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ABSTRACT

This study explored the learning problems Chinese graduate students face in U.S. social science classrooms and how they cope with these problems. The focus was on the conflicts students perceived between their own learning styles and the American way of teaching and learning. Interviews were conducted with three Chinese graduate students in the United States and the researcher also drew on her own experiences as a graduate student from China in the United States. Course assignments and course syllabi were also collected from the participants. Analyses of these data show that when these students could use their prior knowledge as resources for their individual learning, they had positive learning experiences. Learning challenges for these students included language proficiency in classroom discussions, a lack of training in research skills, a lack of exposure to current research in related fields, and a lack of cultural knowledge or understanding. These students felt they had no close friends among Americans because they had few common topics of interest. All of these participants had been excellent students in China and were accustomed to Chinese teaching and learning styles, so that the open and individualistic atmosphere in the U.S. classroom had a great impact on them. While they found it easy to use statistics skills, using university facilities and writing a reference list were difficult for them. Once they overcame these frustrations, they found their learning experiences to be rewarding. (Contains 26 references.) (SLD)

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The Learning Experiences of
Chinese Graduate Students
in American Social Science Programs

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Introduction

In August 2000, I came from China to an American southeastern urban public university to pursue a doctoral degree in Social Science Education. Although English is not my native language, I have little problem understanding instruction in American classrooms. Credit for such language proficiency goes to professors of undergraduate and graduate programs in my home institution – Beijing Foreign Studies University. Communication in spoken English seldom poses a problem. Still, I felt intimidated by the social science classroom instruction simply because I was not prepared for courses that require critical thinking skills.

It is quite a frustrating experience to realize that our home social science educators do not promote such higher-level thinking skills. It is a more frustrating experience to realize that lack of such thinking skills makes me into a passive participant in the learning process. Here in American social science classes, I found it difficult to accomplish course assignments such as journal article reviews, book reviews, research proposals, and presentations.

Before long, I found out that I was not alone in the struggle. My fellow Chinese graduate students feel frustrated in the face of such a large number of reading assignments and course projects that require high level thinking skills. The source of this frustration appears to be twofold: a lack of practice in developing higher order thinking skills and insufficient training in verbalizing complex thoughts in English. This twofold problem could be a challenge to Chinese graduate students in American social science programs.

My research question does not come merely from my personal observation. The Department of Social Science Education has been engaging its students at all levels to investigate the evolution of social studies curriculum and instruction in American public education. We had discussions over the essential elements of social studies curriculum in which thinking skills are a crucial part. This experience reminds me constantly of what is missing in curriculum and instruction in Chinese social studies classrooms. I began to wonder if that missing part has anything to do with my own frustration and the frustration of many other Chinese graduate students who pursue a graduate degree in social sciences. The purpose of this study is, therefore, to explore the learning problems Chinese graduate students would face in American social science classrooms and how they learn to cope with these problems. I hope the findings of this study can bring to light what hinders a more fulfilling experience for Chinese graduate students when they try to adjust to a new learning context in American social science programs.

I then started to look for in the existing literature what have been done in relation to the learning experiences of Chinese graduate students. Preliminary searches of some key databases showed that Chinese graduate students' learning experience has not yet been well documented or explored, especially with regard to graduate students of social sciences. However, there is a large body of literature about the experiences of international students in American universities.

The increase of international undergraduate and graduate students in American universities has profound implications for higher education policies (Feng, 1991; Parker, 1999; Wan, 2001). According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), there were 514,723 international students in the United States during the 1999-2000 academic year (www.opendoorsweb.org). Of these, approximately 50% came from South and East Asia. This group of graduate students came with totally different educational backgrounds from countries that have different cultural, political, linguistic and academic environments. The learning style and educational background of this group of students often conflict with the American academic practices in classrooms and computer labs. Bennett (1995) argued that students coming from different cultures have different cognitive and communicative styles. The understanding of these students' academic background and their learning styles will contribute to the success in learning for this particular group of students.

