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Coping Strategies of Chinese International Undergraduates in Response to Challenges in U.S.

Colleges

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Structured Abstract

Background/Context (required): Description of prior research on the subject and/or its intellectual context and/or policy context. One in three international students in the U.S. comes from China, propelled by a steep increase in undergraduate enrolment in U.S. colleges. This phenomenon has been accompanied by negative media discourse that portrays them as needy, passive, and unable to cope with their new educational demands.

Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study (required): Description of what the research focused on and/or why. Using a hybrid sociocultural framework that privileges student agency and locates students within their sociocultural milieu, this study investigated strategies Chinese international undergraduates used to cope with challenges they faced in U.S. colleges.

Population/Participants/Subjects (optional): Description of the participants in the study: who (or what), how many, and other key features. Eighteen participants—nine freshmen and nine sophomores—from three liberal arts colleges situated in an urban context took part in the study.

Research Design (required): Description of the kind of research design (e.g., qualitative case study, quasi-experiment, secondary analysis, analytic essay, historical analysis, randomized controlled field trial). This qualitative study followed participants through one academic year. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire, engaged in three semi-structured interviews at the beginning, middle, and end of their academic year, and wrote four journal prompts.

Findings/Results (optional): Descriptions of main findings with specific details. Results reveal that student strategies cluster around themes of agency and self-reliance, as well as outreach and support. Students spent more time studying, used a range of learning techniques, developed self-help and psychological strategies, tapped into institutional and technological support, and reached out to teachers and peers for help.

Conclusions/Recommendations (required): Description of conclusions and recommendations of author(s), based on findings and overall study. Students' coping strategies reveal fluid responses to intersecting and changing sociocultural expectations, nimbleness in their adaptations, and transience in the challenges faced. Other than contesting stereotypes around Chinese students, findings spell implications for differentiated and responsive college policies serving international students, faculty members, and local peers. It also points to the need to incorporate more longitudinal studies with clear conceptual frameworks so that novel and nuanced understanding of international students can emerge.

Higher education institutions worldwide have seen an expansion in the number of international students—“those who have crossed borders for the purpose of study” (OECD, 2013)—in the past decade. Asian students constituted the largest group of international students (53%) in 2011, with students from China, India, and Korea forming the top three in that order (OECD, 2013). The presence of Chinese students, in particular, has been keenly felt in tertiary institutions in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the U.S., and the U.K., (herein named CANUU for short) as they form the largest proportion of international tertiary students in these countries (UNESCO, 2016).

The observation that international students face academic and social issues in their host countries is well established (Heng, 2016; Lee, 2010; Zhao, 2011). However, research shows that there is a statistically significant difference in experiences between international students from predominantly non-White regions (e.g., Asia and Latin America) vs. those from predominantly White regions (e.g., Europe, Canada, Australia) (Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007). In particular, the former group reported more negative experiences, such as unfair treatment and social adjustment difficulty, and was consequently less satisfied with their university experience and less willing to recommend the school to their peers. Other research echoes this finding; Asian and Chinese international students experience more adjustment strain and acculturative stress compared to international students from Europe (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Scholars highlighted that international students often bear the brunt of adapting to challenges in CANUU¹, with the responsibility of adjustment to their new academic and host environment laid squarely on their shoulders (Grimshaw, 2007; Marginson, 2014; Ryan, 2011; Trahar, 2011). This, they suggest, stems from a superior attitude—the assumption that host countries and institutions have more to offer to international students than vice versa—which permeates higher education and host communities. This attitude also distorts perceptions of

international students yielding conclusions that they are struggling, needy, or passive (Tang Heng, 2016; Marginson, 2014; Ryan, 2011). Asian international students, in particular, are often associated with these undesirable perceptions (Ruble & Zhang, 2013). Given the different experiences and enduring stereotypes of Asian international students, this article will investigate how mainland Chinese international students in the U.S. cope with the academic and non-academic challenges they face in U.S. colleges. By highlighting student agency in responding to challenges as well as illuminating the decision-making process around their coping strategies, this article seeks to clarify misconceptions around Chinese international students and explore how higher education institutions can attend to international students' needs. Higher education institutions have long claimed that other than the financial benefits internationalization of education brings, enhanced intercultural understanding is a key soft benefit as interactions with international students purportedly helps faculty members, host peers, and institutional community become more open-minded and culturally-competent (Ryan, 2011; Trahar, 2011). Yet, intercultural understanding remains elusive if institutional communities do not shed their misconceptions to fully understand the nature and complexity of the international student experience.

Background

Perceptions of Chinese Students in the U.S.

One in three international students in U.S. colleges originated from China in 2014 (IIE, 2014). The 274,439-strong Chinese student population represents a five-fold increase from 2000, with undergraduates expanding more than eight-fold since 2006 (IIE, 2014). This expansion can be partly attributed to U.S. higher education institutions' aggressive recruitment of international (particularly Chinese) students to make up for their revenue shortfall and to diversify and internationalize their campus (Altbach & Knight, 2007;

Clotfelter, 2010). In China, reasons such as rising affluence, marketability of an overseas degree, appreciation for different educational approaches, and potential for emigration in China also drive the expansion (Berman & Cheng, 2010). Accompanying the expansion is widespread media attention: The New York Times coined it “The China Conundrum” (Bartlett & Fischer, 2011), The Atlantic highlighted the “clash of civilizations” (H. Gao, 2011, December 12), and Washington Monthly alluded to students as “separate but profitable” (Stephens, 2013). Media headlines and coverage suggest that perceptions of and encounters with Chinese students are fraught with tensions (Abelmann & Kang, 2014). Further evidence is found in accompanying reader comments online, which are often contentious, at times vitriolic, revealing deep-seated prejudice of Chinese students by host communities and resentment by Chinese readers. Clearly, a large gulf exists between host/college communities and Chinese students. The intended benefit of intercultural understanding from internationalization of education for both sides remains elusive.

Scholars also point to a lukewarm reception of Asian² international students within academe. Faculty members find it stressful and tedious working with Asian students because it demands more of their time and effort (Ryan, 2011; T. Zhao & Bourne, 2011). Faculty members and local peers perceive Chinese and Asian international students as passive and dependent, uncritical, prone to rote learning or plagiarizing, and uninterested in acculturating or improving their English (Bartlett & Fischer, 2011; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Grimshaw, 2007; Gu & Brooks, 2008; Le Ha, 2006; Ruble & Zhang, 2013; T. Zhao & Bourne, 2011; Zhou, Topping, & Jindal-Snape, 2011). Furthermore, mutual understanding between faculty members and students appears inadequate—many faculty members report their own need for diversity training as much lower than international students’ rating for faculty members’ need for such training (Adrian-Taylor, Noels, & Tischler, 2007). Faculty members also attribute Chinese and Asian international students’ academic challenges largely to language

inadequacies, even though many scholars have contested this assumption as the sole explanation; personal confidence in speaking, perceived discrimination by and attitude of listeners, and preference for listening rather than speaking are only a few of the other reasons for students' academic challenges (Fischer, 2014; Kim, 2002; Lee & Rice, 2007; Lu & Han, 2010; Swagler & Ellis, 2003). Inadequate understanding of international students comes at a price. Colleges report retention rates falling for international students, and a NAFSA study concluded that there is a gap in understanding between educators and international students dropping out of college: educators cite academic difficulties while students cite a lack of access to jobs or internships as cause for drop out (Fischer, 2014). Academia, it appears, remains unconscious of the unique academic and personal issues international students face.

