

## **Chinese Students' Experiences Transitioning from an Intensive English Program to a U.S. University**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of former intensive English program (IEP) Chinese students by concurrently examining national origin, language problems, forms of capital, culture shock, and institutional programming using qualitative case study methods. The findings give us insights into the students' sociocultural and academic transitions, which have implications for intensive English program and university recruitment, admissions, instruction, student support, and programming.

**Keywords:** acculturation, Chinese students, intercultural communication, intensive English programs, pathway programs

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In the 2018–2019 academic year, almost 1.1 million international students came to the United States for higher education (Institute of International Education, 2019). International students from non-English-speaking countries must demonstrate adequate English proficiency for admission to U.S. degree programs. Students who do not show proficiency might be offered conditional admission, met when the student achieves the necessary minimum proficiency score, or in many cases, upon completion of a partnering English language program. These language learning institutes for pre-admission English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students are intensive English programs (IEPs).

Noncredit IEPs remain mainstays of higher education, but credit-bearing ESL courses are increasingly popular as pathways into degree programs (Cross & O'Loughlin, 2013; Melles et al., 2005). Credit or partial credit programs combine ESL classes with for-credit coursework for one or more semesters before international

students can progress through their university degree programs. These programs are often called pathway programs, bridge programs, or Credit English for Academic Purposes (CEAPs).

Many universities rely on international students, who typically pay full tuition, as revenue streams (Hawthorne, 2010). Thus, international students have a positive financial impact on universities. But “higher education institutions that take international students for granted, as ‘cash cows’, do so at their peril” (Peterson et al., 1999, p. 69). With increasing numbers of international students attending English-speaking universities, a disconnect between recruitment policies and goals regarding international students and the support services created to assist them could evolve (McGowan & Porter, 2008). As student populations diversify, universities and academic staff face more challenges in supporting international students’ transitions and facilitating learning within their degree programs (McGowan & Porter, 2008). In turn, international students are more likely than domestic students to drop out of universities; the lack of support for integration into the university cultural context may be responsible (Smith & Naylor, 2001).

Much of the research on international students has been conducted viewing international students as a single population, but because Chinese students constitute the largest international student population in the United States, it is beneficial to foster deeper understanding of how Chinese students experience academic stresses (Yan & Berliner, 2009, 2011). Chinese students’ experiences of stress may be more difficult than students from other Asian countries, since China and the United States have been identified as having maximum cultural distance (Samovar & Porter, 1997). Greater cultural difference equates greater cultural distance, and the degree of cultural distance relates to the degree of psychosocial distress in cross-cultural transition (Demes & Geeraert, 2014). To explore how former IEP/CEAP students describe their experiences transitioning to the university, this study concurrently examines national origin, language problems, theoretical models of culture shock, and institutional programming within a conceptual framework that defines and relates the concepts of social and cultural capital.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Language Problems**

Many international students arrive at U.S. universities with passing language proficiency scores, but language proficiency requires more than language test skills. Truly proficient speakers recognize cultural conceptualization systems (Sharifian, 2009). Findings from a study of pre-sessional international students in Britain identified four major language speaking encounters: service, social, casual, and academic (Copland & Garton, 2011). Service encounters are conversations to obtain information or complete errands—for example, at a bank or restaurant. Social encounters are to start or maintain relationships with friends, classmates, and coworkers. Casual encounters are short conversations with strangers, like asking for directions. Finally, academic encounters are about course-related matters with classmates and professors (Copland & Garton, 2011).

Often, service encounters are the first students will have upon arrival. If language use is unclear or different from expected, nonnative speakers may become confused during complex service encounters, and may in turn infer unintended meanings (Touchstone et al., 2017). International students have reported social opportunities to speak and interact in English are rare (Copland & Garton, 2011), and have indicated problems with academic language in terms of taking notes, interacting in group discussions, reading textbooks, demonstrating comprehension on written exams, and understanding professors' lectures, expectations, and grading (Bastien et al., 2018; Gebhard, 2012).

International students also often want assistance with identifying community living essentials, understanding academic systems, and developing social networks (Kim & Egan, 2011; Guo & Chase, 2011). Students with access to noneconomic forms of capital, such as language proficiency and cultural knowledge, can navigate environments with greater ease than those who lack such capital; they benefit from the social and cultural resources available to them through their social networks, and this plays an important role in students' adjustment processes (Glass et al., 2015).

