

© *Journal of International Students*
Volume 10, Issue 1 (2020), pp. 28-49
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
Doi: 10.32674/jis.v10i1.770
ojed.org/jis

We Are Not All the Same: A Qualitative Analysis of the Nuanced Differences Between Chinese and South Korean International Graduate Students' Experiences in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the experiences of six Chinese and South Korean graduate students in the United States. Semistructured interviews and an interpretive phenomenological approach were used in which three major themes emerged: (a) academic challenges and acculturation, (b) academic support from host institute, and (c) cultural and pedagogical nuances. Challenges included language barriers during lectures, discussions and writing assignments, and lack of support services for international students. One significant finding was Chinese and South Korean students do not have the same graduate experiences in the United States. Participants shared how their prior homeland learning experiences (course delivery, relationships with instructors and assessments) impacted their learning, relationships, and academic challenges in the United States.

Keywords: academic challenges, academic experience, acculturation, Chinese international graduate students, South Korean international graduate students

INTRODUCTION

According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2017) during the 2016–2017 academic year there were 1,078,822 international students in U.S. higher education, who contributed \$39.4 billion dollars to the U.S. economy. Of the total population of East Asian international students, 33% are Chinese and 5% are South Korean (IIE, 2017; Young, 2017). The majority of quantitative research studies that have examined Asian students have focused on educational experiences (Leong, 2015; Sawir et al., 2012), stressors (Yan & Berliner, 2013), and social and emotional adaptation to host institutes (Cross, 1995; Reynolds & Constantine, 2007). These findings noted that international students' learning experiences are different across time spent at the host institute, and as such, students who stay longer report lower levels of acculturative stress (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006).

Acculturative stress is one of the predominant factors that affects international students' adaptation, academic achievement, and social confidence (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). The concept of acculturative stress is defined as "one kind of stress, in which the stressors are identified as having their source in the process of acculturation" (Berry, 1995, p. 479). Acculturation refers to "a dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (Berry, 2005, p. 698). Acculturative stress is mitigated through opportunities to learn about the host culture, although levels of stress are based on the quality of these experiences (Kuo & Roysircar, 2004; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). In addition, research has indicated that students from Asian countries experience more acculturative stress due to more pronounced cultural differences and language barriers that are between their home and host nations (Leong, 2015; Yan & Berliner, 2013).

Curriculum, course delivery, classroom management, and assessment in graduate programs are very different from undergraduate courses. Few research studies have explored how the academic demands and experiences of U.S. graduate education might affect acculturation for Chinese and South Korean international students (Huang, 2012; G. Lee, 2009). In addition, the majority of studies about Asian students are often focused on cultural commonalities, and not cultural differences (Campbell & Li, 2008; Li et al., 2014). The tendency in the United States is to regard "all Asians as a homogeneous cultural group" and therefore, dismisses cultural differences and their diversity of educational values and systems (Lin & Scherz, 2014). While researchers have focused on Asian international students in the United States, only a limited number of studies have explored Chinese and South Korean international students' similarities and differences in graduate studies (Huang, 2012; G. Lee, 2009) and very few, if any, have examined the voices of Chinese and South Korean international graduate students. Thus, the guiding research question for this study is: How do Chinese and South Korean international graduate students describe their unique academic experiences in the United States? As such, this qualitative study explores the experiences and academic challenges of six Chinese and South Korean graduate students and the subtle differences they experience while attending a university in the Southeastern region of the United States.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, we share research related to several critical aspects of international students' experiences. International students are defined as students who are not a citizen or permanent resident of the United States who have F-1 visas that allow them to attend U.S. universities and work on campus. The literature review includes research studies on academic acculturation and acculturative stress, length of stay, language barriers and adjustments, support services for international students, and cultural difference with pedagogies and learning.

Academic Acculturation and Acculturative Stress

According to Ward et al. (2005), the acculturation progress is defined as “changes that occur as a result of sustained firsthand contact between individuals of differing cultural origins” (p. 43). These researchers conclude that both personal awareness of skill deficits and the impact of cultural differences affect acculturation stress. As international students become more familiar with their settings, they develop coping strategies, which help their adjustment to the new environment. In fact, Ward and his colleagues' (2005) research further noted that *characteristics of the person*, including personality (e.g., introverted or extroverted), language fluency, prior training and experience, and the *characteristics of a situation*, such as length of stay, amount and quality of intra- and intergroup interactions, cultural distance, life changes, and social support are influential factors of acculturation stress. However, having the voices of Chinese and South Korean students is needed to understand how they respond to acculturative stress.

