today’s practices of the business field], we actually have little idea of what American companies are like. … for instance, leadership, there is a great difference between China and America. … if you want to do it, you can. But as a student, it is so complicated, so difficult. … You put culture as a mediator factor, but if you want to get some results that specifically show cultural differences, I think it is risky.”

*Participation in class.* Among the eight participants who commented on their participation in classes, four of them tried to either answer questions or contribute to group discussion whenever they could understand the topics. The other reason that four other participants did not participate in class frequently is that Chinese students are not used to asking questions and making comments in class due to the lecture-based teaching style found in Chinese universities. Kobe mentioned that his professors did not encourage students to ask questions in class. Regardless of their desire to participate, English has limited their participation to various extents. Anthony said sometimes he knew the answer and really wanted to say the answer; however, he did not know how to express his point clearly to the class. English again hinders participation in comprehension. Coco cannot participate because sometimes has not finished reading the material before her group mates started to discuss. Both Coco and Xin Qiji mentioned being given the easiest part in group projects because their American group mates worried about their English skills. Overall, new students and students with low English proficiency are likely to be less active to participate in class.

Kobe, Xin Qiji, Zhang Min, Coco, Ding Fei, and Zhao Cheng all commented about asking questions in class. Zhao Cheng said it was a good practice to ask question in class. Except for Zhao Cheng, the other five participants were not used to asking
questions in class due to their previous education experience in China. Xin Qiji explained why he struggled to participate in class.

The teaching style is also different. In China the teaching activities are very uniformed, we are all familiar with what to do first and what’s next. And [here] we have to ask questions, but [in China] we just sat in class without asking any question. But he [American professor] wants us to ask. I thought for a while about what to ask, then I forgot [my question], really nothing to ask.”

Culture shock. All participants had more or less culture shock during their stay in Mississippi. Common cultural shock issues reported by these participants are mostly due to their previous living environment. All fourteen participants have lived or worked in urban areas in China. Specifically, five participants are from Beijing, three are from Shanghai, two from Nanjing. The other four participants are from the second tier cities in China. Xiao Ou was the only one who considered the living condition in Mississippi is better than his home city though he did complain about the public transportation system and food. Other participants all appreciated their living experiences in Mississippi as a peaceful and less stressful place to live. Ding Fei commented on such living environment that “this is a good place for study and living.” Mississippi is considered as a comfortable place to live; however, it can be inconvenient sometimes because of the public transportation system. Zhang Min mentioned that public transportation service has caused inconvenience in her learning experience in Mississippi. “It is very inconvenient, and I haven’t been in such a remote place like this. The academic atmosphere is closing. To go to another place is not easy. … I don’t have a car, it is very difficult to go outside. I have to go to New Orleans first and then take a flight there.”
Transportation seems to be the most common issue that all participants had when they first came to Mississippi. All these participants live in Chinese cities where public transportation is a common service. However, in the three cities where the selected institutions are located, the public transportation is not very common. Instead, local people all rely on themselves for transportation. International students who just came to Mississippi do not have a car, nor do they have a Mississippi driver’s license. Applying for a local driver’s license is also challenging as the traffic rules are not completely the same with the rules in China. Meanwhile, preparing the tests as well as the application documents can be very confusing for new international students. These participants mentioned having to ask friends or people from local churches who have cars to take them there.

Food became another big issue according to the participants in this study. Because the cafeterias on the three campuses mainly serve American food, which most participants were not used to. Chinese participants also reported unable to find satisfying food from the Chinese restaurant in Mississippi. Partly this is due the fact that many Chinese restaurants are opened by Chinese immigrants from Fujian Province in China. In addition to that the chefs have modified the recipes to better fit American customer’s taste, which tastes very strange for Chinese international students who grew up in other area of the country. None of the fourteen participants are from Fujian area. Instead, some participants learned to cook Chinese food for themselves to prevent themselves from missing the food in China. However, most participants mentioned that they did not know how to cook before they came to Mississippi. In addition, the ingredients they can use to cook Chinese home-style food are also limited in the local Asian grocery stores. Ding Fei
mentioned that she sometimes had to drive two hours to another city in Mississippi to do grocery shopping during the weekend. The Chinese restaurants in their cities also did not serve Although food did not become a direct reason for any participants to leave Mississippi, food along with other Chinese elements were mentioned by several participants as factors to be considered when they choose their next destination in the United States. When being asked about her preferred destination for her graduate study, Coco said she wanted to go to places like California, where there are many Chinese.

“Food is important, many Chinese restaurants gives me a sense of familiarity.”

Not having enough activities for fun is another common complaint by the participants. Rachel thinks radio game is one of the few entertainment activities that Americans have. “If you don’t play this, it’d be really boring” Rachel said one of her friend, who was in her second semester in Mississippi, decided to discontinue her study in Mississippi because she can no longer tolerate the life of studying in Mississippi.

Making appointments and communicating through email are also things that participants had to learn to get used to. “At the beginning I felt it is so low-efficient. But later I realized because it is the matter of responsibility” Coco mentioned that she did not know that she had to make appointments first each time she needed help from her advisor, her advisor’s attitude was not good each time Coco went to her advisor’s office. “It took me a very long time to understand why his attitude was not good. Gradually I learned that I have to make appointments. Ever since I made appointments, his attitudes really changed.” Evan Zhu did not understand why Americans used email so often rather than telephone. Later he learned to understand and appreciate this method of contacting people. Evan commented, “It actually is a very high-efficient method, even though under
many circumstances it seem to be very low-efficient. … when you write emails, you will think carefully about what you want to say, you have to consider your phrasing. And later I have learned that the reason why Americans prefer such a slow way, it is because that it is there responsibility [to deliver the accurate information], that’s why Americans seem to be so slow.”

Though participants cannot help but having those negative impressions about Mississippi due to their previous life experiences in China, they all became more understanding and perceived Mississippi more positively as they stayed longer in Mississippi. Participants most often mentioned that they think people in Mississippi are nice to them.

Experiences of being treated unequally. When being asked about experiences of being discriminated or treated unequally based on their race, nine participants remembered being racially discriminated on campus or off-campus. Among nine, only one participant mentioned being discriminated by faculty members on campus. Anthony reported being racially discriminated twice in his Intensive English Program (IEP) classes. There was a time when Anthony was late for his IEP class, the instructor, who was originally from a Middle Eastern country did not allow Anthony enter the classroom and said Anthony was always late for his class, but Anthony remembered that was his first time ever being late for class. Before this conflict, Anthony also experienced being unfairly judged by this instructor. The instructor said something in class, some students laughed because they thought it was funny. According to Anthony’s description, this Middle Eastern instructor is racist toward people from East Asian countries. “I think this is not culture difference, I think he is racist. Because students from other countries, for
example, European students were fine to laugh, but Asian students can’t. He only asked why Asian students laughed but he didn’t ask European students. Everybody laughed, he only asked Asian students, Korean, Chinese, Japanese.”

Other episodes of discrimination happened both on campus and off campus. Occasions on campus are often caused by staff members or other American students. Coco encountered racist students on campus. There was a time when Coco was studying in a building on campus, she heard a student behind her saying that he hates China. The student told his friends how ridiculous his Chinese teacher was, because his teacher kept talking about Taiwan and China. “There are so many guys at that table, actually I cannot help but wanting to ask him why he said that, but I worried that I can’t express my point clearly, so I did not go.” The other time, Coco went to a business office on campus to meet a staff member. The American student at the front desk was not patient because he could not understand Coco’s meaning. Then the American student said ‘no’ in Chinese to Coco in a very impolite way. Although later when Coco met the staff member, the staff member comforted her for what happened, she still felt very upset.

Rachel also felt disrespected by her American friends in Mississippi. Rachel and her sister heard stereotypes about Chinese people and China very often during their stay at the private religious institution. “They are joking, but they made us feel uncomfortable. Then they would say do Chinese people speak ‘ching chong chang,’ We heard lots of things like this. ... At the beginning, in 2006 or 2007, they would ask if your home connected to internet. Do you have this at home, you don’t you have this? In their impression, they did not have a comprehensive understanding of China, but they made judgments.”
Wolin Wang felt an employee at Starbucks on campus held accent bias against him. “I went there to buy coffee every morning, so the cashier knows me already, so later I do not need to tell her what I need. She would ask same as usual? And just places the order for me. But there was one time that employees didn’t work that day. Then a black fat lady took my order. I said I want venti iced coffee. She said she did not understand me. I said venti iced coffee. She said, ‘I totally cannot understand what you are talking about’ and her facial expression showed she became impatient. After I said two or three times, the person who prepares the coffee said ‘oh, I know him, he wants venti iced coffee. Then she (the cashier) said ‘ah, you want this!’” Ding Fei also reported similar experiences of being disrespected by staff on campus.

The rest of the participants reported they were discriminated at off-campus sites. For instance, Ding Fei mentioned that she was discriminated based on race on the court and she believed that the judge was racist because he did not approve her appeal as well some black people’s appeals. Ding Fei felt the judge did not respect her when she handed her appeal material to him. After her appeal was rejected, an intern lawyer who listened to her defense told her that he thought Ding Fei had made an excellent defense with sufficient evidence but he told her “this is Mississippi” and recommend her to accept the decision. Anthony mentioned he and his friend were verbally insulted based on their country of origin by an American man at Walmart. Kobe mentioned he was ignored when he tried to say thanks to a bus driver. “You will find it’s very obviously that their attitude to Americans is good. For example, when I get off the bus with Americans. He would say something to them, but when I said [thanks] to him, he did not even look at you.”

Although color and country of origin do not always cause discrimination, the
effects of being a foreigner do show in everyday situations. Evan Zhu did not recall himself being racially discriminated but he mentioned his international student status has placed him at a disadvantage position to compete in the job markets. For instance, language is an example of his disadvantage. Legal status to work in the United States is the common concern when companies hire international candidates. Xiao Ou mentioned that he was given a higher price than that local people got when he was shopping at a market.

Although most participants more or less had some unpleasant experiences due to their race or country of origin, five participants still believed their campuses were relatively safe from racial discrimination. “I think it is fine doing research, because there isn’t so many biases, so in school is fine.” “I don’t often have such feelings from faculty in the department, but staff in administrative departments, sometimes they may show it (bias or prejudices against you).” Both Wolin and Jiahua also think it is relatively less frequent to experience discriminations on campus.

*Social support.* Supervisors, classmates, friends or roommates, staff or office-mate in the department, family are found to be the main social support groups. Churches are another sources of social support for those who believe in Christianity. In this study, eight participants reported received help from their supervisors. Six participants received help from classmates in the United States, and one participant mentioned having emotional support from her former classmates in China, such as research support, information about living. Friends or roommates are equally important in providing help and support as seven participants received help from their friends or roommates in the United States. Seven participants sought help from Chinese classmates, friends or
roommates. Three participants mentioned they were supported by their family members as well during their adaptation process at Mississippi. Three participants reported received help from staff or officemates within their department. The three participants who have religious beliefs also mentioned people they met at the churches provided direct help or emotional supports.