Differing Classroom Practices and Challenges of Asian Students in their Host Countries

Chinese or Asian college students have articulated their need to adjust to an educational system distinctly different from what they are used to when they study in CANUU (Chen, 2006; Eland, Smithee, & Greenblatt, 2009; X. Gao, 2006; Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Holmes, 2004; Parris-Kidd & Barnett, 2011; Turner, 2006; Wang & Shan, 2007; Watkins & Biggs, 1996; Zhou et al., 2011). In the research literature, Chinese students are reported as having to adjust to differences in various aspects of classroom practices, such as teaching and learning methods, curriculum orientation, assessment, and academic conventions. Some of these aspects researchers have described over the past twenty years are summarized in Table 1 to provide a broad framework for contemplating the proclaimed differences between education styles in China and CANUU.

[Table 1]

As a result of differing classroom practices, Chinese students face academic challenges transitioning to new classroom expectations in CANNU that impinge on

psychological and social aspects of their lives. Academically, students struggle with different expectations, teaching methods, curriculum content, assignment requirements, and relationships with faculty members (X. Gao, 2006; Gu & Brooks, 2008; Tang Tang Heng, 2016; Holmes, 2004; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Lee & Rice, 2007; Lu & Han, 2010; Wang & Shan, 2007; T. Zhao & Bourne, 2011; Zhou et al., 2011). This in turn means that they spend long hours improving their language, writing assignments, preparing for classes before and after each lesson, and familiarizing themselves with missing prior knowledge (Tang Tang Heng, 2016; Holmes, 2004; Huang & Klinger, 2006; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Turner, 2006; Wang & Shan, 2007). Psychologically, a large proportion of Chinese students experience tremendous stress, self-doubt, a dip in confidence, anxiety and depression (Cheung, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Yeh, 2003; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Ying & Liese, 1990). Griffiths, Winstanley, and Gabriel (2005) termed this “learning shock—acute frustration, confusion and anxiety” (p. 2) that comes with unfamiliar teaching and learning methods and disorienting cues.

Socially, many students appear less well-adjusted given perceived cultural differences between themselves and peers from their host countries; furthermore, their poor social adjustment is exacerbated by the long hours spent catching up and adapting to new academic requirements (Cheung, 2010; Holmes, 2004; Huang & Klinger, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007; Wang & Shan, 2007). Some Asian international students sense that many of their American peers have no interest in them or their culture and feel alienated (Gareis, 2012; Glass, Gómez, & Urzua, 2014; Lee & Rice, 2007). Additionally, even though they want to interact with their American peers, discomfort with unfamiliar social activities, like partying or heavy drinking, put a halt to socialization (Gareis, 2012; Lee & Rice, 2007). Reduced opportunities to interact with Americans in turn affects the acquisition of sociolinguistic norms that help reduce uncertainty and anxiety in interactions, resulting in a downward pattern of

socialization and upward rise in mental health issues amongst students (Tang Tang Heng, 2016; Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2006).

Useful as most of this research around Chinese and Asian international students has been in highlighting student issues, unenlightened readers of such research run the risk of thinking student challenges are permanent and students problematic. A lack of clear theoretical or conceptual framework through which student challenges can be interpreted affects the choice of methods, data analysis, and conclusions. Qualitative studies focused solely on student challenges tend to involve data collection via one or two interviews focusing on *what* challenges students face. While discussions around challenges sometimes explain their causes, lack of deep and meaningful exploration of how contextual differences drive student challenges results in readers understanding student challenges, but not *why* they exist or *how students coped or changed*. Thus, it is natural for readers to form conclusions that Chinese or Asian international students suffer the above-mentioned challenges throughout their overseas education, and that students make no effort to address them. In short, Chinese or Asian international students are often perceived from a deficit perspective as they seem needy, problematic, and passive.

Conceptual Framework

To address the issues above, I created and used a “hybrid sociocultural framework” for this study that draws from principles and concepts in psychological, anthropological, and postmodern work around culture. The four¹ key tenets of this new framework are:

- 1) Humans are embedded within and shaped by their sociocultural contexts.
- 2) Humans participate in more than one sociocultural context, and their participation, motivation, attitudes, and behaviors may change within each context and across time.

- 3) Humans possess agency—i.e. the capacity to act independently upon one’s own choices—in improvising, interacting with, or contesting the values, beliefs, and behavior associated with different social-cultural contexts.
- 4) Cultural symbols, signs, and tools mediate humans’ learning, development, and behavior across different contexts.

To begin to understand the rationale for this framework, one needs to first understand how the concept of culture has evolved over time and why psychological, anthropological, and postmodern work are necessary to situate international student experiences.

Evolution of the Concept of Culture

In the late 19th and early 20th century, Tyler, followed by Boas and his students, overturned racial explanations of behavior as a biological transmission of patterns in human activity and beliefs, and replaced the concept of race with culture—the transmission of patterns in human activity and beliefs (Gonzalez, 1999). The inclusion of anthropological methodologies in educational research popularized the study of culture in education in the 1960s. Researchers focused on the “culture of poverty” to explain educational achievement disparities across various groups, and upon criticism of the deficit conception underlying the “culture of poverty” approach, a “cultural difference” approach was introduced to illustrate the incongruence between school and home cultures in the 1970s (Gonzalez, 1999; Levinson & Holland, 1996; Nasir & Hand, 2006).

At the same time, in the 1970s, the introduction of Vygotsky’s (1978) cultural-historical theory to the U.S. influenced the work of psychologists. Rather than interpreting humans’ learning as isolated from their external culture and history and occurring only within humans’ minds, Vygotsky argued that learning and development was interdependent on humans’ external socio-cultural and historical contexts. Further, Vygotsky popularized the

idea of “mediation,” that human learning and development is mediated by cultural symbols, signs, and tools, such as language. Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory set the foundations and informed the work of other psychologists or learning theorists such as Cole (2005), John-Steiner and Mahn (1996), and Wertsch (1994) who coined the term “sociocultural theory” in place of cultural-historical theory. Simultaneously, Vygotsky’s ideas have also informed fields as diverse as sociolinguistics, human development, and curriculum and pedagogy (Lewis & Moje, 2003).

Despite the wide adoption and adaptation of theories around culture and sociocultural approaches across the fields of anthropology and psychology in education, work around culture has been criticized for portraying culture as static and essentializing, participants/humans as passive, and analysis as limited in its failure to consider the intersectionality of culture with power, gender, history, and structures (Abu-Lugbod, 1991; Eisenhart, 2001; Greenfield, 2007; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Lewis & Moje, 2003). The postmodern turn in the late 1980s and 1990s precipitated new ways of thinking and writing about culture. Scholars urged the need to make connections in the practice of culture across different physical and historical contexts, to include discourse about the practice and processual engagement in cultural work to highlight the agency/resistance of participants and the fluidity of culture, to explore tensions and similarities within and across various groups, as well as to contemplate intersectionality of culture with class, race, gender, and power (Abu-Lugbod, 1991; Abu-Lughod, 2002; Eisenhart, 2001; Erickson, 2011; N. González, 2005; Lewis & Moje, 2003; Street, 1993; P. Willis & Trondman, 2002).