Most of the studies on international students' learning experiences and their adaptations to the U.S. educational system have been conducted from the perspectives of international students as a whole (Pusch, 1979; Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986.; Briggs, 1983; Perkins, 1977,). In fact, there is a great deal of differences among the subgroups of the international students. Studies done on Chinese students in particular (Elkins, 1994; Feng, 1991; Zhang, 1992) showed that Chinese students share some experiences with other international students from Latin America, Africa and Asia, but they do have their own features as a group. Among Chinese students, there is little research done to analyze the distinctions among students from different disciplines. Studies assumed that students from the People's Republic of China are supposed to have the same experiences as those of other international students. Hull (1978) showed that students from certain geographic areas have a greater tendency to have certain kinds of problems. It is therefore highly necessary to study each group of international students rather than examine them as a cohort.

In much of the emerging literature on U.S. higher education, it is a common assumption that students within various academic disciplinary areas will exhibit somewhat differing behaviors (Hull, 1978). But the research I could get my hands on at this point did not attempt to distinguish international students according to their respective disciplines. Much of the attention is on cultural

adjustment of international students. Little is known about the academic challenges students from different disciplines have and how they cope with them. Among the available studies, there is very little research done on the specific learning problems many Chinese graduate students in American social science programs are facing.

This study will therefore focus on the learning experiences of Chinese graduate students in American social science programs. The ultimate purpose of this study is to empower the Chinese graduate students and make recommendations to American universities on how higher education policies could be geared to enhancing the educational experience of this particular group of students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to describe the challenges of Chinese graduate students in social science program and explore the conflicts they perceive between their own learning styles and the American way of teaching and learning. It will also examine how they cope with these problems and make recommendations to American higher education on how the host institutions could do to help this group of students.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide my study:

1. What differences do they perceive in American social science programs as compared to their educational background in China?
2. What are some challenges they have in American social science programs?
3. What strategies do they employ to cope with the challenges?

Content of the project

This paper will have four parts.

- Part I -- will present a context of literature for the study. The literature review will be presented in three sub-sections: findings, methodological considerations and conclusions.
- Part II -- will include a methods statement with a detailed description of data collection, some discussion of the analysis methods, and a subjectivity statement that shows the researcher's relation to this research project.

- Part III -- will discuss the preliminary findings based on the data in hand.
Part IV -- will present the researcher's reflection on the research process.

Part I: Literature Review

A comprehensive and up-to-date literature review of research relating to my research questions would include three sections. They are: international students' learning experiences in the U.S. universities; the learning experiences of Chinese students from the People's Republic of China as a particular group; and educational background and cognitive styles of Chinese students in American social science programs. For this final project, I attempted to conduct a review of a subsection of one part of my dissertation literature review – international students' perceptions of their cultural and academic adaptation in U.S. universities.

In this subsection of the literature review I asked two questions to guide the review of studies: How do international students perceive their learning experiences in the United States? What challenges do they perceive in their process of cultural and academic adjustment? Nine articles will be reviewed in their relations to these two questions. They are primary studies on international studies. In terms of research designs, the six qualitative studies examined learning experiences of international students in American schools using interviewing, participant observation, and document collection as research methods. The three quantitative studies attempted to measure differences between international students and American students by using MMPI-2 (Steven & Kwan, 1993), questionnaire (Steven & Kuan, 1993; Ying & Liese, 1990) and surveys (Wan, Chapman, & Biggs, 1992).

The following section analyzes the studies in terms of findings and methodological considerations. The relevance of these studies to my research design will be discussed in the conclusion part.

Findings

In terms of findings, studies on international students' cultural and academic adjustment discussed the challenges and rewards in their learning experiences. Four recurring themes identified by these studies are language proficiency, cultural awareness, academic stress, and coping strategies.