Four participants mentioned having an emergency situation in Mississippi, and indicated that they all sought help from their American connections rather than relying on the Chinese peers from whom they usually received help. Jiahua had to deal with a car accident off-campus, and the first person she contacted was the secretary in her department. The secretary helped her to talk to the police officer at the accident site and also helped Jiahua with the claim process to the insurance company. The other case Jiahua sought help from this secretary was when Jiahua was helping her friend deal with another car accident experienced by a visiting scholar at her institution. When dealing with emergency situations like this, American friends can help solve the problem more quickly. Evan Zhu remembered requesting an assistance from a local hospital when he had to pay for a surgery. He did not seek help from his Chinese friends, instead he relied on staff at the hospital completely. Emergency situations like this are not so common, especially for Chinese internationals to encounter, it is therefore not likely to find timely help from Chinese peers. Their American friends know and can deal with the situations better than Chinese friends. When Chinese students cannot find help from Americans in emergency situations, they might rely on themselves. In another case, Ding Fei, after being ticketed, did not receive any help, and instead she searched information online and prepared herself for an appeal in the court. “I asked my [Chinese] supervisor, but she
didn’t know about it either. And when I mentioned it, I said I have evidences, I think I should appeal, she didn’t even believe I can. She thinks I should just pay the ticket, and why should I appeal, so I did not receive too much understanding.”

*Dissatisfactions with studying in Mississippi.* When being asked whether there was anything that they are unsatisfied with their institution, only three participants mentioned they were overall satisfied with their education experience so far. According to the interviews, most participants perceived their institution’s support for international students as insufficient. For instance, four participants think the orientation service for international students in their host institutions failed to efficiently prepare them for the academic settings. Participants also mentioned that the extra curriculum activities organized by their institutions are very limited in terms of variety and inclusiveness to local communities. “Nobody organized activities like that. … I think maybe there isn’t many people here or something like that, including Chinese, international student organizations. Their activities are nothing but having dinners together.” Wolin Wang’s comments on this issue are aligned with Kobe’s point, “I think all facility hours are not good, I think the facility hours are different from most Chinese people’s schedule. I think Americans like staying up late, seriously. Libraries opens from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Saturday. It opens from 12 p.m. to 2 a.m. I can understand why the open hours are like that on Sunday, because they might go to churches on Sunday. But Saturday, it closes at 6 p.m. Then what should I do after 6 p.m.? And the gym is closed after 6 p.m. as well. ... It didn’t seem to put international students’ situation into consideration. Unlike Americans going home, [spending time with] friends or family, we don’t have so many connections like this, so I became isolated.”
Multiple participants from both SSAH group and STEM group reported having to depend on themselves. “All in all I felt it was difficult to have to ask, to figure things out by myself, and find help from co-nationals.” Rachel mentioned the assistance remained unsatisfying in her institution, she mentioned “In my university, new students like exchange students from China. They still asks Chinese studying here, because Americans didn’t even realize the need to explain to you. Many younger students would ask me where do I find the deadline for drop this class, can we drop. They don't know anything, there wasn’t a good orientation available.”

Three participants expressed their dissatisfaction with some of the academic support and resources at their institution. For example, Evan Zhu did not think he received enough training on his academic writing, which almost caused him to fail his dissertation defense. “I had this issue during my dissertation defense, one committee member did not approve my defense. He did not want to sign. He said my writing quality is too bad, which later caused my supervisor’s attention to it. Of course I admit I should take a big responsibility for that, but I think my supervisor unavoidably have responsibility too. Because during my doctoral study, I did not receive enough training on academic writing].” On the one hand, Evan’s supervisor did not encourage him to do research for publication due to his supervisor’s preference to use research results to make profits. Instead, Evan was asked to spend most of his time in the laboratories. On the other hand, Evan’s supervisor was not capable of giving enough corrections nor feedback on Evan’s dissertation writing due to his own limited English proficiency. Evan’s study and work experience caused him to have a great challenge while writing his dissertation. Ana also shared her experience of not having enough academic assistance during her
study. She wished to find more help on her statistics knowledge but was not aware of what resources were available on campus.

Two participants had experiences of not being allowed to customize their plan of study due to limitation of credit hours per semester. Ana Li was not allowed to take higher level class because her AP (advanced placement) credits was not delivered to the institution. Because the course that Ana wanted to enroll in usually filled up very quick, Ana wanted to override the system to enroll in the advanced level class and transfer the AP credits later when it is delivered. However, her department chair would not allow her to do so. “I was really angry at that time. I spent so much time taking college courses* (advanced placement classes) in high school just to avoid wasting time on them again in college.” Xiao Ou wanted to take more courses than the maximum credit hour limit for international students in his institution, but the dean in his college did not approve his request. From the researcher’s point of view, although neither of these two supervisors made the right decision under the university policy, in the future institutions could consider allowing exceptional students to have chances to apply advanced level classes or taking more than approved number of classes given that their grade and work are not damaged, especially since time and finance are common concerns for international students.

The other issue in regards to coursework is the recommendation of courses by academic advisors. Rachel mentioned that in both of her undergraduate programs, her supervisors at both universities did not take the real learning difficulties for Chinese international students into consideration when making suggestions for course registration. “I think, in terms of your advisor choosing classes for you, they made the mistake of not
considering Chinese students. They think biology is the easiest class, because they think physics or chemistry can be very difficult, for American students.” Also, Rachel mentioned that in her first institution, her advisor assumed that she already knew how to drop a class when she did not feel confident of completing it, when in fact Rachel did not even know that she had that option until one semester later, which caused her grade to be sacrificed. Her advisors assumed that she knew everything when in fact she did not know enough at the beginning for her to live and study in Mississippi.

It is interesting to find that although the majority of participants in the current study had some complaints about their host institutions in terms of assistance provided to international students, only a few of them have expressed their expectations for improvements. In Evan’s words: “But if you think about it from the other way, this is something really difficult to be changed. This is a very difficult thing. … So overall, it [the assistance by the institution] is acceptable.” When facing difficulties due to insufficient assistance, these participants also tend to compare their higher education experience in the United States with their previous experience in Chinese institutions. “Compared with domestic [Chinese] institutions, they have done a pretty decent job.” This could explain why not every Chinese internationals are expecting changes by their institution. Also, from the interviews, all Chinese students’ attitudes to adaptation to their universities is mostly their own responsibilities instead of seeking or expecting help from their universities. In other words, they took adaptation as their own responsibility.

However, among those who expressed their expectations for improvements, two participants hoped their institution would hire someone that performs like advisors in Chinese, who takes care of every aspects of a student’s living and learning experiences.
Evan thinks person like this would be especially important for undergraduate Chinese international students. Both Evan and Jiahua believe having professionals who understands Chinese culture and Chinese students well would be necessary and helpful.

**Strategies and adaptation processes**

*Attitudes to American culture.* As mentioned earlier that participants from SSAH group and STEM group consider the significance of learning about American society and culture differently, with participants in the STEM group felt less urgent to be involved in American community. It was found in this study that participants in STEM programs did not consider American culture and society a necessary component to learn even though they have realized that culture has hindered their interaction with American people. This is partly due to that they had enough Chinese peer support, and felt sufficient to study and live with the Chinese peers, so they are less likely to live outside their Chinese community. Their adaptation to American higher education are limited to an earlier stage.

The conversation with Kobe led to a concern about another side effect of interacting with Chinese peers only. When being asked about career goals after graduation, Kobe showed his confidence, which was the only case of being confident about his career life in the United States. Besides the fact that he has only been in Mississippi for one semester and a total length of one year and a half in the United States, he also interacted predominantly with Chinese students. As he mentioned in the interview, more than half of the students in his department are Chinese international students.

Due to their initial attitudes to adapting to the mainstream society during their studying in American higher education, their cultural adaptation attitudes and strategies
in a later stage are less likely to change. Because of the vicious cycle of interacting with primarily co-nationals, when they get a new job they are likely to group with co-nationals or coworkers who share similar culture, which prevented them from further involving in the new working environment after graduation. Without moving out of the comfort zone, Chinese international students are likely to have a difficult time fitting in American mainstream culture. Having little experience of interacting with population from other cultures will not help with Chinese international students’ future development in the diverse American society.

Zhao Cheng struggled to adapt to the new environment. He personally thinks he should be more involved in the new environment, however, due to the negative impression he had about Mississippi when he first arrived here. “It doesn’t feel like a very tolerant environment, once it is intolerant, you can barely have a good attitude to it, not very interested. But this really is a complicated problem, saying the culture is intolerant, it doesn’t mean people in it are not tolerant. Hattiesburg is relatively tolerant, because it is a college town. More people voted Hillary compared to Trump. But it varies from person to person. [In] a so conservative, so hard-core, so red state, there still can be very liberal people … very intelligent, very open person. But sometimes you just cannot doubt your first impression. … I, as a visitor, definitely have space to improve myself. This is also a kind of prejudice, thinking the South a very closing, under-developed, very red-neck place. … This is what I have been struggling, but it still feels difficult, to judge each individual objectively and independently. So I think I was defeated by Mississippi, I still can’t overcome [my old prejudices].” Zhao Cheng has a positive attitude to adapt to the new environment; however, his limited communication with local people in
Mississippi as well as constantly comparing Mississippi with Minnesota has prevented him from completely accepting and adapting to Mississippi.

The researcher noticed that most participants found themselves being changed by the new environment to some extent. Ding Fei just returned from China when we met, and she said she became no longer used to the traffic in her home city, and felt Mississippi is a nice place to live. Fei said “Here though there’s no mall, only supermarket. But during weekend I can drive five hours to Atlanta and then come back. And just go to cities once in a while and rest of time just live in the town, such life is fine. It’s good for you to do research. … It is a good place to study and live.” Kobe mentioned that he learned table manners from his American supervisor. Coco felt that she considers about other people more. Respecting other’s privacy and other’s opinion is what Evan Zhu became used to. Ana Li and Ding Fei both mentioned that their way of dressing changed after staying in Mississippi. Ana had even more changes than the rest of participants.

Because I had little contacts with Chinese since 13 years old, I no longer know much about their culture. Now I only use Chinese when I communicate with my family. I don’t remember my friends in elementary school. I have no friends when I went back. … And I am no longer used to the way of doing things in China. For example, there is no drier there, now I can’t imagine doing laundry without dryer. This time I went back home, my dad told me to hang my clothes, I couldn’t tolerate the thirty minutes of hanging clothes. I want to go back to America, I need dryer.

Adopted strategies for adaptation. Seven of the fourteen participants adopted a
separation strategy in their adaptation to Mississippi. Another six participants adopted an integration strategy in Mississippi. There was only one participant who was recognized as using an assimilation strategy. None of the participants in this study adopted marginalization strategy. Although Ana Li thought herself having very limited interaction with both Chinese peers and American peers, from her use of language during the interview as well as her attitudes to practices of both culture of origin and host culture, the researcher considered her adopting an assimilation strategy.

The data collected from interviews supported the researcher’s assumption that students from SSAH fields should be more often found than those from STEM fields adopting an integration strategy. Specifically, five participants from SSAH adopted an integration strategy, whereas only two from STEM adopted an integration strategy. Instead, participants from STEM fields were more often found using a separation strategy. Four participants in the STEM programs adopted a separation strategy in comparison to two participants in SSAH programs.

However, two other factors stood out and were found to be significant in Chinese international students’ adaptation, namely, total length of stay in the United States and English proficiency. An individual’s total length of stay in the United States was found to be the most dominant influencing factor toward adaptation. English proficiency is often positively correlated with international students’ total length of stay in the United States. Regardless of fields of study, low English proficiency in general has more connections with adapting a separation strategy with only one exceptional case of Zhao Cheng. As mentioned earlier, Zhao Cheng’s adaptation strategy is partly due to his prejudice against Mississippi caused by his constant comparison between Minnesota and Mississippi. All
the three first-year Chinese international students in this study were found to be using a separation strategy whose English is an issue of interacting with Americans. Both Wolin Wang and Kobe mentioned that their English proficiency was inadequate to support them having a smooth conversation with Americans. Xin Qiji’s interaction with his American office-mates was also limited to asking some simple questions. The other explanation of why more participants from SSAH adopted an integration strategy is the higher demand for knowledge of American culture and English skills.