Length of Stay

In addition to cultural distance, length of stay is also a characteristic that has an impact on the acculturation process. Several studies have investigated how East Asian international students' length of stay impacted their cultural and language adaptation process (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Wei et al., 2007). Baba and Hosoda (2014) noted that social adjustment is predicted by length of residence in the host country.

Further, Wei and his colleagues (2007) concluded that the length of stay could buffer the negative influences that language barriers caused during acculturation process. Similar findings are supported in studies by Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006) and Kashima and Loh (2006). Moreover, several studies have investigated the relationship between length of stay and language development (Ishihara & Cohen, 2012; Martin-Beltrán, 2014). Martin-Beltrán (2014) investigated the impact of length of stay on accuracy of grammar and pragmatic use of English (i.e., whether an English oral expression makes sense in various contexts), and found that only pragmatic use of English improved over time. The ability to manipulate pragmatics is strongly associated with culture awareness (Ishihara & Cohen, 2012; Martin-Beltrán, 2014; Rafieyan et al., 2014), and the length of stay is related to culture awareness and less so with language awareness. Although Martin-Beltrán's (2014) research has been

supported in other studies (e.g., Alcón-Soler, 2015; Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011), Bella (2011) as well as Félix-Brasdefer (2013) found that length of stay is not sufficient to explain the pragmatic improvement of international students. Instead, they determined that the composite prediction of length as well as the intensity of interactions between international students and native speakers predict variance in pragmatic usage proficiency.

Language Barrier and Adjustment

Language barriers are related directly to academic success and to an individual's ability to adjust during the acculturation process. Researchers such as Yu and Shen (2012) as well as Masgoret and Ward (2006) confirmed that language proficiency is relevant to acculturation progress. Yu and Shen (2012) further supported this finding by stating that "the core components of an international student's socio-cultural adaptation were language proficiency and communication competence, supplemented by effective intercultural interaction, which in turn constituted a part of the broader construct of sociocultural adaptation" (p. 73). Likewise, Fass-Holmes and Vaughn (2014) found that language barriers cause not only academic concerns, but also decrease self-confidence, which affects international students' overall success. The reciprocal relationship and impact of language proficiency and acculturation process are supported through several empirical studies (Andrade, 2006; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Jia et al., 2014).

Support Services for Writing

Another critical matter to consider is the impact of a host institution's academic support services on academic writing for graduate courses. University students, especially at the graduate level, are required to write research papers to demonstrate their mastery of course content. Writing centers are a common form of academic support in Canadian and U.S. universities. According to Okuda and Anderson (2018), writing centers assist students in improving their writing, especially in the area of grammar. However, their case study found that: (a) writing center tutors sometimes do not give sufficient attention to international students' needs (e.g., some students felt frustrated about the writing center because of inadequate, untimely, and unfocused support), and (b) the frustration developed from poor learner-tutor interaction amplifies the stress of international students during the acculturation progress (Okuda & Anderson, 2018).

Cultural Differences with Pedagogies and Learning

While learning and teaching are culturally connected, they can differ between and among cultures. For example, in East Asian countries, the learning style is teacher-centered, in which the teacher delivers the lesson and knowledge (Dong et al., 2008). Learning to achieve "perfectionism" is a characteristic of Confucius, or East Asian culture (Shin, 2012). Under this approach, students are expected to emphasize the morals of the culture, develop a persistent attitude to progress toward

the established goal, and make the necessary adjustments to achieve the goals (Li, 2003). Additionally, Chinese and South Korean students strive to be successful to obtain a higher social status (Jang et al., 2009; Kim & Park, 2006; Lee et al., 2017; Shin, 2012).

Although South Korea is a neighboring country to China, there are some different patterns regarding teacher and student interactions between the cultures. Studies by Clarke and Xu (2008) found that classrooms in China had more student contributions and oral interactions with teachers than classrooms in South Korea and found similar results in a 2010 study (Clarke et al., 2010). In another 2013 study, Xu and Clark found that teachers in South Korea possessed more authority in mathematics classes than Chinese and Japanese teachers did: For example, South Korean teachers emphasized a specific way of solving mathematical problems, rather than using various methods that allowed students options of using several approaches.