The hybrid sociocultural framework I propose synergizes key ideas from educational anthropology, psychology, and postmodernist perspectives on culture to address some of the aforementioned critiques to create a more complex and holistic lens to analyze the experiences of Chinese students. Furthermore, since this study does not reside neatly in one

sub-field of educational research (e.g., socio-linguistics or human development), but instead intersects various sub-fields such as curriculum and pedagogy, TESOL, anthropology, and intercultural communication, a multi-dimensional conceptual framework lends itself to explore the complexities of potential findings in the proposed study.

Four Tenets of the Hybrid Sociocultural Framework

Tenet one—humans are embedded within and shaped by their sociocultural contexts—suggests 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 (Cole, 1995; Norma González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). By situating humans within their social-cultural-historical milieu and studying the interactions between humans and social others, or signs and symbols, Vygotsky (1978) asserts that there is a dynamic interdependence of contextual and individual processes. Learning, development, and behavior are shaped by the internalization of external behaviors and active processing of new information acquired through different sources in one's external sociocultural environment. Thus, to understand Chinese international students' decision-making processes in U.S. colleges, it is critical to understand their previous and present external contexts.

Tenet two recognizes that each individual participates in multiple sociocultural contexts at a given time and over a lifetime. Thus, an individual's behavior, learning, and development cannot be reduced to personal traits associated with a single culture; instead, it is a combination of his/her experiences in various contexts (Abu-Lugbod, 1991; Erickson, 2011; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). In crossing borders as students move from homes to schools to their communities and the larger society, their participation varies given changing beliefs, expectations, and values in each context (Delpit, 1995/2006; Norma González et al., 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). For instance, students may engage in silent observation and assistance of

an adult to learn to operate various tasks and household chores in accordance with home expectations, and participate actively in raising and answering questions to learn the school curriculum in accordance with school expectations (González, et al., 2005). Tenet two reminds us that Chinese international students' behaviors need to be examined in light of different contexts that wax and wane in their influence.

Core to tenet three—humans possess agency—addresses Willis' (1981) idea that humans are not passive but has the capacity to improvise, interact with, or contest the values, beliefs, and behavior associated with different social-cultural contexts, even as they reproduce existing structures and ideology within these contexts. For instance, scholars have concluded that minority students' lack of cooperation with schools' expectations stem from their deliberate adoption of oppositional frames of references to contest cultural expectations of their families, teachers, and communities (Lew, 2006; Ogbu, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999). Similarly, some Muslim women's decisions to veil themselves stem from their personal choice of honoring their community and ought not be seen as passive acceptance of religious expectations (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Tenet three is critical to my research as in studying coping strategies of Chinese international students, the assumption is that they possess agency in shaping their own educational experiences in the U.S.

Tenet four argues that “semiotic mechanisms mediate social and individual functioning and connect the external and the internal, the social and the individual” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 192). These mechanisms include language, systems of counting, sign language, diagrams, writing, and so on, and have recently been extended to include tools such as computers. Mediation is central to understanding humans' learning and behaviors, and learning and behaviors are linked to socio-cultural-historical contexts that provide cultural or psychological tools, which are in turn mastered to support development (Wertsch, 1994). Ipso facto, humans' learning and behavior in any given sociocultural context is influenced by

signs, symbols, and tools. For example, Greenfield (1984, as cited in Greenfield, 2007) found that newer cultural tools such as video games and computers become a medium that impacts other types of learning, as children transfer this recently acquired knowledge of using icons to interpret and represent information across different contexts. Thus, human thoughts are shaped by the prevalent methods of physical and economic survival, the access to materials/tools, and the signs and symbols used by a community to represent abstract concepts (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Rogoff, 2003). This tenet is helpful in understanding what elements mediate Chinese international students' coping strategies given the variance in access to semiotic mechanisms across different sociocultural contexts.

Methods of Inquiry and Analysis

The hybrid sociocultural framework privileges a contextualized and fluid way of understanding how Chinese international students cope with academic and non-academic challenges they face in U.S. colleges. Such a framework aligns well with qualitative research, which underscores understanding subjects' own construction and interpretation of experiences set within their sociocultural milieu (Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Thus, the choice of qualitative data collection methods flows naturally from the lens that accompanies the hybrid sociocultural framework.

Data Collection Methods

The 18 participants involved in the research (more details on selection and participants below) were first expected to complete a demographic questionnaire aimed at understanding their personal background and home circumstances. As this article features a subset of data from a much larger research project that examined student experiences and change over time, participants were involved in three rounds of semi-structured interviews that took place at the beginning, middle, and end of their school year. During each interview, students were asked

what issues they faced in college and what they did about it, in addition to other questions aimed at answering the main research questionsⁱⁱ (refer to Appendix A for a sample interview protocol). Each interview averaged 90 minutes and was held in participants' choice of language (mostly Mandarin) to allow them the best way to express their thoughts. Face-to-face interview was used so that paralinguistic—or non-verbal elements of communication like body language, facial expressions, pauses—could be noted. These non-verbal communications were critical as they were to be interpreted within a cross-cultural lens. All interviews were audiotaped, upon participants' approval, and translated/transcribed verbatim.

Journaling was a secondary source of data to complement interviews as it gave participants time to process and reflect on their experiences and provided a direct path to understanding participants' perspectives (Hatch, 2002). This is particularly important as scholars have reported that a large proportion of Asian international students prefer having time to think through deeper questions or comments prior to sharing, as opposed to speaking up on the spot (Kingston & Forland, 2008). Furthermore, many East Asian students tend to perform better on written tasks than spoken tasks (Kim, 2002). Thus giving participants the opportunity to reflect on their classroom experiences and coping strategies on paper may have helped to capture insights that would have been missed via interviews. Participants were given question prompts for their journals and completed two journals per semester (refer to Appendix B for a journal prompt sample).

Participant Selection and Backgrounds

Eighteen participants were recruited—nine each in years one and two—mostly studying engineering, mathematics or business-related subjects, as more than half of Chinese international students pursue these subjects in the U.S. (Chow & Bhandari, 2010). All students were unmarried and under 20, held student visas, and had no prior educational experience outside of China, typical characteristics of Chinese students in the U.S. (see Table

2). To facilitate face-to-face interviews, participants were recruited from three urban colleges in a large northeast U.S. city in which the author resided. All colleges were liberal arts, private, four-year institutions and ranked 80th and above on U.S. News University and World Report's USA college ranking. Data collected included individual information, three rounds of interview and journal entries. These data were supplemented with Chinese/English findings in existing research and non-research literature.

[Table 2]

Data Analysis

Data analysis took place through memos and coding. During preliminary data analysis, I wrote three types of memos: i. theoretical, ii. methodological, and iii. emic (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) to capture thoughts around data that related to i. theory in existing literature, ii. ways of improving my data collection, and iii. reflections on recurring ideas emerging from the data or feelings arising from data interpretation. Midway into data collection, I started preliminary coding both interview and journal data by first using the research questions to create broad deductive codes, like “challenges” and “coping strategies,” to break data into large chunks, and then to code inductively using participants' words and ideas. Preliminary coding helped me make sense of whether I was in the right direction with my research or if I were being overly subjective. To overcome the latter, I conducted member checks on recurring ideas in subsequent interviews (e.g. asking for their opinions around the concept of “working hard”).

