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## **Conflict Resolution Skills of Chinese International Students in the United States**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The number of Chinese international students in the United States has dramatically been increasing for the past two decades, while little is known about how these Chinese students handle campus conflicts in the United States. With an interpretative phenomenological research methodology, we invited 10 Chinese students at three different universities in the United States to share their experiences and strategies in resolving campus disputes. Five themes emerged based on the experiences of research participants. The findings strongly indicate that conflict management strategies and styles of Chinese students are significantly shaped by Chinese culture, and Chinese international students are less likely to express their needs and negative feelings. According to findings, this study suggests that more attention and resources of student help centers should be allocated to Chinese international students in the United States for improving their learning experiences.

**Keywords:** Chinese international students, conflict resolution skills, qualitative study

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American universities have a much more diverse student body than at any previous time (Urban & Palmer, 2016). An increasing number of

international students are studying at thousands of colleges in all 50 U.S. states, greatly contributing to the diversity and internationalization of classrooms, campuses, and communities (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Wu et al., 2015). According to data released by Institute of International Education (IIE, 2021), for the past decade, the total number of international students in the United States increased from 690,923 in 2009 to 1,075,496 in the academic year 2019–2020, almost doubling. The increasing number of international students has cultural influences on the United States. Not only can international students greatly contribute to the diversity and academic prestige of American universities, but domestic students are also able to take advantage of the diversity of their campuses (Carnevale, 1999). For example, American domestic students can have a deeper understanding of cultural sensitivities and acquire communication skills through working with international students (Calleja, 2000; Perry, 2016).

The number of Chinese students made up the largest portion of all international students studying in the United States and accounted for 32.5% of the total population in the academic year 2016–2017 (IIE, 2017). The passion and enthusiasm of Chinese students for pursuing their overseas education can in part be understood from the competitive job market, as data show that over 98% of Chinese workers aspire to gain a higher level of education for improving their professional skills and becoming more competitive in the Chinese job market (Wenting, 2017). Among many different choices, the United States is one of the most ideal countries for pursuing quality education as many Chinese students are deeply attracted by American culture and the American education system, which offers international students many different academic programs at all levels (Chen & Jordan, 2016). However, earning a degree as an international student is surely not an easy endeavor. It is more so for many Chinese students studying in the United States, where they have to overcome many challenges such as cultural differences, language barriers, and homesickness. Many researchers (e.g., McClure, 2007; Msengi, 2003; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Wadsworth et al., 2008; Unruh, 2015) have studied a series of serious challenges often encountered by international students. Among empirical work on challenges faced by international students, the cultural adaptation experiences of Chinese international students have been extensively explored (see Gill, 2007; Li, 2016; Yuan, 2011), but few research studies look at how Chinese students deal with disputes and conflict at American institutions to achieve their academic success.

Campus conflict plays a critical role in influencing students' learning experiences. When Chinese students do not get along with domestic

students or their professors, it diminishes the potential for their success. Not only are the Chinese students involved often unable to concentrate on their coursework, but teachers must spend extra time and energies dealing with those in conflict (Johnson, 2005). Holzinger (2004) distinguished three different types of conflict according to the substance of conflict, which respectively is conflict over facts, over values, and over interests. The last two types are often faced by Chinese students in the United States as their cultural backgrounds lead them to have different value systems from the Americans. Although campus conflict is ubiquitous among Chinese students, American domestic students, and American professors, it can be effectively managed through conflict resolution skills and strategies. Any attempt to resolve a conflict or to terminate a dispute will usually be accompanied by communication skills wherein involved parties learn from their past experiences and their culture. The absence of studying conflict resolution skills of Chinese students in the United States makes understandings inadequate of how to better drive Chinese students to succeed in the United States. The goal of this study was to fill this literature gap with an interpretative phenomenological research approach, so a more comprehensive understanding of how Chinese students at American universities resolve classroom conflict with peers and faculty could be built.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There are four components in the following literature review. First, we discuss general challenges for international students in the United States. We introduce some empirical research findings on the difficulties of international students in the United States. We then analyze the unique challenges for Chinese students studying in the United States, considering the distinctive challenges Chinese students face based on their cultural backgrounds, as well as general challenges faced by all international students such as language barriers. We also present the features of Chinese culture and how it shapes Chinese students' behaviors. Then, we review the conflict management styles developed by Thomas and Kilmann (1974) and further examine how to understand the conflict resolution behaviors of Chinese students in the United States. Last, we address the campus conflict resolution systems of some American universities. The literature review section covers the causes of campus conflict for international students and generalizes conflict resolution strategies and resources of which Chinese students may take advantage.