Teaching styles and classroom norms can impact differences in students' learning and conceptualization. Several researchers have studied the difference between the Chinese and U.S. cultures' pedagogy in middle school mathematics classes (An et al., 2004; Correa et al., 2008). These studies revealed that Chinese teachers relied on traditional, drill-based approaches to help students achieve competence with a focus on drilling and practicing content. On the other hand, U.S. teachers provided more inquiry-based learning guidance and students used their creativity in solving mathematical problems. In another cultural comparison study, Sorto et al. (2009) did not find significant differences between teachers' pedagogical difference in Panama and Costa Rica. However, it should be noted that these countries have similar cultural values (Sorto et al., 2009). Therefore, one conclusion is, if two cultures differ in their values and beliefs, the learning and teaching styles will differ; and if the two cultures are similar, their teaching practices tend to align.

There are cultural differences in how respect is expressed, which leads to differences in student-teacher interactions. Studies reported that East Asian international students were silent when participating in U.S. classroom activities to show respect to the instructors (Ing & Victorino, 2016; Kim, 2008). More specifically, Kim (2008) reported that East Asian students tended to compensate for the lack of oral participation by listening attentively to lecturers. Supportively, H. J. Lee et al. (2017) found that frequent usage of a listening-based approach can predict higher grade point averages among Korean students, perhaps because "receiving and recalling" is a typical assessment method in Korean universities. That is, only students who can recall the exact knowledge taught in the classroom can achieve better scores.

In addition, there are differences in studies regarding how East Asian students view their experiences in U.S. classrooms. East Asian cultures value collectivism and seek to maintain a harmonious group atmosphere; therefore, they tend to avoid conflict with others in classrooms. Several studies noted that some East Asian international students view western classrooms' critical thinking and debates as too vigorous and hurtful to their peers (Durkin, 2008; Tan, 2017). Yet, Littlewood (2000) concluded that East Asian international students are much more open to new values and perspectives than previously thought. Littlewood (2000) asserted that the conflicts between individualism and collectivism manifested in classrooms have been

overestimated because individual opinion does not always conflict with group harmony. Most East Asian international students in Littlewood's study (2000) expressed that they were still in a "honeymoon" period when they experienced such "conflicts." Therefore, the participants may not continue to experience high levels of acculturation difficulty or stress.

Overall, as detailed in Li and his colleagues' (2014) a review of literature about East Asian international students reveals studies about the length of stay in a host country, English proficiency, attitudes toward seeking help, and acculturation. In this study, we are interested in exploring how to improve these factors to support the sociopsychological, educational, and cultural experiences of international students in U.S. graduate schools by listening to their voices. As stated by Li et al. (2014), 72.2% of the studies imply that Chinese international students are representative of the whole East Asian international group, with studies on East Asian students often neglecting to include views from students who are from other countries such as South Korea. Therefore, this study included not only Chinese, but also South Korean international graduate students, and compares and contrasts their learning experiences and academic challenges in a U.S. university.

METHOD

Data Collection

This qualitative research design featured in-depth, semistructured interviews of six international students. This approach is used to investigate educational and social phenomena experienced by people in educational contexts (Seidman, 1998). Before collecting data, approval was received from an institutional review board. Each participant was given an information letter with an explanation about the purpose of the study, criteria for participants, research procedures, and participant protections. Participants were asked to complete a background questionnaire consisting of eight questions about participants' gender, ethnicity, age, program of study, previous learning experience in English-speaking countries before attending the university, and marital status. Face-to-face and one-on-one interviews were held on the university's campus. Each interview was in English and took approximately 60 min. The interview questions were derived from educational literature (Astin, 1993; Campbell & Li, 2008). In the interview, each participant was asked about their learning experiences, satisfaction with their relationships with faculty, graduate curriculum and instructional practices, interactions with classmates, and support services at the university (Astin, 1993; Campbell & Li, 2008). Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed by the researchers, and during the interviews, field notes were taken on nonverbal body cues and salient ideas that emerged from the interviews.