The time effect of staying in the United States was also strongly supported by the two cases who have stayed in Mississippi for over eight years. When comparing the ages of these two participants, the researcher has found that the younger an individual came to the United States, the more likely he or she will adhere to practices of American culture. Although Ana Li stayed in Mississippi three years shorter than Rachel, Ana came to Mississippi when she was in sixth grade whereas Rachel came to Mississippi during her last year in high school. The younger an individual is, the more likely he or she will accept and adhere to the new culture. In Ana’s case, she came to Mississippi when her values and world views were forming. Though Ana’s mother used to be a Ph.D. student in her institution, she did not recall having much connection with Chinese peers due to her age. “I was the only one who came here in middle school. And I am not American Asian. Neither did I come here for college. So most Chinese here are college students, right? I cannot hang out with them. I was so young, and there was no Chinese in my school, so you couldn't really find people to communicate.” So she was exposed to American culture for the most of her time in Mississippi because she went to middle school and high school with no other Chinese peers around. Ana did not meet her best
friend in America, who is Asian American, until second year in high school. By then Ana
has already become assimilated by American culture with little influence of Asian
culture. In college, Ana did not take any classes with Chinese professors, nor did she
work with any Chinese supervisors. She considered herself more like American born
Chinese (ABC) than Chinese international students. “I think in college, the Chinese
faculty members considered me an ‘ABC’, just like Americans. I came to college like
other Americans. And they never heard me speaking Chinese.” This is why Ana has
shown signs of being assimilated such as her attitudes to practices in host culture and her
language use.

Rachel’s English is also fluent thanks to her immersion experiences in her
previous institution. She had no Chinese peers but her sister in college. During holidays
and breaks they usually stayed with an American host family. The immersion experiences
have not only helped Rachel to learn English but also the Mississippi culture. However,
as Rachel mentioned, her social network changed since she went to her second university,
where there was a large Chinese international student population. She had more
interactions with other Chinese friends, and exposed to Chinese culture more often than
before, so her Chinese heritage was reinforced in the new school. However, compared to
other participants who have adopted an integration strategy, Rachel has a deeper
understanding about practices in American culture, perhaps due to her previous long-term
immersion experiences in American culture.

Attempts to adapt the new environment. Although participants were found using
different adaptation strategies, some common solutions were adopted regardless of the
different strategies they used.
Improving English

All participants considered English as an issue to their adaptation process to American higher education. These participants reported improving their English skills for their adaptation academically and socially. Tian Yao, Ana Li, and Ding Fei took advantage of watching American TV shows or YouTube videos when practicing their listening skills. Yao felt that following a YouTuber kept her interest of learning English from YouTube. Yao also mentioned using the services from the writing center on campus to improve her writing skills. Fei practiced her speaking skills by participating in the three-minute thesis competition held by the Graduate school. Fei enjoyed opportunities like this. “I felt my improvement is visible, I thought I should have gotten a reward for my second time. … To make audiences who had no knowledge about your field understand what you have done, I think it is a great skill. I really like this way. … You used only three minutes to make yourself be understood, the meaning of your study … I think it is a personal charm, something really awesome.” Fei also mentioned practicing speaking English by chatting frequently with her American office-mate. Some participants also used churches as a place to learn English. However, only Xiao Ou continued to use churches as a way of learning English because of his duty in the Chinese religious group.

Learning American culture

As mentioned earlier, the participants in STEM programs reported having a lower demand for knowledge about American society and culture. After further analysis, the researcher found that all participants respected American culture; however, beyond fields of study, participants’ perceived urgency to learning American culture vary based on
their motivations. Specifically, all participants from both SSAH and STEM showed integrative motivations to learn about American culture. Overall, participants in the SSAH had a higher integrative motivation than their peers in STEM. In terms of instrumental motivation, six of the seven participants in SSAH had instrumental motivations to learn American culture, whereas no participant from the STEM program showed any instrumental motivation. Kobe was the only one who reported feeling no motivation to learn about American culture for class purposes. This could be due to the fact that the interview with Kobe was conducted at the beginning of his second semester of study at his university. As he mentioned, most courses he had completed in his first semester were research foundation courses which did not require a background knowledge about American society and culture.

Ding Fei said “because I’m a science major. … My major horticulture is under the category of plant science. Plant science is science, so in science, American histories are rare.” “We are engineering majors … it is pure science. Like chemistry formula, physics calculations. As long as you understand the concepts, taking steps to do the calculation (you should be fine).”

It was found that though having little instrumental motivation to learn about American culture for class purposes, STEM majors who work on campus showed various degrees of integrative motivation to learn about American culture. Participants who were working with Chinese supervisors at the point of interview showed a lower integrative motivation to learn about American culture and hold a more neutral attitudes toward accepting American culture. For instance, Ding Fei and Tian Yao both worked with Chinese supervisors, they both reported having a passive attitude about learning and
immersing themselves in American culture. “I think I grew up with Chinese culture … It is not very unlikely for me to completely involve in their life. I don’t have the intention to do so either. … I think I respect other’s culture, but I won’t give up my culture of origin to involve in the new culture. I think that is impossible.” Evan Zhu mentioned his attitude change toward learning American society and culture due to his job change. Evan Zhu worked with a Chinese supervisor throughout his doctoral study. In his post-doc program, he was assigned to an American supervisor. He felt a higher pressure on improving his understanding about American culture and how to work with American coworkers. He felt more culturally competent to work with Americans and appreciated the authentic American working environment.

SSAH participants showed stronger instrumental and integrative motivations. As Zhang Min has highlighted “because I study social science, this is required by many aspects. But on the other hand, this is the purpose why you came here. ... I want to learn about American higher education system, what it is like, from undergraduate to graduate, then doctoral. I can learn about it from this program. … I want to be a professor in a university, either in the United States or in China. I think I benefited from these.” “If you have no relevant cultural background, history knowledge, like I’m choosing topic for my dissertation … I can’t do research on Americans”, Min added. When being asked about the need to learn about American culture and American people, though Zhao Cheng did not think it is directly required by his psychology courses, he felt it is necessary to deepen his understanding about American culture. “Psychology, is about human’s psychology, but in fact it is about American’s psychology. Because lots of data were collected from American samples. So psychology study is also a type of empiricism, because lots of
their conclusion are based on Americans, which may not apply to people around the world. So for example, a psychology experiment, you will have an interpretation about result, but in order to understand the interpretation, there are lots of cultural assumption in there.” Zhao Cheng also mentioned feeling the need to learn about American culture due to issues related to cultural background during his communication with American office-mates. Jiahua has an American friend who proofread her papers, which helped her improve her English grammar.

Involvement in the local community

Participants who have stayed in Mississippi for a longer period tend to appreciate the local culture more than those who came Mississippi more recently. Involvement in the local community was mentioned by the participants to better help themselves adapting to their life in Mississippi. Jiahua has a comprehensive strategy to learn about local culture and building connections with local people. She actively participated in activities within her department. She built connections with her coworkers beyond work. She would go to things like baby showers, or wedding of her coworkers. She also often took her children to cultural events in her city. Jiahua also goes to all kinds of churches to learn about their culture and meet people. Jiahua thinks her adaptation process to Mississippi was “enjoyable instead of painful.” Coco and Rachel mentioned hanging out with American friends they met in class or a student organization. Ana Li mentioned that she used to observe how her American classmates interacted with each other and learn to communicate with them in American ways.

Seeking help from professors and classmates

When facing academic challenges, most participants mentioned seeking help from
professors or classmates. Evan Zhu mentioned having to communicate with his classmates often for answers when he was taking courses in other departments. Rachel believed group works with American classmates helped her study. Rachel also received feedback on her English writing during group working.

*Using the “old tricks”*

Beyond finding help from American peers and professors, participants also commonly reported relying on their previous learning strategies. Participants mentioned using the learning strategies they used in China for their study in American universities. Hardworking seemed to be appreciated by all participants in this study. They mentioned having to spend extra time after class to prepare for class and complete course assignments. Xiao Ou used high school reading strategy when he read journal articles. He reread and focus on details of articles that are relevant to his study and required himself to be able to summarize the main idea of that article. Previous test-oriented education experiences seem to help with some participants to prepare for quizzes and exams in American universities. Xiao Ou also used his high school techniques of guessing quiz questions, which helped him achieve high grades in American universities. “From the first quiz, you can know what he taught was included in the test. You can focus on those aspects of the knowledge for next quiz.”

Some participants in STEM programs mentioned that using the third language such as formulas and symbols in physics, chemistries and math, which are universal in all countries, helped them understand course content even when they had more issues understanding their professors at the beginning of their study. Using English learning materials in China also helped STEM students with their adaptation to American classes.
Xin Qiji mentioned “Some courses used textbooks written in English. Some PowerPoint slides [that professor used] were in English. … Though he taught in Chinese, but reading English materials feels very common, not a problem. So I felt familiar when I see their learning materials.” Kobe mentioned one of his required course in his Chinese institution was taught in English because that course was offered to both domestic students and international students.

Think positively

Some participants mentioned when they felt depressed by difficulties while staying in Mississippi, they tended to think positively to support themselves to continue their study. Six participants mentioned using such will power to stop themselves from quitting. For instance, Zhang Min mentioned that having to teach undergraduate courses and taking graduate courses in her first semester was very challenging for her. However, she perceived it as a necessary step to adapt to the new environment. She appreciated the working opportunity that her department offered her, and she felt herself was improved and gained some teaching experiences. This finding connects with Yue’s (2010) and Zhou’s (2014) studies that Asian students were found maintaining a strong persistence when studying abroad.

Self-improvement

Facing the challenges and difficulties during their stay in Mississippi, three participants mentioned improving themselves to better fit in the new environment. Kobe thinks that some Americans still hold the stereotypes about Chinese, and do not recognize Chinese students’ ability. “I think we should not care too much about this. And you should improve yourself to be competent enough, and they will recognize your
achievement then.” Beyond English skills, Ding Fei wanted to learn new skills that she can take advantage of in the job market in the future. Junfei improved her cooking skills so she no longer felt missing the food in China.

*Attitudes to Chinese culture and the motherland.* When being asked about their current attitude to Chinese culture and China, all participants but Ana Li have a positive attitude to Chinese culture. However, Ana only expressed her preference to American lifestyle over Chinese lifestyle. Coco and Rachel both mentioned they cannot help but want to defend her country when they heard comments against Chinese culture and China.

All participants in this study are critical about China as well as the United States. No easy answer to which culture is preferred was found. Ana Li, Zhang Min, and Evan Zhu expressed their confidence about China’s future, though most participants agreed that there are certain aspects that China should improve based on the models the United States has provided. “We should compare and find what needs improvement. Like biases [about the United States], we should update our perception. … Though I don’t think it [the United States] is so special, won’t admire (it) so much. But we do have some places to improve.”

Jiahua thinks Chinese culture is very important to herself as well as her children. One of her child and goes to a local elementary, but Jiahua taught her at home. She taught all of her three children about traditional Chinese culture. “A person with heritage culture can better survive in this diverse society. Otherwise, a person without heritage culture feels like a rootless grass. So I’d protect heritage culture.”