## **Challenges for International Students**

Many research studies have addressed the academic cross-cultural adjustment of international students (e.g., Barratt & Huba, 1994; Bauer & Picciotto, 2013; Bochner, 1985; Briguglio, 2000; Paez, 1985; Unruh, 2015). Barratt and Huba (1994) argued that international students who were less fluent in English normally experienced greater challenges in adapting to American higher education. The results of this study were repeated by the findings of many other scholars such as Liu (2011), Paze (1985), Poyrazli and Lopez (2007), and Probertson et al. (2000), who all argued that international students with weak English language skills were more likely to encounter social and academic problems. For example, they hardly made local American friends but more easily got involved in unexpected conflict with local students because of misunderstandings caused by language barriers. In addition, lack of English proficiency is one of the main sources of conflict between international students and their advisors and instructors (Liu, 2011; Probertson et al., 2000; Terui, 2011). Liu (2011) examined her personal experiences to discuss the negative effects that the language barrier caused in hampering relationships between her and her instructors during her learning journey as an international student in an English-speaking country. Some scholars (e.g., Briguglio, 2000; Habib et al., 2014) further argued that different educational styles also play an important role in causing misunderstandings between international students and their instructors. For example, in western universities, instructors often encourage students to express their thoughts in class while many international students feel uncomfortable speaking and discussing their opinions in the classroom (Briguglio, 2000). Some international students, with their cultural concerns, even believed that they may cause negative feelings of other classmates if they answered questions in the classroom too often (Briguglio, 2000). Based on their qualitative study, Wu et al. (2015) argued that transition difficulties and cultural difference present a major problem that many international students in the United States have to solve for achieving better learning experiences, but at the same time, they also believed that these difficulties have some positive effects on international students, such as motivating them to integrate themselves into American culture.

## **Unique Challenges for Chinese Students**

Chinese students in American universities often face difficulties and challenges that they have to skillfully resolve to achieve academic success. Lack of English proficiency, cultural differences, and unfamiliarity with the American classroom environment often catch them in unpleasant situations, even conflict, with their classmates and faculty members

(Hsieh, 2007; Y. Huang, 2012; Sun & Chen, 1999; ). Based on a case study exploring a Chinese student's experiences in the United States, Hsieh (2007) argued that some Chinese students were isolated and often felt ignored by American students because of cultural differences. Indeed, many Chinese students in the United States suffer significantly from a high level of academic stress due to ineffective interactions with American professors and academic advisors (Yan & Berliner, 2009). Valdez (2015) found, with the qualitative double consciousness approach, that many Chinese students in the United States believed that American faculty members, advisors, and students had negative perceptions and bias against Chinese students. Moreover, the problem of English listening is especially a huge obstacle in making some Chinese students less confident and thus negatively influences the use of their conflict resolution skills at American universities, discouraging them from seeking resources offered by American universities to resolve their classroom conflicts (J. Huang, 2006).

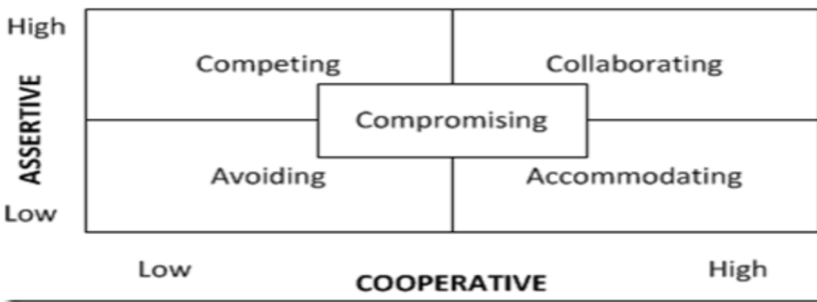
Chinese culture is a distinctive type of high contextual culture in which the traditional value systems along with collectivism have tremendously shaped the Chinese society where being humble is always promoted (Hanzan & Shi, 2009; Hofstede, 1991), so Chinese students are more likely to show agreement at the thoughts of others and avoid arguing with peers and instructors in the classroom. Also, during the conflict resolution process, Chinese people are always encouraged to conduct self-criticism and apologize first to earn others' respect (Fei, 1993; Perkovich, 1996). Conducting self-criticism is one of the central ideas promoted by Confucianism that has had a long-lasting influence on Chinese culture. Confucianism stresses the harmony of the community. The essence of self-criticism is to educate disputants to not think about other's mistakes, but to focus only on what they have done wrong. In contrast, American students are encouraged to express their thoughts in public and firmly defend their stances (Hofstede, 1991). Also, self-criticism is not a common practice in the American conflict resolution process, which pays great attention to fair procedures to identify a mutually acceptable outcome (Moore, 2003). Hence, when Chinese students in the United States encounter classroom disputes with American classmates or instructors, their conflict resolution experiences acquired in China may not be effective.