Participants

The purposive sampling technique was used to recruit the six participants who provided rich descriptive data in the study. The selection criteria included an

international Chinese and South Korean student with at least 1 of year experience as a master or doctoral graduate in the university. Previous research studies indicated that international students experience the greatest challenges with adjustment during the early phases of studies, and these difficulties will gradually dissipate during the process of acculturation (Campbell & Li, 2008; Heggins & Jackson, 2003). Therefore, international Chinese and South Korean graduate students who had studied in the United States for at least 1 year were considered as potential participants (Campbell & Li, 2008). The six full-time Chinese and South Korean international graduate students who met the criteria included one master student and five doctoral students. Three participants were from China and three participants were from South Korea. There were five females and one male with five of the six participants enrolled in education programs. The participant profile is listed in Table 1. To protect their confidentiality, participants were given pseudonyms.

Table 1: The Profile of Participants

Name	Country of origin	Years in US	Major	Marital status	Age	Gender
Flori	South Korea	1+	Culture and curriculum	Single	26	Female
Jenny	South Korea	2+	Chemical engineering	Married with no child	33	Female
Kathy	South Korea	3+	Education psychology	Married with no child	35	Female
Chloe	China	1+	Teacher education	Single	27	Female
Sera	China	2+	Reading and literacy	Married with no child	28	Female
Cody	China	3+	ESL	Single	30	Male

Data Analysis

An interpretive phenomenological approach was used to analyze the experiences of the participants in this study (Smith et al., 2009). No computer-assisted data analysis was used. Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed and analyzed with other notes taken during the interviews. Each researcher separately read transcripts several times, then began to identify segments of texts that shed light on our research questions through open coding (Merriam, 2009). These open codes were both heuristic or meaningful and important enough to be a stand-alone unit of information. Open codes were then compared across all interviews for each researcher and the axial coding process collapsed several codes into the major themes. During the data analysis process, we triangulated codes and results through multiple researchers who were involved at each stage of analysis. Additionally, member checking was employed with each participant after the themes were developed to ensure data

accuracy and authenticity of the analysis. The analysis generated three major themes that are discussed in the Results section.

RESULTS

Three major themes emerged from the data to address the research question, “How do Chinese and South Korean international graduate students describe their academic experiences in the United States?” These themes were: (a) academic challenges and acculturation, (b) academic support from the host institute, and (c) cultural and pedagogical nuances.

Theme 1: Academic Challenges and Acculturation

In this theme, participants talked about challenges that Chinese and South Korean international graduate students faced as they sought to acculturate to the academic demands of graduate studies in the United States. All participants mentioned the language barrier as the most difficult challenge that they encountered. Other challenges mentioned included difficulties in writing assignments, group work, class discussions, understanding academic content, and their strategies to overcome their barriers. The language barrier was a challenge irrespective of the culture of the participants, but academic experience seemed to vary mostly with their length of time studying in the United States. Participants also shared some critical variations across cultures.

Language Difficulty for New Graduate Students

New graduate students, Flori and Chloe, who studied 1 year or more in America, mentioned that their greatest academic challenge was language difficulty. They felt that their English language experienced in the United States was different from what they learned in their motherlands. Flori from South Korea said:

My biggest difficulty in the U.S. is language. I can understand only 60% or 70% in classes. Sometimes, I knew the words and sentences literally, but could not understand what they were talking about... In South Korea, I learned English only through textbooks and listening tapes. When I first came to America, I realized that there are so many diverse accents and English usages. Learning English in real life is important to communicate with other students. I used a Facebook app to learn English usage. And I also read assigned textbooks or chapters very carefully before each class.

Chloe from China had a similar experience as Flori. She shared:

The most difficulty in America is using English. In China, I learned English through textbooks. I didn't have enough experiences in speaking English. When I came here (America) earlier, I didn't even know how to communicate with a cashier at a supermarket...I practiced through phone apps and communication with my officemates.

In China and South Korea, students learn English through textbooks or listening to English tapes, but participants in this study expressed that these practices were insufficient. Flori explained that even though she understood conversation among peers literally, she could not catch “the real meaning in context.” She was limited to inferring the actual meaning from the connotations of how the words were used. This was a common concern across all participants new to graduate studies in the United States regardless of their culture.

Language Difficulty for Experienced Graduate Students

Jenny, who has been an international student for more than 2 years, also mentioned that the language barrier was her biggest difficulty as a first year PhD student, but now she is getting better. She stated:

I had a difficulty in understanding what my instructors said in my first year. Some instructors had accents that is totally different from what I learned from audiotapes in South Korea. Some of instructors speak too fast to understand. To overcome it, I recorded the class lectures and listened to them over and over again. As time goes by, it is easier to understand. I think I am getting better in general.