### **Forms of Capital**

Social capital is the sum of resources available through one's acquaintance network (Bourdieu, 2011/1986), described as social networks embedded in relationships. International students leave social networks in their home countries; consequently, they need to form new ones that often are very different from those of domestic students (Lacina, 2002). Neri and Ville (2007) found only a minority of international students forged relationships with host country nationals, but it is social ties that give international students access to other networks, information, and resources. Accessing such resources is a basis of increasing one's social capital (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). Instead, most social capital investments by international students occur with other international students, predominantly from the same country of origin (Neri & Ville, 2007). As well as language problems, cultural differences could also contribute to international students' inability to forge social networks (Lacina, 2002). This could imply that accumulation of social capital is dependent on language skills and having the right cultural capital.

Cultural capital is defined as culturally relevant knowledge, skills, abilities, or other symbolic elements serving as a form of currency in social settings, such as taste in music, clothing styles, or mannerisms (Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Longhofer & Winchester, 2016). Cultural capital can be acquired in two ways—through one's social origin and through education (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). Bourdieu mentions linguistic capital as mastery of and relationship to a language. Included as a subset of cultural capital, he claims it must be acquired to achieve academic success (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The unavailability of linguistic capital to some international students conceals the worth of the cultural capital that international students bring with them (Lin, 2008). These aspects of an international student's identity, language proficiency, and capital affect the process of acculturating to life in the United States, the process known as culture shock.

## **Culture Shock**

Oberg (1960) first explained culture shock as a disorientating process of transitioning through an unfamiliar culture. Individuals wanting to adapt and acculturate in a new culture need strategies to acquire new social skills (Belford, 2017). In a 2017 Institute of International Education survey, many universities indicated they explicitly support international students, provide opportunities for students to discuss events, and/or offer counseling for students about the U.S. social and political climate (Elturki et al., 2019). Nevertheless, many students do not utilize support services for lack of familiarity, not seeing the usefulness, viewing them in a negative light, or perceiving co-national student support as sufficient. Additionally, international students are significantly less likely than U.S. peers to have previously accessed counseling or consider doing so in the future (Yakunina et al., 2011). International students also have more negative perceptions of available educational services than do domestic students (Sherry et al., 2004).

The quality of international students' experiences is important for continued university enrollment of international students and overall intercultural global understanding (Zhou et al., 2008). Findings from a survey of international students' educational satisfaction suggest that an international student's personal identity can be affected by adjustment levels and perceptions of discrimination from host culture members; this can create further stress levels, hinder adjustment processes, and decrease overall educational satisfaction (Wadsworth et al., 2008). Conversely, a study at an English university found international students with near-native English proficiency experienced less culture shock (Brown & Holloway, 2008). English proficiency was a predictor for both psychological and sociocultural adjustment (J. Zhang & Goodson, 2011). These findings indicate that language skills and forms of capital can determine international students' success in navigating culture shock.

## **Chinese Students at U.S. Universities**

While there are shared attributes for the adaptation process across cultural groups, the experiences of transitioning vary among cultural groups (Yoon & Portman, 2004). International students from Western and English-speaking countries face little-to-no discrimination (Lee & Rice, 2007), whereas American students' perceptions about Chinese students as an "outgroup" leads to communication anxiety and less willingness to attempt communication (Ruble & Zhang, 2013). Asian students are generally less engaged in diversity-related classroom activities than counterparts from other regions of the world (Zhao et al., 2005), and students from Southeastern Asia perceived greater constraints to participation in leisure activities—important factors in achieving adaptation and intercultural friendships—than other international students (Gareis, 2012; Glass et al., 2014).

Professors' use of complex sentences and colloquial expressions, and the fast pace of speech cause difficulties with Chinese students' academic listening (Huang, 2004). In Wang (2002), Chinese students identified four factors as reasons for language problems: (a) influence of Chinese language and the use of "Chinglish" expressions; (b) lack of cultural background knowledge; (c) inadequate previous

language training; and (d) limited opportunities to practice English with native speakers. Chinese students on some campuses create ethnic enclaves, or co-national networks, that help new Chinese students adjust and accrue cultural and academic capital (Chen & Ross, 2015; Glass et al., 2015). However, while these enclaves provide a safe harbor, they can become a place to hide from the local culture, and the process of withdrawal and separation from the host culture can accelerate (Storti, 2001). Additionally, participation in these enclaves is often viewed by others as unwillingness to integrate, and Chinese students are more likely to resort to speaking Chinese, reducing the opportunity to practice English (Dooney, 2010).