### **Conflict Management Styles**

One of the most widely cited definitions of conflict given by Rubin et al. (1994) describes conflict as "perceived divergence of interests, or a

belief that parties' current aspirations can not be achieved simultaneously" (p. 5). Conflict is unavoidable and inherent in any interpersonal relationship, but it can be managed with decreased odds of nonproductive escalation (Katz & Lawyer, 1993). Thomas and Kilmann (1974) developed a conflict-handling model that used two parameters, cooperation and assertiveness, to create five distinct styles: avoiding, competing, collaborating, accommodating, and compromising. The following is the figure of the model.

*Figure 1. The Conflict-Handling Style (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).*



According to Thomas and Kilmann (1974), the avoiding style is when people just simply avoid the issue. People in this style do not help the other party reach their goals, and they do not assertively pursue their own goals. The accommodating style refers to people who cooperate to a high degree at the cost of sacrificing their own goals and desired outcomes. The collaborating style means that people partner with the other party to achieve both of their goals. The competing style is the “win-lose” approach. People with this style normally act in a very assertive way to achieve their goals and they do not cooperate with others. The compromising style is the “lose-lose” scenario where neither party really achieves what they want.

When applying the conflict managing styles of Chinese students in the United States to the conflict handling model, there are some salient features. Culturally, Chinese students pay greater attention to long-term relationships, so their styles, arguably, tend to be more cooperating and accommodating. However, culture is not a fixed thing attaching people forever, and people can change their cultural predisposition over time. . If Chinese students in the United States learn that being more assertive and tougher to their classmates and professors may result in a better outcome in practice, they may gradually adjust their conflict managing strategies. Thus, their experiences of handling campus conflict in the United States

along with their cultural background are critical in forming their conflict styles that guide their behaviors and strategies in resolving conflicts.

### **Campus Conflict Resolution Systems**

Although classroom conflict is a natural occurrence on college campuses, some American universities have started providing mediation and consulting services to decrease the number of campus dispute cases for the past several decades (Katz, 2016; Wartens, 2011). However, many international students do not take advantage of these campus services and the underutilization of conflict resolution services by international students has been studied in some academic reports (e.g., Russell et al., 2008). When it comes to Asian students in the United States, the situation gets worse. In terms of the nature of high-context culture in the conflict resolution process, Asian people are more likely to solve problems independently to maintain a strong and positive self-image (Augsburger, 1995; Heggins & Jackson, 2003). Compared with other international students, Chinese international students have fewer experiences in seeking help from various service centers as mediation and counseling services at school are highly unpopular in China (Hou & Zhang, 2007). Lack of experience with campus counseling services may further make Chinese students less likely to seek resources of American universities to deal with their classroom conflicts, while seeking help from mediation centers can benefit Chinese students in many ways. On one hand, Chinese students can learn and improve conflict resolution skills at these mediation centers. On the other hand, by interacting with the staff of mediation centers, Chinese students can have a deeper understanding of American culture and may further integrate themselves into the American learning community.

### **Research Questions**

Previous research studies on Chinese international students have mainly aimed at their psychological stress, English deficiency, cultural transition, and academic difficulties, focusing on the negative experiences of Chinese students, while there is a clear research gap of understanding the conflict resolution skills of Chinese international students in American universities. The ability to resolve disputes for Chinese students in the United States is crucial because it can play a decisive role in influencing their academic performance in many cases. The goal of this study intended to fill the academic gap by examining both the positive and negative experiences of Chinese students in applying conflict resolution skills to achieve their academic success. Thus, the research questions of this study are as follows:

- RQ1: What conflict resolution skills do Chinese students use in the United States?
- RQ2: What kind of conflict resolution resources do Chinese students seek in the United States?

## **METHOD**

In order to achieve a deeper understanding of what conflict resolution skills and strategies Chinese international students at American universities use for cross-cultural adjustment and academic achievement, we used an interpretative phenomenological research approach to allow Chinese students in the United States to give meanings of their lived experiences. Certain conditions regarding the experiences of Chinese students require the use of a qualitatively interpretative phenomenological methodology. First, phenomenological research methods help stitch together diverse perspectives on a single phenomenon to transfer the meaning of an experience to others (Moustakas, 1994), so it is fitting for the research questions of this study which examine the dispute resolution skills and experiences of Chinese students in the United States. Additionally, an interpretative phenomenological analysis allows us to explore the subjective interpersonal experiences of Chinese students in the United States (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), increasing substantial understandings of researching subjects.