*Plans after graduation and concerns about immigration policies.* Among those who indicated their plan after completing their current programs in their host institution,
nine participants intend to find a job or internship in another state. Rachel was the only one who was looking for a local job in Mississippi, partly due to her fiancé also looking for a local job when the interview was conducted. Four participants planned to continue their education in the United States with only one participant indicating her interest to pursue a higher degree in Mississippi. Tian Yao admitted that she considered continuing her education in the United States mainly due to her supervisor’s help. She wanted to continue to work for her current supervisor in her future doctoral program in her current institution.

Though planning to leave Mississippi, Ana Li and Anthony both have considered southern states as their next destination for future study. Both participants mentioned Texas as an ideal destination. Ana Li considered staying in the South because of the culture and life style she enjoyed in the South. Ana Li mentioned, “I definitely will consider the location. I think Texas is good, more modern than here, but still in the South. So I will be familiar with its culture, and it won’t be too cold. … it won’t be as crowded as big cities, and it is convenient, like Dallas, Houston.” Anthony considered Texas because some graduate programs for Civil Engineering in Texas have a high ranking in the nation.

It was found that participants’ intention to stay in the United States after graduation period did not indicate their perceived needs to adapt to the new environment. However, it can be used as a reference to interpret a participant’s perception of his or her current experience in Mississippi. For example, Evan Zhu mentioned that he did not consider his previous learning and working experience with the Chinese supervisor helpful to his future development in the United States. Chinese international students who
planned to seek a career in the United States after graduation may hold a more positive attitude and feel a stronger motivation to adapt to their institutions and to the American society. Similarly, those who consider applying for a green card or becoming an American citizen will have an even stronger motivation to adapt.

Although no participants in this study indicated a desire to leave the United States immediately after completing their current program, only two participants indicated little interest in returning to China after graduation. Seven participants indicated that their decision for immigration to the United States depends on their future career. Another five participants indicated no intention to become U.S. citizens. It could partly be due to China does not allow dual-nationality, which means Chinese international students will have to give up their Chinese nationality if they want to become American citizens. Instead, H-1B visa and Green card are the most common options considered by the participants who are interested in seeking a career in the United States.

It is interesting to find that there are four participants from the SSAH fields are determined to return to China after gaining some working experiences in the United States, whereas only one participant from STEM has a returning plan. This finding echoed their concern about immigration challenges. There are more participants in SSAH fields than participants in STEM fields who are worried about the new immigration policies. Three participants in STEM programs were confident about their career in the United States, and they did not believe the new policies will influence them, with only three expressed their serious concerns about immigration policies. In the social sciences and humanities, only one participant did not seem to be influenced by the immigration policies. Kobe felt confident about his career development in the United States as he
mentioned an example of a former Chinese student who just graduated from his program. However, four other participants were not so optimistic and expressed their worries regarding to the new policies by Trump’s administration.

However, because the updated immigration policies as well as other policies against international students studying in American universities, applications for H-1B visa and Green Card has become increasingly competitive. Rachel mentioned her personal experiences of being rejected for positions due to her international student status. “Yes, there were many. Basically, as long as they heard you need them to apply for H-1B status they immediately said no.”

H-1B and Green Card application were implied by the seven participants as the determining factor for the decision making about immigration to the United States. At the same time, some factors from the communication during interview, the researcher noticed the difference in participants default attitudes to immigration. Participants in STEM fields originally all had a default immigration plan, though their attitudes changed based on later experiences in the United States. Children’s education is another common factor that played a role in these participants’ decision making. Both Jiahua and Evan Zhu expressed that they want their children to receive education in the U.S due to the recognized education quality in the United States. Tian Yao also think child could influence her future plan is she were to have a baby in the United States.

Meanwhile, other factors such as family, property in China, social capitals and connections for employment, and optimistic anticipation about future development of China, all created the pulling force on Chinese international students to return home. As Zhang Min said, “unlike other students who went abroad, I do not have to stay. Because,
on the other hand, I think our country is developing prosperously. … it makes [Chinese]
international students very confident, I got the option [to return to China].” Rachel agreed
with Min, “I considered to return. I don’t think that is wrong. And China is developing
fast now. I don't have to stay here.” Anthony mentioned that he has social connections in
China to help him get a decent job. “I don’t have a lot of pressure, because if I return to
China, I can start working immediately.”

The seven participants from STEM all considered finding a job in the United
States as a default direction after graduation whether they intend to return to China or not.
The participants all recognized working experiences in the United States as a way to
prepare themselves for the job market. This could be due to that overseas experiences are
highly valued in China today. For instance, in the field of Chinese higher education,
studying or working experiences in the United States are preferred qualification for hiring
and promotion. As Jiahua highlighted, “I worked in higher education, getting a doctoral
degree eventually will be the step to make.”
CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the cultural adaptation experiences of Chinese international students from mainland China attending public universities in Mississippi. The phenomenological research method was chosen to better understand the lived experience of Chinese international students associated with their learning and living in three predominately white institutions. The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, the researcher intended to discover any different adaptation experiences based on the Chinese international students’ fields of study (STEM fields versus fields in social science and humanities). Second, the findings of this study aimed to shed light on how the unique history and culture of the Deep South has been perceived by Chinese international students, and how their lived experiences varied from their Chinese peers studying in other regions of the United States. Government officials in both China and the United States, administrators and faculty from universities in the China and the United States, and current and prospective students from China who may attend higher education institutions in the Deep South should find this study informative.

This chapter begins with answering research questions, followed by a review of the detailed evidences from research findings and a comparison with previous study. A consideration of limitations of the study, as well as recommendations for future studies, will conclude the discussion.

Answers to research questions

1. What cultural adaptation issues do Chinese international students majoring in SSAH in the Deep South report during their time of study in American colleges and universities?
Participants from SSAH in this study reported having language issues during their study in Mississippi. Specifically, writing and speaking was reported as the most challenging for their study and research, especially in the SSAH disciplines. In these fields professors have higher demands for English expression, and require student to exercise higher-order thinking skills in writing and speaking. Participants in SSAH also mentioned they were unable to apply their previous learning skills and knowledge to their learning in Mississippi. They all mentioned their trouble of understanding the heavily culture-bounded learning content in their classes. The requirement for knowledge about American society and culture also caused issue for participants in SSAH to do research and complete writing assignment in classes.

Because of the higher demand for learning about American society and culture, students from social sciences often reported a high urgency of involving themselves in the local community to learn about American culture. However, due to the language and culture barriers, they often experienced frustration during interactions with American peers. Participants in social sciences also reported having fewer Chinese peers around; often they have to rely on themselves because few others in the department could understand their situations.

2. What cultural adaptation issues do Chinese international students majoring in STEM in the Deep South report during their study in American colleges and universities?

First, and very similar to the reports from participants studying in SSAH, STEM participants also mentioned having trouble with their English writing and speaking. Second, because there were more participants from STEM fields than SSAH fields working with Chinese professors, STEM participants had more complaints about their
working relationship with their Chinese supervisors than did participants in SSAH fields. Third, because of the influence of Chinese peers and Chinese supervisors in the department, STEM participants were more often found using Mandarin Chinese for communication. This tendency limited STEM participants’ English learning to some extent. Fourth, More STEM participants reported having more issues with English listening comprehension.

3. Are the reported experiences about cultural adaptation of Chinese international students majoring in STEM in the Deep South qualitatively different than reported experiences about cultural adaptation of Chinese international students majoring in SSAH in the Deep South?

Although English was a common concern reported by participants from both SSAH and STEM fields, the requirement for academic writing in for the two groups varied to some degree. As reported by multiple participants in STEM, English and writing skills were less of a concern when grading their assignments. As some STEM participants highlighted, as long as they can make their points clear, their grade was not harmed by English problems such as grammar mistakes or phrasing. In comparison, students in SSAH experienced more challenges in academic writing. For SSAH participants, English skills and writing skills were often considered when their professors graded their work. Overall, participants in SSAH reported a higher demand for English skills and writing skills than their STEM peers.

Participants from STEM also reported having the advantage of using previous knowledge and skills to help with their current study in Mississippi. However, participants in SSAH were less able to do so, which caused them to have greater
challenges in understanding and learning new contents. Culture-bounded subject matter and learning content also created additional difficulties for SSAH participants.

Perhaps because of the differences in learning content in the United States, SSAH participants reported having a higher motivation than their STEM peers to get involved in local communities and learn about American culture. A major difference discovered in this study was participants’ different attitudes towards learning new culture.

The different attitudes to learn about the American culture led to different adaptation attitudes and strategies. Overall, participants from SSAH were more active in learning American culture and more willing to participate in local cultural events. SSAH participants reported that they considered adapting to the larger social environment necessary for their study in Mississippi. In comparison participants in STEM were less active and likely to do so. Meanwhile, they also reported a lower motivation to adapt to the social environment in Mississippi. Due to the different adaptation attitudes, participants from different groups were found using different adaptation strategies. In short, participants in SSAH reported using an integration strategy more often, whereas participants in STEM used a separation strategy more often.

When the participants were asked about the number of Chinese peers in their department, participants in STEM reported a much higher number of co-nationals (peers, classmates, supervisors, faculty, staff from China) in their programs than participants in social sciences and humanities. This difference of student demographics within the department had not only influenced their study of English, but also the feedback they received on their study efforts. STEM participants mentioned a group approach, being able to finish class assignments and prepare for tests together. Those in SSAH were far
less likely to have such support groups or strategies for completing assignments, SSAH participants often reported having to rely on themselves or seek one-on-one help from their professors.

Another factor that was found leading to different adaptation experiences was the influence of supervisors and advisors. In this study it was found that there are more Chinese faculty members in the STEM fields. As a result, more STEM participants reported working with Chinese professors. Working with Chinese professors reinforced the influence of Chinese culture and hindered participants’ adaptation process, even though at the beginning Chinese supervisors or advisors could help STEM participants get settled in their living arrangements quicker. Because of the Chinese relationship between professor and students, some STEM participants reported having some unpleasant working experiences with Chinese faculty members. Instead, those who worked with American professors seem to enjoy the different working relationship in the United States.

The different demographics of faculty with in the departments also led to different cultural and academic adaptation experiences. Specifically, as Nguyen (2013) mentioned that the personalization of relationships with advisors helps with international graduate students’ success in American universities. This study confirmed the significant influences of advisors and supervisors. However, this study also found how some supervisors impacted the participants’ experiences negatively, which confirmed Jariam and Kahl’s (2012) point that faculty members could have both positive and negative influence on their students’ success. All participants, especially those who are graduate students, mentioned how their advisors or supervisors had influenced their learning and
working experiences. A difference was detected due to the different number of Chinese faculty members in the programs. More STEM participants than SSAH participants reported having a Chinese advisor or supervisor, which they considered to be crucial to their experiences in Mississippi. Participants who had American supervisors or advisors reported a more positive research and working experience with their superiors or advisors. In contrast, those who worked with Chinese faculty perceived some negative effects of working with Chinese faculty members. Because of the different demographics, STEM participants reported more unpleasant experiences with their advisors or supervisors than the SSAH counterparts.

4. Are the reported experiences about cultural adaptation of Chinese international students studying in the Deep South qualitatively different than what the literature says about types of experiences, challenges, and adaptations that Chinese international students who undertake advanced study in other regions of the United States? Are any of these issues related to the distinctiveness from the American South?

The current study confirmed results from previous studies regarding to English language issues, socialization obstacles, academic challenges and adaptation strategies. However, two themes in the findings about Chinese international students’ adaptation experiences can be related to the distinctiveness of the South.