Considering learning within a cultural context, almost all Chinese students share common Confucian orientations that involve “effort-focused conceptions of learning, pragmatic orientations to learning, and acceptance of behavioral reform as an academic goal” (Tweed & Lehman, 2002, p. 93). Chinese students may experience challenges in Western academic settings, which tend to be Socratic-oriented, involving “overt and private questioning, expression of personal hypotheses, and a desire for self-directed tasks” (Tweed & Lehman, 2002, p. 93) and which emphasize individualism, assertiveness, and self-sufficiency over interdependence and relatedness (Mori, 2000; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Learning styles can contribute to individual variation in academic performance, due not to ability but to how individuals use their abilities (L.-F. Zhang & Sternberg, 2000). Asian international students have shown a preference for collaborative, social learning styles and strategies, whereas other international student groups have shown a preference for metacognitive strategies (Hong Nam & Leavell, 2006; Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001). Results from a study into learning styles of international students indicated that Chinese students face initial problems in terms of confronting different learning and teaching styles, but that they are highly adaptive (Wong, 2004). The longer students study, the more likely they are to adapt to the style of teaching and learning, hinting that learning styles are contextual, not culturally based (Wong, 2004).

It is important to note that the classification of Chinese students in this and other studies invites us to see this group as homogeneous, and their needs and responses as determined by their cultural background. However, each province has distinctive histories, cultures, and even languages. Moreover, the backgrounds, goals, and motivations of students and instructors, and the setting for the interactions, are also influential (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Tait, 2010).

### **Intensive English Programs**

The search for relevant research on IEPs yielded few results, as listings did not fit the type of program of interest to this paper or focused on a teaching method or teacher knowledge wherein the IEP was just the research site.

One reason for the lack of specific research could be the widely ranging structures of IEPs, making research complex. U.S. universities started establishing ESL programs in the 1950s, after World War II when international students increasingly began to study in the United States, but these programs were created without forward planning, and no agreement on how the needs of international students should be met (Kaplan, 1997). Another reason is the “unfortunate

phenomenon of the marginalization of these programs in the university setting” (Thompson, 2013, p. 213). IEPs are often not a part of an academic unit, and IEP professionals usually have different academic roles, and IEP students are often given limited student status on their campuses (Thompson, 2013). Some IEPs are even marginalized geographically on campus, often placed in older buildings on the edges of campus (personal observation).

IEPs can be broadly categorized into three groups: independent U.S. English language institutions; those operating outside the United States; and those with direct reporting within university administration. Most IEP students are enrolled in full-time, non-credit English classes, but some have programs to earn university credit while receiving ESL support. With IEPs increasingly serving as a pathway into higher education for international students, understanding of IEP students’ difficulties with language, capital, and culture shock, and strategies to help students overcome those difficulties, is invaluable for IEPs and universities alike (Kaktiņš, 2013).

The literature shows three major international student adjustment issues: language, capital, and culture shock. These themes are inseparable in understanding the variable outcomes of international students’ adjustment.

## **METHOD**

Qualitative case study research was the main methodology to collect data in understanding the transition experiences of international students from China to the United States. For this case study, I employed a constructivist epistemology, which maintains that individuals construct their own understanding through the interaction of what they already believe and the ideas with which they come into contact (Ültanır, 2012). I looked at data through the theoretical lens of social and cultural capital theories.

### **Research Site**

The research site is referred to here as the University of the Great Plains, or UGP (a pseudonym). UGP hosts over 1,300 international students from more than 100 different countries. Depending on TOEFL or IELTS scores, students may be unconditionally admitted, begin with the CEAP program, or start in the noncredit IEP.

Upon institutional review board approval in late 2016, I recruited the study participants from select freshman composition classes. These classes were ideal because they comprised international students, most from China, who had earned similar scores on an English proficiency exam. Accessing students in similar composition class provided a degree of control over the participants’ academic environment. Because participants were all from mainland China, a small degree of control over cultural background was achieved.

### **Sample Selection**

Criterion-based selection (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) was used in choosing potential participants. The essential criteria were that participants were formerly in

the IEP or CEAP, and currently in their first or second semester in their program of study. From this, convenience sampling provided the basis for selecting participants (Merriam, 2009), taking those who were available and willing. The participants in this study were four Chinese students in their first year at UGP after completing at least one semester of the university IEP or CEAP. All participation was voluntary, and participants' confidentiality was protected using pseudonyms.

**Table 1: Characteristics of Participants**

Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	IEP/CEAP
Lee	20	Male	1 semester IEP
Amy	21	Female	1 semester IEP
Kay	20	Female	1 semester IEP, 1 semester CEAP
Eric	22	Male	1 semester CEAP

*Note.* IEP = intensive English program; CEAP = Credit English for Academic Purposes.

### **Data Collection**

Case studies were created using in-depth data collection, utilizing information from multiple sources, such as observations, interviews, and documents (Creswell, 2007). In case studies, triangulation is important to ensure results that reflect participants' experiences as accurately as possible (Yin, 2009). In addition, triangulation, member checks, and peer review are strategies followed to be ethical and trustworthy (Merriam, 2009). Because this case study focused on participants' meaning-making, interviewing was chosen as the primary data collection method. The data were enhanced with two additional points: document data and participant observation/shadowing.