Language proficiency. Language proficiency was identified as a major source of stress and frustration or challenge to international students (Wan, 2001; Sun & Chen, 1997; Chen, 1996;

Parker, 1999; Pinheiro, 2001). In Wan (2001)'s case study of two Chinese graduate students, he discovered that they were better in reading and writing than speaking in terms of English proficiency. Chen (1996) reported that international students found it hard to keep pace with their classmates in the classroom discussions. Her participants had both difficulties in speaking and writing in English. Such language problems deterred the understanding of communication with Americans academically and socially (Sun & Chen, 1997; Parker, 1999). My study not only attempts to confirm these findings, but also tries to find out if Chinese graduate students in social science programs have a similar or different experience in relation to their English proficiency as far as academic achievement is concerned. One of the researcher's assumptions is that Chinese graduate students who are enrolled in social science programs have a greater command of English as compared to Chinese graduate students in disciplines such as science, engineering and computer science. Does language play the most important part in the learning experiences for Chinese graduate students in social science programs? How much language proficiency is adequate for Chinese graduate students? Will a good command of English guarantee a less frustrating learning experience? Parker's study (1999) took a step towards that direction by finding that the acquisition of new and unfamiliar words (particularly those regarding research and research design) required extended time and patience on the part of the student and faculty. My study will identify language-related and non-language-related challenges, and examine how they influence learning and how students cope with such challenges.

Cultural awareness. When international students came to the American colleges and universities, they reported that their experiences in classrooms and daily life in the United States brought about an awareness of cultural differences (Wan, 2001). Such cultural awareness resulted in different degrees of dilemma and frustration in adjusting to the American culture (Wan, 2001; Pinheiro, 2001). Researchers seem to agree with each other that when there is less cultural dissonance, there is more learning taking place (Wan, 2001; Bennett, 1995). Students from different cultures learn in different ways and they differ in cognitive styles, self-expression and communication styles (Wan, 2001; Bennett, 1995; Feng, 1991). Understanding Chinese students' cultural background, learning experiences and styles will contribute to their success of learning (Wan, 2001; Pinheiro, 2001; Chen, 1996). International students indicated that different cultural values, attitudes and beliefs severely affected their academic and daily life (Sun and Chen, 1997). Language barriers and lack of cultural knowledge made it hard for international students to develop intimate relationship with American students (Sun and Chen, 1997; Chen, 1996;

Liberman, 1994). When they made friends with American students, international students could only have superficial relationship with them. Liberman (1994) explored this issue from the perspectives of the international students and he found that Asian-born student were critical of American life and social customs. This attempt raises the question about the theoretical perspective(s) from which the researchers are coming from. In fact, having international students on campus could be a cultural shock for American faculty and students as well and researches show that international students can be a very good source for promoting cultural awareness on American campuses (Parker, 1999; Chen, 1996). Perspectives of the American faculties and American students were not very much studied except in Parker's study when he used a dual-perspective approach (Parker, 1999).

Academic stress. International students came to the American colleges and universities mainly for professional growth (Wan, 2001; Parker 1999; Chen, 1996). Based on his study of Taiwanese students who were enrolled as a cohort in a physical education program, Parker concluded that they were more task-oriented and ignored developing reasoning styles in the learning process. Taiwanese students also had difficulty in writing academic and scholarly articles and they needed further assistance in developing academic writing skills. Few of them had ever been taught learning theories and they were not familiar with such a variety of teaching styles available in the United States (Parker, 1999). When American classrooms required more classroom discussion and de-emphasized memorization in favor of critical analysis, students had difficulty in adjusting to the way American professors teach especially when they expected students to develop independent creative thinking (Parker, 1999; Pinheiro, 2001; Liberman, 1994). Graduate students in both Parker and Chen's studies found it overwhelming to take research courses that required specific statistical techniques they didn't have in their prior experiences.

