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American Students’ Cultural Adjustment in China: Experiences and Coping Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Employing critical incident technique and the constructivist grounded approach, this study conducted individual in-depth interviews with 13 undergraduate students who had experiences studying abroad in China to find out how American college students perceived their new learning environment in China, and to examine the strategies students employed to adjust to the new culture. The results provided practical suggestions for the design and implementation of study abroad programs in China, including the compatibility between the program structure and individual student’s learning needs and aspirations, the use of service-based community-building activities to foster the mutual engagement in interactions between American students and host nationals, and the inclusiveness of local perspectives in American students’ reflection of their cultural immersion experiences.

Keywords: American students in China, coping strategies, cross-cultural transition, intercultural identity, study abroad program design

INTRODUCTION

Given recent trends in globalization during the past two decades and China’s increasing influence, there has been a rapid increase in the number of American college students participating in study abroad programs in China. The 100,000 Strong Initiative, announced by President Obama (U.S. Department of State, 2009), has also encouraged all types of educational experiences for American students to have in China. According to the report on the 100,000 Strong Initiative from the Institute of International Education (Belyavina, 2013), in the 2000/2001 academic year, 3,219 American students studied in China for academic credit. In the 2010/2011 school

year, this number increased to 15,647, making China the fifth most popular study abroad destination on an annual basis for American students, behind the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, and France. The report from the Institute of International Education also revealed that the majority of U.S. postsecondary students studying in China were undergraduates, while 21% of the American students in China were graduate students, and just over 3% were associates degree and nondegree students (Belyavina, 2013).

Despite the trend, relatively little is known about the experiences of American students studying abroad in China. This study aims to fill in the gap by examining American college students' cross-cultural transition experiences and coping strategies during their participation in for-credit study abroad programs in China. A for-credit program was selected as the focus of the study because more than 58% of American students who studied in China earned credits at their American home institution (Belyavina, 2013). Study tours, noncredit-bearing Chinese language programs, and programs for American students to pursue full degrees in China were excluded from this study. Based on the findings, the study provided some practical suggestions for the design and implementation of study abroad programs in China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research focusing on American students' cross-cultural adjustment in China, especially what resources and strategies students use to navigate life in China, is scarce. More common are studies that focus on American students' cultural transition in general (e.g., Leslie, 2017; Pedersen et al., 2011; Strange & Gibson, 2017), or American students' cultural transition in European countries (e.g., Kenyon et al., 2012; Savicki et al., 2008; Pitts, 2009). Those studies revealed some difficulties that American students have experienced abroad. For example, Pitts (2009) found that the academic expectations of American students for study abroad programs in Europe were often unrealistic. Many students felt shocked when they discovered that their academic responsibilities abroad were equivalent to those in America. Some studies revealed that American students studying in culturally similar countries to the United States still encountered certain sociocultural challenges. For example, O'Reilly et al. (2015) reported that American students experienced moderate levels of sociocultural adaptation difficulties when studying in Ireland, and a small number of them experienced some form of discrimination and found such experiences stressful. Kenyon et al. (2012) found that American students studying in Canada encountered difficulties familiarizing themselves with host country bureaucracy and expressed frustration at the unexpected nature of these difficulties.

Compared with European countries, the Chinese language and culture are more foreign to American students. In Belyavina's study (2013), 465 American students reported the challenges they faced when considering participating in study abroad programs in China. Except for financial constraints, language barrier was reported as the biggest challenge, followed by scarcity of courses in China taught in English and cultural differences. Consequently, there was a need to address the unique transition issues specific to China, and explore how American students studying in China utilize strategies and resources to successfully navigate the challenges. Very few studies

were identified as the closest fit for this research purpose, and most of them adopted quantitative research methods. For example, Hashim and Yang (2003) looked at sources of stress perceived by 82 African and 74 Western second semester freshman students studying at universities in three cities in China. It identified a number of stressors experienced by those students, such as difficulties with parents, roommate conflicts, messy living conditions, serious arguments with instructors, difficulties with the Chinese language, and increased class workload. In the same vein, Yang (2009) employed two questionnaires to investigate 200 international students at six universities in China and conducted follow-up interviews with 18 students. The study reported that international students had great difficulties being engaged in Chinese society, particularly in making Chinese friends, due to the different “cultural values” and “social styles” between China and the participants’ home countries. These studies collected data from a large population of students and identified a number of challenges/stressors that international students might encounter when adapting to life in China, but failed to explore what strategies or resources might be used to help students transit the new learning environment successfully.