Another student, Kathy, also shared her strategies to overcome the English barrier.

I had limited English and communication skills when I first came here. I didn't know how to adjust to the new learning methodology, how to read and write. To overcome them, I visited in-person writing center a lot, I improved not only my writing skill, but also speaking skills a lot. During the year, I visited there twice a week on regular bases. And I also studied grammar and English usages in class textbooks or papers.

This study aligns with the previous finding that English language is a challenge facing Asian international students, which often leads to stress as they learn to adjust to the academic rigors of graduate studies (Leong, 2015; Wei et al., 2007). In general, as students advanced in their studies, they learned various strategies to master American English, study for courses, understand lectures, and write essays.

Difficulty With Writing Assignments, Group Work, Group Discussions, and Content Knowledge

Participants noted that their former learning experiences in their homeland affected their current learning and challenges in the United States. They faced difficulties with writing assignments, group work, group discussions, and content knowledge. Most of the participants came directly from colleges in their homelands and had little knowledge of American academic conventions or intergroup communication.

Writing Assignments. According to research, writing is one of the most common difficulties for international students (Elliot et al., 2016) and this study

concur with that finding. Sera from China stated, "...although I have had stayed in America for 2 years, I still did not feel confident in writing. In China, I experienced paper-pencil tests, not writing essays." Others shared the similar feeling of difficulty.

In South Korea, I had writing assignments at college level. But writing assignments in English take forever. I contemplate the concepts and key sentences in Korean first and then translate it. Sometimes, I could not find the proper expressions in English...and the required essay structures are diverse in America such as review paper, research paper and so on. I had no idea how to develop each of these different formats: qualitative, quantitative, essay, proposal. Nobody teaches me. —*Flori*

I didn't know how to find appropriate sources and expressions in English and how to organize them. Writing in English is difficult. —*Jenny*

I experienced writing assignments in South Korea, but in doctoral program in America, I am really struggling in reading and writing because of different styles and structures." —*Kathy*

In this study, the participants expressed their concern about writing assignments. In the United States, academic writing can take many forms and vary by subject area, all requiring different organizational structures and using of different types of research and sources. These variations, combined with the language barrier, makes written assignments challenging for all international students.

Group Work and Discussions. In contrast to direct instruction, which is the predominant teaching method in Asian countries, the collaborative reasoning approach is a common instructional method in graduate studies in the United States (Dong et al., 2008; Lin & Scherz, 2014). In this study, most participants valued the collaborative reasoning approach in terms of helping them make friends in class, increasing interpersonal skills, reducing their fear to speak to the whole class, understanding different cultures and diverse perspectives, and extending their own thinking. However, some Chinese participants had few experiences with this instructional approach in their motherlands, so they had difficulty in participating during courses in the United States. They did not know their group members and had no idea how to handle debates among group members. Sera, for instance, mentioned:

I didn't learn the culture of collaboration in classes in China. Because classes are teacher-centered. In the U.S., classrooms are student-centered, so I needed time to practice to collaborate in different cultures...I need to learn how to respect each other's culture, how to resolve different ideas.

Cody also shared:

In China, we (Chinese students) do a lot of individual assignments. But in the U.S., there are a lot of group work and discussions in classes...When I was in the first two years, I was just a listener. I always just sit there and listened. I didn't know how to participate with them... In China, the teachers are traditionally lecturing all the time, and students did not have to really do

a lot of activities. In the U.S., there is group work and discussion in the classroom. I was not feeling very comfortable in terms of my classroom experience in my first and second year of staying in the U.S.

As Sera and Cody indicated, some Chinese participants needed support to learn how to respect diverse cultural backgrounds and different opinions, and participate in the group work and group discussions.

On the other hand, participants studying over 1 year mentioned that sometimes they felt their classmates did not think they were capable students. Chloe studying more than 1 year from China noted, “When I had group work, native speakers (in my groups) did not want me to do more work. They may have thought that my language was not good.” Flori’s remark was similar to Chloe’s:

When I had group work with native speakers, they did all the main parts and they assigned me to a small part. They might not think I am the same level. If I had high level of English skills, they would expect more of me...I also experience difficulty with discussions. As an international student, it is hard for me to catch up with the discussion speed in class. Sometimes, I feel, I am not the part of the class.