Coping strategies. Coping strategies were discussed in some of these studies (Wan, 2001, Sun & Chen, 1997; Chen, 1996). A new understanding of the American academic culture could be developed through coping mechanisms. Some international students used opportunities in school work and daily life to cope with the problem of limited English proficiency. Chen identified the reflective thinking as the most significant process when her informants dealt with their problems in terms of cultural shock. She did not explore the coping strategies students adopted to deal with academic challenges. Sun and Chen suggested further study be conducted to examine coping strategies international students use to cope with the problems they face in the process of intercultural adjustment.

Methodological considerations

These studies investigated the experiences of the international students from three different theoretical perspectives. The cross-cultural comparative perspective was adopted by most of these studies (Wan, 2001; Parker, 1999; Sun & Chen, 1997; Chen, 1996; Liberman, 1994; Stevens & Kwan, 1993; Ying & Liese, 1990) with different focuses. For example, Chen adopted a pair of multicultural lenses through which she conducted a qualitative interview study. She used two question frameworks to guide her interview questions. The Dolbeare and Schuman's "three-interview series" cited by Seidman is the most solid design among these six qualitative studies. Chen's study is more convincing than others also because she was among the very few who checked on her own subjectivity and reflected on her own relationship to the research (Chen, 1996). Pinheiro (2001) employed the model of andragogy of Knowles to help develop his interview protocol to assess the learning experiences of the international students. Using this model, this study was able to identify three major domains to organize the results. The three domains were the role of participation, the learner's prior experiences and the teacher's role. Wan, Chapman and Biggs' study (1992) was grounded in a cognitive framework based on the work of Lazarus and Lazarus and Cohen (cited in Wan, Chapman and Biggs, 1992). Within this framework, stress resulting from cross-cultural learning experiences occurs "when the environmental demands are evaluated as exceeding a person's resources for coping with them". (Wan, Chapman & Biggs, 1992, p.609).

Participants of the nine studies ranged from international students in general despite their country of origin and disciplines to international students from a specific country of origin, such as People of Republic of China (Wan, 2001; Sun & Chen, 1997), Taiwan (Parker, 1999; Yin & Liese,

1990), or from a specific discipline, such as physical education (Parker, 1999) and education (Pinheiro, 2001; Chen, 1996). Researchers also studied international students both at undergraduate and graduate levels (Lieberman, 1994; Parker, 1999; Pinheiro, 2001; Wan, 2001; Chen, 1996). Sun and Chen (1997) studied nontraditional Chinese students who were exchange scholars on American campuses. They identified this as a great limitation of their study. Using the adult learning theory by Knowles, Pinheiro suggested that a similar study of international students could be implemented with students from other disciplines. (Pinheiro, 2001).

Among the studies using qualitative interview as a major data collection method, none of them mentioned if the interviews were done in English or Chinese. Nor did they discuss any issues occurred in the interview process. None reflected on the research process except Chen (1996). Very few studies checked on the reliability and validity of their studies (Wan, 2001; Chen, 1996). All three quantitative studies suffered from the limited representativeness of the sample. The sample size of one study was so small that it posed a threat to the external and internal validity of the study (Stevens & Kwan, 1993). In Ying and Liese's study on adaptation of Taiwan foreign students, only one third of the pre-arrival survey takers agreed to participate in the post-arrival survey. That became a major limitation of the study (Ying & Liese, 1990). The third quantitative study was well grounded in cognitive framework and had a good sample size of 412 international graduate students (Wan, Chapman & Biggs, 1992). The study also clearly defined variables such as cultural distance, academic stress and findings were clearly presented.

Conclusions

The findings of the nine studies reviewed here showed that international students identified language difficulties, cultural differences, academic stress as major challenges in their learning experiences across cultures. Research showed that international students' educational backgrounds and learning experiences in home institutions conflict with their experiences in American schools. I wonder if my study will confirm that Chinese graduate students who claim to have few language-related problems have other challenges and that they employ effective coping strategies to deal with the challenges so as to have a fulfilling learning experiences across diverse cultures.

