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**Different Is Not Deficient: Contradicting Stereotypes of Chinese International Students
in U.S. Higher Education**

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Abstract

Mainland Chinese students form the largest international tertiary student population in the U.S., yet most discourse around them tends to adopt a deficit perspective. Adopting a hybridized sociocultural framework, this qualitative study follows 18 Chinese undergraduates over one year to examine how challenges they face are influenced by sociocultural contexts and change over time. Findings reveal that Chinese students face challenges around relearning new language skills and communication styles, thinking like a ‘Westerner’, understanding new classroom expectations and sociocultural contexts, and finding balance between work and play. These challenges arise from the different school, societal, and cultural expectations in China vs. the U.S. Debunking stereotypes that Chinese international students are passive and needy, this study argues that they possess agency as evident in their responses to challenges faced and changes in their attitudes and behaviors over time. Findings aim to increase intercultural understanding between international students and staff and improve college policies that address students’ needs.

Keywords: Chinese students, international students, higher education, inter-cultural, stereotypes

Introduction

In recent years, U.S. colleges saw a rapid growth of mainland Chinese students who now form the largest proportion of international students (31%), with undergraduate enrollment increasing more than eight-fold in just six years (Institute of International Education, 2014). Growing Chinese affluence, competitive college entrance examinations, the Chinese labor market's reverence of an overseas degree, and aggressive recruitment of international students by U.S. colleges to bolster falling revenues are some reasons for this phenomenon (Jiang 2012). Media coverage of this phenomenon, readers' heated responses to media coverage, and existing research literature around Chinese students' experiences tend to center around challenges students face in the U.S. without adequate exploration of how external sociocultural contexts and histories shaped students' experiences (Abelmann and Kang 2014). This creates an incomplete understanding of Chinese students' experiences in the U.S. and inadvertently perpetuates a stereotype that the students are incompetent and deficient. This article aims to dispel some of the myths around Chinese students and argue that many of their challenges are temporary. Given that Chinese students form the largest international student community not just in the U.S. but Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the U.K., and New Zealand, it is hoped that relevant findings can illuminate similar phenomena in these countries (UNESCO 2014).

Existing Research around Chinese Students

Studies have shown that Chinese college students have to adapt to a very different educational system when they pursue an education in Anglo-Saxon countries. In the classroom, students struggle with a learner-centered teaching approach that values group work, classroom participation, and student perspectives (Gu 2008, Kingston and Forland 2008, Parris-Kidd and Barnett 2011, Yan and Berliner 2009, Wu 2015). In particular, students are unaccustomed to the requirement to think critically and the possibility of

challenging their teachers (Gu 2008, Swagler and Ellis 2003, Turner 2006, Wu 2015). Written assignments also pose the challenges of style, analysis and citation convention requirements that differ from those in China (Holmes 2004, Turner 2006, Wu 2015). Students' interaction with faculty members also suffered because of their limited command of English and unfamiliarity with self-directed learning (Yan and Berliner 2009). While it is critical to understand the challenges Chinese students face in school, attention to challenges without adequately examining their causes within context may lead to unfair perceptions of Chinese students. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Chinese students are often perceived as passive and excessively dependent (Zhao and Bourne 2011, Roberston et al. 2000, Cortazzi and Jin 1996), unwilling to participate in class (Bartlett and Fischer 2011, Ruble and Zhang 2013), and uncritical thinkers and rote learners (Chalmers and Volet 1997, Roberston et al. 2000, Cortazzi and Jin 1996). Faculty members in the U.S. complained that Chinese students were incapable of reading articles or orally summarizing them and attributed this to their poor English language and lack of motivation (Jenkins 2000). In turn, faculty members associated students' poor English language and motivation to their culture—in their opinion, Chinese students tend to congregate and are uninterested in acculturating or improving their English via socializing (Chalmers and Volet 1997, Jenkins 2000). Similarly, American college peers stereotyped Chinese students as bad in English, unsocial, and annoying (Ruble and Zhang 2013).