In this study, students who have studied over 1 year shared their feeling of isolation in regards to group work and discussions. They felt their limited English language skills hindered their participation in collaboration, and often expressed not feeling a part of the class. These challenges were complicated among Chinese students due to a heavier focus on teacher-centered instructional practices in their homeland that provided little-to-no practice with group-based learning and class discussions.

Theme 2: Academic Support From the Host Institute

Many institutions try to allocate proper academic, social, and cultural supports for international students (Ammigan & Perez-Encinas, 2018). For participants, the most commonly used support centers were the writing center and the International Student Services (ISS) center. In this theme, we share participants’ experiences and recommendations for improving the writing center and the ISS center.

Writing Center

U.S. writing centers supports writing and public speaking for graduate and undergraduate students. The writing center offers in-person and online consultations by making an appointment. Most participants had an online consultation experience. Their writing center experience was related to academic challenges. As stated previously, participants were still struggling with speaking or writing in English to some degree. Overall, participants stated how the writing center assisted them in their writing skills for their various writing assignments, such as how to develop qualitative and quantitative research reports, essays, field reports, or research proposals, and how to organize content in their particular major fields.

However, many participants felt they received insufficient support from the writing center. For example, Flori said, “They check only simple things like grammar and tense. I wanted more suggestions. Logical flow or content, weakness of my viewpoints, citations. I also don’t know how to develop each different type of written assignment.” Sera also shared her feelings of disappointment with the online writing center.

Their (writing consultants) works were very superficial. They may come from different majors. Their help were not helpful like peers in the same major. Even though they are native speakers, they don’t know my content area, required structures in written assignments and logic flow. They only focused on grammar.

Cody and Jenny also pointed out that the writing center was only helpful in terms of grammar and vocabulary. The participants needed more help and advice related to writing in their majors. Participants had experienced difficulties learning how to organize different types of writing assignments and how to use citations and required structures for essays that go beyond basic grammar or correct expression. Both Chinese and South Korean students believed that the writing center should have helped them reach their full academic potential. Therefore, the university should review the effectiveness of their writing center and should seek ways to promote international students’ writing skills and abilities such as hiring writing consultants who have a critical understanding of numerous academic fields.

International Student Services

The ISS center administers a wide variety of services to international students at the host institute. The ISS center’s responsibilities are to issue documents for international students to obtain nonimmigrant visas to study at the university and to provide information about immigration, medical insurance, employment, income taxes, and academic registration policies that are related to government and state laws. Most participants mentioned that their level of satisfaction with the ISS was low. They described the ISS as inefficient, slow, and unprofessional and were unsatisfied with this organization.

Cody shared his poor satisfaction with the ISS. “I am not very satisfied with ISS. They are slow and not efficient. It take a long time to process paperwork. They even lost my documents. They need to be more professional.”

Flori found it was difficult to meet with an academic advisor in the ISS directly.

I had a visa issue. I needed to meet an academic advisor at ISS, but it took 2 weeks to meet her. As an international student, visa issues are very important and urgent. They didn’t know how this was critical. They said there were no available supervisor at this moment.

Jenny and Sera also shared their experiences with ISS staff.

Whenever I ask something to ISS, I feel disappointed and frustrated. I tried to request to renew my documents and then I was assigned to one academic

advisor, she asked me for another document. And I submitted it. Few days later, she responded and asked for other document. And then I submitted that document and I felt I went to the first stage again. The staff did not know what documents would be needed to solve a particular issue, so they could not let students prepare the documents. —*Jenny*

They are nice, but they need to be more professional. For each time, I needed to bring up different material even though I had the same issue. They did not know what exact materials were needed to solve the problem. —*Sera*

Overall, the participants felt that the host institution needed more competent staff who are able to address their issues. They needed staff who were knowledgeable about all documents and policies required for international students. They felt that they had wasted time making unnecessary trips to the ISS. In this regard, the institution should listen to their international students' concerns and provide the necessary professional development so staff will be able to address their concerns more efficiently.

Theme 3: Cultural and Pedagogical Nuances

Prior research often has viewed Asian students as having the same cultural backgrounds (Lin & Scherz, 2014), but our findings suggest that there are critical nuances in the cultural-educational experiences of Chinese and South Korean students that affects how they experience instruction, interactions, and assessments in the U.S. graduate programs.