### **Participants**

Following the requirement of the interpretative phenomenological analysis that samples should be small and homogenous, we recruited 10 Chinese students. The participants in this study were identified as Chinese students currently studying at American universities. Chinese international students who had graduated from an American university before December 2018 were not qualified. We chose these Chinese participants purposefully, recruiting them through our personal networks. We sent an informed consent agreement to each participant at a preliminary stage so all participants were well informed of the purpose of this study. All participants were from three different universities in South Florida—one public university and two private universities. All three universities are research universities that offer doctoral programs. The student size of each of the three universities is over 10,000 people, which means that participants were more likely to experience a bigger class size and had more chances to interact with American domestic students. Eight participants were from graduate programs and two were undergraduates. Although all participants were in their 20s, the oldest participant was 9



years older than the youngest one. The rationale for the sampling is that the 20s age group takes the largest proportion of Chinese students in the United States among all age groups. Also, the number of Chinese students studying for a degree at the graduate level is much more than the number pursuing a bachelor's degree in the United States. Participants' majors ranged from social sciences to technology. The gender ratio of participants was seven women and three men. Almost all participants were from big cities in China. Their names are anonymous in this study for confidentiality.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Years in the U.S.	Major	Interview length (minutes)
Participant A	Female	Late 20s	3	Mathematics	52
Participant B	Female	Mid 20s	4	Conflict Resolution	53
Participant C	Male	Mid 20s	6	Business	72
Participant D	Female	Early 20s	1	Biology	55
Participant E	Male	Early 20s	2	Engineering	63
Participant F	Female	Mid 20s	4	Accounting	56
Participant G	Female	Mid 20s	4	Business	54
Participant H	Female	Early 20s	5	Psychology	55
Participant I	Male	Early 20s	5	Oceanology	58
Participant J	Female	Late 20s	3	Family therapy	52

## Procedure

There were three steps for data collection. The first stage was a preliminary stage at which we sent informed consent agreement to all 10 participants, so they were able to learn the purpose, importance, and benefits of this study. We also held several informal, face-to-face meetings at the preliminary stage to build rapport with the participants in a cafe or a conference room, based on participants' requests. We also learned more detailed background information during this preliminary stage. These informal and face-to-face meetings served as an ice-breaking process for helping participants to have a better understanding of this study, allowing more productive conversations to take place at coming formal interviews.

In the second stage we used semistructured, open-ended interviews from January to March 2019 that were 50–60 minutes long. We interviewed five participants at their home, four participants in a classroom, and one participant at a café. Although the planned time for each interview was 1 hour, we gave extra time if participants wanted to share more information. Thus, one interview was 72 minutes long. To secure the accuracy of data, we conducted all interviews in Chinese, which

made participants more comfortable. We recorded all interviews with the participants' permission.

At the last stage, we conducted follow-up interviews with all participants through either phone calls or face-to-face meetings to verify the accuracy of the data, depending on the availability of participants. The follow-up interviews were relatively short, about 10 to 15 minutes long. The subsequent interviews allowed us to produce more detailed explanations from participants, and we discussed anything that was not clear from the previous discussions. Through a three-stage data collection process, we secured richness and validity of data.

### **Analysis**

We read all interviews carefully to make sure that the meanings of participants were 100% understood and fully interpreted before we translated from Chinese to English verbatim. The 10 interviews produced over 100 pages of research data. Following the rules of coding of the interpretative phenomenological analysis process (Smith et al., 2009), each researcher first put words having the same meanings in groups independently and we then met to discuss findings together. We discarded low frequency groups or combined them into superordinate themes. As all the researchers in this study are Chinese native speakers, we were able to catch the covered meanings hidden in words with our own explanations.

### **Credibility and Subjectivity**

To ensure this study's credibility, we used triangulation involving cross-checking of both the transcribed interview data and the audio-recorded data. Two of three researchers checked the similar data generated across both sources, as both measures are integral to corroborating what the research participants had contributed to this study. Also, as all three researchers have a Chinese cultural background, it is impossible to be completely objective. However, we made concerted efforts to keep our thoughts and biases hidden, not negatively influencing the interview and data analysis process. Nevertheless, we may have still interpreted research data with our personal experiences. Thus, after the data analysis process, we shared the research findings with participants to see if we misinterpreted their meanings and thoughts. Participants confirmed that the transcripts had accurately captured their opinions, and the essence of their discussions has been effectively depicted.