Another line of previous studies adopted qualitative research methods to investigate American students’ identity negotiation when studying abroad in China. For example, through the data from monthly interviews and diaries that students wrote, Tian and Lowe (2014) investigated eight American students’ study abroad experiences in China and the impacts of such experiences on their identity transformation. Their findings revealed that all participants underwent some degree of a cultural identity shift from perceiving China as an “exotic other” toward the more “open-ended” intercultural identity. The study provided evidence to illustrate how students’ acculturation process evolved from stress to adaptation, and eventually delved into growth. However, the strategies used by students to facilitate this acculturation process were not discussed explicitly. Du (2015) examined how students’ identities and self-presentation provided challenges and opportunities for their life in China through interviews with 29 American college students, who participated in an intensive language program in China for one semester. The findings confirmed Tian and Lowe’s study that although students experienced otherness at the beginning of the study abroad, they were able to learn to take advantage of their foreign identity, and furthermore used their Chinese proficiency as a means of joining the host community. The study highlighted that students’ Chinese proficiency and foreign identity could be used as a means for acculturation. However, all the participants in this study had a high level of Chinese proficiency. Further studies should be conducted to examine what strategies are used by American students with no or low levels of Chinese proficiency to navigate the life in China.

Generally speaking, previous studies have either focused on the possible sources of stress and challenges perceived by American students in China, or students’ identity negotiation process in China. The strategies used by the students, especially those who have no or limited Chinese proficiency, to cope with the stress and challenges and students’ positive experiences of cultural transition were seldom discussed. There is a need to better understand the positive aspects of crossing cultures, and the experiences and resources that facilitate the successful transition. Moreover, many of the previous studies employed quantitative methods to collect

data from the participants. More qualitative studies should be conducted to collect data with a depth not usually available from questionnaires. This kind of data helps us more fully understand the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of participants.

This study attempts to address two dimensions that are missing in the current literature: a qualitative approach to explore in depth American students' perception of their learning experiences in China and a focus on the coping strategies adopted by students. No other work has been found that addresses the two dimensions in one study.

METHODS

The design of the investigation encompassed two major influences: the critical incident technique, pioneered by Flanagan (1954), and the constructivist grounded approach first described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and further developed by Charmaz (2000). The critical incident technique is both qualitative and exploratory. It involves collecting an observer's accounts of significant incidents contributing to a particular outcome. The critical incident technique was chosen for this investigation because it offers considerable flexibility, taps into personal experiences, and mirrors the humanistic values and collaborative skills used by counselors (Woolsey, 1986). The constructivist grounded approach is a research methodology that has an enormous potential for a range of disciplines due to its explanatory power. This power allows people to identify common issues with theory and use it in their own lives. Under the influences of critical incident technique and the constructivist grounded approach, this study conducted individual in-depth interviews with students who had experiences studying abroad in China.

I adopted the critical incident technique to structure the interviews and design the interview questions (see the key interview questions in the Appendix). Each participant engaged in an in-depth interview with me. I provided participants the key questions in advance of the interview and invited them to think back over their experiences of studying abroad in China and identify important events or situations that had facilitated or impeded their adjustments in China. After the participant identified a critical incident, I asked questions to gather further information about the incident. I asked participants to recall other incidents until no further incidents could be recalled. In the end, participants generated a total of 783 minutes of interview data.

After I transcribed the interviews, I sent the transcripts of the interviews to each participant by email to (a) sign off on the transcript of the interview; (b) discuss any information or gaps that needed to be explained from the transcript; and (c) discuss any further information that the participant may have liked to add after reading the transcript. I then employed the constructivist grounded approach to analyze the data collected from the interviews (see details in the section on data analysis).