At the end of data collection, with the aid of Atlas.ti (a data analysis software), I re-coded my interview data using LeCompte and Schensul's (1999) item, pattern, and structural analysis technique. I began by open coding—looking for items that related to coping strategies. These items were identified because they were high in frequency, were declared as

significant by participants, or had been omitted. I tagged item-level data (e.g. repeating words like “internet”), and categorized and regrouped within patterns (e.g. technology) by looking for overlaps across data sources. I then created a structure to describe relationships between patterns (e.g. agency vs. outreach). After pattern codes were finalized, I re-coded the data ensuring that each participant can only be coded with a pattern code once so that I could report the proportion of participants related to the code (see coding samples in Appendix C and D). At this stage, I also triangulated interview data with journal data to check for convergence and discrepancies. Throughout coding, I referred to memos written to help me make sense of the data; simultaneously, I wrote memos to reflect on the coding process.

Positionality of Researcher and Trustworthiness of the Study

The researcher is considered a key instrument in data collection because of his/her role in interpreting participants and the data (Hatch, 2002). The interpretive process itself can be influenced by the many subjective “I”s (Peshkin, 1988, p. 18)—the International Student I, the Chinese I, the Partial Insider I, and the Researcher I—and articulating them allows for readers to understand how the study was conducted/analyzed and myself to address this study’s trustworthiness. Being an international student and ethnically Chinese helped me build closer rapport with Chinese international students (some affectionately called me “big sister”, others, their “therapist”) as they perceived I empathized with their circumstances. Consequently, participants’ responses were candid, intimate, rich, and lengthy. However, as a Chinese from Singapore, not mainland China, participants never saw me as a full insider. Hence, I could leverage my partial insider status to create an objective distance and ask questions that may seem obvious. For example, when asked “Why is there a need to work hard?” many expressed surprise, and a few clarified aloud that perhaps I do not understand as I was not from China, before patiently answering the question. Finally, as a researcher, my

very presence and the interview questions asked might also trigger participants to think and act in ways they might not have done otherwise.

To address these subjectivities, I tried to be reflexive when writing emic memos by being aware of my own feelings and asking myself questions like: When did positive and negative feelings surface and why? How did I know what I know? What did I do with what I found? (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Warm feelings might lead to differential generosity while cold feelings might make me feel defensive; questioning how I knew and my subsequent reactions sensitized me to subjectivities in data interpretation and alternative perspectives. To address “researcher effect,” I asked students in the final interview whether their research participation affected their experiences and responses. Four out of 18 admitted some influence: engaging in the interviews and reflection journals reminded them to pay more attention to issues they usually would not. “Through interviews and journals, I’m periodically reminded to think: Hey, is there a problem? What is easier for me to do?” (Wen). However, all four acknowledged that the influence was not large.

Triangulation of data is another way of increasing trustworthiness of studies (Shenton, 2004). In this study, triangulation took place by comparing participants’ interviews with journal entries and research findings from available literature to assess the degree of internal congruency of the data. Relying on previous research findings to frame my interpretation also helped reduce my personal subjectivity. During data analysis, I looked for negative or omitted cases to enhance the trustworthiness of my analysis (e.g. seeking counseling help was seldom raised). In addition, I engaged in member checks in later interviews by asking participants to offer reasons for specific patterns observed by me (Shenton, 2004). For instance, participants were asked to comment on “social media” as this code surfaced frequently during the first two interviews. Other than reducing subjectivity, I also hoped that

member checks would address the issue of “the Researcher I” and give more voice to the participants.

Findings

Challenges Participants Faced

As shared earlier, this article derives from a larger piece of research examining how Chinese international students experience U.S. colleges. Before discussing participants’ coping strategies, an overview of participants’ challenges is necessary to provide the context for understanding the main thrust of this articleⁱⁱⁱ. Participants’ challenges were found to cluster around five main themes: relearning language skills and communication style, thinking like an “Easterner” vs. a “Westerner,” understanding unfamiliar classroom expectations and contexts, navigating freedom and balance, and making friends with locals (Heng, 2016). With respect to language and communication, speaking up in class was stressful because of a lack of practice in China, as well as the fast speed of discussions, unfamiliar discussion formats, and different communication styles. Speaking with teachers, institutional representatives and local peers was challenging because participants struggled to phrase themselves quickly, accurately, and respectfully. In addition, writing was challenging because they had to adjust to different format and style requirements, create new ideas, and navigate a new language. Related to writing, participants felt that thinking in a logical, critical and divergent manner was not easy as such thinking was more strongly emphasized in the U.S. while intuition and contextual thinking was more strongly emphasized in China.

Participants also had to grapple with unfamiliar classroom expectations and contexts, having to adjust to more open-ended teaching methods and new assessment formats. In addition, novel socio-cultural-political contexts meant that participants labored to put in extra time to understand the content of their readings or unfamiliar examples discussed in class.

The freedom (and consequently responsibility) that came with a different external environment also created some issues as participants found themselves struggling to make appropriate academic and career choices or to find balance between work and play. Finally, participants bemoaned not being able to make as many close local or international friends because of a perceived variance in values and lifestyle as well as a lack of common topics and schedules.

Coping Strategies of Participants

Participants' coping strategies in response to the above-mentioned challenges can be largely categorized into two main themes: i. self-reliance and agency, and ii. outreach and support (see Table 3).

[Table 3]

Self-reliance and agency. The theme of self-reliance and agency is characterized by participants relying on their internal resources—like learning techniques, observation skills, sense of self-efficacy, psychological assets, and inner strength—and reveals an internal drive to better control their circumstances.

Working hard by spending more time. Two thirds of participants had the conviction that their own hard work—often equated to spending more time—would bear fruit as there was little time could not overcome. “By spending time, you’ll figure it out eventually. It all depends on whether or not you have time” (YaNing). By spending more time, participants felt that they had better control in navigating their challenges as the solutions could be found within themselves. When participants encountered language or content challenges, they found that re-reading was useful in improving their reading speed and filling gaps in understanding.

By re-reading, I slowly grasp the actual idea, and once the author emphasizes it in the end, I realize I understand it. So, I learned that to write well, I have to develop my ideas slowly. Writing a few more sentences may help. (Wen)

While many participants bemoaned the time-consuming effort of writing, and much worse, in their second language, they also acknowledged that spending time in drafting and re-reading was helpful in improving the quality of their writing. Other than spending more time re-reading and re-drafting, participants also invested extra time to prepare before classes and review their learnings after class. Participants found that reading ahead better prepared them as it helped them “figure out what the teacher is saying” (Lisa) in class and improved their concentration. Reading ahead also gave them a leg up as they deciphered difficult vocabulary and worked out how they might phrase ideas or questions to smooth their classroom participation process. After classes, participants consolidated what they learned by “reviewing after class” (Lisa).

When asked why they felt that working hard and putting in extra time was a typical response to learning challenges in the U.S. by themselves and their peers, more than half of participants were surprised by the question and offered the following reasons. Firstly, they shared that hard work is a value that has been impressed on them from young: “from young, my parents, teachers, my friends around me, they say that...working hard will allow you to arrive at a goal you intended to achieve” (MinDeng). In school in China, “teachers like students who are hard-working and conscientious and do not care about how large your talent is. They care about whether you are hard-working” (Duan). As such, participants grew up with a strong belief that independently putting in extra time and effort can help them overcome many challenges.