### **Positionality**

Positionality is integral to qualitative research, as it can impact all aspects and stages of the research process (Holmes, 2020). In this study,

we played both insider and outsider roles from the data collection to the data interpretation. As all three researchers of this study are Chinese, as insiders, our cultural background allows us to ask more meaningful and insightful questions. We could better find nonverbal cues and the hidden meaning of some Chinese words that “outsiders” of the culture may have difficulty perceiving. However, we fully realized the disadvantages of being “insiders” to the research study, so we manipulated our positionality with some strategies. For example, in the process of designing the questionnaire for interviewees, we double-checked questions for latent biased possibility. For another example, during the interview, when participants answered questions like “you are Chinese, and you were an international student before, so you should know how it feels,” we reminded the research participants of the goals and tasks of the study. Thus, information that the participants thought obvious to “insiders” was still explained and discussed. Although we tried to straddle both positions with strategies, the joint knowledge-producing process of this study leans toward the “insider” position. Thus, the findings of this study may fall more in the lens of the Chinese culture.

## **RESULTS**

In this section, we present five themes identified in this study: managing conflict at an earlier stage; seeking suggestions from older Chinese people; keeping distances from American peers, advisers, and instructors; bringing gifts to develop relations; and apologizing first to earn others’ respect.

### **Managing Conflict at an Earlier Stage**

We found that all Chinese participants believed that conflict should be managed at an earlier stage before escalation and eruption. However, as to how to skillfully avoid or manage a classroom conflict, different participants have applied different strategies in terms of their different personalities and gender. Two outgoing, talkative, male participants shared their past experiences in actively seeking a chance to discuss with their peers in a polite but cautious way to avoid the escalation of the conflict. They believed that the earlier people address problems, the less likely people would be bothered by latent conflict.

You have to tell them your feelings at the very beginning. If you do not tell them and just hide your anger, your anger will outbreak one day and put you in trouble. I got experiences. I am from Chongqing and you know people from Chongqing are simple and

straight. Thus, my experiences tell me if I am not happy with something, I have to tell my American classmates or friends directly. Let me take an example for you. One of my classmates joked about my name in a way that I dislike in front of several other classmates, so I immediately told him how I felt like in private. He said sorry and he never did it again. (Participant C)

Yes, I did have few minor problems with American classmates which had been solved. You know I am good at Mathematics, so some classmates just wanted to plagiarize my homework. I knew their heavy pressures, but it is dangerous. I do not want to be expelled from my university. Thus, now I tell those friends who want to take advantage of my assignments very clearly, I would not lend them my assignments. But instead, I can teach them, so they can learn mathematics from me and I can improve my English by teaching them. Hence, my experiences are that you have to tell your rules to American friends when you just know them. You can express it jokingly, but make them realize where your bottom-line is. I think that it can help avoid latent conflict. (Participant E)

In contrast, several Chinese participants would not actively seek a straightforward conversation to address problems with their peers and instructors, but they all discussed their experiences and concluded that escaping from a latent conflict at an earlier stage is a good strategy that can save them from any possible hurt. In the case of Participants B, F, and G, their experiences showed that avoidance or stopping further contact with American peers at an earlier stage of conflict helped them deescalate the fuses of conflict.

One of my classmates got biases on me. She thought she got stronger English writing and speaking skills so she would not partner me on an assignment when a professor put her and me in a team randomly. She cared about her grades, so did I. Then, she started asking the progress on my part of the assignment by texting messages to me a couple of times. I quickly replied to her that we should not be on the same team and I proposed that we should re-choose our partners. She was happy with that, as I made my decision very fast and helped her save enough time to choose a new partner. You have to do it fast and react appropriately when something bad comes to you (Participant B)

I knew my ex-classmate was mean and I could tell it at the beginning. He was a lazy guy and when we were on the same team, he did nothing. As I knew his personality was just like that, I avoided talking to him as much as possible at the beginning and just smiled at him. If you did not provoke them, they would not argue with you. Thus, at the very beginning, I told myself that I needed to handle the assignment by myself. When I told myself so and adjusted my moods, everything was better. (Participant G)

Participant D even expressed the importance of the first impression. She believed that classroom conflict is a cultural concept to her. On a few occasions, she experienced misunderstandings either caused by cultural differences between the United States and China or the language barrier, but she immediately explained or apologized to comfort others.