First, due to the relatively small Chinese international student population on campus, the Chinese Student and Scholar Association (CSSA) on campus did not play as important a role as a previous study (Li, 2013) found. Not only did the CSSA fail to represent Chinese population on campus in Mississippi, but CSSA also failed to provide enough support for Chinese international students living in Mississippi.
Second, all participants from the three institutions expressed their culture shock with the rural campus life. No entertainment, no public transportation, and no authentic Chinese restaurants were some of the common complaints by the all participants. In comparison to the findings of this study, Chinese international students in locations where there is a large Chinese population such as California reported having an urban life similar to their life in China (Li, 2013). Perhaps due to the lack of urban campus and community life, participants of this study often mentioned have limited social activities and few fun places to go.

Third, different from Ours’ (2014) notion that internationals who study in the American South are subject to more discrimination and low tolerance for diversity, than those studying in other parts of the United States, participants in this study did not report more racial discrimination in Mississippi. Instead, the researcher found a “greenhouse” effect on campus which protected the participants from being exposed to more discriminations. Beyond the “urban campus” factor and the “greenhouse” effect, the researcher did not detect any qualitative differences about on-campus diversity in Mississippi higher education institutions that are related to the distinctiveness of the South.

Discussion of research findings

Pre-departure experiences

In previous studies, the application process has been a major focus when examining the whole study-abroad experiences of international students. Chinese international students specifically have reported using agents prevalently for making application to American higher education institutions (Zhang, 2011). Because English is
a common requirement for admission, those whose native language is not English, “TOEFL/IETS-exam cram schools” are the most common option used to help Chinese international students prepare for their language tests (Tung, 2016). Zhang (2011) found that some comprehensive agencies also offered training for English tests and college entrance tests such as ACT and SAT. The researcher believes the application process to some degree influenced the studying abroad experiences. In this study, no participants used agents for their application to study in the United States, although some of them went to training programs for language tests and GRE/GMAT tests. Overall, participants had a shorter list of universities to apply. During the application stage none of the participants applied to more than four American institutions, and several only applied to one, their current institutions. According to the researcher’s previous interaction with an agent from China, Mississippi was not on the popular recommendation list of destinations for studying in the United States. Tian Yao’s comments on her short communication with an agent also verified the researcher’s assumption that Mississippi is a less common destination suggested by Chinese agents.

Instead of using agents’ help, many participants especially STEM students mentioned choosing their current institution due to a personal connection with a professor at the institution. Kobe, for instance, decided his list of institutions based on his previous connections with professors at four different American universities. He used his personal connections when applying for those institutions. Five participants mentioned using such resources when choosing institutions to apply. Because of such personal connections prior to their study in the Mississippi, most STEM participants were assigned to the professor who they contacted for applications. These built-in relationships have highly
influenced these participants’ later experiences in Mississippi. Other participants came to Mississippi without similar personal connections. These participants’ learning experiences in Mississippi were less influenced by the faculty members.

When being asked about reasons of choosing the United States for their education, the participants’ answers confirmed some conclusions by other researchers, such as high occupational income, advanced facilities for research and development (Cheung & Xu, 2015). Kobe, for example, chose the United States specifically for research reasons. He enjoyed his previous visiting-scholar experience as a researcher in New Mexico and followed his former supervisor’s suggestion to continue finding research opportunities in the United States. He started his second doctoral program after he achieved his first doctoral degree from a Chinese institution. Kobe also considered the United States because of its relatively high occupational income. Similar to the findings of Chao and Hegarty (2014) participants in this study reported their choice to study in the United States was influenced by peers who had studied abroad. The U.S.’s robust educational system, and parents’ wishes for participants to study abroad. In addition to confirming previous research findings, participants in the current study also chose the United States for their interests in learning about American culture.

When examining the experience of Chinese international students overseas experiences, many researchers focused on students’ on-site experiences at American universities and colleges. Students’ pre-departure experiences were less often discussed. In this study, the researcher intentionally included questions about participants’ previous educational experiences as well as their preparation process for their journey to Mississippi. Specifically, this study shows that the knowledge and skills that participants
gained in China was a factor and played a role in their academic adjustment in Mississippi. Wang (2004) found that for social sciences and humanities there are less former knowledge that can be used for understanding the learning content in the United States than natural sciences in the United States. There is not much difference in terms of what natural sciences students did in their academic study United States than in China. However, social sciences and humanities students in the United States had to rethink and reconsider knowledge learned in China as their previous knowledge cannot always be applied to the social practices of the United States. Findings from this study supported Wang’s conclusion. Many STEM participants in this study reported being able to apply previous theoretical knowledge to their current learning in the United States. Meanwhile, they were not only familiar with the learning content, but also the format of class assignments. Xin Qiji even mentioned that his college course in China used teaching materials written in English which allowed him get familiar with the textbooks he later used in the United States. Two engineering students in this study mentioned using formulas and equations as a third language to understand course content. In contrast, several participants from SSAH programs mentioned their struggles with learning and understanding the new knowledge which was tightly connected with American social and cultural practices.

Previous research and publication experiences were also mentioned by several participants to be helpful for their study in Mississippi. Specifically, participants at the doctoral level mentioned using their previous research skills to deal with course assignments in Mississippi. Almost all doctoral students had research experiences, and several STEM students had experiences of publishing in an international journal. These
participants felt that reading and writing in English was less of a challenge, even though English was still a barrier to their adaptation experiences both academically and socially. This topic is discussed later in this chapter.

*The Mississippi experience*

Due to the distinction between the United States and China in terms of cultural and educational practices, most participants reported some degree of culture shock and academic shock.

*Culture shock.* Chao and Hegarty (2014) noted in their study that Chinese students assumed that living conditions overseas were better than in China, and this was a consideration for going abroad. However, this conclusion is not supported by findings of this study. Almost all participants complained about the living conditions in Mississippi, especially transportation and food, in Mississippi. Although the researcher did not find previous studies that analyzed living conditions’ impact on international students’ retention in higher education overseas, important information on this aspect was discovered in the current study. Although it can be confirmed that transportation and food did not cause any participants to want to quit, their future plans after graduation from their Mississippi institutions seem to be influenced because of their living conditions of such. Coco and Ana Li have specifically mentioned food as a reason why they considered places like Los Angeles and Dallas respectively as their next destination. They both enjoyed the sense of belonging due to the Chinese culture in those cities when they traveled to those places. Zhang Min, Wolin Wang, Xin Qiji, Rachel admitted transportation situation in Mississippi caused inconveniences for their life and study.

Jairam and Kahl (2012) found that socializing and fun activities with academic
friends impacted the completion of doctoral degrees. However, in this study, almost every participant complained about the socializing quality and availability of extracurricular activities in Mississippi. Zhao Cheng specifically mentioned that he could not find things to do to relax after becoming exhausted in study, and he believes lack of availability for fun did not help his study in Mississippi. These participants’ expectations for urban life style could be due to their previous living environment in China. As mentioned in the previous chapter, all fourteen participants were born and grew up in large cities in China where an urban life style is possible. Li (2013) collected opinions from students at University of California at Los Angeles and found that they enjoyed the city’s entertainment, restaurants, food markets, and other elements in daily urban life. Li (2013) also studied a rural campus at University of Indiana at Bloomington (UIB), and noted that Chinese international students treasured the rural campus life, which provided an environment free of air pollution and heavy traffic. Gareis (2013) found that Chinese internationals had more satisfying friendships with locals in the South (including Mississippi) than elsewhere in the United States. Nevertheless, different from Li’s and Gareis’s findings, most participants in this study saw rural campus life as a negative, complained about the lack of urban life in Mississippi, and established few friendships with locals. However, time in Mississippi may be a factor. Participants in this study who lived in Mississippi for over four years mentioned that they enjoyed some aspects of the rural life style in Mississippi. Similar to Li’s findings, the participants in this study enjoyed their relationship with faculty and staff in Mississippi. “The ability to communicate directly with faculty, staff, administrators and alumni on campus is an additional benefit of studying and living in a rural campus” (Li, 2013, p. 87).
The “greenhouse”. Although Mooney (2014) and Ours (2014) claimed that tight states, such as states in the South, are less tolerant about foreign culture and have greater chances of discrimination, findings from this study did not fully support both assertions. According to participants’ descriptions, their campuses seemed to have created a “greenhouse” which protected them from racial discriminations to a large extent. Participants in this study were found mainly socializing around campus or in their residential neighborhoods, which were usually close to their university campuses. People on campus, especially faculty members and most staff are well-educated, therefore this researchers believes that they are less likely to intentionally hold any prejudices against Chinese international students. Overall, participants, including those who have been discriminated against, still reported that their chances of being racially discriminated against or treated unequally on campus were relatively small.

The findings of this study could be due to the very limited range and means of transportation and community interactions reported by the participants. Outside the campus greenhouse, participants reported several cases of being treated unequally due to stereotypes and racism. Thus, many participants stayed primarily within the campus environment. Another factor may be transportation. First of all, the activity range of participants was relatively small partly due to the transportation issue in Mississippi. Also, participants who had recently arrived, and who did not foresee staying long in Mississippi did not own automobiles or motorcycles. And due to a lack of public transportation, their lives were largely restricted to a radius around the university campus. This issue is not as prevalent in states where there are well-established public transportation system that most Chinese international students are accustomed to using in
Meanwhile, the greenhouse effect appeared to be a double-edged sword to participants’ adaptation experiences in Mississippi. On the one hand the greenhouse established a shield around campus against racism and prejudice. However, on the other hand, staying inside of the greenhouse environment prevented or minimized these participants from interacting with local people at a deeper level and learning American culture outside the campus context. This researcher suggests that the greenhouse environment was created by individual students and their host institutions together. Students who had limited interaction with local people and those who had little exposure to local culture were likely to have the “greenhouse” experience. Such low involvement in the local communities could be the result of several factors, including Chinese students’ low motivation to interact, the exclusion of outsiders by the local community, concerns about racism, and lack of transportations. Four participants in this study reported not appreciating the “Southern Hospitality”; instead, they perceived it as an insincere reaction to outsiders by Mississippians. On the other hand, all participants reported that they enjoyed people greeting and smiling at them on the street and considered local people, in the main, to be nice.

Social categorization. Loewen (1983) wrote that once one is socially categorized as a minority, it is hard for that person to change status. “Just ‘cause I’m not white in the Delta doesn’t mean I can’t be white somewhere else…, or maybe I can even be Chinese in another place …” (Loewen, 1983, p. 712). Although Delta Chinese were recognized as a distinctive cultural group by local whites, they were also labeled “merchandiser” and grocery store owner. Local Mississippians’ perceptions of the Chinese in the Delta locked
Chinese residents into a third category and prevented Chinese Americans to be re-categorized. Mississippi Chinese was not included in the campus community in the history of The University of Mississippi (Kao, 2012). As Kao described, Mississippi Chinese had such an ambiguous position that is perceived as neither Black nor White, due to the grocery business that most Mississippi Chinese family owned in the Delta area. Participants in this study may have been affected by this history in terms of the social categorization Chinese international students were given. Kobe, for example, expressed a concern regarding the image of Chinese in today’s American’s mind. Kobe commented, “At the very beginning, those immigrants rarely earned any high degrees, many of them opened a restaurant or something like that. So they didn’t have a good impression about you [Chinese] … They believe Chinese are just at that level.”

Even though participants did not report too many experiences of being discriminated against based on race, they still were not included in the local community, perhaps due to “tightness” that involved the closeness and limited interactions with those in the local community. Some participants echoed with what Zhao Cheng called as the “in-group” effect. “People here are double-sided, the Southern Hospitality might be real, but it only applies to who they considered as their in-group. To the out-group, they are relatively intolerant, and reject them more. … Here, if you belong to the in-group, they will be very nice to you. Out-group, they won’t care about you.” Therefore, having more (satisfying) friendships with locals in the South including Mississippi (Gareis, 2012), was not supported by the findings of this study.