### **Interview Data**

Interviewing is necessary in discovering participants' "feelings or how [they] interpret the world around them" (Merriam, 2009, p. 88). Through one-on-one interviews with participants, I investigated their verbal interpretations of their experiences transitioning to UGP. I collected data until redundancy was reached (Merriam, 2009). To this end, three interviews per participant were held at a location of each participant's choosing.

Participants were asked a uniform set of open-ended questions to obtain information on (a) demographics, (b) previous experiences with American culture and English, (c) participants' experiences and perceptions of the IEP and/or CEAP programs, (d) participants' experiences and perceptions transitioning to their program of study, and (e) participants' advice for future students and program administrators. Open-ended questions were used throughout to encourage participants to respond freely and openly (Esterberg, 2002). Probing and/or follow-up questions were used as necessary to elicit elaboration or clarification of responses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

## **Written Data**

Interviews were the primary data collection method. However, essays or blog entries from participants on topics related to their adjustment were also analyzed. Merriam (2009) conceded that document data is highly subjective, but it allows the participant to “select what he or she considers important to record” (p. 143), which is pertinent to this case study. Document review can also clarify or substantiate participants’ interview statements and provide thicker description of the case (Esterberg, 2002; Merriam, 2009). I collected one reflection blog entry, one reading response paper, and two essays; all were on topics related to students’ experiences transitioning to UGP. This document data was collected from the participants’ instructors, with the students’ permission; the assignments were already a part of the course requirements and not additional work for this study.

## **Observation Data**

Participant observations can be used to increase the validity of a study, giving researchers fuller understanding of the phenomenon under examination (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). Schensul et al. (1999) listed relevant reasons for using participant observation in this proposed research:

- to help the researcher get a feel for how people interrelate, and what the cultural parameters are;
- to show the researcher what the participants deem to be important in manners, leadership, and social interaction; and
- to provide the researcher with a source of questions to be addressed with participants.

I followed the process of selective observation, in which I focused on different types of activities to delineate the differences in those activities (Angrosino & Mays DePerez, 2000). Researchers look at the interactions in the setting, including who talks to whom, how decisions are made, and where participants sit or stand (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). To this end, I shadowed each participant during a “typical” week day, in and out of classrooms. On the day of observations, each participant had two to three lecture classes with at least one block outside of class lasting an hour or more. During these observations, I particularly noted each participant’s conversations inside and outside of class.

Using multiple sources of data collection methods to confirm findings helps ensure the goodness, reliability, and ethical nature of the research, and strengthens the validity and reliability of this study.

## **Data Analysis**

There is continuous interaction between data collection and data analysis in qualitative research studies, so I began analyzing data after the first interview to start identifying themes and patterns, and to facilitate subsequent data collection and

analysis. I analyzed the interview transcripts, document data, and observation data following a constant comparative, step-by-step process of analysis, based on the development of grounded theory suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2015).

### **Researcher Positioning**

A researcher's "reflexivity," or positioning, is the process by which the researcher puts forth their biases, assumptions, and experiences (Merriam, 2009, p. 219). This helps readers of qualitative research to evaluate the validity of conclusions that the researcher pulls from the data. Therefore, it is essential that I position myself as a U.S.-born, middle-class White Anglophone in her mid-40s.

I previously worked as an instructor in an IEP for 5 years and was involved with an extracurricular group to try and further facilitate IEP students' adjustment to the university, community, and larger national culture. I have been the director of an IEP for the past 5 years. With these experiences, I have become familiar with the context of IEP students' experiences before their transition to their programs of study. The relationship I have had with the university's IEP population (including former IEP students) could potentially affect my data analysis; therefore, I will conduct member checks during the analysis process. It is my hope that my interest and work as an IEP instructor, director, and advocate will allow me to better understand the complexities for each student's experience, thus strengthening the data analysis.

## **RESULTS**

This section summarizes participant stories about coming to the United States, their adjustment experiences, and reflections on the English programs' impact on that adjustment. The participants' names have been changed to provide anonymity. However, with so many Chinese students studying in the United States, the participants were comfortable preserving their gender identification, home province, and academic majors in their narratives.

### **Participant One: "Lee"**

Lee was a 20-year-old finance major from a city near the Hunan province capital. He lived in an off-campus apartment with two Chinese roommates, but said of himself: "Personally speaking, I consider myself inclusive person. I'm willing to accept all the new things instead of just deny it." Indeed, he did interact with his American neighbors, and opted to sit next to non-Chinese students in classes.

Lee arrived to UGP in the fall of 2015 and spent the first semester in the IEP. Family members who had spent time in the United Kingdom helped him to brace himself for culture shock, and he was pleased to discover that the people are friendly, and the community is safe.