Gloomy portrayals of Chinese students' experiences and inadequate understanding of Chinese students' background may partly be attributed to the methodology of existing research. Without a conceptual framework that analyzes how students' personal histories as well as how previous and current sociocultural contexts influence their challenges, research may unwittingly perpetuate deficit images of Chinese students or frame their cultural background as baggage (Cho, Roberts, and Roberts 2008, Kingston and Forland 2008, Wang

and Shan 2007). While recent research has placed more emphasis on the contextual understanding of Chinese students (Gram et al. 2013, Parris-Kidd and Barnett 2011, Wu 2015), this body of work needs to continue growing to trouble existing discourse. Further, many existing studies utilized one-off interviews or a narrow range of research methods to study Chinese students' educational experiences at one point in time (Jin and Cortazzi 2011). In doing so, Chinese students' experiences were rendered static, obfuscating student agency and change over time. To address these issues, this study aims to elucidate 18 Chinese undergraduates' perspectives on academic challenges they faced in U.S. colleges within their sociocultural contexts, and highlight how they changed over an academic year.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework—a 'hybridized sociocultural framework'—used in this study draws upon concepts from anthropological, psychological, and postmodern work around culture. This framework situates participants within their previous and current contexts to attain a more holistic understanding of their experiences. Ideas from various scholars have been distilled (Abu-Lugbod 1991, Eisenhart 2001, González, Moll, and Amanti 2005, Gutiérrez and Rogoff 2003, Rogoff 2003, Vygotsky 1978) into three key tenets:

1. Humans are embedded within and shaped by their sociocultural contexts.
2. Humans participate in more than one sociocultural context, and their participation, motivations, attitudes, and behaviors may change within each context and across time.
3. Humans possess agency in improvising, interacting, or contesting the values, beliefs, and behavior associated with different sociocultural contexts.

Tenet one emphasizes that human learning, development, and behavior are intimately intertwined with their social-cultural milieu, which is in turn influenced by the changes in

human behavior, patterns, and phenomena across history (Nasir and Hand 2006, Rogoff 2003). This dynamic interdependence of contextual and individual processes is evident in how humans interact with social others, signs, or symbols within the larger external context (Vygotsky 1978). For instance, schooling and classroom practices are influenced by dominant socio-economic-cultural structures, and schools are sites where students' learning, development, and behaviors are shaped. Tobin, Wu, and Davidson (1991) observe that the pedagogy and content in different preschools in China, Japan, and the U.S. reflects the larger societal and dominant cultural values that varied across the countries. For instance, Chinese preschoolers are taught to be academically ready and disciplined in response to societal concerns of spoiled and over-indulged children born under the one-child policy; preschoolers in Japan are taught to discern and intuit others' feelings rather than outwardly express their own feelings in preparation for the society's value for collective responsibility; preschoolers in the U.S. are encouraged to freely express their feelings and creativity to assert their individualism that is valued by the dominant U.S. culture.

At the same time, each individual also has the propensity to participate in multiple sociocultural contexts at a given time as well as over a lifetime (tenet two). Thus, an individual's learning, development, and behavior cannot be essentialized to personal traits related to a single culture; instead, it comprises a constellation of his/her experiences in various contexts (Erickson 2011, Gutiérrez and Rogoff 2003, Abu-Lugbod 1991). For instance, students cross different borders as they move from homes to schools to their communities and the larger society, and within each context, they may participate dissimilarly (or similarly) given changing expectations, values, and beliefs (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005, Phelan, Davidson, and Yu 1993).

Related to humans' behaviors and interactions changing within their contexts is the concept of human agency (tenet three). As Willis (1981) noted, humans are not passive

beings but “active appropriators” (p. 175) who struggle in and contest their reproduction of current social structures. Researchers have documented how mainland Chinese students change their language learning practices according to differing practices and motivations in China and Britain (Gao 2006) and how some Muslim women’s choice of veiling themselves should not be interpreted as a lack of agency but voluntary and deliberate acts honoring their community (Abu-Lughod 2002). Thus, human practices are dynamic and complex, as opposed to passive and unitary in the system of cultural rules pursued (Erickson 2011).

Methods of Inquiry

The hybridized sociocultural framework was adopted as it privileges the examination of participants’ meaning construction within their sociocultural milieu for more holistic understandings to emerge (Hatch 2002, Lincoln and Guba 2000). This framework aligns well with a qualitative research approach as the latter aims to paint a more nuanced and complex picture of participants’ experiences by having them construct their lived experiences (Creswell 2007, Hatch 2002). This is important as this study attempts to provide the full perspective of Chinese student experience over time.