Friendship patterns. In this study, the common composition of friendships or relationships owned by the participants is classmates, coworkers, and roommates or
neighbors. Wang (1993) recognized two socialization patterns, which are monoculture friendship pattern and bicultural friendship pattern. Slightly different from Wang’s finding, this study unveiled four different socialization patterns, namely, “predominately co-nationals”, “predominately Americans”, “diverse socialization”, and “limited socialization.” Factors influencing socialization patterns of the participants in this study are demographics of students in classes and offices, living arrangement, and social distance. Specifically, those who have Chinese classmates or officemates tend to have more Chinese friends or acquaintances. Living with Chinese roommates or having Chinese neighbors have a similar effect of building co-national relationships. By comparing the international relationships reported by the participants, the researcher found that most of the relationships were established with other international students who have shared culture, such as Vietnamese. Although some participants mentioned that they had American friends, they all found it difficult to maintain contacts with American friends.

This study supported previous studies on barriers of building cross-cultural relationships (Chapdelain & Alexitch, 2004; Kao, 2012). According to Chapdelain and Alexitch (2004)’s assumption that greater cross-cultural differences between native culture and host culture are more likely to hinder social interactions in the host country. Most participants in this study were found having more trouble interacting with Americans. Instead, some participants mentioned their best international friends were from Asian countries or Asian Americans. For instance, several participants reported having Vietnamese friends. Besides the cross-cultural differences, English was also frequently mentioned by participants as a reason for unsuccessful relationships, with
culture background as the second barrier. Low frequency of interaction with American friends was another reason for discontinued relationship between participants and their American peers. Time available for socialization seemed to be a common concern for participants, which echoes Zhang’s (2016) notion that Chinese international students were often found struggling with balancing their school work and social life. Wolin Wang specifically mentioned that time was the biggest reason why he stopped participating in activities with Americans and other international students.

*Academic demands on Chinese international students.* The researcher found that participants all felt that the competitive academic environment was more rigorous and competitive in American universities than in Chinese universities. Zhang (2005) found that Chinese students who studied in American universities were more integrated in academic activities. The integration in academic activities are multidimensional, such as conducting research, making presentations at national conferences, and publications. In comparison, Zhang found that Chinese students who studied at Chinese institution have higher integration levels in social activities. Zhang’s first conclusion was supported by the findings of this study. For instance, Zhang Min felt that she wrote more research papers in her first semester in Mississippi than during her whole master’s program in China. Another example comes from Kobe, who reported that he seeks helps from his supervisor mostly for research and publications, as he stated his supervisor could help him publishing his paper at a higher ranking journal. Ana Li, even as an undergraduate students, reported similar dedication to her academic life. She presented several times at academic conferences with her supervisor and won awards for their studies.

*Adjustment to American pedagogical practices*
Participants all reported some degree of academic shock when they first came to Mississippi. Yue (2010) found Chinese students studying in another country are likely to experience more academic shock in their first semester of study at the university. The participants in this study reported being not used to the teaching style and classroom activities in Mississippi. Compared with Chinese universities, some participants felt that the workloads in American universities were overwhelming, and often they had to explore and discover the answers by themselves. Previous studies have found that Chinese students tended to stay silent in class and were not active to ask questions. This study also found this tendency on the part of some participants. Valdez (2015) found that some professors in China did not allow students to ask questions in class. This is supported by Kobe and Xin Qiji’s comments that they were not used to asking questions in class because of their previous education experiences in China. Most participants believed it is necessary to participate in class discussion, however, two participants admitted they rarely participated in class nor did they find it meaningful to participate in class. Ota (2013) stated that the teacher authority and the teacher-centered classroom in China made Chinese students only play a role of passive listener, which caused the concept of asking question strange to most Chinese international students studying in American classes.

In traditional Chinese classrooms, a good student is one who is obedient and remains silent in class. This orientation has been used to explain why Chinese students are less active in American university classes than their non-Chinese peers. American classrooms, as Tang, Collier, and Witt (2018) noted, placed a higher requirement for autonomy on the learner, and this is not what Chinese students were used to. Ota (2013)
found Chinese students in his study had the preference for teaching and learning styles in China, which they set as standard. Their expectations for American professors and American classrooms were therefore formed based on their previous learning experiences in China (Ota, 2013). Valdez (2015) argued that the exclusive classroom setting in American colleges should also account for the low participation of international students. The ideal classroom settings that allowed all students to participate actively in all activities may not work for international students who did not have a Eurocentric education background because American college classroom practices are heavily Eurocentric (Valdez, 2015). Valdez argued that the classroom exclusion has resulted in some international students’ sentiment of non-membership or non-belonging to the classroom community. Low language ability, unable to meet unfamiliar classroom expectations in the U.S were the stated reasons for exclusion.

The researcher’s findings on this topic modify those findings of Roy (2013) and Ota (2013) and partially confirm the findings of Valdez. At the time of interviews, the majority of participants gave positive comments on the American teaching and learning style, but they admitted that it was challenging at the beginning and it took them some time to get used to it. However, slightly different from Roy’s (2013) findings, participants in this study seemed to appreciate the culture of group work. Several participants enjoyed having group discussions in class which they believed have helped them understand the learning content from a different angle. The researcher found consistency with Roy’s finding that some Chinese students find it difficult to accept their American professor’s informal teaching style. Rachel, for example, believed that such teaching style would not be helpful for Chinese students who do not have high learning motivation and good time
management. Xiao Ou considered some of his professors incompetent to teach because his professors went to class with no prepared teaching materials in hand. This comment may be due to the textbook-based lecturing commonly seen in Chinese classrooms.

Ota (2013) found that due to their unfamiliarity with the pedagogical practices in American classrooms, Chinese international students are found inactive in participation in class. In this study, although most participants mentioned they attempted to participate in class, their participation was still less frequent than their American peers, which is also aligned with previous studies (Giardelli & Patel, 2016; Roy, 2013; Sharif & Osterling). Participants reported occasional participation in classes in the form of answering professors’ questions, or asking questions for clarification. Five participants in this study mentioned that they were not used to asking questions in class. When it comes to free discussion, participants also reported feeling behind due to their English proficiency and comprehension ability. Roy (2013) noted that most new Chinese international students admit they are not used to the relatively free classroom where the professors were only facilitators of learning. And this study confirmed this finding. Some participants, most of them in the STEM group, were not used to having to asking questions and making comments on a topic in class. Instead, according to some participants from both SSAH and STEM, their professors in China did not encourage them to ask questions in class.

However, as their study in Mississippi continued, all participants reported becoming accustomed to American teaching and learning styles. At the time of interviews, most participants were satisfied with their learning experiences in Mississippi, which supported Yue (2010)’s finding that Chinese international students find their transition from Chinese education system to a foreign education system beneficial.
Consistent with previous studies (Roy, 2013; Su & Harrison; Wang, Martin, & Martin, 2002), English was also found as a common issue for the participants studied at Mississippi. It was found in the current study that English has not only been a problem for most participants’ academic performance, but also has hindered their personal interactions with American peers and professors. Only two participants, who had long histories of learning English since childhood, and did not consider English an obstacle in academic integration and social integration. The rest of the participants believed that English had prevented them from participation in class, communicating with American peers, and making American friends. However, the perceived need to improve English seem to be from academic demands. Therefore, those who did not recognize a need to improve English for the reason of academic integration perceived a lower urgency to improve their English.

These participants’ insufficient English skills may be due to their previous English education experiences in China. Except for four participants, the rest of participants all received college English education from an institution in China. CET has been the key component of college English education in Mainland China since the late 1980s (Ma, 2014). The CET tests are achievement tests that did not train Chinese college students for daily communication (Ren, 2011). Participants in this study mentioned the training they received in colleges were mainly focused on reading. Their writing skills were also not the focus of their college English classes.

*Different degrees of urgency to improve English.* All participants in this study considered agreed that English was an important component of their cultural adaptation experiences in Mississippi. However, their perceived urgency for improving English
skills varied. This researcher suggests that it varied for two reasons: (1) The level of academic demand on English proficiency and, (2) the degree to which participants needed to improve English listening and speaking for social interaction. On the one hand, as Wang (2002) found, professors from different fields held different expectations about their international students’ English performance. Although such pattern was less commonly found in this study, different expectations on participants’ English level from different programs were detected. A few participants received comments from their professors regarding improving their English skills. For instance, Coco’s Chinese professor asked her to read more English articles and learn phrase and word selection. In the other case, Evan Zhu’s committee member wanted him to improve his English writing due to his writing issues in his dissertation. Several participants from STEM programs, such as polymer science, and civil engineering, even mentioned that their professors did not have a high expectation on their English. Instead, they stated that as long as they expressed their meaning clearly in English, their professors were unlikely to deduct points for their writing projects. According to the descriptions by several STEM participants, their writing assignments, such as lab reports, are more patterned than those for SSAH, which generated a lower urgency for improving English writing skills. In comparison, Zhao Cheng from a social psychology program told the researcher about his professors’ high expectations on his writing assignments. On the other hand, participants themselves also perceived a need to improve English in order to perform better in their course works.

English writing was considered the most difficult and challenging skill for participants from both SSAH and STEM, with speaking being the second most
challenging skill. Two SSAH participants from SSAH participants considered themselves having trouble with reading comprehension of English subject matter. However, reading was not considered by any of the STEM participants in this study as a challenge. The infrequently reported reading issue could be due to the priority position of teaching reading in college English education in China (Li, 2009; Ma, 2014). Such difference between STEM participants and SSAH could be due to the different roles that previous knowledge and skills played in their comprehension of the reading materials in American classes. STEM participants were able to use their previously learned knowledge and skills to understand the new subject matter. SSAH participants often undertook study that is Eurocentric and culture-bound, and thus could hardly rely on previous knowledge to understand the new content in the American classroom.

*Faculty’s role in international students’ cultural adaptation process.* Nguyen (2013) found some advisors personalizing their relationships with their international student advisees. In the current study, five participants mentioned having nonacademic interactions with their supervisors or advisors. However, it worth noticing that four of such personalized relationships with faculty members happened between the participants and their Chinese supervisors. Only two participants reported having such relationships with American supervisors.

Findings from this study confirmed the significant role that faculty members played in international students’ adaptation experiences. Jairam and Kahl (2012) also found that faculty members provided knowledge-based support to graduate students. Most participants in this study mentioned that they received academic support from their supervisors or advisors. Kobe and Jiahua mentioned their supervisors’ expertise in the
field helped with their research and publication goals. However, no participant in this study reported receiving emotional support from faculty members.

*Cultural adjustment.* Aligned with Yan and Berliner’s (2013) study, the current study also found that American social norms were reported frequently by participants in this study as an obstacle of interacting with American people and adapting to American society. Participants mentioned having trouble interacting with their American peers due to different social norms in China compared with the United States. Wolin Wang had trouble understanding American’s non-verbal clues. Jiahua reported issues of composing an email appropriately for communicating with Americans. Evan Zhu said he had to learn to interact and work with American coworkers. Several participants also mentioned the different understanding of relationships between Chinese and Americans as an obstacle for interactions with Americans. As Evan Zhu highlighted, Chinese students tended to expect more care and helps from their professors and supervisors.