The nine studies also unfolded for me a variety of choices in terms of methodology and theoretical perspectives. Methodologically, I would like to follow Wan and Chen's design and conduct a qualitative case study around the learning experiences of the Chinese graduate students in social science programs. The major data collection method would be interviewing. The three

available theoretical perspectives used in these studies had their own strengths. I have not found any studies using cognitive learning theories to guide the investigation of learning experiences of international students. I would like to use cognitive learning theories to guide my research.

For my study, I will also use symbolic interactionism to inform my study. I believe “human experience is mediated by interpretation.” (Blumer, 1969). In my study, the meaning Chinese graduate students give to their learning experiences and how they interpret the experiences are essential and constitutive, not secondary to what the experience is. My participants act upon symbols and signals in their new learning experiences rather than upon prior learning experiences in Chinese social science classrooms. They become interpreters and readers of such symbols and signals. At the same time, interpretation is not an autonomous act. Individuals interpret with the help of others – people from their past, and persons they meet in settings in which they study. I believe through interaction, individuals construct meaning. Chinese graduate students in American social science classrooms often develop common definitions – shared perspectives. My participants shared perspectives since they regularly interact and share experiences, problems and backgrounds. While some take “shared definitions” to indicate “truth”, meaning is always subject to negotiation. The participants’ interpretation can only be understood by having the researcher enter into the defining process through such ethnographic methods such as interview, participant observation and document analysis.

Part II: Methods Statement

Data collection and analysis

Ever since I came to Athens to pursue a doctoral degree in social science education, I have compiled a scrapbook and a diary with my daughter to document major life events as “sojourners” in the United States. Photographs as important as our baptism ceremony and events as trivial as Hannah losing her first tooth were systematically collected for Hannah’s two sets of grandparents in China who would have to miss the process of Hannah coming of age. The diary as well as our colorful scrapbook might well be authentic data for a researcher with a particular interest in understanding the hardships and joys of Chinese students in America.

Data in qualitative research also include materials a researcher actively records, such as interview transcripts and participant observation field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Data also include what others have created and the researcher finds, such as official documents, photographs, diaries and newspaper articles. Our diary and scrapbook are collectibles in this

category. Data collection for my study on the learning experiences of Chinese social science students includes in-depth individual interviews of three participants, participant observation of participants in their social science courses and document collection of course syllabus and course assignments.

For the interview projects, three participants – Tom, Lucy, and Taylor -- were identified through emails, personal phone calls, and friends' recommendation. My original plan was to interview Taylor first in the pilot study. He is a Chinese graduate student whom I do not know very well. I met him on the bus and a casual conversation with him made him volunteer to participate in this study. In my past interview experiences, I interviewed either students in the research method class or acquaintances with whom I did not have to worry about gaining entry or establishing rapport. This time I intended to see how well I could conduct an interview without priori knowledge about my participant. Unfortunately Taylor's time schedule was so tight that it was unlikely that I could conduct our interview before I talked to the other participants.

Tom and Lucy, my first two participants, are friends of mine and they both fit my subject criteria very well. In fact, when I told Tom my research purpose on the phone the first time, he immediately agreed to be interviewed and he said he looked forward to be interviewed, as he commented that "interview is seldom known as a valid research method in the field of economics." I also asked him if he would feel comfortable to be interviewed in English. He assured me that he works as a teaching assistant and an interview conducted in English would not be too much of a challenge for him. Lucy, a sociology major pursuing her master degree, was an English major graduating from the same university as the researcher in China. But I have never had the pleasure to make her acquaintance until I came to UGA. Talking to her was the most pleasant experience among the three interviews. Our similar backgrounds as English majors from the same school provide the natural rapport. But I warned myself against potential assumptions researchers have when interviewing acquaintances or friends.