Using a snowball sampling approach, eighteen participants were recruited—nine each in years one and two—studying engineering, mathematics or business-related subjects, most Chinese students’ subjects of choice in the U.S. (Chow and Bhandari 2010). All students were unmarried, under 20, on student visas, and without any prior educational experience outside of China. Participants came from three private, four-year, liberal arts colleges in a large city in North East U.S.

A demographic questionnaire was used to collect participants’ background information to frame their experiences. Thereafter, participants were interviewed thrice: at the beginning, middle, and end of their academic year. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in

participants' preferred language (mostly Mandarin) to allow them to best communicate thoughts or ideas deeply embedded within their culture that are hard to translate (Ryen 2001, Davies 2008). To reduce memory recall bias and encourage deep reflection, participants also wrote four journal entries. This was important as research has shown that many Asian international students prefer having time to contemplate more thoughtful questions or comments before sharing, as opposed to speaking immediately (Kingston and Forland 2008).

Data were analyzed using LeCompte and Schensul's (1999) item, pattern, and structural analysis approach. Item-level data were tagged (e.g. recurring words like 'critical thinking'), categorized, and regrouped within patterns (e.g. thinking issues), by examining items for similarities, co-occurrence, and corroboration with other data sources. Finally, a structure was derived to describe the patterns' relationships. Credibility was enhanced by triangulating data, searching for discrepant evidence, and conducting member checks on themes.

Findings

The following sections discuss five academic challenges participants¹ faced, interpret the challenges within their contexts, and highlight their changes over time.

Relearning Language Skills and Communication Style

Language issues were the most commonly cited challenge. Although all participants learned English in middle and high school in China, most felt their foundation was inadequate for the U.S. Speaking and writing, in particular, were most challenging.

Speaking

Almost half of the participants reported that they struggled with speaking—be it in class, with teachers or with friends. Participants explained that since English was not their native language, they 'need to spend several seconds to consider' (April) how to phrase their

¹ Pseudonyms, chosen by participants themselves, have been used throughout the findings section.

ideas, before they could respond. Participants felt that the vocabulary and phrases learned in China were overly academic or arcane and inappropriate within a conversational context. Further, they shared that discussions in their English classes in China were rare. Classroom participation was particularly challenging for the above reasons. Furthermore, participants had to contend with the fast speed of discussions: ‘native speakers speak really fast and their responses to issues are faster’ (Wen). ‘When the teacher asks a question, [participants] need to spend ten to fifteen seconds to straighten out [their] language. By then, the opportunity is gone’ (Kevin). Additionally, some participants were unsure of the participation format, like appropriate ways to enter and exit discussions.

When a student says something, often others can complement what is said. But I don’t know how to complement what is said, and at the same time, introduce my own idea. I feel that I have to wait until a moment when everyone is quiet before I can speak. In China, we didn’t have to participate in a group, we all speak up one by one. (SiWan)

A couple participants also observed that communication styles were different in the U.S. They felt they had to adjust their way of speaking in class to make themselves an ‘attractive speaker’ (Sophia). Participants explained that they had little practice in oratory skills since, in China, ‘there’s an emphasis on being low-key’ (Wen). Being too outstanding was perceived as being individualistic, an act that was generally frowned upon in the comparatively more collectivistic Chinese society. A reluctance to speak was further exacerbated by perceived impatience on the part of listeners: ‘if they seem impatient ... then my voice will go soft’ (Jane).

However, over time, participants became more comfortable with speaking in class or with friends, as only two reported speaking as a major challenge by the third interview. Jane observed that speaking itself was a self-fulfilling cycle: ‘My English is a little better than previously, so I dare to speak more. And because I dared to speak up, my English has

improved. It's a positive cycle.' Participants prepared talking points and questions for class and forced themselves to speak as they found that practice made perfect: 'I think I've improved because I spoke more with friends, my dorm friends, soccer team friends' (Kelvin). However, half the participants reported that when confronted with new speaking tasks (e.g. interviews, marketing presentations), they continue to experience some discomfort.