Although cultural adjustment was recognized as a common issue, participants in SSAH and STEM students perceived different levels of urgency and necessity to learn about American culture and American society. Tang, Collier, and Witt (2018) found that Chinese students only expect some integration instead of full integration. They found that the degree of integration was related to the goal of graduating successfully. Tonga and colleagues also found that internationals would only interact with Americans for necessary daily life needs. Yuan (2011) also found that cultural adaptation was not urgent for Chinese students whose grades were not affected or when they stayed with co-nationals. In the current study, STEM students presented observed lower urgency to learn American society and culture. This can be explained by their low instrumental motivation
and little concern about grades due to Chinese peer’s support. All STEM students in this study can hardly recall any situations when the knowledge related to American society and culture was needed, except for occasions when they did not understand a professor’s or classmate’s joke in class. Nor did STEM participants realized a need to be involved in the local community. Even after they realized that social cultural background prevented them from having deeper communication with American peers, they did not force themselves to be more involved in the local community. Instead, once they were settled in the new environment, STEM participants were more often found to associate and stay close with Chinese peers and barely attempted to interact with Americans unless for necessary work and study purposes. STEM participants reported having adequate support from their Chinese peers and believed issues in their life and study can be solved by themselves or with the help of Chinese peers. In comparison, students from SSAH perceived a higher level of urgency to learn about America and were more motivated to involve themselves in the local community. This finding is aligned with Wang’s (2004) finding that Chinese students in the social sciences have to rethink and reconsider things that they learned in China. The researcher suggests that this is because knowledge gained in one country cannot always be applied to the social practices of the other country. Wang also concluded that there is not much difference in terms of what Chinese students do in natural science majors in China and in the United States. The current study’s findings with regard to STEM participants’ urgency to learn American culture fully supported Wang’s conclusions.

Some participants’ comments supported Grantham’s (1994) notion that Southerners are more often than other Americans to identify closely with their own
community. Reed (1986) stated that the South’s culture contained a strong sense of group membership. Several participants commented on this and agreed that the strong sense of group membership prevented them from becoming a member of the local community. Zhao Cheng believed that the ‘honor system’ that Mississippians had reduced his interest in learning about the local culture as well as his intention to be involved in the local community.

Figure 1. Factors in adaptation experiences

Church and religion in Mississippi. Reed (1986) concluded that Southerners are more likely to be conventionally religious and the role of church is more important in the South. Fichter and Maddox (1965) held that southern religion had a high visibility. Although the researcher did not find direct evidence to prove that Mississippians are more religious than people in states outside of the South, the impact of churches and religions on Chinese international students’ adaptation process were found to be very visible at the three institutions. Such high visibility was not only visible to locals but also to internationals. Xin Qiji called the local churches “sparing no efforts to spread the religion.” All participants reported going to churches intentionally or unintentionally for various purposes. Having free dinner, Bible study, increasing exposure to American culture (Sun & Rhoads, 2018), or to seek fellowship and ethnic belonging (Cadge &
Ecklund, 2007), were all proved to be meaningful to participants in this study especially when they first arrived Mississippi. There were four participants who claimed to be religious. Xiao Ou and Jiahua became religious in Mississippi. Xiao Ou and Zhang Min’s life seemed to be surrounded by people and activities at their churches. Zhao Cheng also mentioned church as a big element in his life, even though he felt his interactions with the local churches in Mississippi relatively unsatisfying.

Their experiences in Mississippi were therefore impacted to different degrees by the southern religion. Chinese churches close to the campuses of these three Mississippi institutions, for instance, were found to have several ways of engaging Chinese international students, such as providing transportation services and holding Chinese cultural events. Similar strategies were also used by Chinese-ethnic-based churches in the East (Sun & Rhoads, 2018). However, unlike what Cao (2005) found, most participants including one who claimed to be religious did not consider the local Chinese churches to play a family role.

_Becoming more “cliquish” and less “collective.”_ One particular finding of this study was not covered in the literature. The finding included what the research identified as cliques—“a small group of people, with shared interests or other features in common, who spend time together and do not readily allow others to join them” (“Clique”, n.d.). Chinese international students in Mississippi were found cliquing with only a certain group of Chinese students, which usually consisted of co-nationals from the same department or classes. Moreover, different Chinese cliques at the same institution were not found to interact much with each other, nor did they feel it necessary to interact with “other” Chinese students on campus. This researcher suggests that this is a reflection of
what is happening in China, as the Chinese have become more distant to each other in the homeland, which could be due to the fast-paced life and living arrangement. People in China today, especially those in the urban areas, do not always know people living in the same neighborhood (Wang, 2004). During the interviews the researcher was expecting to hear about closer connections among Chinese students studying abroad, however, Chinese international students at the three universities were not united.

*Chinese student and scholar association (CSSA)*. A common finding, at the three selected institutions, was that Chinese Student and Scholar Associations (CSSA) did not play a role of uniting all Chinese international students on campus. CSSAs at the three universities did not create Chinese communities where Chinese internationals could feel a sense of belonging. Instead, Chinese participants only reported themselves belonging to their own friendship networks. According to Li (2013), the missions of CSSA in University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) and Indiana University in Bloomington (IUB) can be summarized to four categories: promoting a sense of belonging, building social support networks, helping Chinese students express their cultural and national identity, and fundraising and community support. According to the researcher’s personal experience as well as communication with Chinese students studying in the West and Northeast of United States, the goals of cultural identity, fundraising, and community mission were not pursued by CSSAs in these three institutions. However, creating a sense of belonging, and building social support networks for Chinese international students on campus are commonly considered goals by CSSAs. Because of the relatively small Chinese international student population at the three Mississippi institutions, along with the description of experiences with the CSSA on
these three campuses, the researcher will next discuss the first two missions mentioned by Li.

*Promoting a sense of belonging*

Li (2013) found in her study that many participants appreciated the opportunities provided by the UCLA to connect with Chinese peers. Participants in Li’s study also enjoyed deeper level connection with their peers in the CSSA than with students in other student organizations on campus. In contrast to Li’s study, all participants in the current study reported little connections with peers through the CSSA on their campuses. According to these participants, the CSSAs on their campuses failed to provide communities where Chinese internationals could find a sense of belonging. Instead, the reported dissatisfaction with the services and supports that the CSSAs provided. Some participants felt that their CSSA did not do anything helpful to assist their adaptation to their university. Two participants who held positions in the CSSA at their respective universities considered their working experience within the association unpleasant. One participant who had participated in a cultural event held by CSSA also felt disappointed because of the quality of the event as well as the Chinese audiences’ disrespectful reaction to her efforts.

*Building social support networks*

Support and services provided by CSSAs in UCLA and IUB include airport pick up, rides for shopping trips, student orientation, and so on (Li, 2013). At UCLA and IUB, both CSSAs helped Chinese students to get settled, and get familiar with the local community and campus. However, such patterns were not found at any of the three institutions in Mississippi. Instead, these services were often reported being conducted by
local churches, which in return, amplified the influence of churches on participants’ internationals’ adaptation experiences. As mentioned earlier, religion and churches were found to play a big role in the adaptation and learning experiences of participants in Mississippi. The shortcomings by CSSAs allowed local churches to spread their impact on the campus community.

Unlike the perception of “family, home base, or home away from home” (Li, 2013, p. 97) noted about CSSAs by Chinese international students at UCLA and IUB, the participants at Mississippi institutions reported feeling helpless and left alone to figure out things by themselves. Participants all expressed low or no expectations of the CSSA at their universities; few participants considered the CSSA had provided enough social support nor did they often seek help from CSSA. Instead, they relied on their personal social networks for help. Some participants in this study reported that they hoped the CSSA at their institutions could do a better job of helping new Chinese students to get familiar with the university community and American academic life.

The key role of CSSA, in terms of building social support networks, is to establish new relationships in the United States. Li (2013) believed that CSSAs are supposed to assist Chinese international students at the same institutions to build personal relationships with Chinese peers, which Li believed will facilitate Chinese internationals’ adaptation to the new campus and society. The CSSAs at the three Mississippi universities also failed to fulfil this goal. In this study, participants who were still new to their universities (those who have studied at their universities for no longer than two semesters) reported building connections with Chinese peers especially at the beginning of their adaptation stage. However, due to the incompetency of CSSAs on campus,
participants rarely claimed receiving much help from the CSSAs on establishing relationships with other Chinese students at their institutions.

One reason why CSSAs at UCLA and Mississippi institutions played different roles and were seen differently in the adaptation experience may be because the Mississippi institutions have a relatively small Chinese international student population on campus compared to their counterparts in more populous states. Although the researcher cannot generalize, this may also be the case at others institutions in the West Coast and Northeast where the Chinese international population is relatively large. Nevertheless, one can speculate that the influence of CSSAs at institutions in Mississippi was minimal to Chinese students’ adaptation compared to CSSAs at other institutions where there is a large Chinese international student population.

It is worthy of our attention that all participants in Mississippi reported some level of dissatisfaction in terms of the institutional support on their learning and living experiences in Mississippi; however, in rare case some participants expressed their expectations for their institutions for improvements. Only a few participants hoped their institutions could developed a better orientation program for international students. Heng (2017) also found the same request for a well-run student orientation programs. This could be due to the fact that Chinese international students on campus were relatively small in number in Mississippi institutions compared to institutions in preferred regions represented by previous studies. Because of the relatively small size of Chinese international student group, Chinese international students may not believe their ability to create a significant impact on changes being made by their institutions in Mississippi. For the same reason, participants in the current study were not often found participating in
any student organizations besides CSSAs on campus. Only Coco and Xiao Ou worked for CSSA at their institution before. Shertzer and Schuh (2004) had a similar finding that international students are not actively involved in student organizations.

*Adaptation strategies*. All participants had what Berry (1997) identified as the multidimensional view of acculturation model. The differences lay in each participants’ preferences to contact with and involve themselves in the larger society, as all participants expressed their desire to maintain their heritage culture. Their preferences also impacted the cultural adaptation strategies they used. The findings of this study verified Berry’s identifications of different strategies. The six participants who chose the integration strategy all showed their willing to maintain Chinese cultural heritage while at the same time were interested to be learn more about American culture. The seven participants who adopted separation all showed little interest or perceived little needs to learn about American society. The only participant who adopted an assimilation strategy stated that she was no longer used to the Chinese ways of doing things, and struggled with interacting with peers and family members in China. Instead, she felt more comfortable with the American style, and preferred to stay in the United States due to the mentioned reason.

Lee (2016) found that separation strategy and integration strategies were the only two adaptation strategies by Chinese international students. This study supported Lee’s finding. Besides, the assimilation strategy was also found in this study. In general, SSAH participants adopted integration strategy more often than separation strategy. In contrast, STEM participants showed a more frequent pattern of using separation strategy than integration strategy. However, there was an exception that Ana Li, who lived in
Mississippi since primary school, was observed adopting an assimilation strategy.

However, it is surprising to find that intention to stay in the United States did not always align with the degree of preference, in which STEM participants had to be involved in the American society. Some of these participants who showed stronger desires to stay in the United States did not demonstrate a strong intention to learn about American society during the interviews. This could imply that Chinese international students’ multidimensional view of acculturation is related their choice of adaptation strategies, but is not necessarily related to their intentions to stay in the United States after graduation.

Limitations and opportunities for future research

Because this study was exploratory, its findings raise more questions than answers. Chapter Five ends with a list of nine limitations and opportunities for future research.

1. Because this study focused on the three largest public institutions in Mississippi as sites for data collection, the research findings of this study may not represent the practices of institutions of other types in Mississippi. For instance, Chinese international students in historically black institutions such as Tougaloo, Alcorn, and Jackson State, and Mississippi Valley State should be studied in the future. Also traditionally white private and public institutions, such as Millsaps, Belhaven, and William Carey might be studied as well to have a more comprehensive understanding about Chinese internationals’ adaptation to higher education in this distinctive state and region.