The Research Site

The China branch campus of a Midwestern U.S. university was selected as the research site for this study. The selection relied on three considerations. First, the selected research site offered academic programs all year around, including both

long-term semester programs and short-term summer programs. Semester abroad programs were typically 14 weeks, while summer programs usually ran from May to late June. Second, the academic programs offered by the research site were open to more than one U.S. university, and recruited students with or without Chinese language proficiency. This ensured a variety of students' backgrounds. Third, courses offered in the research site covered most areas of undergraduate studies, such as arts, business, engineering, humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences. All courses offered in the study abroad programs had the same academic rigor and adhered to the established course objectives and learning outcomes of the same courses taught at the American main campuses. This ensured that different academic expectations in the two countries were not a factor affecting students' cultural transition.

Participants

Once university ethics board approved the study, I sent out a study invitation letter to all the students who had participated in the study abroad programs offered by the research site. Incentives (e.g., gift cards) were provided to encourage students' participation in the study. Thirteen students voluntarily responded to the invitation and participated in the study. At the time of study, the participants aged from 19 to 22. All of them were undergraduate students. Two had taken Chinese courses at a beginner's level for 1 year; others barely knew any Chinese. Six of them majored in business, five majored in humanities, while two majored in engineering. Five of the participants were females.

Data Analysis

I used the constructivist grounded approach to analyze the data collected from the interviews. The aim of the data analysis was to provide a rich and valid interpretation of students' perceptions of their experiences and coping strategies in a rigorous manner.

The analysis entailed three stages: (a) extraction of themes reoccurring in the interviews, (b) category formation, and (c) assessment of trustworthiness and credibility. The first stage began with an analysis of each student's data to identify key phrases that reoccurred throughout the data. I used memo notes to record further questions needed for follow up. These questions usually related to information that needed further clarification. Once I completed the individual analysis, I conducted a cross-case analysis to identify recurring themes that emerged from the data. After the cross-case analysis, I extracted themes from the data and sorted them based on similarity, becoming preliminary categories. I assigned tentative category names to each of the groupings at this time. In the third stage, I checked credibility and trustworthiness through an assessment of the comprehensiveness of categories using a random 10% sample of incidents that had been withheld before categorization. The assessment showed that the extracted themes could be used to explain around 92% of the incidents that had been withheld before categorization. Additionally, I invited participants to provide feedback on whether the interpretation reflected in the categories was consistent with their experiences.

RESULTS

Themes From Positive Incidents

A total of 172 positive incidents and 75 negative incidents were identified from the interview data. Participants tended to more significantly recall positive events than negative events. This indicated that students were able to smoothly transit to the life in China most of the time. Four themes emerged from the 172 positive incidents.

Active Engagement in Experiential Learning Experiences

Because most of the courses offered in the program primarily focused on China, students were able to compare what they had learned to what they actually experienced in China, and apply what they learned to real life. Students reported that they experienced different social dynamics in Chinese culture outside of class, and what they learned in class helped them understand the reasons why things are that way. The following was an example how the course offered in the program was tailored to fit the learning environment:

Our professor made our economics class specific to China. So I learned about China's economy and it was cool to be just be there, and be learning about the history of the economy, and shopping there and eating there. And the one big thing was to think about what kinds of business/technologies are presently available in China, while they don't exist in the United States, or vice versa. —*Interview #12*

The program also established partnerships with a number of Fortune 500 companies in the local area, such as Honeywell, GE Aviation, Emerson, and so on. Opportunities for students to visit those corporate partners were integrated into the courses offered by the program. All the students recalled those visits as one of the most valuable experiences they had. The visits enabled them to see the things they learned in classes in real life and helped them think about how the business strategies changed to cater to the needs of the Chinese market. One student recalled that,

When we went to the Stanley Black & Decker tour, the guy who was giving us the tour gave us a global supply chain lecture, and I felt that was really interesting, especially because he applied the supply chain theory to the company in China. —*Interview #5*

Expansion of Worldviews and Global Mindedness

Students' recalled experiences revealed that exposure to an eastern culture, a culture dramatically different from the west, allowed them to gain a broader and more sophisticated worldview and diversified their thoughts and values. Most of them reported that the experience in China enabled them to see the world in not just black and white, and helped them develop more rounded perspectives:

I feel like I became more of a mature adult, because I was constantly interacting with Americans, but I was also interacting with, um, Chinese people on a daily basis and learning too. This will help me in the working world, too, um, learning to interact with people who aren't really the same as you, who have different world views, different personality traits, etc., etc. Um, it really teaches you that, that you are not, um, you're not correct in everything. I mean, each one is unique and it really teaches me to celebrate differences. —*Interview #1*

Some students reflected on how the experiences in China facilitated them to form a more objective perspective to see the world, and enabled them to critically analyze the things they heard or saw in media:

I would say just I'm, I'm just more of an objective person now. You know the media or other people tell you. But you need to do your own research to form conclusions. People could say, you know, business in China is corrupted or something like that, but you really have to further understand culturally and societally the reasons behind why those things are. Rather than just look at what they are on the surface. —*Interview #2*

The daily interactions with the host nationals also helped student understand how Chinese young people view their faith traditions, and enabled them to better understand people of other faiths. One of the students summarized his observations of Chinese youth's faith commitment as:

Most people (in America) are like, okay, I'm Christian or a Muslim, or you know, Jewish or whatever, you know. And from what I understand, especially with the younger culture in China. It's kind of like they take a little bit (in one religion) and a little bit in another. I think that works relatively well. They incorporate each of them (religions) into life because they work individually. —*Interview #6*

Development of Valuable Life Skills

Students all reported that they became more independent through their experiences in China. Through a series of information sessions and orientation workshops, students obtained the information necessary to navigate the city, to use the public transportation system, to behave appropriately at the table, to deal with the peddlers on the street, and to negotiate the prices with them. Through the personal experiences of navigating life in China, students felt they became more open to new foods and other things they weren't familiar with before. They learned effective ways to deal with the anxiety and nervousness of an unfamiliar environment, and felt more comfortable seeking help from other people. Some students mentioned that they learned to cook and take care of themselves. As reflected by many students, the experiences in China helped them build confidence, made them feel more comfortable being on their own and being more independent in the outside world. They felt much better prepared for trips in other countries after studying abroad in China. One student elaborated this as,

I would say that my experience in China and being in China helped me become a better person. It helped me be relaxed more in myself. It helped me learn to trust others. Um, one thing that I learned through being in China that will always be with me is, um, the lesson that it's okay to be helpless to the point where you can't even order your own food without help. —

Interview #7

Bonding With People From Different Backgrounds

All the students reported that being able to interact with people from other backgrounds was one of the most valuable experiences they had during their stay in China. They felt more open and more comfortable talking to people from various backgrounds. They were able to make friends from other countries, not only with the Chinese students, but also with the French, Spanish, and Australian students who lived in the same living community. The community building activities offered by the program helped them bond with each other through a variety of sports, games, excursions, and cultural discussions, such as a table tennis tournament, a scavenger hunt in an old town, and cultural discussion nights. Students reported that the community building activities enabled them to get out of their comfort zones and meet people that they would never have had a chance to meet before. Meanwhile, students learned how to interact with people who don't have English as a first language. They were able to be more helpful and have more empathic understandings. Many students compared their own experiences in China to the experience of international students in the United States (foreign nationals who study at any U.S. schools) and expressed their willingness to help international students bond together with other American students when they came back from China. One student explained,

In the past, we would go like “Oh, we should totally hang out” and then we would never do. But now I like to take this up further and I got to know and talk to them. I definitely have a lot more Chinese friends now.

—*Interview #9*

Themes From Negative Incidents

Negative incidents fell into three categories: culture barriers, language barriers, and different expectations of the study abroad experiences.