Writing

Almost half of the participants shared that writing was challenging in two main aspects: adhering to a new format/style requirement and creating new ideas. Participants explained that they were not used to the argumentative format required for their writing class in the U.S. as they were used to writing narrative essays in China. Even when participants wrote argumentative essays in China, the requirements were different to the strict writing format expected in the U.S.—a clear introduction, a main body containing the arguments, and a strong conclusion. This structural prescription was new to students as they felt more used to thinking and writing in 'circles' rather than 'in a straight line' (MinDeng).

In the US, there's a thesis and there's a structure that works like a branch. And all the details are the sub-branches that grow from the main branch, so it looks like a tree. In China, it's like ivy, it grows in all directions. (Jane)

In terms of writing style, participants remarked that they struggled with asserting their opinions forcefully as they were used to 'hint[ing] at a lot of things' (GangNan). They observed that writing in the U.S. required them to be more 'organized and concrete' vs. reflective and 'profound' (GangNan) in China. In addition, arguments had to be 'linked very tightly' (YunJing) in the U.S. Participants attributed this communication style difference to language and culture:

When we talk, we wouldn't say what we feel directly. For example if I'm hungry, I wouldn't say: 'I'm hungry.' I may say: 'Oh what time is it? Do you have

something on?’ I guess it has to do with culture, our speaking habits are not to the point ... we think it’s rude. (MinDeng)

A few also ascribed the vagueness in communication and lack of tight step-by-step development in their essay writing to a perceived lack of grammar in the Chinese language. They explained that there is ‘stricter cause-effect logic in English.... Whereas in Chinese, it’s more general ... there is no tense for verbs (MinDeng).

As for writing content, participants observed that there was a stronger emphasis on original ideas and arguments in the U.S. whereas linguistic elegance with the use of proverbs and metaphors were prized more in China.

I feel that in China, there’s more emphasis on the beauty of the language.... Over here, teachers don’t want you to use SAT terminologies. But in China, teachers care about the terms, proverbs, or pretty phrases you use...over here, they focus on how you argue. (Sophia)

Participants shared that coming up with profound and novel ideas was more challenging for Chinese students because ‘they’re not predisposed to abstract thinking’ as they had spent ‘a lot of time on math and science....[and] cannot carry on an intangible train of thought’ (LuZhan). HeFeng added that, given the exam-oriented and curriculum-heavy education system in China, not having had time to engage in much leisure reading previously made it ‘hardest coming up with [his] own idea’.

Writing continued to be challenging for participants as more than half reported difficulties even in the third interview. Twice as many first year as second year students found writing challenging, partly because writing was a mandatory class in the first year and many second year students had the freedom to select less writing intensive classes. Another reason for second year students coping better was because they found that with practice and a firmer grasp of the language, they improved. They observed that ‘living within the larger environment, [they] become more confident of [their] language’ (GangNan). Specific coping

strategies for participants included reading newspapers and articles for ideas, creating outlines, using the school's writing center, and asking friends to review their essays.

Regardless, many participants acknowledged that 'writing is harder than reading ... you'll not be able to get the grade unless you practice. And that takes a long time' (YunJing).

Thinking Like an 'Easterner' vs. a 'Westerner'

Half of the participants raised the issue of what they defined as thinking like an 'Easterner' versus a 'Westerner' (Dan). They observed that there were tangible differences between the thinking they were used to in China and that in the U.S., and this was more noticeable in social sciences, humanities and language classes (SSHL) as opposed to science and math classes. Participants claimed that logical, critical, and divergent thinking were emphasized more strongly in SSHL classes in the U.S., and associated this with thinking like a 'Westerner', whereas intuitive and contextual thinking were less evident in the U.S., and associated this with thinking like an 'Easterner'.

Logical Thinking

Participants interpreted logical thinking as 'digging deeply' (YaNing) with 'step by step' (YunJing) development of arguments and ideas. They observed that 'in the U.S. there is a strong focus on logic and reason' (Lisa) and that 'in every step that [they] think, [they] have to reveal it in [their] essay' (LeXin). A third of the participants felt that they needed tighter logic when writing given their professors' feedback. In their opinion, writing—and, as a corollary, thinking—in China required less logic.