Secondly, a few participants explained that being alone in the U.S. without a network on which they could rely meant they had to depend on themselves. “It’s harder here [in the U.S.] because you have to depend on yourself, there’s no parental network” (Kelvin), hence, participants had to prove their worth, particularly by excelling in their studies in order to find an internship or a potential job. Thirdly, participants felt compelled to work hard because of

their parents' monetary investment in their education. However, three participants rejected the idea that working hard was a concept that was only emphasized in China. They felt that "working hard is important not just to Chinese students, but to many" (MinDeng) because "overall hard-working as a concept is a correct concept" (April).

Using a range of learning techniques. Intimately related to working hard via spending more time was the notion of "practice makes perfect" (SiWan), and a little more than half of participants relied on this tried and tested technique to overcome language, thinking, sociocultural context, and socializing challenges. Participants felt that practice aided automation of certain skills such that what was challenging gradually became "more natural...familiar...and easier" (LuZhan). In particular, practicing supported their reading, speaking, and writing process by improving their language processing speed. Participants immersed themselves in practicing English, by "hang[ing] out with a lot of non-Chinese students" (YaNing), or "read[ing] New York Times or watching television daily" (Wen). Constant practice helped participants to "accumulate to a certain level and then...feel very at ease" (YuWan) with the language. Furthermore, practice helped them overcome their psychological barrier by increasing their sense of self-efficacy over language use.

Complementing practice was the technique of memorization. A few participants explained that memorization helped them overcome language and content issues. Ming confided that practice and memorization helped him reduce anxiety when it came to classroom weekly presentations.

I'll write every word down and create a draft. Then I'll memorize my draft. Thereafter, make sure I have eye contact and some hand gestures. Make sure I'm giving a speech and not purely regurgitating from memory. After some practice, it becomes easier. (Ming)

Some participants explained that because of language and sociocultural unfamiliarity in the U.S., memorization became valuable especially when under time constraints, revealing how techniques of coping with classroom demands changed under different circumstances.

In high school, I'm the kind who will accept it [information] as long as I understand, I didn't focus too much on memorizing. But it's different here because it's in English, it's not in Chinese. (YunJing)

Thus, changing sociocultural contexts and mediating mechanism of interacting within the context (i.e. language) dictates participants' choice of learning technique.

While memorization, practice, and hard work were stressed, not all participants agreed that they were always effective.

I think finding a good way is more important. And I feel that when you are here and you are only hard-working without doing anything else, it is not very good. In high school, hard work is important. You learn a lot of knowledge. You need to put in the time and effort and you'll grasp the content well. But in university, finding the right method is more important. (YuWan)

In Yuwan's case, the changing context from high school to university demanded that she seek alternative routes to effective learning. Participants gave details of the alternative techniques that they used, including taking notes and summarizing essays as they read to "extract the logic [to] make it easier to understand" (Wen) and drawing "annotated illustration" (LeXin) or "flow charts" (SiWan) to enhance understanding. Participants also varied techniques according to different subjects: "For math, I'll memorize formulas. For economics, I'll draw the graphs" (YuWan).

Developing self-help and psychological strategies. A little less than half of participants shared that they developed self-help skills like minimizing procrastination, multi-tasking, and exercising to cope with the stress of school work and anxiety associated with the new setting. A few participants spoke about how procrastination was related to the psychological barriers of perceived challenges and tried to overcome procrastination by doing "a little bit of things every day" (April) to reduce stress or starting an assignment on the day it was given because

“once [they] have started, it becomes easier” (YuWan). Participants also shared that to cope with the large amount of work, they multi-tasked to become “efficient in time use...like bringing a book out to read [on the subway] when going out” (Sophia). One third explained that “exercising at the gym helps with stress” (Ming). Some relaxed by taking non-academic for-credit classes (like piano), traveling, watching movies, or having a good meal. Others relaxed by taking part in school extra-curricular activities like the orchestra.

In dealing with unfamiliar sociocultural contexts and appropriate behaviors in these contexts, participants relied on observing others and imitating speech or behaviors.

Whenever they [peers] finish a task, they’ll say “good job everyone,” and so I’ll learn that...I make sure to listen carefully to what they say and think about what I know that can be related to what they are saying. (Jane)

Not only did observing others help with learning new and appropriate behaviors and speech, it also relieved participants’ worries as they realized that they were not alone.

GangNan: I noticed that when I don’t understand something local students also have trouble, sometimes even the teacher has trouble reading it. We need constant discussion before we achieve a common point. Difficult to understand concepts are hard for everyone.

Interviewer: How do you feel?

GangNan: Much better, since all of us don’t know! (Smiles) It’s less frustrating because we’re all frustrated together. (GangNan)

In addition, by observing that when peers shared similar ideas to theirs and the teacher did not refute their peers’ ideas, participants felt emboldened to share their own in future.

Almost half of the participants shared that psychological adaptations were essential to their personal well-being. Participants tried to change their perceptions to adapt to things they had no control over or to avoid unnecessary stress. For instance, Sophia explained that rather than thinking of herself as an international or mainland Chinese student, she preferred to think of herself “as a student” or “an individual” (Sophia), just like her peers, and to focus on

looking at similarities rather than differences. LuZhan explained that he got over his initial angst of not socializing enough when he shifted his mindset:

In the beginning, I felt that it's a necessity that I ought to do it [socializing] regardless of whether I like it or not...Now I feel that socializing should be something that makes me happy. I don't need to give up my happiness for socializing. By thinking this way, it makes me happy, to chat with people I want to chat with or to learn when I want to. (LuZhan)

Managing their personal expectations and setting reasonable targets for themselves was another way participants took care of their well-being. To cope with different academic expectations, some set lower goals for themselves or willed themselves to focus on "improvement, not the C [grade]" (Wen). This was necessary as many of them were high achievers back in China, unused to the shock of poor grades, particularly in humanities and writing subjects in the U.S. Frequent psychological reinforcement by telling themselves to stay strong and focusing on the transitional nature of their challenges was yet another technique used. For instance, Duan mentioned that if she did not frequently comfort herself, she would have "collapsed by now." "I think a strange environment has a strong influence on a person. If I don't give myself positive encouragement....I'll feel depressed...I feel that everyone has the same transition process" (Duan). Participants drew strength from their past experiences and progress made in the U.S. Several shared that because they had gone through similar difficult episodes in China and managed to overcome their hurdles, they knew that they had the tenacity and resources to overcome their current challenges. Furthermore, being patient with themselves, having realistic expectations, and overcoming challenges in the U.S. strengthened their confidence and built their sense of self-efficacy.

Outreach and support. The outreach and support theme is characterized by participants tapping into external (as opposed to internal) resources to manage their challenges. Resources ranged from social others, to institutional and technological help.

Tapping into institutional support. All but four participants mentioned that they utilized their school's writing center to cope with writing. Most participants learned about the availability of this institutional resource through their writing teachers, student orientation, or peers. Participants found the writing center helpful in reviewing their grammar as well as the structure and logical development of their writing. At the same time, they valued the new perspectives given at the writing center by readers, who would "ask meaningful questions" (YuWan) and "prompt [them] to think" (YaNing).