Lee thought his language improved in the IEP, and he learned about how UGP functions and tips for university work, but mostly he valued the time to adjust before beginning his degree program. His advice for the program in the future was more interaction with native speakers, through partnerships. Lee's advice to other students

was to expect the transition difficulties, study vocabulary, and use other Chinese students as resources. Most importantly, he stressed that students remain open to new ways, ideas, and friends.

Lee spoke about being open-minded, noting and learning from differences, and adopting new ways; this shows that he was finding his “middle way,” synthesizing Chinese values with aspects of Western norms (Durkin, 2008; Yan & Berliner, 2011).

### **Participant Two: “Amy”**

Amy was 21 years old and was from the capital of Shaanxi province. Amy had planned to come to the United States for graduate school, but after 2 years at a Chinese university, her uncle convinced her to come to the United States earlier and she began in the IEP in the fall of 2015. Amy thought the time at her Chinese university was beneficial in terms of living and working with others and forming study habits.

Amy was pleased to realize that the campus was safe, and she found Americans to be friendly. Still, she had difficulty making American friends and relied on conational students at UGP for much of her social support. She credited the IEP for the time it afforded her to learn about the university system and surroundings and appreciated the more relaxed semester it gave her upon arrival. Amy wanted to reassure future international students to not be worried about making mistakes in speaking, because she has found that Americans can understand her despite mistakes.

Amy exhibited a positive attitude overall toward her current experience and future outcome at UGP. Though Amy may not have been actively seeking new connections to the host community, she was content, comfortable, and confident within that culture.

### **Participant Three: “Kay”**

Kay was 20 years old, from the Guanxi Autonomous Region of China. She had campus jobs working at a food science lab and in a dining hall. Despite these out-of-class activities, Kay found it hard to socialize with other people. She said, “I don’t know how to start a conversation, I don’t know what I should talk to them. Sometimes I really want to have some domestic student friends but I don’t know how to do that.” She was trying to overcome her shyness and said that was part of her motivation for participating in this study.

Kay attended English camps in the United Kingdom and the United States in middle and high school and had traveled to other countries in which English was the lingua franca. Kay spent one semester in the IEP followed by one semester in the CEAP. Given the choice, she recommended the CEAP for its academic focus and inclusion of community outings in the course requirements.

Even though Kay admitted that she did not participate voluntarily in many activities or clubs, she recommended that new international students arrive early, try to have confidence, and attend activities and events. She also credited IEP and CEAP instructors for helping her gain speaking confidence through presentation assignments. It is also confidence that she thought was most essential for other international students coming to the United States to study.

Kay was the only participant who had previously traveled to the United States. This might have given her a more accurate perception of aspects of the U.S. life, as she was not as surprised by differences when she arrived at UGP. However, her previous time here did not shield her from experiencing many of the same difficulties in adjusting to academic life. Overall, Kay found a comfortable place for herself within UGP.

#### **Participant Four: “Eric”**

Eric was 22 years old and from a city in the Zhejiang province. Eric noted that difficulties are a normal part of the transition process:

I am a student since I came to the US except [besides] the college, I traveled many cities... I viewed the beautiful landscape of American; I learned the great culture of American; I faced many troubles and things; I suffered pain, loneliness, homesickness, and I grow up. All in all, it's not easy to live in a foreign country, but you will be happy when you overcome the problem every time. For me, that's enough.

Eric started at UGP with a CEAP semester. He had family already studying in the United States, so he knew to expect shock, and wanted a semester to better adapt. After completion, he looked back at CEAP as a “soft landing” and was glad he did it.

Eric thought the CEAP helped in terms of time to adjust and practice the language, and an opportunity to learn functions of the university and community. He believed that the IEP and CEAP programs have too many Chinese students, and that the CEAP would be stronger with more contact with domestic students. For other students, Eric recommended they still try to include time at the beginning of their sojourn to “go easily” and gain experience being in the United States and making friends.

Eric exhibited strong motivation to adapt to the host culture, evidenced by his participation in extracurricular activities, outings, and programs, and his embrace of the challenges that come with adjusting to a new culture and place. Unlike the other three participants, Eric regularly participated in extracurricular programming, and as a result was partnered with an American peer who became, and remains, his roommate. The additional efforts that Eric has made to see other parts of the United States and interact with more Americans indicates he was using strategies in dealing with his adjustment.

### **DISCUSSION**

Each participant had slightly different experiences and opinions, but the narratives are grouped under subheadings that correspond to themes that emerged from the data, then considered per the themes identified in the literature review. This section will review these themes, then further draw together those common themes through the lens of the research questions.