In terms of writing in Chinese ... there's no strict focus on a tight thinking process or strong logic flow that connects ideas across.... In argumentative essays, even if you have three points, you don't have to focus on them one after another in a certain sequence. (YuWan)

Participants felt that writing, reading, and thinking were more intuitive and required contextual interpretation in China. For instance, Lisa noted that reading comprehension exercises in China often asked ‘what the author is thinking, how it relates to his thoughts and his environment’ as opposed to content-based questions. April explained that contextual thinking—being able to recognize how historical-sociocultural circumstances influenced behavior—was more valued in China ‘because of years of history; in learning history, [they] learn philosophy and viewpoints from the past, see cause-effect and recurring incidences in history, and so are willing to understand why things happen’ differently in changing contexts. At the same time, April argued that Chinese students’ struggles with logic had less to do with a lack of it but more with a difference in values and perspective.

I find that in the west [writing is] like a branch because there’re many things that they [Americans] can’t understand, hence we need to lay it out one step at a time ... But I find this writing style doesn’t mean their logic is good, instead it reflects their attitude, that you need to clarify an issue for a person step by step. I find that many Chinese can write intuitive essays because the background logic that they have is deep. They see some things and have an automatic emotional feeling with it, rather than asking, why things occur step by step.... In the west, they want to understand things from a very straightforward perspective, hence, they will require you to lay things out step by step. (April)

In short, what was often interpreted as a deficit in logic in Chinese students might have been just a difference in communication style.

Critical and Divergent Thinking

More than half of the participants raised critical or divergent thinking as a concern in their interviews. They interpreted critical thinking as questioning ideas, refuting arguments, and exploring alternatives. They felt that ‘because of the lack of habit of questioning in the past, when [they] grow up, even though [they] have a question, [they] will not pursue it’ (SiWan). They explained that in China, humanities lessons like history ‘required

memorization and no analysis' (YunJing) and given the large class size and dense curriculum material to cover, teachers transmitted knowledge and rewarded students for quiet and cooperative behavior. Over time, students 'lost the ability to think and ask questions at the appropriate time' (LuZhan). Hence, participants felt that they were at a disadvantage at critical thinking in U.S. colleges, especially when compared to their American peers.

This sentiment applied to divergent thinking. Some participants shared that they 'don't have the ability to think divergently like Americans' (Dan) as participants themselves had a 'more fixed way of thinking' (LuZhan). Wen attributed the 'exam-oriented' system in China for restricting divergent thinking as students were 'very afraid of making mistakes' and taking risks ... since there was only one correct answer for standardized tests. Another participant opined that he was less able to contribute ideas pertaining to the U.S. context as he was less familiar with it.

Half of the participants improved in this aspect over time. They talked about how reading, writing about and listening to various opinions, and how new experiences in the U.S. opened their minds to fresh viewpoints. Participants also mentioned that they reminded themselves to not accept what they read at face value, but instead to 'question more when reading' (SiWan). Many reported being pleased with their own progress in critical thinking and shared their parents' appreciation: 'Even my parents noticed that I have stronger and different opinions. They are more convinced by my arguments and praised my thinking' (Wen). Participants who claimed it was a continued challenge explained that thinking takes time to change and appeared to have high expectations of their progress.

Understanding Unfamiliar and Unclear Classroom Expectations

One third of the participants raised the issue of unfamiliar and unclear classroom expectations, namely in the areas of pedagogy and assessment.

Pedagogy

Participants had to adjust to an open-ended teaching method in smaller classes, like recitations, where they had to come to conclusions themselves. Professors acted more as facilitators who, particularly during HSSL classes, ‘made it clear that questions do not always have right or wrong answers’ (Wen). Rather than transmitting information, participants felt that their professors usually gave them framework within which students had to direct their learning. Along with the open-ended teaching approach was the expectation that participants joined in and initiated class discussions. This was as opposed to in China, ‘where the teacher will ask a question and [participants] simply have to answer’ (April).

Many participants also had to adjust to group work and shared that it took effort to understand group dynamics and feel at ease. Participants explained that they were less comfortable with face-to-face confrontation of ideas as they felt that ‘to question someone’s ideas or argue with someone is considered impolite’ (LeXin). They also self-censored for fear that their language inadequacy could result in overly strong and potentially offensive phrasing. Participants attributed the avoidance of confrontation to their upbringing in China where maintaining harmony was privileged and meant showing care for others’ feelings by refraining from interrupting, avoiding disagreements, and circumventing concerns. Further, not knowing what was appropriate to say, what to say, and how to say their thoughts during group work contributed to their discomfort.