Cultural Barriers

Culture barriers mainly focus on four aspects. The first is the concept of “privacy.” In the views of many Chinese people, what takes place in public is public. Students were surprised to notice that other bystanders would stare at them or even directly comment on them when they were shopping in the markets; when they and their friends were having conversations in restaurants or on campus, people would stop next to them and make an effort to listen in or even join in. Some students called it one of the most challenging cultural barriers to adjust to. A second aspect was

reading in-between-the lines: Students reported that Chinese people are generally less direct, and sometimes it's hard to interpret the real intentions of what they said. Instead of clearly stating, hinting is usually preferred by Chinese natives, especially when one needs something (assistance, information, forgiveness, etc.) from others. Some students reported that they sometimes upset their Chinese friends because they failed to pick up hints on matters, such as changing a previously agreed upon appointment schedule, help with Chinese-English translation, or disagreement with a suggestion. The third aspect was the rule of reciprocity. Students were surprised to see that, in China, "returning a favor" often does not mean that people will do the same for those who have shown them kindness or provided them assistance, but that they will do more than what others have done for them. Some students perceived this as one-upmanship and felt puzzled about how to end this kind of "goodwill competition." The final aspect was the rule of being a guest. In China, it is the host's responsibility to plan everything and make decisions, the guest is more or less along for the ride, and is expected to enjoy a reprieve from responsibility. Some students hence reported that they usually felt socially obligated to eat or try something they did not like, and usually didn't know how to appropriately discuss the arrangements with their hosts without offending them. One student described:

Sometimes I would sit with the host dad and he would make me eat all this food that I just didn't want to eat, but I didn't want to be rude so I would just eat that. They (the host family) were really friendly but I just was horrible at communicating, you know, just like I don't know, like it was overwhelmingly hospitable at times. —*Interview #10*

Language Barriers

In the program offered by the research site, the American students were paired with Chinese peer students on campus to help them navigate the life in China. However, a number of American students reported that although they were able to rely on help from peer Chinese students to overcome the language barriers, such as ordering food, shopping, traveling around places, etc., this experience of being helped still made them feel a sense of losing independence, and they worried if they were annoying some of the Chinese peer students. The lack of Chinese proficiency also prevented them from having more interactions with the local people. One student recalled:

Sometimes strangers would literally just walk up and either have tried to ask me something, or just tried to say something to me. And a lot of the time, I really couldn't understand. I mean, they were just speaking in Chinese to me. —*Interview #6*

Students further suggested that the situation would be better if a Chinese language workshop of useful expressions were provided before they left for China. In this way, they would have more time to study those expressions before they left, and be better prepared for the life in China.

Different Expectations About the Study Abroad Program

Students experienced certain expectation gaps about the study abroad program, which resulted in a stress-evoking impact. Specifically, students experienced a gap between their expectations for travel and cultural experience, and the reality of balancing academic study and cultural immersion. Some students considered participation in a study abroad program a time to have classes while being on vacation, at the same time. Therefore, they sometimes had a feeling that the academic work deprived their time of cultural immersion in China:

The amount of work that I had to do for that class alone on top of the other classes that I had to keep up with, detracted from my ability to actually be in China because I spent a lot of time in my room reading, taking notes, studying, doing homework, which is the life of a student. —*Interview #5*

Students from different majors also had different expectations of the program. Students majoring in business and engineering expected to have more experiential learning experiences with the corporate partners. They expected to have more frequent corporate visits, and have more interactive discussions with the corporate professionals (e.g., small group discussions with professionals from different divisions of the corporations). Students majoring in humanities expected to have deep and rich immersions in the local culture. Some students expected to have a program centering in one city, but splitting up some of the class time into other cities. Some students also expected to have more time to travel on their own, and thus have more chances to interact with the local people.

Coping Strategies

The interviews revealed that students adopted the following strategies to overcome the challenges they experienced in China.

Being Open-Minded and Considering the Challenges as a Learning Process

When dealing with the cultural barriers, many students suggested that once they were willing to overcome the stereotypes and embrace the differences, the challenges had become a learning process. Students realized that most of the negative experiences were caused by either the overemphasis of the differences or the ignorance of the cultural norms in another country. A student recalled that she had to overcome the mindset of overthinking cultural differences when interacting with the host nationals, and that change helped her feel more open-minded and willing to interact with people from other cultures when she got back from China:

I would say the most challenging thing that I had to overcome personally was interacting with the Chinese students, not because they weren't friendly, not because I didn't want to talk to them, that's not what it was. It was more. I had to get over my, um, my mind being like, "I'm American and you're Chinese and we're different even though we're the same." And I really had to work hard to be like, "No. It doesn't matter. We're the same," and you

know, now that I'm back. It's not even a problem anymore. It was just a silly mind game. My mind was playing with me but it took me a little bit. It was hard to just get over that. —*Interview #5*

Further analysis indicated that the participants in our study were able to utilize their cross-cultural experience as a learning process and gradually developed the capability of individualization and universalization to establish an “intercultural identity,” defined by Kim (2008). According to Kim (2008), the capability of individualization is an ability to overcome social and categorical stereotypes and embrace others as unique individuals, and the capability of universalization is an ability to find commonalities in human nature among members of different cultural, ethnic, or social groups. Kim (2008) argued that conceptually, intercultural identity goes beyond the simplistic categorization of people based on stereotypical understandings of cultural differences, and helps to promote an awareness of human beings as both individuals and as a collective human whole. The following accounts from our interview data illustrated how open-mindedness and understanding of the norms in another culture enabled the participants to develop the capability of individualization to embrace the differences:

You would need to be as open-minded as possible and to forget everything about America, like forget about the way it is, because that's not how it is, that's not how it's going to be and if you, if you approach China like that, you're just going to have a bad time because you're not going to be able to relax, you know, you're not going to be able to actually be in China. —*Interview #1*

I felt like if people are more aware of other people's culture norms and they respect it, like, it's easier to make those friendships and it's easier to bridge that gap of understanding, because I feel like people just don't have more time to connect with other international students, because they don't know what to do, what to say. But I feel like just being more culturally understanding and cultural respectful helps. It makes them feel like they want to stay here and feel more respected. —*Interview #8*

On the basis of the individualization capability, the participants further developed the capability of universalization to find the commonalities with other people, as shown in the following account:

I think that's something that actually quite a few of the American students realized that China and the United States, although we seem pretty opposite, we're actually not, not so much. We have different dynamics to our culture, but at the, at the deepest level, at the most fundamental level, we're really not all that different after all. —*Interview #4*

The capabilities of individualization and universalization enabled students to consider the challenges they encountered in China as a process of learning, which helped them be better prepared for the future.

Seeking Emotional and Social Support

Social support has been identified as one of the important factors that has consistently predicted a successful transition (Poyrazli et al., 2004). Echoing this finding, participants in this study also reported that social and emotional support played a prominent role in facilitating their cross-cultural transition. All participants agreed that the onsite staff were not only great resources to get any information they needed to navigate their daily lives, such as places for shopping and eating, travel planning or schedule managing, but also people they could talk to when they experienced emotional downfalls. As students recalled, the staff made their experiences in China better because they were open to helping them with anything and they were people the students could “sort of look up to” and “could talk to” (Interview #3).

This kind of social and emotional support was not only from the onsite faculty and staff, but also from the peer students on campus, especially those who were natives of China. Students reported that those peer Chinese students provided support to help them maneuver in daily life and understand the uncertainties they experienced during the cultural transition. As shown in the following, the student recalled her interactions with the Chinese peer students as the necessary support for her to get through in an alien environment and avoid the risk of being lost in translation.

I was able to ask questions and not feel awkward or ashamed not knowing or not understanding, and they were all very patient in explaining different things and they would go with me to different places to help me navigate the language. Um, they would try to help me. They really provided the support that you really need to feel at least you have one friend, you know, like, you're in a totally alien environment and you feel all alone, but there's this one person who lives in the new environment and is your friend, so it must not be so bad.” —*Interview #1*

Drawing Information From Previous Experiences or Preparation

Participants also reported that they were able to draw information from previous experiences, especially the information from the predeparture workshops to help them establish expectations about certain cultural differences that they might encounter in China and helped them avoid embarrassments and misunderstandings. For example, a student recalled that she was told in a workshop that Americans would slap someone on the back if they got a good grade in class, but maybe a Chinese person wouldn't like that. When she interacted with Chinese students, she was able to recall such information to help her avoid the chances of offending others (Interview #5).