However, my assumed knowledge about Tom was self-evident in the interview. For example, when Tom introduced himself as a Chinese graduate student, who graduated from Tianjin Institute of Foreign Trade, he mentioned he had been a businessman before he came to pursue a master degree in consumer economics in a large university in Southeastern United States. It never occurred to me to ask him how long he served as a businessman. I did not even ask him what made him to come to the United States to major in consumer economics. Surely these two unasked questions are not directly related to my research question, which is "what are the learning

experiences of Chinese graduate students in American social science classrooms”. But I would have asked them to a participant whom I was not so familiar with.

After I realized that I had made assumptions about his educational background, I reminded myself to be critical and perceptive about anything interesting in his learning experiences. The first few turns between the interviewer and the participant have always been the most difficult part in the whole process. After Tom gave a brief and general introduction of his educational background in China, I did not find anything to probe on. Therefore, I asked a question as “anything other than that?” It is close-ended and vague. Tom was confused for a short while. Then I had to relate my question to social sciences. Tom began to talk about his learning experiences in Chinese social science classrooms. I should have just asked my second question in the interview protocol to get the similar information.

Before I finally scheduled an interview with Taylor, I had finished the transcription of the interview with Tom. Reflections on the interview with Tom served as a constant reminder during the interview with Taylor. Taylor seemed to have had fewer learning challenges than the other two participants, because he could use much of his prior knowledge and experience as resources for his study in American social science programs. He admitted that he had challenges, but he seemed to be more confident and optimistic than Tom.

All the interviews were preceded by one or two informal telephone or email exchange of information about my study. Consent forms were shown to the participants before we turned on the recorder. All participants agreed to have the talk audio taped and transcribed. Each interview started with a cover story that guaranteed the participants the confidentiality of all the information they shared with me. The researcher explained to participants the purpose of study before asking questions in the protocol. Questions were not limited to those in the protocol. The researcher used quite a number of probes to elicit detailed narrative responses from participants. All interviews lasted from an hour to an hour and 15 minutes.

The researcher transcribed all the three interviews. During the transcribing process, I noted down recurring themes and reflected on my role as a researcher. One reflection is that cultural differences play the role in a research interview like this. No matter how hard I tried with those open-ended questions and open-ended cues for probes, my participants sound more reticent and hard to be probed. Taylor tended to avoid talking about his personal experiences. Most of the time, he used the second person narrative to recount the experience of a Chinese graduate student. I doubt I had successfully elicited a good narrative from that interview no matter how hard I tried

to use open-ended probes. Lucy was more active and the same questions and cues tended to elicit more information about her. Talking to her has been a real pleasant experience. Transcriptions of the interviews were saved on a disk and printed out for each participant to review and provide feedback.

The three interviews I have conducted so far convinced me that my research questions are valid in the sense that all three participants identified similar challenges in their learning experiences in social science classrooms. These challenges include problems in the areas of language, academic matters, culture, social interaction in classrooms, educational system differences, instructor-related difficulties and student-student interactions. They also had different perceptions of this learning experience. Taylor seemed to have fewer challenges than the other two participants because his prior knowledge and working experiences were more closely related to what he was studying now. In terms of instructor-related difficulties, Tom and Lucy were both full of praises of their supportive advisors, while Taylor was not very much impressed with his relationship with his professors.

Though my project is a major interview study, I also tried to conduct participant observation. I took me quite some time to get the authorization from instructors that my participants had courses with this semester. One instructor believed that my presence as an observer would be a disruptive force in his graduate seminar. Another instructor simply suggested I observe another session of his colleague since my participant was just auditing his class. Therefore I conducted three one-hour participant observations for one participant. Other participant observations were conducted for the purpose of refining my skills a participant observer. I first took condensed notes in a note pad, paying attention to the instructional strategies of the instructor, interaction between instructor and students and interaction among students if any. Reflections of the participant observation process were documented in a research journal. Condensed notes were expanded into more detailed notes to be further analyzed.

As a third method of collecting data, I also asked for course assignments and course syllabus from my participants. They sent them to me either by email as attached files or by campus mail. I photocopied every piece of material and placed them respectively into a folder designated for each participant.