## **Language Problems**

Lee, Amy, and Eric all wished the IEP had afforded more opportunities to interact with native speakers, consistent with findings in the literature (Copland & Garton, 2011). Other international students have reported that their difficulties in forging friendships with local students was due to poor English language proficiency or cultural shyness (Gareis, 2012), which was how Amy and Kay felt. However, Eric supported findings indicating that international students' satisfaction increased and homesickness decreased with more host country friendships (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Lee and Amy reported difficulties following academic lectures, and Lee, Amy, and Eric mentioned troubles communicating in group work with Americans, which is also consistent with reports from other international students (Gebhard, 2012; Major, 2005). Despite the difficulties the participants experienced in transitioning to their degree programs, all felt that the IEP/CEAP helped them improve English language skills.

## **Forms of Capital**

Kay was the only participant who had previously visited the United States, and she was the only who did not feel misinformed by the media before arriving. The other three had relatives who had been to the United States or the United Kingdom, and to varying degrees had awareness of cultural differences they would face in the United States. Eric had cousins studying in the United States, and conversations with them imparted ideas of social and cultural capital to Eric. They helped convince him that UGP would be a safe place.

Both Eric and Amy had already attended 2 years of college in China before coming to UGP. Amy noted that this experience was helpful in showing her she needed to be responsible for her own studying. She also felt she benefitted from the social skills she learned by living in a dormitory. These are aspects of college life, or academic capital, that are also important in a U.S. academic environment, so Amy benefitted by already having these skills.

Lee had perhaps the weakest direct ties to U.S. culture before arriving. However, his perspective on his experiences shows he understood language proficiency is more than grammar and vocabulary, that "you have to learn how THEY speaking, not how you yourself speaking." He also hinted at his understanding of social and cultural capital concepts in saying, "Accept the nuances of the culture... like how they act, how they speak, or how they—how they do things. Uh, it definitely gonna have very difference. Definitely gonna surprise you but embrace it."

At the time of this study, only Eric had a close American friend, and Eric believed this relationship benefited him in gaining U.S. cultural knowledge. The others made most social capital investments with other international students, and mostly other Chinese students—consistent with findings from other studies (Neri & Ville, 2007; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013; R. A. Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Lee, Amy, and Eric referenced the Chinese ethnic enclave (Chen & Ross, 2015) that provided support and advice, though Eric expressed his desire to use UGP resources instead of the ethnic enclave. All participants expressed that they gained knowledge of the U.S.

academic system and academic skills, which indicates an accrual of U.S. cultural capital (Longhofer & Winchester, 2016). Additionally, all four students expressed motivation to overcome difficulties; this personal growth initiative is a predictor of adjustment (Yakunina et al., 2013).

### **Culture Shock**

The participants expressed surprises and difficulties endured after arrival to the United States. Three participants spoke about it being part of the process and feeling empowered to overcome difficulties. Eric said, "It's not easy to live in a foreign country, but you will be happy when you overcome the problem every time," and Amy remarked, "Everybody has a tough time...it looks like you cannot pass, but when you pass it you feel like, 'Okay'!"

Participants shared that time in the IEP/CEAP was beneficial, allowing them to work through challenges in a more supportive environment. Even for international students whose English proficiency scores are high enough for direct entry into a U.S. university, participants' recommendation was to consider arriving early. Kay said, "I think you need ... some time to adapt yourself, adapt to the new life." All participants indicated coping styles and social supports indicative of a positive sociocultural adjustment (J. Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

### **How do these Chinese International Students Describe their Transition?**

The participants' initial experiences transitioning to the United States are not surprising, as they reflect the major themes from the literature review: problems with language, forms of capital, and culture shock. Kay and Amy referenced difficulties in making host country friends, and partially attributed their struggles as being related to their own shyness and/or fears about their limited proficiency. Lee referenced linguistic capital, stating that students not only need English language skills, but also need to know "how THEY (Americans) speaking."

### **Do the Participants Refer to Social Networks and Cultural Knowledge?**

Eric, Amy, and Kay specifically referenced the advantages and disadvantages of the Chinese co-national network at UGP. Consistent with the findings of the Chen and Ross (2015) study into ethnic enclaves, these participants found assistance through the existing network of Chinese students, as well as an extended enclave of other international students. Chinese upperclassmen were a resource in learning about the university and community, and in explaining aspects of the host culture. Chinese and other international students provided a safer, more comfortable space to speak English freely, without fears of making mistakes or giving offense. However, too many Chinese students also meant that it was easy to fall into a comfort zone wherein some participants did not feel they needed to try to make new friends, and in Eric's case, he could not always mix with domestic students in class group work.