Believe or not, I know who can be my friends at first glance. Some Americans like Chinese culture, some do not like and it is common. I always smile to other classmates and instructors first so they can feel my politeness at our first meeting. As an international Chinese student in their country, you also have to care about their feelings. I know a Chinese girl in our major. She often asked Americans some private stuff that was not supposed to ask in terms of American culture. I dislike her. When I made the same mistake and caused their resentment, I explained it immediately. It is always good to eliminate misunderstandings as soon as possible. (Participant D)

### **Keeping Distance from American Peers, Advisers, and Instructors.**

Of All 10 participants, only one (Participant E) clearly explained that he had high self-confidence in his English proficiency and spent more time with American peers than Chinese students at school and was able to build good relationships with American peers and instructors. All other Chinese participants viewed keeping distance with American peers and instructors as a good strategy to avoid conflict, and they illustrated this idea with different experiences in detail. Participants A and B believed that studying in the United States was merely a step of their whole life, so by keeping distance from Americans, the possibility of getting involved in conflict was lower.

I do not think our lives are closely related. I mean, me and my American classmates. Once I finish this program and earn my degree, I will go back to China and get a job in Beijing. There were

no many common topics among me and Americans. If something happens between me and an American classmates, it must be something bad. Thus, I believe that I should not get closer to American classmates. My goal is to get a job in China after graduation. I just study here and I would not bother them and I hope they do not bother me either. (Participant A)

You got bored and stereotyping people all around the world, not just in the U.S. There are many boring and mean people in China too, so my understandings and experiences of conflict resolution are, do not even talk to them. Especially in the U.S., keeping distance and being cautious with Americans are always good. Look at what happened to other Chinese international students, Zhangyingying, for example. They should not trust strangers. If you do not talk to them, they got no chance to hurt you. (Participant B)

Zhangyingying was a young Chinese scholar at the University of Illinois at Urbana who was abducted and killed by Brendt Allen Christensen in 2017 (Rhodes et al., 2017). Participants D, F, and H had negative experiences with a few American advisers and professors with some academic issues, but in their understanding, American advisers and professors were at higher social rankings than they were, so they thought that getting out of touch with those problematic advisers and professors was a better choice for deescalating disputes and conflicts. Participants D and H even stressed repeatedly how important an American degree was to them, and they did not want to mess with academic professors and advisers and just wanted to study and earn their degree quietly.

Many professors at this institution got problems. They were bad at teaching but good at researching. This institution was classified as a research university, so I felt like professors were more interested into researching than teaching. One professor even used the wrong materials on Blackboard. When I told our program coordinator, the professor said it was his TA's fault. What was worst, he knew that it was me to rat him out. I could feel he treated me a little bit differently. Therefore, I would not say any more to our program adviser and I did not want to get trouble and I just wanted to get my degree. My strategy was simple, keep distance and being invisible. (Participant D)

One of my instructors got attitude problems. Whenever I asked her questions, she thought that was my problem. She thought I was too stupid to understand her course, but actually, she did not explain everything clearly in her course. I was not the only one in her class who got this feeling. She even insulted me. I mean, not every openly, but I could tell her contempt. However, what can I do? I just avoided taking her course again. I knew irresponsible teachers like her exist in many universities and I was just not lucky. I wanted to graduate and I did not want to get involved in trouble. (Participant H)

### ***Apologizing First to Earn Others' Respect and Understanding***

Findings showed that when the participants were involved in an argument or experienced an unpleasant quarrel with their classmates or instructors, apologizing first was one of the most frequent conflict resolution skills that they were likely to use. Seven out of 10 participants shared their experiences of applying apology first to handle the difficult conversations with American classmates or instructors. Although participants who regarded apologizing first as a conflict resolution strategy had different opinions on how effective the strategy is in resolving conflicts, they all believed that apologizing first could at least build a bridge for resolutions. Participant D stated her points as follows:

Before I left China, my mom told me to be polite and nice to American classmates. Thus, I believe that if I say sorry first, it delivers a sign of good faith to my classmates...from my experiences, I know when people are in a quarrel, they are emotional and angry, so an apology may help ease their emotion.

One participant shared his personal experiences to explain the effectiveness of apology first.

I borrowed my classmate's notebook and took it home, but I did not know she so cared about it and wanted me to give it back to her on the next day. We did not have class the next day and that was why I kept it for a few days. When other classmates mentioned that she was not happy with that, I immediately apologized to her first and returned her notebook. I think that if you sincerely apologize first, they can feel it. Now, we are still friends, it is a good way to get you out of some embarrassing situations. (Participant I)

The other participant discussed why she chose to apologize first to her classmates from a different angle. She believed that apologizing first could help build a good self-image and earn others' respect and support.