Other institutional resources participants found helpful included institutional infrastructure like courses and school facilities. For instance, YuWan took a philosophy class to help with improvement of her "logic," while HeFeng attended a speed reading workshop to improve his "reading speed." Administrative support and information such as "a webinar on course selection" (HeFeng) and "a handbook that explains the mandatory requirements" (SiWan) were essential in aiding participants in understanding the new academic expectations and processes. Similarly, institutional facilities like the school library and school gym were commonly used as students felt that university facilities in the U.S. were far superior to China's.

All but one participant took part in institution activities, both academic and non-academic. Academic-related activities included career advice workshops, networking events, and company information sessions. Participants were very appreciative of these as they filled gaps in their professional knowledge and personal network for career enhancement, kept them informed about options, and mitigated the stress of post-graduation plans. Extra-curricular activities included joining sororities, interest groups, sports groups, religious organizations, and volunteer organizations. Most participants took part in extra-curricular activities with the intention to make friends, understand the local culture, expand their network, or become part of a community.

While GPA is important, if I spend all my time studying daily, I'll feel like these four years will be meaningless and uninteresting. I wouldn't have encountered the US society, so I feel that I ought to push myself out of my comfort zone and try to meet others. (SiWan)

Many felt that their schools did not provide sufficient opportunities for them to experience cultural events in the U.S.

[joining the choir] was quite helpful in understanding the American society. For example, you learn about religious events, how people celebrate. If not for the choir, I wouldn't be able to see how they celebrated such events. (Ming)

Others focused on wanting to "experience different things" (April) and pursue interests they were not able to back in China: "I was not able to join the orchestra in China because there is no orchestra in China...it is good to join the orchestra [here]... it's fun" (Wen). Thus, participants embraced opportunities to engage in non-academic pursuits as the resource-rich and holistic emphasis of U.S. education allowed for it.

Overall, participants were positive about the institutional support and opportunities available to them. When they were not able to tap into these resources, they cited issues such as heavy workload, inappropriate matching of services ("I went to see if they had services for international students, they asked me to go to the disability center. I'm not disabled, why should I go?!" Duan), or structural issues such as distance ("It is very far from me" Kelvin).

Reaching out to teachers and peers. More than three quarters of participants reported that they approached their professors or teaching assistants (TA) for help when they encountered learning issues. A few spoke to their professors in the beginning to explain their language challenges in hope that professors would understand or provide support.

When I first started, I told my teacher that because of my second language I may not be able to participate as well in discussion. ... She sent me some websites and had me read books. (MinDeng)

To make an impression on their teachers to make up for their lack of participation in class, several participants chose to attend office hours, ask teachers questions before or after classes,

or email teachers. Emailing teachers was a very popular alternative to engaging with teachers as it allowed participants to “organize [their] thoughts and use the best way to phrase [their] questions” (Duan). Furthermore, they were able to re-read teachers’ replies should they forget or be unable to understand immediately. However, for issues requiring more dialogue, like clarifying feedback on their writing, participants found it more efficacious to approach their teachers directly. Participants were also willing to approach their teachers when they felt that their teachers were “helpful” (YaNing) and “there’s no condescending feeling from the teacher” (Wen).

Yet, not all participants had positive experiences with teachers. A handful of them reported that when alternatives (like the internet, peers, self-study) did not work, they felt their only recourse to challenging classes was to drop out as the teachers were unreasonable in their demands, unclear in delivery and expectations, and unhelpful. When asked why they felt compelled to drop a course and did not complain against irresponsible teachers, participants explained that they did not want a poor grade to lower their GPA or “[did] not know how to and who to find to complain” (YunJing). Having grown up in a context where harmony was privileged and where participants were not allowed to rebuke leaders, participants might have found that the best way out of a difficult learning situation was to avoid conflicts. At other times when participants were frustrated or dissatisfied with a teacher’s pedagogy, they simply chose to skip the class.

Besides reaching out to teachers, almost all participants relied on peers in one way or another. In terms of advice on course selection, feedback on teachers, career, and work-life balance, participants preferred to seek upperclassmen’s help because of their experience. The excerpts below showcase questions and advice participants sought:

Where to eat is value for money? Or what courses I should choose, or what I should take note of when learning? When I should choose classes? Which classes

are easier? Which professor is nice? If I want to study abroad what should I do...?
(Duan)

I know some friends who have studied here and are working here, they gave me advice that in university, I have to participate in clubs especially in year one. They felt that they ought to have joined more clubs... I should join more activities, and find what I find more interesting in year three and four to focus on. (SiWan)

In overcoming learning challenges, one common method participants used was to choose classes appropriate for their readiness and language level or where professors were less strict and ask for revision advice. In such cases, participants shared that asking Chinese upperclassmen was most appropriate “because some classes may be easy for Americans but hard for [Chinese students]” (JieYing). Participants felt that Chinese upperclassmen were more familiar with issues they faced as they underwent the same context transitions. Participants befriended upperclassmen through avenues such as their Chinese peer and parental network, social media, and clubs/activities.

In terms of getting help with existing courses, participants mostly reached out to their peers, both local and Chinese/international. For instance, they borrowed notes from American peers and sought friends’ help in reviewing their essays to get a more “objective view” (GangNan). HeFeng even shared that he leveraged on the Asian stereotype by offering to help his American peers with their mathematics homework in return for their help with reviewing his essay. Participants differentiated between the peers they approached based on the type of help needed. For humanities and language classes, they preferred to ask local peers because they felt that local peers were more familiar with the contexts. However, for mathematics and science classes, they typically asked Chinese peers because they perceived the latter doing better in these subjects. In commiserating about adaptation woes, Chinese and international friends were much preferred as they were in the same boat.

Several participants also joined study groups to overcome learning difficulties, with no preferred nationality in group composition. These participants liked study groups because

it was “better than reviewing a book on [their] own” (YuWan) since they could raise their questions directly around “open questions” (LeXin). They shared that forming study groups was rare in China as assignments could not be discussed, whereas their U.S. professors allowed cooperation and actively encouraged study groups. Thus, social others became a strong mediator of their learning in the U.S. given divergent academic expectations around peer learning.

Tapping into technological support. All participants reported that they tapped into technology for easing all manner of challenges. Technology and the internet became an important mediating tool for their learning as “it can answer all your questions” (Duan). Previously, they relied on peer or familial networks more as the internet was downplayed in the Chinese high school environment. Yet, in the new U.S. environment where support network was limited, participants turned to technology for help. In terms of overcoming language issues, the electronic dictionary and online translation were invaluable. Some participants online even resorted to “copying and pasting into Google Translate” (Jane) to speed up their reading. While the latter method could be awkward, they found it helpful in grasping the gist of arguments and speeding up their understanding when re-reading in English. Participants also used the internet to translate Chinese terms to English, and then adopted the English words for further online searches.

Internet searches were helpful in understanding new content and unfamiliar contexts, and researching ideas for essays. For instance, some made use of Wikipedia to “get a sense of the background” (SiWan) of what they were reading, others used free online courses to supplement their learning.

I do research online and read a lot of information. I'll read the review of the essay, find out what it's really about at a deeper level....After the research and reading the reviews, I'll try to link them together and link it to my personal experience or news or history....I'll write an outline and then focus on writing. (HeFeng)

Participants also used the internet for getting ideas about courses and professors, with half of them using ratemyprofessor.com to find out if a professor was “tough” or “helpful” (YunJing).