Lee, Amy, and Kay mentioned difficulties in group work that included Americans; this further illustrates findings in studies on Asian students in Western

learning contexts (Mori, 2000; Tweed & Lehman, 2002; Yeh & Inose, 2003). All four students mentioned the need for the IEP and CEAP to arrange classes and activities that brought in host country students, so the international students could experience and adapt to the communication differences earlier, in preparation for their academic courses.

Through a program for international students, Eric was partnered with an American student who later became his roommate. He recognized this as an asset to acquiring increased language proficiency and cultural knowledge. This is verification of what studies cited in N. J. Smith and Khawaja (2011) found on programs pairing international and domestic students that resulted in improvements to international students in the areas of social adjustment and support, among other benefits. Eric also credited student outings as helpful in increasing his cultural and linguistic knowledge, stating, "Every experience I feel like my speaking, my knowledge will 'boom'! Like, oh wow, this is American."

Regarding culture shock, all encountered surprises and had difficulties in the first semester. Kay reflected on a conversation activity as a time and place to talk with others about "challenges and difficulties." Eric looked back at his experience as a journey to becoming an adult, saying, "I faced many troubles and things; I suffered pain, loneliness, homesickness, and I grow up." Lee anticipated the difficulties, and stated that others should "accept it, just embrace it."

### **Do the Descriptions Differ from those of other International Students?**

This study did not include participants who did not previously attend the IEP or CEAP, but comparisons can be drawn based on the existing literature on international students at U.S. universities, as well as the participants' perceptions. The main difference for these students is that difficulties occurred during their time in the non-credit IEP or sheltered environment of the CEAP, which the participants viewed as an easier entry to the university: a "soft landing, like butter," as Eric put it. For example, Chinese students in a different study attributed their academic problems to their unfamiliarity with American formal academic environments and teaching methods (J. Huang, 2005). The participants of the present study, however, reported that they acquired study habits, knowledge of the university system and services, increased language proficiency and confidence, and a gained social network during their time in the IEP or CEAP. They all reflected on the time spent in those programs as valuable in allowing for adjustment to UGP and the surrounding community before starting their program of study.

All the participants reflected on their time in the IEP as beneficial to their transition process into their university programs, for the time it afforded them to practice academic skills, gain confidence, and simply become accustomed to the environment.

## CONCLUSION

### Language Problems

The research on language difficulties has indicated that students without skills for casual and service encounters will have difficulties with some basic living essentials. Without language skills for social encounters, students cannot establish social relationships outside of co-national students. Academic encounters require additional language skills for students to understand and be understood within the classroom (Copland & Garland, 2011). Other researchers have synthesized findings to identify major principles critical to international students' successful adaptation and learning: (a) feelings of belonging; (b) being valued as knowledgeable; and (c) ability to communicate effectively and with confidence (Guo & Chase, 2011). Pre-sessional programs (like IEPs) could give instruction on scripts common to service encounters, possible permutations, and techniques to use to ask for clarification (Copland & Garton, 2011). For the language skills needed for casual, social, and academic encounters, however, the participants of this study all advised that IEPs create more structured opportunities for interactions with host country nationals, and research backs them up.

Studies have shown that simply arranging contact between students is an ineffective solution to the problem (Woods et al., 2013). This was supported by McKenzie and Baldassar (2016), who found an assumption among local students that friendships between local and international students would "emerge organically and freely" (p. 12) from simply facilitating spaces and initiatives for communication. However, the same local students reported that they had not formed friendships with international students due to the local students' social realities, and both parties' understandings of friendship (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2016). The researchers' conclusion was that temporary interactions did not suffice. One suggestion was mentoring programs that are connected to students' coursework, allowing both local and international students to benefit (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2016; Woods et al., 2013).

A major implication for instructors and administrators of IEPs and CEAPs is how to integrate native speakers into their programs; perhaps more specifically, how to recruit and retain native speakers to participate. Some universities with TESL certificate or endorsement programs have created partnerships with students in those programs and students studying English in the IEPs. Many universities, however, do not have TESL or similar programs.

Participants Lee and Amy mentioned the need for such partnerships to be mandatory or part of a class, as even many international students also will not attend optional activities despite their desire for more interaction with native speakers. Kay lamented that she wanted to be friends with domestic students, but she did not know how to initiate conversations. Compulsory participation is one way to ensure participation from students, with the hope that repeated, regular, "forced" interaction will eventually lead to organic and optional interaction across the groups. A problem in setting up partnerships with academic courses and IEPs is the marginalization that many IEPs face. Since IEPs are not always part of an academic unit, instructors are

not tenured faculty, and the larger campus community might have limited awareness of the existence of the IEP. These teaching professionals can have a hard time finding inroads to initiate partnerships.