2. The researcher recruited participants from all levels of higher education due to the concern of sample size. One drawback of this design is that the differences discovered
may not only be related to fields of study, but also could be the result of different level of academic programs. In future studies, researchers should consider controlling the level of academic programs in order to find the difference caused solely by the fields of study.

3. The researcher is a candidate in a higher education Ph.D. program at one of these universities. Thus, his learning and research experiences are more similar to the participants from SSAH than those from STEM. During this study the researcher sometimes had more difficulty understanding STEM participants’ experiences, which could potentially cause misinterpretation of their responses. In the future, the academic background of the interviewer might be factored in as an influence during the data collection and analysis process. Researchers with a STEM backgrounds might be recruited as co-researchers for interviewing participants.

4. In this study the translation of Mandarin Chinese transcriptions was done first by the researcher himself, and later proofread and edited by the invited professional translator. Independent translations by both the researcher and the professional translator might have yielded different translation results. In future studies, if time permits, the researcher and the professional translator(s) might consider working independently on all transcriptions, and then comparing translations, to avoid unnecessary biases.

5. In the future, questions and surveys on exploring the differences of class assignments and activities between the SSAH and STEM groups should be included to shed more light on whether there is any between-group differences in terms of class activities and assignments. By doing so, the different expectations on international student language skills as well as other academic skills can be better explained.

6. Because the researcher used a semi-structured interview, the original interview
protocol only provided guidelines for interviews, which was updated frequently during
the process of data collection based on the researcher’s reflection on previous interviews.
Those who are interviewed at a later stage were asked more focused questions which
were developed based on previous interviews. This may have result in some information
loss for interviews conducted at the early stages, and may have reduced the chances of
finding shared experiences and drawing relational conclusions from all interviews.

7. In this study, “business and management” was categorized as social science and
humanities (SSAH) because those in business field deal with the relationships among
people. However, both participants from business and management programs in this
study studied ‘like’ (science division) in high school, which may be why they both shared
some similar responses with participants in the STEM programs. Although the researcher
put business and management under the SSAH category as a subgroup, it is worthy in the
future study to study business and management as an independent group. Fields such as
fine arts, visual arts, performing arts, and music could also be included in the recruitment
process for sampling if research ability and writing skills are not the main focus for
evaluating academic demands.

8. Also, the relatively larger STEM student sample and relatively larger number
of Chinese faculty members within STEM departments might be a significant factor, and
needs to be studied in more details both qualitatively and quantitatively, especially when
comparing STEM Chinese Internationals to SSAH Chinese Internationals.

9. Overall, more studies in the South and other regions of the United States, which
make use of a variety of qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods, are necessary to
gain a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese international students’ adjustment
to higher education in America.

In conclusion, although the results of this study cannot be generalized to other states or institutions of high education in the United States, they are relatable. Said another way, the results can be compared to what is already known about Chinese international students’ experiences, and thus add to what may become a more complete picture of cultural adaptation in U.S. high education. Hence, the findings of this study may be helpful, not only for researchers, but also for policymakers, government educational officials, higher education administrators, CSSAs, and faculty and students’ from colleges and universities in the United States and China. The findings may also provide useful information to prospective students from China who may consider attending higher education institutions in the United States.
IRB-18-119 - Initial: Goshorn Committee Letter - Exempt

irb@usm.edu
Fri 11/9/2018 3:13 PM

to: Thomas O’Brien <Thomas.O'Brien@usm.edu>; Xiaoran Song <Xiaoran.Song@usm.edu>; Sue Fayard <Sue.Fayard@usm.edu>

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INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 21, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

• The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
• The selection of subjects is equitable.
• Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
• Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
• Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
• Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
• Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident template on Cayuse IRB.
• The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-18-119

PROJECT TITLE: The Cultural Adaptation Experiences of Chinese Higher Education Students in Mississippi: A Comparison Across Disciplines

SCHOOL/PROGRAM: School of Education, Educational Research and Admin

RESEARCHER(S): Xiaoran Song
Thomas O’Brien

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved
CATEGORY: Exempt
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: November 9, 2018 - November 9, 2019

Edward L. Goshorn, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson
Greetings—

My name is Xiaonan Song, and I am currently a doctoral candidate in Higher Education Administration at The University of Southern Mississippi. I am writing my dissertation tentatively titled *The Cultural Adaptation Experiences of Chinese Higher Education Students in the American Deep South: A Comparison Across Disciplines* under the direction of my dissertation committee chaired by Dr. Thomas O’Brien.

I am reaching out to you to invite you to participate in my study on the cultural adaptation experiences of Chinese international students in American higher education in the American South. This study is important because it will provide information about the barriers that Chinese international students experience at universities in the American South, and give information about success for Chinese international students.

Your participation will help me better understand what factors are likely to assist Chinese students’ adaptation to life and study in higher education institutions in the South. Specifically, voices from different fields of study will help to shed the light on barriers specific to students in certain fields. Assistance and advising strategies based on these differences could be developed in the future. The information collected from interviews will be used for completion of my doctoral dissertation.

Participation will include a 90-minute in-depth semi-structured interview in the second half of fall 2018 semester and the beginning of spring 2019 semester at your university. Interviews will be either in person or online and will accommodate your schedule. My goal is to conduct interviews through the end of fall 2018 semester. No identification information will be included in the final documents and analysis. As a token of appreciation for your time, you will receive a $15 gift card to Walmart for your participation in the interview.

If you are willing to participate, please fill out the information form through this link and I will be in touch as soon as possible to schedule an interview with you: [https://usmep.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2h5XMh6t8YfwS3P](https://usmep.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2h5XMh6t8YfwS3P)

I appreciate your willingness to consider participating in this study. Also, please feel free to forward this email to any friends that would fit the needs of this study. Participants need to be native Mandarin speakers who had at least ten years of education in mainland China, and are currently enrolled or have been enrolled in your institution.

Thank you for your time!

Xiaonan Song

The University of Southern Mississippi

Doctoral Candidate and Research Assistant
Higher Education Administration
If you have any questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, please email the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The University of Southern Mississippi at irb@usm.edu.

____________________________________
Signature of Participant                Date

_______________________________________________________
Name of Participant (please print)
APPENDIX C – Interview Protocol

About Relationships and Social Network
1. 你有多少好朋友是中国人？（用表格）请描述你们之间的关系。
   How many of your close friends in the United States are Chinese? How would you
describe your relationships with them?
你有多少好朋友不是中国人？（用表格）请描述你们之间的关系。
How many of your close friends are not Chinese? Describe your relationships with them?
熟人呢？
How about acquaintances? (用表格)
2. 你在美国除了南方以外的地区生活过吗? 你在当地有不是中国人的朋友吗？
   Have you stayed in areas than the South in the United States? Did you make any non-
Chinese friends there? [to test the loose and tight state theory]
(If the participant have been in other areas other than the South, I will ask the following
question.)
你在美国其他州上过学吗？你觉得那里的大学和密西西比的大学在政治和文化上有
什么不同和相同之处？
Have you received any education in other states in the United States? What do you feel
are some (political or cultural) differences and similarities between higher education
institutions there and in Mississippi?
3. 有没有经历过文化冲击？在哪里？你是怎么应对的？
   Have you experienced culture shock? Where? How did you overcome it?
4. 请描述现在你在美国的社会支持系统。（是谁和什么对你帮助最大？）
   Describe your current social support system in the United States. (Who and what helps
you the most?)
5. 你在建立人际关系和社会支持系统时有没有遇到过困难和挑战？这些遭遇对你有
怎样的影响？你是怎么处理的？
   Have you ever encountered any difficulties or challenges in establishing relationships and
social support in the United States? How did these problems affect you? How did you
deal with these problems?
6. 你认为你的大学有没有对你提供足够的支持（在你适应的过程中，还有平时的
情况）？有没有什么事是你认为大学或者 (心理) 咨询中心本来可以做的，这些事
是可以让你适应美国的过程更容易一些的？
   Do you think your college/university has provided you with enough support? (During
transition and in general.) Is there anything that the university or counseling center could
have done to make your adaptation to the United States easier? (E.g. To help you meet
people and form relationships?)
7. 你会参加教会的活动吗？你对教会是什么印象？教会对你的生活有影响吗？
   Do you go to church? How do you feel about going to churches? Has churches affected
your life in the United States?
About Education Experience and Career Plan

1. 你在高中分科吗? 你是文科还是理科?
Was there high school division in your school? Were you in the liberal arts division or science division?

2. 你所学的专业是什么？攻读什么学位？你们专业中国学生有多少？平时完成作业时会互相帮助吗？
What is your major? Level? How many Chinese students are there in your major (department)? Do the Chinese students in your class or department help each other on projects and assignments?

3. 你之前学的是相同或者相关的专业吗？（你换过专业吗？如果是，请解释你做出这个决定的原因。）
Are you in a similar/relevant major as your last degree? (Have you changed your major before? If so, explain why you made that decision.)

4. 你觉得自己的英语能够应对在美国大学的课业吗？你们系或者专业课老师对国际学生的英语水平有什么具体要求吗？
Do you think your English proficiency is enough to support your study in American college? What are some language competence requirements by your department or your professors for international students in your major?

5. 你的课程对学术写作的要求是怎样的？（频率和质量要求）
How about the requirement for academic writings in your program? (In terms of frequency and quality of writing.)

6. 你毕业后的打算是什么？你认为最新的移民政策对你的决定有什么影响吗？
What is your plan after graduation? How do you think the latest immigration policies have influenced your decision making?

关于这次采访我们谈到的问题，你还有要补充的吗？
Is there anything that you would like to add to what we have talked about in this interview?
APPENDIX D – Participant Consent Form

Dear Participant:

This study is intended to study factors that influence undergraduate Chinese international students’ cultural adaptation experience in American higher education institution in the American South. Your participation in this study will help me to better understand how fields of study have influenced Chinese international students’ adaptation experience in the South. This is an invitation to participate in one 90-minute interview and completion of an online information sheet. Data analysis will follow standard qualitative procedures and will be conducted by Xiaonan Song. All identifying information will be removed from transcripts prior to analysis. As a token of appreciation for your time, you will receive a $15 gift card to Walmart for your participation in the interview.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time, with no penalty of any kind. You can choose not to participate at all, or not answer some or all of the questions. There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study. The interviews will be audio recorded. If this is an issue, you can choose to not participate in the interview. If you agree that I may do so, you can request at any time that I turn off the recorder. Digital recordings will be kept in a secure location until three years after this study is completed, at which time they will be erased. The online information form will be kept in a separate secure location than that of the digital recording.

Your identity will remain confidential in all transcribing, analyzing, and reporting of data. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. I will use a pseudonym of your choice in transcribing, analyzing, and reporting data.

It is possible that you may become uncomfortable discussing your experiences. I remind you that you may, at any time and without penalty, elect not to answer a question or terminate the interview.

If you have any concerns or questions regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact the researcher: Xiaonan Song, (601) 401-0815, xiaonan.song@usm.edu.
Social Science and Humanities:

- Anthropology
- Communication studies
- Economics
- Education
- Geography
- History
- Law
- Linguistics
- Political Science
- Psychology
- Sociology
- Sociology

Notes: classification based on Redfield (1950) and Perry (1969).

STEM:

- Biological Sciences
- Chemistry
- Computer Science
- Computer Science
- Electrical, Chemical and Mechanical Engineering
- Geometric Analysis
- Mathematics,
- Physics
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