We can never win from a quarrel with local students, as English is not our native language. Thus, apologizing first and say something that they want to hear to end the conversation is a smarter choice, is not it? If you have different issues and opinions, you do not have to speak it out. You can keep it in your heart and do things in your way. However, in the classroom, you should be nice and most importantly, make them realize that you are nice and polite. Apologizing first to the person who emotionally roars at you can beautify your own image and earn others' respect and support. (Participant J)

### **Seeking Suggestions from Older Chinese People in the United States**

When we asked Chinese participants what kind of resources they relied on for resolving conflict, all participants mentioned their connections with other Chinese people and the Chinese community with different evaluations on the effectiveness of support and suggestions provided by the Chinese community. Some participants (Participants B, D, F, H, and G) relied highly on support and suggestions from the Chinese community in the United States, and they not only sought suggestions for resolving disputes, but they also learned other information, experiences, and knowledge from other older Chinese people such as housing and insurance information.

Of course, I have to ask for help from a Chinese schoolmate if I am involved in a dispute with my American peers or professors. It is nothing wrong to learn about their experiences. I trusted the Chinese more, because they can understand me better. Their suggestions were helpful and they introduced new friends to me. For example, before I took courses, I always asked other Chinese people who had taken those courses, listening to their feedback on the academic performance of professors teaching those courses. For another example, I got my package lost and I was very angry and I asked other Chinese people for help. They accompanied me to the post office and I got my compensation for the lost package. Thus, it is good to live with Chinese people and listen to their suggestions which can help you save time and money. (Participant B)

Participants F and G would not share bad news with their families in



China as they did not want their family to worry about them. Thus, when they were involved in school conflict with American classmates and/or instructors, asking help from the Chinese community in their eyes seemed to be the only possible resource that they could use.

My mother always thought too much. She texted me almost every day, so I would not let her know my unhappiness. Last time I got a quarrel with my American roommate. She did not like me and she often went to night clubs in the middle of the night. Then, I asked how other Chinese people handle situations like this and I learned a lot. I mean, although their suggestions may not all be good, some were helpful. In the end, I moved out and lived with a Chinese girl who is a hard working student. That was good. See, although their suggestions may not be useful, you still learned other information that helped you. For some people, you do not need to resolve your issues, but just keep some distance with them. You can choose to live with the people whom you like. (Participant F).

Other Chinese participants (Participants A, C, and E) believed that although support from Chinese people may have only played a minor role in helping them resolve classroom conflict, it was better than nothing. Their experiences of seeking help from other Chinese people were all positive, but not effective in dealing with causes of conflict.

Yes, I asked other Chinese when I got a quarrel with other Americans. I guess that every Chinese international student did the same. It was normal. We are foreigners and are not familiar with American culture and regulations. The reason why I did ask for help from program advisers, but from other Chinese was because I was worried if the conflict got escalated if program advisors handled it. I wanted to put it down, but not heat it up. (Participant A).

### **Bringing Gifts to Develop Relationships**

Interestingly, this theme in the research study explored the fact that most Chinese participants are naturally born diplomats who would like to spend time and money to build relationships with their classmates and professors who are important or have negative views on them. Eight out of 10 research participants admitted that they had offered gifts to either their classmates or professors to develop good relationships. The

participants believed that bringing gifts changed the attitude of people who did not like them, so it was a good strategy in conflict resolution.

I used to give a box of Chinese tea to a professor who did not like me. I submitted his assignment late once so he thought that I am a lazy student and he kept one eye on me and got a stricter requirement. Then, I stopped by his office with a box of Chinese tea before thanksgiving and we talked a little bit. It worked. I can feel that he changed his attitude a little bit to me after that. For example, the words he used in his feedback on my assignment were more encouraging. (Participant C)

Giving a gift is one of the fastest ways to make you closer to the people and eliminate misunderstandings, so I did use this stunt to re-develop relationships. I had given lots of gifts to my advisers, professors, classmates, schoolmates. Just like the old Chinese sayings, people like you when you give gifts to them. (Participant I)

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study are relatively rich. On one hand, the findings repeated the patterns of previous studies analyzing negative factors of Chinese students in handling campus conflict in the United States. On the other hand, this study explores new facts that previous scholars in the field have not paid attention to. Previous studies (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2007) have found that international students at American universities were less likely to seek suggestions and consulting services when getting involved in school conflict, compared with American students. This pattern was also confirmed repeatedly in this study. The pattern of conflict resolution skills and experiences of Chinese students in the United States could be understood through a cultural lens where Markus and Kitayama (1991) argued that in collective cultures such as the Chinese culture, people are not encouraged to directly ask for help but are encouraged to imagine what another might want. Chinese students thus prefer to express their feelings and emotion in a more indirect way, and as the findings reveal, they prefer to give gifts to show their goodwill, but not speak out. In contrast, American students have the freedom to seek help in American culture. Therefore, Chinese students at American universities are more likely in a disadvantageous position in a conflict resolution process, as they may not express themselves very clearly.