Most participants were able to adjust to the different pedagogy in the U.S. quickly as only one found it a problem by the third interview. Participants observed peers, noted expectations, kept an open mind to different types of pedagogy, and adapted their learning ‘to adjust to the teacher’s teaching style’ (LuZhan). Further, with practice and positive experiences, they became more confident.

After a while, you know what's going on here, what each class's discussion format will look like.... If others' ideas are the same as yours, upon speaking up, if the teacher didn't refute, you think: 'Ok I can say that too.' (JieYing)

Assessment

A third of the participants mentioned that they were uncertain of assessment format and expectations, especially at the start of their studies. Assessments were confusing because of unfamiliarity with format and grading, question choice, and language.

I was not used to the first exam, including the format and how they grade. I had all kinds of small mistakes, like choosing the right questions, reading the question accurately, and understanding basic concepts. (GangNan)

However, only a few participants reported assessment as a major struggle by the third interview as they learned from experiences. 'Slowly I know what the professor will assess ... their teaching styles.... With this experience, you'll slowly feel that it gets better.' (Jane)

Participants tapped into strategies they had previously used in China, like finding 'a few questions to practice' (Lisa) so that they became more familiar with expectations. With different assessment formats, participants utilized different strategies, for example they 'review textbooks, write down key points. For math, [they] memorize formulas, for economics, [they] draw graphs' (YuWan).

Grappling with a New Sociocultural Context

A little over half of the participants articulated that it was a challenge grappling with unfamiliar sociocultural content because they did not grow up in the U.S. Given the liberal arts college education in the U.S., participants floundered because they were unaware of classic authors/texts, popular ideas, or key historical events. The frequent references to Christianity, for example, were something participants struggled with. The new socio-political-legal environment also meant that participants labored to understand teachers'

references in classes. Business students, for example, were stumped by companies and laws they had never heard of. Many things that might seem like ‘common sense to [Americans] in daily life’ took immense effort for participants to understand because it was ‘all new’ (Kelvin).

As a result, participants found themselves paying a price for their unfamiliarity in various ways. They had to put in a lot more time than their American peers when it came to learning, like doing more ‘research to write good papers’ (LeXin) or ‘reading several times’ (SiWan) to understand a text. They found classroom participation harder, as ‘there are culture issues or politics that stop [them] from understanding what is going on’ (MinDeng). They were afraid of raising questions for fear of being out of place: ‘Sometimes I don’t even understand what they are discussing. For example someone cracks a joke and everyone laughs’ (Dan).

However, there was marked improvement in participants’ experiences of new sociocultural contexts over time. The longer participants resided in the U.S., the more they understood the U.S. contexts given their interactions with people, media, and books. ‘I like small group work.... during the presidential election, they’ll [group mates] teach me, and I learned a lot of enriching information... It helps me understand Americans better.’ (Ming) Extra-curricular activities like soccer or string orchestra were also activities through which participants learned more by ‘tak[ing] the initiative to speak with them [Americans]’ (Wen). A couple participants also observed that the best people to explain sociocultural contexts to them were Asian Americans as they made a ‘good cultural and communication bridge’ (Wen).

Finding Balance Between Work and Play

More than half of the participants complained about the heavy workload in U.S. colleges. They struggled with the reading load and lamented that there were ‘so many

assignments' (Lisa). Further, they shared that they were required to 'prepare a lot in advance' (LuZhan) so that they could engage in classroom participation. Writing took up even more time as participants had to write 'many drafts' (LeXin) before submission.

While participants similarly had heavy workloads in China, day-to-day work was of more significance in the U.S. because results counted towards their grade point average². 'Because every quiz and test counts [in the U.S.], you need to take each one seriously. My peers in China only have to do well for the mid or final exams' (MinDeng). Several participants mentioned that grade point average was a huge concern as they needed a higher average to apply for summer internships/graduate schools or to find a job. Many participants felt a strong duty towards their parents who 'will ask about [their] grades... as they feel that as a student, [they] have only one thing to do, which is to study and do well in it' (MinDeng). Participants felt even more compelled to excel given their parents' large monetary investment in their U.S. education. 'My mum is worried, because she feels that all our savings is invested in this education, what if I can't find a job, or earn enough money to recoup the savings invested?' (Dan). Ingrained in many participants' minds was the notion that 'exams affect everything in [their] lives, like [their] grades, [their] opportunities' (Wen) as they had been told repeatedly by family and teachers that in a populous and competitive country like China, education was the route to a better life. As a result, participants found it hard to balance work and play in the U.S. as they felt incessantly guilty that they were not preparing adequately for the future whenever they relaxed.