To manage the data, I typed and stored all the field notes and interview transcripts using a word-processing program and filing system. I also prefer to be old-fashioned just to save a hard copy and place each document into a labeled folder for each participant using the agreed-upon

pseudonyms. In each folder, one might find the signed consent form of the participant, the well-labeled interview tape, the contact information of that participant, a color-coded copy of the interview transcription, the condensed and expanded field notes of the participant observation, and course syllabus and assignments collected from that participant.

As a beginning researcher, I found it beneficial to start preliminary data analysis in the field. At least I managed to have some ongoing analysis during the data collection. For example, as soon as my first interview with Tom was over, I had to force myself to make a decision on what language to use for the remaining interviews. When I conducted participant observation, I had to make decisions on a focus. It is simply impossible to record every detail of the activity. The compass I had in mind and also in hand is always my research questions.

The data in hand was overwhelming to me. I found myself at a loss. What do I do with all these data? Then my very first qualitative research method class came to my mind. On the floor of a large classroom, the instructor emptied a box of seashells and asked her students to sort them out. I remembered that our group sat down and started to examine the seashells in the pile. We picked up them one by one and examined them. As we could be able to describe them, some themes will occur. We ended up sorting them into piles according to size, shape and resilience. Of course the data I had were more complicated than seashells. But I decided to do the same thing. When we sorted the seashells, we were at a loss because we did not have a research question in mind. Now the research questions should guide data collection and data analysis.

First I read through the interview transcripts one by one and tried to discover patterns and topics my participant talked about. Then I wrote down words and phrases to represent these topics and patterns. These words and phrases, as I learned from research method classes, are coding categories. Some of these coding categories came to me during data collection and I had jotted them down already. The preliminary coding categories for my study included educational background in China; course requirements in China; working experiences in China; frustration; heavy load of reading assignments; lack of critical thinking skills; class participation; unfamiliarity with research methodology and theories; instructor-student relationship and cultural knowledge of the host culture. Within each major coding category, I tried to break it into smaller categories. For example, the major theme, “lack of critical thinking skills”, also included four sub coding themes: finding research journal articles, literature critiquing skills, comparing and contrasting skills, and evaluating skills. With this list of coding categories, I went through all the transcripts, some field notes and documents, and marked each paragraph with the appropriate

coding category. Relationships among these coding categories surfaced to enable me to write the list of preliminary findings.

Subjectivity Statement

In this study, I see myself as a researcher and participant in one. Before I undertake this research, I am one of the Chinese graduate students of social sciences, the very group that my study is about. Being an insider-researcher in the community can be both an advantage and a disadvantage.

My role as an insider-researcher could help me establish rapport with my participants. As a member in this community of Chinese students, I share in common social norms, cultural values and educational experiences with my potential participants, who will view me first as a compatriot before they see me as a researcher. My strong sense of community also affects the process of recruiting participants in my study. Since I came to this community, I have been participating actively in activities sponsored by the Chinese graduate student union and local churches. Many potential participants are at least acquaintances, if not friends; therefore, finding participants for this study should be a smooth process.

But the insider-researcher's biases could play to my disadvantage. First of all, I assume the perceived twofold problem is the major challenge for the participants. I see myself different from a science major in terms of thinking skills. It is certain that our subject matters differ. But the thinking process and thinking skills must not be very much unlike. Social science students in China have been more engaged in dualistic thinking (Perry, 1968). In American graduate schools, it would be difficult for Chinese students to be successful in the majority of courses in the core curriculum of social sciences, for example, in literature, philosophy, fine arts, sociology, history and political science, as long as the student approaches learning from a dualistic perspective. It is painful and time-consuming to make possible the transition from a dualistic perspective to a relativist perspective. In addition, I see myself different from the participants who are ten years younger than me. Some social science classrooms in China are no longer as boring and didactic as they were. I might be too preoccupied with the perceived problem to detect any other learning challenges for my participants.