However, Chinese students in the United States, according to the stories and experiences of participants in this study, have distinctively

effective strategies in solving campus disputes with American peers and professors, such as resolving conflict at an earlier stage and bringing gifts to build relationships. Resolving conflict at an earlier stage means that Chinese students have to identify the source of the conflict and look beyond the incident to the essence of the conflict. Identifying the causing factors of conflict is hard, but the identities of Chinese students in the United States have helped make them more culturally sensitive to latent factors that may lead to unexpected situations. Apologizing first as a strategy in the conflict resolution toolbox of Chinese students could be explained through cultural differences, as keeping the harmony of the community has always been an important concept in Chinese culture (Hanzan & Shi, 2009). Interestingly, Chinese people are always encouraged to apologize first by Confucianism, so it also reveals that Confucianism still plays a role in guiding the behaviors of Chinese students in the United States. Additionally, giving gifts to develop relationships is a soft and flexible strategy in dealing with conflict. It again shows that Chinese students prefer to apply relatively soft strategies in managing unpleasant situations.

The findings of this study also describe the conflict managing styles of Chinese students in the United States. Overall, the conflict managing styles of Chinese students were less competitive, as there was no theme falling into the competing category. Facing campus disputes, some Chinese students used the avoiding style, as they wanted to keep a distance from their peers, and even from instructors in some cases. Other Chinese students had more positive styles such as the collaborating style, as they cared about long-term relationships with their peers and wanted to maintain the relationships by giving gifts. Interestingly, the “win-lose” model is always criticized and discouraged in the Chinese traditional culture, so the conflict styles of Chinese students were highly similar to the norms and strategies promoted by Chinese culture. For example, a famous Chinese old saying says “avoiding is always better than fighting.” Thus, it may in part explain why some Chinese students like to use the avoiding style when having a campus conflict.

The findings of this study strongly indicate that more resources and attention to mediation and consulting centers at American universities need to be given to international students, especially for Chinese students who are less likely to express their needs, stress, and other negative personal feelings. Stronger relationships among Chinese students and their academic program advisers need to be further developed, so these consulting centers and mediation service systems at American universities could really work for help. Working with Chinese students requires rich

cultural sensitivity of university staff and instructors. Seeking suggestions and information from older Chinese people as a conflict resolution skill could be understood through uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Kramer, 1999; Redmond, 2015), which assumes if people face much uncertainty, they have to seek information more actively to reduce their questions and uncertainty. The findings also suggest that more mediators, advisers, and consultants with Asian/Chinese background may be recruited into various service centers and international offices of American universities so Chinese students are more willing to share their concerns with the staff of these service centers.

In the present study, the lack of interaction with American peers has been addressed as a conflict resolution skill, but it is *de facto* extremely negative for Chinese students' cultural integration. One Chinese participant even thought that her lifestyle in the United States was somewhat similar to studying in China as all people around her were Chinese and she barely got a chance to speak English on a daily basis. Thus, how to skillfully help the large number of Chinese students get integrated into the American learning community remains a difficult question for many American universities and urgently calls for a course of effective actions. At the same time, there is some good news in this study. Some Chinese participants realized that a conflict resolution process could be a good chance to redevelop their relationships with American peers, advisers, and professors, as they learned in practice that apologizing first and bringing gifts to their classmates and professors who used to have problems with them can help change the relationships. Some strategies learned from Chinese culture do help them resolve campus conflict in the United States.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While this study was confined to Chinese students at three American universities in Florida, it provides direction and insight for future research to build upon. The sample size can be accepted as a good number for an interpretative phenomenological research study, as an overlarge sample size can hinder phenomenological studies and should normally be avoided (Smith et al., 2009).

Due to the issues addressed in this study, we believe that additional issues related to the school conflict resolution experiences of Chinese international students at American universities need to be further investigated. Unfortunately, the number of both qualitatively and quantitatively academic research studies on the lived experiences of Chinese international students on American campuses is still small (Bertram et al., 2014; Lertora et al., 2017; Yan & Berliner, 2013). More

surveys regarding learning and the conflict resolution experiences of Chinese students in the United States should be collected to have a broader and deeper understanding of Chinese students.

To date, there are not many research studies focusing on the unique experiences and strategies of Chinese international students in resolving conflicts. We believe that the findings of this study begin to fill this research gap and allow researchers and educators to better understand both the experiences and the strategies of Chinese students in overcoming campus conflicts to reach their academic success. We also anticipate that this study will help shed a light on studying conflict resolution experiences of international students, so more international students in the United States can be better helped.

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