It's hard to learn well and play well.... I often feel down when I see friends around me going out to play, taking photos with a lot of Americans... .. I feel that I (pause), I haven't reached the goal of my studies here. I'm here to study, not simply for a degree, but here to understand the culture. But given my current state, ... I have few foreign friends, I don't have time to hang out with them. (Dan)

² Grade point average is an average of grades for all classes. It is typically used by higher education institutions and prospective employers to compare the results across students.

Thus, attempting to balance work and play not only took a toll on participants' social life, but also their psychological wellbeing as they felt depressed about not socializing.

There were mixed responses to finding balance over time, with some participants sharing that they gradually proportioned more time to explore leisure activities and others complaining that there was no let up. The former group learned to become more efficient by 'organizing [their] deadlines' (Kelvin) or learning techniques to increase efficiency, like taking a 'speed reading class' (HeFeng). The latter group continued to struggle, partly, because they took on more non-academic responsibilities like leadership positions or were actively looking for summer internship opportunities.

Discussion and Significance of the Study

This study interprets mainland Chinese undergraduates' challenges in U.S. colleges within their sociocultural contexts and highlights their changes over time. While the study would benefit from methodological improvements like random sampling, following participants over a longer period, and having objective observations of change over self-reports, the findings can still illuminate some Chinese undergraduates' experiences. Findings reveal that students experience challenges namely in the areas of language and communication, 'western' thinking, classroom expectations, sociocultural contexts, and finding balance. Yet, what is more interesting and important is to understand where these challenges arise from. Tenets one³ and two⁴ of the hybridized sociocultural framework allow us to see the embeddedness of Chinese students within the multiple sociocultural contexts that they participate in, and how expectations across these contexts overlap or collide, and, in turn, shape their attitudes and behaviors. A complex interplay of schooling, societal, and cultural expectations interact to influence participants' experiences. For instance, an exam-

³ Tenet one: Humans are embedded within and shaped by their sociocultural contexts.

⁴ Tenet two: Humans participate in more than one sociocultural context, and their participation, motivations, attitudes, and behaviors may change within each context and across time.

oriented Chinese education system that emphasized memorization and standardized answers gave participants few opportunities to practice the divergent and critical thinking encouraged in the U.S. system. A more collectivistic society in China that stressed being low-key meant that participants found it hard to speak up and bring attention to themselves in the more individualistic U.S. education system that demands student classroom participation.

Expectations within each new context they encounter do not only contribute to tensions they experience but to changes they undergo as they adapt to differing expectations, thus corroborating other scholars' conclusions (Gram et al. 2013, Parris-Kidd and Barnett 2011, Wu 2015).

Using a conceptual framework that situates participants' challenges contextually provides a more holistic understanding of their experiences and urges us to recognize that different socio-cultural milieus possess different expectations around values, attitudes, and behavior. This suggests the need to pay close attention to methodological choices when framing and reading research to be aware of the limitations in conclusions drawn (Heng 2014, Jin and Cortazzi 2011). Reporting challenges students faced without investigating *why* makes it easy to essentialize them as deficient and voiceless. Further, judging participants based on their difference reflects hubris and narrow-mindedness, for different is not deficient. Societies have different parameters by which they operate, and these parameters are shaped by a vast range of influences, like history, cultural legacies, economic trajectories, and globalization. Hence, it is critical to look beyond Chinese students' challenges, understand its causes, and ask why we make the assumptions we do.