Teacher-Centered Versus Student-Centered Pedagogy

All participants shared that classes in their home nations were teacher-centered using direct instruction. Yet, most participants preferred student-centered learning experiences in U.S. schools as compared with teacher-centered learning in their motherlands. For instance, Cody, comparing his learning experience in China, shared:

In China, the teachers are traditionally lecturing all the time, and students did not have to be active in classes. In the U.S., there are more interactions in classrooms...I think at college or graduate level, learning and teaching styles in the U.S. is more preferable for me. We (students) really need to express, discuss and share our ideas with classmates and teachers. Without the student-centered learning community, we (students) cannot develop critical thinking.

Also, Jenny expressed similar sentiments as Cody when she stated:

In South Korea, teachers lecture across all content areas. At the college level (in South Korea), student participation is not expected, but I think still professors are the main voices in classes. In America, professors welcome to have students' participation in classes. It is interesting and better for me.

Lastly, Chloe compared her coursework in China to a similar course she took in the United States:

I took qualitative research classes in both countries, China and the U.S. In China, the coursework was always theoretical, we (Chinese students) did not get opportunities to really go out and do practice, I was just required to read textbooks and listen to the lectures. But the qualitative research classes here in the U.S., the very first assignment the professor gave was to do practical interviews, and write the field notes. I enjoyed this activity that encouraged me to participate in the class...I am very satisfied with the classes in America.”

Chloe reflected that her learning experience in the United States was more practical and enjoyable because it promoted student participation. Flori, Sera, and Kathy also mentioned that they had teacher-centered classes in their motherlands, while American classes use student-centered strategies. They enjoyed discussions and group work even though cooperative reasoning approaches were not used often in their homelands.

Nuances in Patterns of Interactions

A few studies found that Korean students had fewer oral interactions with their teachers than Chinese students (Clarke & Xu, 2008; Clarke et al., 2010). In this study, similar patterns emerged. All South Korean participants shared that initially they were uncomfortable when they talked with their instructors. South Korean participants mentioned that they were reluctant to ask for assistance or even talk with their instructors in their first year as a graduate student. Flori, stated:

Sometimes I could not understand what the instructor said. When I could not understand it, I just skipped it or asked my classmates...I am still uncomfortable with instructors. I want to talk with classmates, not professors. I probably have a traditional image of teachers in South Korea. In South Korea, most students are like me.

Likewise, Jenny recalled that she did not want to talk to instructors directly when she was a first year graduate student neither. She stated:

When I was a first year PhD student, I worried. If I asked stupid questions, I thought they might judge me. But my experience with instructors are getting better. I feel I am more adjusted. I can ask questions to my professors more feely.

Kathy, as a second year PhD student who also completed a Master’s in the United States, offered the following insight when asked why she avoided talking to instructors when she first came to U.S. She said:

In South Korea, teachers have an authority and students should follow their instruction without questions. I did not have a lot of interactions with teachers or professors in South Korea. I never said anything before they

(teachers) asked me something. I think this image of teachers affected my first relationships with professors in the U.S. But now I feel comfortable with my professors. They are nice and supportive. Here the professors are so close to students and supportive. I was nervous to present something in a class. At that time, my instructor gave me a big hug and said “you can do this.” It really touched my heart. I never experienced such thing from instructors or faculty in South Korea.”

In this study, South Korean participants reported being uncomfortable with their initial relationships with instructors, but felt more comfortable with instructors as they began to adjust to their teaching styles and had increased interactions with them. Participants felt that the impersonal nature of interactions between students and South Korean teachers affected how they approached interactions with their instructors in the United States. Interestingly, none of the Chinese participants shared discomfort as they interacted with their instructors.

Assessment Nuances

Not only did South Korean and Chinese students differ in how they interacted with instructors in the United States, but also in their perceptions of course assignments. Chinese participants reported that courses in China were structured and they had no opportunities to select classes at the college level. They had many paper-and-pencil tests instead of research papers. Sera stated:

In China, courses are structured. I didn't have choices for courses at the college level and I had to memorize many things when taking tests in China. I didn't learn how to collaborate in class because classes were teacher-centered in China... In the U.S., classes are student-centered. And class assignments in the U.S. are paper-based.