Social media supported participants in expanding their network, making new friends, getting information about academic and non-academic issues, as well as providing a platform to relieve their stress or loneliness. Participants shared that Chinese social media, like Renren and QQ, was helpful in finding upperclassmen and current Chinese cohort mates so that they could seek advice prior to their arrival. Work-related social media, like LinkedIn, was helpful in expanding participants’ network to find jobs. Social media was helpful in its breadth of outreach, as participants were able to connect to friends of friends for traveling and engaging in different activities to relieve stress.

I met more friends through Facebook. ... sometimes by distracting yourself from learning and the problems that you face, you’ll feel better and more relaxed. Through the activities you may get new ideas and energy. (JieYing)

However, social media was not always that positive an influence. Many shared that they wasted too much time on social media and one shared that seeing photos of her friends partying on Facebook made her feel badly about her own life.

Discussion and Implications

This study examined how Chinese international undergraduates coped with the challenges they faced in U.S. colleges over a year. While the study could have been strengthened by a longer study period, random sampling, involving participants from a wider range of personal and institutional backgrounds, and incorporating data from more objective perspectives (e.g. counselors or faculty members’ perspectives of students’ coping strategies), these findings can nonetheless illuminate the experiences of Chinese undergraduates sharing overlapping backgrounds or studying in similar contexts. Some findings are more

institutionally-bound (e.g. the type of institutional support provided influences students' coping strategies) and care has to be made by readers in transferring insights to their own contexts. Other findings may be more personally bound (e.g. participants' self-help and psychological strategies) and encourage readers to look beyond Chinese international students as a homogeneous group as well as recognize the agentic potential of individuals.

Findings suggest that in using a conceptual framework that privileges student agency and locates them within their context on top of methods that track students over time, we are able to unveil more nuanced and positive experiences. Chinese students responded to challenges in different ways, e.g. spending more time, using a range of learning techniques, developing self-help and psychological strategies, tapping into institutional and technological support, as well as reaching out to teachers and peers. Such behaviors exhibit resourcefulness and agency in the range of responses Chinese students sought, refuting criticisms of neediness, passiveness, and helplessness that have been levelled on them (Abelmann & Kang, 2014; Bartlett & Fischer, 2011; Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Ruble & Zhang, 2013) and underscoring the heterogeneity of Chinese students. Findings also reveal that students' attitudes, decisions, and behaviors can change and are shaped by the intersections of divergent sociocultural contexts as well as the changing effectiveness and accessibility of mediating mechanisms in their environments. This study thus extends research around the international student experience by highlighting that student challenges are contextually- and time-bound and subjected to change. When students interact with and respond to different sociocultural demands and mediating mechanisms, they inadvertently re-shape their experiences, making fluid their identities and experiences.

As an example of how Chinese students are not as passive as believed, this study found that Chinese students independently put in longer hours to make up for what language, thinking or pedagogical difficulties they faced. Hui (2005), for instance, has highlighted that

most Chinese students believe in diligence as it is deemed to be an effective learning strategy to conquer the vast amount of knowledge in books. Students have been socialized from young with proverbs like *zhi yao gong fu shen, tie chu mo cheng zhen* (as long as you work at it hard enough, you can grind an iron rod into a needle), and thus naturally spent more time to conquer learning challenges. This investment in time ought not to be dismissed as mere rote learning, as critics are wont to think (Murphy, 1987). Re-reading, for instance, is associated with thinking and self-reflection, and is frequently encouraged as an effective learning strategy in China (Hui, 2005). Furthermore, extra time invested saw students modifying techniques according to circumstances and subjects as some noted that mere hard work was insufficient, revealing how students change their behaviors in response to new demands in their sociocultural contexts. The skill of adopting various techniques contests findings that students are incapable of summarizing and merely memorized and plagiarized (Bartlett & Fischer, 2011; Gu & Brooks, 2008; Le Ha, 2006). Instead, it corroborates research arguing that students are capable of differentiating between types of learning techniques in different education systems (Salili, 1996) and identify ways to adjust to new demands (Chalmers & Volet, 1997). Student experience, it appears, is never static.

However, self-reliance and agency in how Chinese students responded to challenges might inadvertently have come at the expense of collaborative learning. For instance, less than half of my participants engaged in study groups to overcome their challenges, preferring instead to depend on themselves, technology, or one-on-one consultation with peers or teachers. This finding aligns with observations that Asian international students are less engaged in active and collaborative learning, particularly when compared to Black or White international students (C. M. Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). A possible interpretation may be that it is a repercussion of the Chinese education system's emphasis on independent learning. As HeFeng suggested "In China, you are supposed to practice questions on your own. So

over time, it develops a more introverted personality and a habit to think on your own, rather than [rely on] teamwork.” Thus, legacies of students’ previous educational experiences persist as they transition to a new environment. Furthermore, the strength of technology as a mediating mechanism may contribute to a lower reliance on collaborative learning. As seen in this article’s findings and in Zhao et al.’s (2005) work, technology is often a preferred solution as it helps students avoid embarrassing exchanges caused by language and cultural barriers. However, this preference may change. To illustrate, while less than half of my participants participated in study groups, more than half of them reported that they enjoyed group work, signaling that they were open to other forms of collaborative learning and attitudinal changes.

Chinese students also exhibited agency by approaching peers for help and revealed differentiated help-seeking patterns, e.g. upperclassmen for course and career advice, and local peers for paper review. Current research highlights that students tend to reach out to peers by forming informal or formal study groups (Chalmers & Volet, 1997) or seek help and solace from fellow Chinese or international peers (Cheung, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Swagler & Ellis, 2003). Concurrently, findings around help-seeking patterns tend to be quantitative in nature (Oliver, Reed, Katz, & Haugh, 1999; Yakushko, Davidson, & Sanford-Martens, 2008), surveying the preference in which international students seek help when they have problems (in decreasing order: friends, academic advisers, medical health care professionals). This research thus extends quantitative studies by revealing the qualitative details by which international students seek help—for example, they differentiated who they sought help from (locals / internationals / co-ethnics; peers vs. upperclassmen; professors vs. friends) by the type of help needed.

Pedersen (1991) and Yakushko et al. (2008) found that international students, particularly Asians, were more reluctant to seek counseling help and typically only do so

after all other resources have been exhausted. Likewise, no participant in this study reported having sought counseling help despite the stressors in their lives. Only YuWan mentioned being aware of counseling services but did not report having used it. The low usage of counseling services and the high dropout rate of students who use it have been attributed to a social stigma attached to counseling (counseling being perceived as a feebleness of mind), a concern about an invasion of privacy, a dissatisfaction with the quality of counseling received due to cultural issues, or limited resources catering to students' needs (Liu, 2009; Oliver et al., 1999; Pedersen, 1991; Wei, Ku, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Liao, 2008). Other possible reasons for my participants' refrainment from counseling are that they had developed their own psychological strategies to cope or were not extremely maladjusted.