Being Engaged in Meaningful Cross-Cultural Interactions With Host Nationals

A number of students reported that the community-building activities with the host nationals enabled them to bond with the local people and understand their way of life. Examples of those community-building activities included English corners for local workers, home-stays with a local Chinese families during holidays, scavenger

hunts in an old town, table tennis tournaments, and cultural discussion nights with the Chinese students. One student recalled the experience of talking to people in the English corner helped him find the commonalities with the local people and enabled him to relate to those people better, as he put it,

We would make connections through, through just broken language on just different things about, um, pop culture in China, and pop culture in America. I was surprised to hear that how much the majority of people at my table just really enjoyed action movies. That was a great thing that I was able to share, um, with my table. Also, to a lot of the workers at my table, I could relate to them with video games. —*Interview #4*

Additionally, students reported that the table tennis tournaments and cultural discussion nights with the Chinese students made them feel more comfortable to interact with each other. A student recalled that he was able to establish an in-group relationship with the Chinese students through this experience: “A couple of the Chinese students and I became friends. Um, they were, they were, um, part of my group. We would kind of meet like every time for like 30 minutes and talk about everything” (Interview# 6).

Students also noted that if they could speak to the host nationals in their language, even just a few simple sentences, the local people would feel thrilled to interact with them:

I think that just being able to say like “I’m American.” Just being able to say those few things, they are like get so excited for me. It’s like not that hard to say, but their face and their reaction was like “wow, oh my God, they know Chinese.” —*Interview #10*

DISCUSSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Exposure to unfamiliar behaviors or values in a study abroad environment can affect pre-established worldviews and result in “a negotiation of difference during which the past and the present ‘encounter and transform each other’ in the ‘the presence of fissures, gaps and contradictions’” (Block, 2007, p. 864). Nevertheless, previous qualitative literature on American students’ study abroad experiences (e.g., Kinginger, 2013) observed that when confronted with challenges to their habitus associated with their pre-established worldviews, or when socially situated in unfavorable or unfamiliar experiences, American students typically withdraw from the negotiation of difference, and draw back into a sense of superiority. However, this does not appear to be the case with the students in our study. Kinginger (2013) pointed out that the success of “negotiation of difference” depends both upon “how the students are received in the contexts they frequent (e.g., classrooms, homestays) and upon how these same students choose to interpret the social, cultural, and linguistic practices of their host communities” (p. 341). The strategies used by the participants in our study showed their willingness to embrace the differences, their ability to draw information from previous experiences and preparations, their trust on the peer students from the host country, and their engagement in the community-building

experiences with the host nationals. These strategies enabled them to interpret the discomfort, ambivalence, and anxiety they experienced during the “negotiation of differences” as the efforts they had to make for the learning process. Their experiences, therefore, led to the following suggestions for the design of study abroad programs in China.

First, the design of the program should ensure the compatibility between student’s expectations of the study abroad experience and the goal and structure of the program. If the program does not match students’ preferred learning needs and aspirations, they would naturally feel dissatisfied and perceive their study abroad experience as negative. A number of negative study abroad experiences revealed in our interviews were due to individual student’s expectation gaps about the program. For example, students majoring in business and engineering expected to have more frequent corporate visits and have more interactive discussions with the corporate professionals, while students majoring in humanities expected to have deep and rich immersions in the local culture. Future program designs may consider different program structures for students in business and engineering, and students in humanities. Anderson and Lawton (2015) reported that students with different motivations experienced differential gains from their study abroad programs. Students who aim to “learn about the world, to achieve personal growth, and to develop one’s career” (Anderson & Lawton, 2015, p. 50) tend to develop better cultural competence through the study abroad experiences, compared to those who only have a desire for entertainment. Therefore, the orientation sessions of the study abroad program should guide students to link their personal study abroad goals to personal growth or/and career development rather than entertainment alone. This will increase the chances of positive study abroad experiences. Once the students feel the program enables them to achieve their objectives, the challenges they experience in the program will simply be one part of a rewarding and worthwhile learning experience.