Cody who studied in the United States for more than 3 years compared his learning experiences in China and in America:

In China, there are too many task-based assignments, paper-pencil tests, which means students are only exercising on the superficial things, such as grammar, not the content based things. In America, every class includes writing assignments.

However, South Korean participants experienced written assignments more often than students from China at the college level. Yet, they still had difficulty writing because of the language barrier, and the different approaches to writing taught in South Korea. Despite having more student-centered assessments, South Korean students still struggled more than Chinese students regarding their ability to interact with U.S. instructors. Nevertheless, both cultural groups enjoyed the student-centered approach learning experience in U.S. graduate schools.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study described the experiences of Chinese and South Korean international graduate students in one graduate program in the United States using a qualitative approach. The literature review demonstrated a need to include more studies on the voices of international graduate students and the subtle differences between South Korean and Chinese students' educational experiences. The findings reiterate previous studies findings regarding how academic challenges decreased as international students' years of study increased in graduate programs (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Li et al., 2014). Likewise, this study supports previous research regarding how learning experiences from international students' motherlands affect their current learning in United States. One of the significant findings in this study was there are different academic experiences and challenges between Chinese and South Korean international graduate students. That is, only South Korean participants shared difficulties in communicating with their instructors in the beginning of their program because they came from a culture in which instructors utilized more authority (Park et al., 2009). For Chinese students, one challenge was the lack of experience participating in group work. In fact, Chinese students had more difficulties in classroom participation, when compared with South Korean students. Previous research studies have regarded Asians as having a homogeneous Confucian culture and have focused on their culturally similar features (Campbell & Li, 2008; Kim, 2008; Li et al., 2014; Lin & Scherz, 2014). While several studies have explored Asian students' academic experience, very few, if any, have examined the differences between Chinese and South Korean international students in graduate programs in the United States. The findings also support that when international students are from different cultural, educational, and linguistic backgrounds, there will be learning challenges in graduate programs in the United States (Berno & Ward, 2004; Lin & Scherz, 2014). When it comes to international student support from the host institute, international students in this study felt that they did not get enough support from the institution's writing center or ISS. Again, these findings are similar to other research findings found in Okuda and Anderson (2018).

Because all students shared how the university services such as the writing center and ISS offices were not addressing their needs, we recommend that U.S. colleges and universities do more to assist Chinese and South Korean international graduate students' acculturation process. First, all participants had received high scores on Test of English as a Foreign Language and had passed the English Language Proficiency Exam, but such high scores did not mean that students experienced fewer difficulties in academic English writing and speaking. It is necessary for instructors to teach academic conventions for writing assignments, essays, literature review, citation, and reporting diagrams or tables to international students whose first language is not English. If there are more courses dealing with academic convention, then students will more easily acculturate to classes in the United States.

Secondly, increased cultural sensitivity for U.S. instructors and students is needed. Instructors must ensure that their pedagogies are culturally sensitive and not culturally biased. Instructors must monitor group projects, and create assessments that ensures that international students contribute equitably to group projects. In this

respect, the instructors should be aware of how to use culturally responsive teaching to improve the academic experiences of international students.

Thirdly, there is a need for the university to monitor support centers' efficiency and user experiences. The writing center is an essential form of academic support for international students. Also, writing tutors have an impact on multidimensional academic socialization of international students (Okuda & Anderson, 2018). Therefore, writing centers should provide more writing tutors who can advise not only grammar or expression but also knowledge of specific academic fields, essay structures, and word choices based on academic majors. Furthermore, the university should provide professional development for all ISS staff members with pertinent information (e.g., forms, current and accurate government regulations) relative to international students. The wait time for seeing an advisor in the ISS should be improved so that students with urgent needs are able to be seen immediately.

Because the number of Chinese and South Korean international students is increasing in U.S. institutions, finding strategies to improve their educational experiences has a two-fold advantage. When students have meaningful learning experiences, it helps recruitment and retention for the university as well as provides students with the academic experiences to enhance their future careers. The findings in this study denoted how U.S. higher education institutions can improve the academic experiences of Chinese and South Korean international students. The findings include a call for more improvements in the services such as the writing center and ISS center, and instructors becoming more culturally sensitive. While this may not be panacea for improving the experiences of all international students, many of the findings support past conclusions from quantitative studies. This study provides a space for international students' voices to be heard, and the experiences of these students echo those of many others who have a desire to share their experiences, but often have not been asked.

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