Other than troubling negative discourse around Chinese students' passivity and problems, this study underlines the role higher education institutions need to play in attending to international students. Fischer (2015) highlights that international student growth is slowing and the close to \$10 billion that Chinese students contribute to the American economy and colleges may be unsustainable. Increasing competition from non-traditional destinations, changing visa policies, and a slowing global (and Chinese) economy are some reasons for the slowdown in the U.S. and traditional higher education institutions worldwide (Clotfelter, 2010; Fischer, 2015). This demands higher education institutions to rethink their policies in supporting international students if they want to continue attracting international students to their campuses. Furthermore, while international students have exhibited resourcefulness and agency in coping with challenges they face, this does not relieve colleges of their responsibilities to support international students. Recent surveys reveal that colleges face retention issues with international students and are unaware of reasons for student drop out (Fischer, 2014).

Extending from findings in this study, institutions need to pay attention to coping strategies and help-seeking patterns of students as well as how their experience change over time to give timely and differentiated support. Given the high reliance on peers for help, setting up a buddy system where international students can reach out to local, international, or senior peers for help, and ensuring buddies are trained and program goals and processes are streamlined can improve the quality of student help (Campbell, 2011; Yakushko et al., 2008). For instance, Campbell's (2011) study found that when New Zealand host peers who volunteered as buddies to international students were provided sufficient training and follow-up support, both host peers and international students reported gains in intercultural understanding, empathy, and communication skills.

Findings from my study echo Lin and Yi's (1997) conclusion that international students actively make use of institutional facilities and participate in activities. Ensuring institutional facilities, e.g. writing centers, and activities are made available, culturally-responsive, and that students are aware of them can enhance student participation (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012). Surveying students directly for their academic and non-academic needs at different points of their student life can improve and sensitize institutional practices (T.T. Heng, In-Press). For instance, several participants shared that they wished dormitories would not shut down over Christmas holidays as they were left to their own devices and sophomores requested for more career counseling help. Institutions could also provide academic transition workshops that explicitly teach students classroom participation, writing, and reading techniques, as well as the varying classroom and cultural expectations in the U.S. to reduce students' transition stress. The deliberate incorporation of issues related to diversity in curriculum and pedagogy has also been shown to improve both international students and host peers' appreciation for each other (Deakins, 2009). Thoughtful structuring of group work is also critical in attaining intercultural understanding for both host peers and international

students to reduce stereotypical thinking (Gram, Jæger, Liu, Qing, & Wu, 2013; Harrison & Peacock, 2009). Next, colleges providing faculty members and peer hosts with intercultural or diversity training that highlights issues international students face, reasons for these issues, as well as suggestions for helping students will no doubt make students feel less anxious and more welcomed (Bezrukova, Jehn, & Spell, 2012). To conclude, higher education institutions must be held accountable to understanding international students' experiences and attending to their needs non-judgmentally, as well as supporting institutional communities engaged in the internationalization process. Financial gains may seem attractive in the short term, yet it is intercultural understanding that brings benefits surpassing time and space.

Notes

¹ Research literature within this article is drawn from CANUU for the following reasons: i. Chinese students form the largest proportion of international tertiary students, ii. tertiary institutions in CANUU use English as a mode of instruction, and iii. research around Chinese or Asian international students in CANUU is published in English and, thus, accessible to the author.

² As quality research literature focused solely on mainland Chinese international students is scant, research literature involving Asian international students was also consulted.

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Table 1

Observations of Differing Classroom Practices in China and CANUU as Reported in Research Between 1996 – 2016

	Education in China	Education in CANUU countries	Authors
Perception of teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teacher as transmitter of knowledge ▪ Teacher not to be questioned 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teacher as facilitator of knowledge ▪ Teacher can be questioned 	Gu (2008), Heng (2016), Swagler & Ellis (2003)
Teaching and learning method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teacher centered ▪ Lecture style ▪ Values competition ▪ Emphasizes recall and understanding of information ▪ Thinking and reflecting before talking ▪ Values teachers' perspectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Learner centered ▪ Group work ▪ Values cooperation ▪ Emphasizes application and critique of information ▪ Thinking and talking simultaneously ▪ Values students' perspectives 	Eland, et al. (2009), Gu (2008), Heng (2016), Kingston & Forland (2008), Parris-Kidd & Barnett (2011), Watkins & Biggs (1996)
Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Past-present oriented ▪ Concepts first, then skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Present-future oriented ▪ Skills focused 	Parris-Kidd & Barnett (2011), Watkins & Biggs (1996)
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Summative assessment (evaluate learning) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Formative assessment (support learning) 	Eland, et al. (2009), Holmes (2004), Turner (2006)
Academic conventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Citation not emphasized ▪ Sharing of class notes, ideas across students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Citation emphasized ▪ Individual-oriented attitude to class notes and ideas 	Eland, et al. (2009), Parris-Kidd & Barnett (2011), Zhou et al. (2011)

Table 2

Summary of Participants

Name*	Year	Subject	Gender	TOEFL	GPA [§]
Sophia Zhang	1st	Undeclared	Female	117	3.8
Dan Yan	1st	Undeclared	Female	105	3.7
GangNan Liu	1st	Mathematics	Male	108	3.8
HeFeng Zeng	1st	Business	Male	103	3.7
LuZhan Zhao	1st	Undeclared	Male	119	4.0
SiWan Zhou	1st	Undeclared	Female	103	3.7
Wen Yu	1st	Mathematics	Female	108	3.9
YaNing Lu	1st	Undeclared	Female	104	3.5
YunJing Zhuo	1st	Business	Female	100	4.0
JieYing Wu	2nd	Business	Female	107	No info
Jane Zhen	2nd	Business	Female	98	3.8
April Cheng	2nd	Film	Female	105	4.0
LeXin Song	2nd	Mathematics/Economics	Male	101	3.6
Ming Ding	2nd	Business	Male	92	3.3
MinDeng Lin	2nd	Business	Female	96	3.5
Lisa Wang	2nd	Mathematics	Female	107	3.5
Kelvin Hong	2nd	Business	Male	84	3.5
YuWan Bing	2nd	Mathematics/ Economics	Female	103	3.5

* Pseudonyms were chosen by participants

§ GPA reported by participants at the end of their academic year

Table 3: Overview of participants' coping strategies

Theme one: Self-reliance and agency		
Working hard by spending more time	Using a range of learning techniques	Developing self-help and psychological strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rereading ▪ Drafting essays ▪ Preparing before/after class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Practicing ▪ Memorizing ▪ Varying techniques: e.g. illustrating, summarizing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Minimizing procrastination ▪ Multi-tasking ▪ Coping with stress ▪ Changing perceptions ▪ Managing expectations ▪ Encouraging self
Theme two: Outreach and support		
Tapping into institutional support	Reaching out to teachers and peers	Tapping into technological support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Using writing centers ▪ Using institutional infrastructure: e.g. libraries, gyms ▪ Participating in institutional activities: e.g. career advice workshops, extra-curricular activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Talking to teachers ▪ Relying on Chinese upperclassmen and peers ▪ Reaching out to local peers ▪ Forming study groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Using translation devices and software ▪ Searching the internet ▪ Leveraging on social media

ⁱ The original hybrid sociocultural framework comprises of five tenets and frames a much larger study investigating Chinese international student experience. The tenet “sociocultural contexts are in turn shaped by humans and may change over time” is not included in this article as it is irrelevant to this sub-study.

ⁱⁱ Appendix A shows an extract of the second round of interview questions relevant to this aspect of the study.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more details about challenges Chinese international students experience and interpretations of their challenges please refer to Heng's (2016) article.