Second, American students can be paired with willing domestic students to encourage meaningful interactions with the host nationals. Wang et al. (2017) observed that the communication concerns of nonnative English speakers and Americans were related to their perceptions of each other and decisions to interact. Their study reported that “the fear of negative judgment and discrimination from Americans was reported as one of the main causes to NNSs’ [nonnative speakers’] communication concerns with Americans” (p. 569). And the more an NNS perceives Americans’ bias toward foreign accents as the cause of his/her communication concerns, the more likely he/she would be avoiding interacting with Americans. Similarly, as reported by the participants in our study, American students’ avoidance of communication with the Chinese hosts was also caused by the possibility of being perceived as “alien” in another culture and the fear of not being able to find commonalities with the host nationals. However, as reported in our interview data, since the program intentionally paired the American students with willing Chinese students, the American students had more opportunities to interact with the host nationals and felt safe and comfortable to ask questions and not feel awkward because of not knowing something. This affirms Montgomery’s (2017) suggestion that accommodations open to willing domestic students to be paired with international

students demonstrate the institution's effort to place the international students in an environment where they feel welcomed and valued, and provide opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural interaction.

Third, the program should integrate service-based learning opportunities, which enable students to give back to their host community while simultaneously developing their intercultural competency skills and increasing their opportunities to make local friends other than their assigned host partners. As reported by the students in the interview, community-building activities, such as English corners for local workers, enabled them to relate to local people more easily and help them develop a better understanding of people's life in China. Students were also advised to help their assigned Chinese partners with English when receiving help from them. Such service-based learning will demonstrate the program's commitment to cultural exchange and its recognition of the importance of reciprocity, and eventually improve its reputation within the local community.

Last but not the least, structured and guided reflection sessions should be scheduled throughout the period of studying abroad to facilitate the process of "negotiation of differences," as reflection is an integral aspect of successful experiential learning. As suggested by Leslie (2017), a cultural mentor is one of the key factors in helping students gain intercultural skills through guided reflection. Our interview data revealed that such cultural mentors could be the program staff, faculty, or the host nationals. For example, local students were invited to the cultural discussion nights with the American students so that perspectives from the host nationals could be included in American students' reflection process, which created opportunities for both parties to develop mutual understandings. Such inclusiveness of the reflection sessions will not only contribute to students' intercultural competence development, but also proves the program's commitment to cultural exchange and its recognition of the importance of local perspectives.

To summarize, with an appropriately designed program structure, and the efforts from both the American students and the host nationals, American students were able to generate the "intercultural identity" through their study abroad experiences. As shown in our interview data, the study abroad experiences in China enabled the American participants to develop the insights and capabilities to overcome social and categorical stereotypes and appreciate others as unique individuals, and at the same time, recognize commonalities in human nature among members of different cultural, ethnic, or other social groups. With the development of "intercultural identity," when the students came back from China, a lot of them took the initiative to approach and help the international students on American campuses:

When I came back, I kind of made it my own personal mission to reach out to foreign exchange students here. Because I felt like they've taken care of me when I was in China, so it was like my turn to take care of them. Plus, like, one of them made really a sad statement where usually like "you're my first American friend ever" and he was like "I've been stowed in America for two years" and I felt so heart broken and I was like "oh my God. I have to change this." Because they've made sure that I had such a nice time in

China. And for that, like I'm eternally grateful forever and I'll be paying that back to the foreign students here. —*Interview #9*

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study showed that although students experienced certain language and cultural barriers, their experiences of studying abroad in China were generally positive. Students reported how they overcame challenges, sought help, remained open to differences, and were better prepared for cross-cultural interaction in the future. They also provided valuable suggestions regarding how expectations of students from different disciplines should be considered to cater to individual learning needs and aspirations; how service-based community-building activities can be utilized to foster the mutual engagement in interactions between American students and host nationals in China; and how local perspective should be included in American students' reflection sessions to enrich their mutual understandings.

Because data was collected from one research site, the scope of this study is limited. However, findings of this study are meant to stimulate discussion of American students' learning experience in China, to inform relevant supports and services for the design of the study abroad programs in China, and to provide some information about how to create activities to foster successful integration and engagement between domestic and international students in the United States. In the future, more studies should be conducted to collect data from a wider range of study programs to generate a more comprehensive picture of American students' transitional experiences in China.

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