In Ernst et al. (2015), a college achieved social and academic objectives by creating a learning community. It developed a curriculum for a critical reading project with cohorts of IEP students and native English-speaking students. Along with positive academic outcomes in communication skills, academic research skills, and historical consciousness, the project reduced IEP students' feelings of social isolation, and fostered increased global awareness among the U.S. students. Follow-up surveys of the project showed "overwhelmingly positive feedback from both U.S. native English speakers and IEP student populations, and 94% of participants indicated that the project should be repeated" (Ernst et al., 2015, p. 15).

### **Forms of Capital**

A common thread in the participant narratives was the value of time before starting fully in an academic program, not only adjust to hearing and using English much more frequently, but learning the way in which Americans talk, getting acquainted with the environment, and acquiring community life skills.

Current newcomer sessions are overloaded with verbal, visual, and printed materials that students are largely expected to work through themselves. This practice is a manifestation of the American self-help and self-reliance lifestyle. Instead, international students need more individual guidance in forging a relationship with advisors, and selecting, adding, or dropping courses (Major, 2005). Considering all of this with the current study warrants an exploration into short-term pre-sessional program options for new international students, perhaps coupled with ongoing orientation throughout the first semester(s) of students' degree programs. Another suggestion is a semester-long orientation focused on academic culture with co-national mentors as peer advisors, to minimize the risk of academic failure and maximize the level of academic and sociocultural adjustment (Major, 2005). Barriers to this type of programming are convincing international students to invest more time and money, and the logistics of accommodating students on campus or with host families during this pre-sessional period.

Negotiating new forms of capital does not need to come only from students. It is "international students' own communication that is most salient to their classroom experiences" (Wadsworth et al., 2008, p. 80), so classroom interactions could be structured such that international students may communicate in ways that might not match the dominant group's linguistic capital, thereby placing value on nonmajority forms of capital. An internationalist perspective sees that "the host community does not hold a monopoly on social resources and opportunities, but rather has as much to gain from the social capital of the international student community as it has to offer them in return" (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013, p. 427).

## **Culture Shock**

The participants were fortunate to have a network of Chinese students. For most international students, this type of support system helps absorb the initial shock (Major, 2005). Within the co-national group, new students do not feel labeled as linguistically or academically deficient, and these groups can help newcomers identify useful academic and social resources. Participants Lee, Amy, and Eric all referenced support they received from other Chinese students. Additionally, social capital attained from co-national networks can be converted into other forms of capital, as evidenced by a study on a Chinese ethnic enclave (Chen & Ross, 2015). Continued reliance on these segregated groups, however, can hinder adaptation (Brown & Holloway, 2008). This indicates that while co-national support is beneficial in moving through the early stages of culture shock, it should only be used as a scaffold, gradually augmented by additional supports.

Institutions often focus efforts on helping international students adapt to their U.S. college classrooms; they should also focus on helping faculty foster cultural sensitivities toward non-U.S. students (Glass et al., 2015). Faculty should possess an understanding of the initial difficulties that international students face with culture shock, different learning approaches and thinking styles, and provide support when needed (Wong, 2004; L.-F. Zhang & Sternberg, 2000). The site of the Chen and Ross (2015) study has started offering workshops for faculty with the aim of improving classroom learning environments for Chinese students and encouraging student organizations to include international and domestic students before and during the students' programs of studies. Several scholars have also recommended group-oriented approaches to increase student support, reduce cultural isolation, and normalize culture shock challenges (Yakunina et al., 2011). Findings from studies on programs that pair international students with domestic students indicate improvements with international students' social adjustment and support, academic achievement, and utilization of university student services (J. P. Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

## **Limitations**

There were limitations to this study. This qualitative case study was limited by participant selection and the timing of primary research. Students from UGP were purposefully selected because they were enrolled in a freshmen English course at one university. As such, assumptions that the results would be like those of another course or site cannot be made. Observations, interviews, and document data were collected during the students' first year of taking university courses after completing at least one semester of the IEP or CEAP. Similar data collected during an earlier or later time in students' degree programs could yield different results.

Also, the scope of this study was limited to four Chinese students at one university in the United States, so results should not be broadly applied to similar contexts. Another limitation concerned the data collection process. Interview data were dependent on participants and their willingness to share, and that information is further limited by their own perspectives. Patton (2002) stated that perceptual data

are in the eye of the beholder. However, this study's triangulation of data helped to verify results, and helped support the themes that emerged from document and interview data.

Through the student narratives, we gained insight into experiences of four Chinese students who transitioned from China to an IEP/CEAP, and to a degree program. The results provide us with a better understanding of these students' lived experiences regarding their sociocultural and academic transitions. The findings also provide a foundation for more studies into pre-sessional programs and the students who utilize them as a stepping stone to their university degrees.

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