Above and beyond, it is vital to recognize that abilities, attitudes, behaviors, and values are not static but can change in response to different contexts. Tenet two of the hybridized sociocultural framework emphasizes the potential for change while tenet three, that of human agency. Studying Chinese students' experiences over time reveals that they make deliberate

efforts to overcome their challenges, and these efforts are aided by increased contextual familiarity. Some ways include asking peers or professors for help, using institutional resources like writing centers, and relying on their own experiences and psychological. This effort results in many challenges diminishing over time, which in turn indicates that Chinese students possess agency in actively making sense of their learning and lives. Therefore, they are not deficient, passive, or unmotivated as the media and research would have us believe (Abelmann and Kang 2014). Additionally, their agency reveals that engagement in different educational contexts changes one's abilities, attitudes, behaviors, and values.

These findings are important to improve intercultural and intellectual understanding between international students and both local students and faculty members. Appreciating the complexities of Chinese students' experiences may minimize the entrenchment of a deficit discourse of these students and enhance both faculty members' and American peers' perceptions of, provisions for, and relations with Chinese students. Colleges need to ensure that diversity or intercultural awareness and training are consistently embedded within its school curriculum and services for *all* members in the college community. As Bodenhausen, Macrae, and Garst (1998) observed, avoidance of stereotypes and discrimination is possible, but the perceiver must first be aware of the potential for bias, care about it, and have sufficient cognitive capacity to act upon it. To increase awareness and empathy, mandating diversity and intercultural training is helpful particularly when they include opportunities to place one in another person's shoes or focus on recategorization awareness (e.g. adjusting mindsets from "us vs. them" to "we") (Dovidio and Gaertner 2010). At the same time, increasing opportunities for interaction across different groups can also help to decrease intergroup bias (Dovidio and Gaertner 2010) be it through academic or non-academic activities. Improved cultural understanding is important not just within colleges, but for countries' long-term diplomacy. The Economist (2011) estimated that soon, 15-17% of China's Central Committee—the 350 most senior members of the

Communist Party—will comprise people who have studied abroad. As mentioned in the introduction, Chinese students are in substantial numbers in higher education institutions globally. Thus, Chinese students' positive educational experiences can lay the foundation to future diplomacy between China and their country of study.

These findings can also promote more responsive college policies that acknowledge the changing needs of not just mainland Chinese, but international students. For instance, preparing faculty members with culturally-responsive pedagogies can enhance both faculty member and student experiences. Such pedagogy believes that students are capable of academic success (rather than assume their abilities are static) and bring resources and knowledge to the table (rather than ignore their background). It emphasizes the notion of respect in building equitable and reciprocal social relations between faculty members and students, and recognizes that knowledge is fluid and students need scaffolding to achieve their potential (Ladson-Billings 1995). Having faculty members attend workshops about various writing conventions, or inviting staff from writing centers to share their observations about how student background influence writing styles can help faculty members better understand their students' contexts and challenges, as well as support faculty members in providing more effective support to students. Likewise, international students themselves can also benefit from explicit instruction around classroom/academic writing norms such that they are cognizant of the differing academic expectations in their home vs. host countries. Resources like writing centers or academic bridging programs can make students' academic transitions smoother. Further, establishing buddy systems, where trained buddies provide social support to international students can be advantageous to both parties as international students have a cultural bridge into the local community while local students benefit from improved intercultural communication and understanding. Support provided should also be differentiated by year of study, as evident in this study that students' challenges change over time. Internationalization of higher education

worldwide means that Chinese and international students seeking to study abroad are now finding a widening variety of choices in non-traditional destinations (Clotfelter 2010). Consequently, U.S. higher education saw its share in the global higher education pie decrease from 28% to 20% between 2001 and 2009 (Chow and Bhandari 2010). Thus, continuous policy improvement needs to happen at different academic year should colleges want to attract international students amidst global competition. In sum, intercultural, diplomatic, and economic motivations demand that attention be paid to how we perceive and respond to the needs of both Chinese and international students.

In terms of future research, the scholarly community could look into how to disaggregate the experiences of Chinese students. Rather than assuming they are a homogeneous group that shares identical issues, it would be helpful to explore student experiences along lines such as gender, socioeconomic status, college-type (e.g. rural vs. urban, public vs. private), and length of stay in the country. This study involved undergraduates as they form the fastest growing student population in U.S. colleges, and because existing research focused on graduate and post-graduate students. Finer sifting of groups of international students would allow us to achieve a more comprehensive understanding and accommodate more targeted follow-up. Finally, future research can adopt a mixed method approach, so that we can both ascertain generalizability and explore nuances in findings.

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