The second issue is my over identification with the participants. The participants in my study might make assumptions about my prior knowledge of the educational background and learning experiences, and, therefore, omit valuable information and explanations from their

stories. Conversely, I might make similar assumptions and fail to probe on relevant cues throughout the interviews. One way to watch over such biases is to document my research process in a journal and make conscious efforts not to make assumptions about any of my participants and try to be a keen listener and an active learner. In this sense, I could not agree more with Kvale who notes, “the researcher may strongly identify with the interview subjects, ‘go native’ and be unable to retain a conceptual and critical distance from the subjects’ accounts.”

Third, being an insider of my participants’ community, I assume it is easy to get access to my participants. However, this might not be the case. Participation in this study requires time commitment and sharing of experiences. Graduate students from China have a tighter schedule than their American counterparts. They will not be as available as they appear to be. In addition, the audio taped interviewing and participant observation used as inquiry methods are new to some Chinese graduate students as they are more familiar with the positivist research methods. Some of them might not feel comfortable speaking English to express complex meanings in sharing experiences. I anticipate that some of the interviews need to be conducted in the language with which my participants feel most comfortable. I will take into consideration all these potential issues when I approach my participants in the future.

Part III: Preliminary Findings

Participant Portrait Memo of Tom

Born in Lanzhou, the capital city of Gansu Province, one of the major industrial cities in the northwestern part of China, Tom doesn’t look like a typical young man from that area. Northwestern-born young men could impress you with a tall, strong-shouldered body and suntanned faces. But Tom is small in build and even looks haggard sometimes. Yet, his eyes always convey wisdom, confidence and energy. Supported by his parents’ great encouragement and expectations, thanks to years of hard work by teachers and himself, Tom passed the most competitive national college entrance examination in 1990 and enrolled as a business major in Tianjin Institute of Foreign Trade. Upon graduation in 1994, he became a businessman in a prosperous import and export company in Tianjin, one of the four municipalities in China. That job offered Tom the opportunity to travel extensively in interior China and provided him with unique lenses through which he observed the dramatic transition of Chinese society and economy. His decision to work for a master’s degree in economics was partially motivated by his job as a businessman, a well-paid job in China but not challenging enough for Tom. Another pushing

factor is the forceful wave of going abroad for a higher degree. Tom decided to jump on the bandwagon and “get himself coated in gold”— a phrase the Chinese often employ to describe all those who venture on an academic journey to the western higher education.

The journey did not have an easy start. It was during those numerous train trips that Tom had to brush upon his English and prepare for the TOEFL and GRE in the dim lights of the sleeping cars. All the hard work paid off; he got a full teaching assistantship. He bid his folks a farewell and came to the University of Georgia in the spring of 2000.

Tom is among the first few Chinese students I met on campus when I became a doctoral student at UGA in August, 2000. Since he joined the school half a year earlier than me, he helped me tremendously to find my feet on this foreign soil. It is unusual for international students to attend an American graduate school in the spring semester, since most graduate assistantships are offered in the fall. Tom credited his “good luck” to his advisor who has been a great support for him.

The process of studying in the master program of consumer economics was far from smooth. First, for Tom, “everything changed.” “One of the challenges” Tom met is “the mathematics skills in economics course.” Tom also found it hard for him to “understand totally about the American culture.” Since his educational background was more business-oriented and business-related, Tom found it challenging to adjust to the research-oriented academic life here. Even making sense of a reference list struck Tom as a new learning experience. Teaching methods of most professors Tom had also impressed him as “totally different.” Taking research method classes has been “revolutional” to Tom. Through reading economics-related research articles, Tom has improved his English and he has become a more critical thinker.

Now when you meet Tom, you would see him as an ambitious second-year Chinese graduate student on the rise in his academic career. Majoring in consumer economics in his current master’s program, he aims high on a doctoral degree program in a higher-ranking school in the United States. “I want to pursue a career in research” beams Tom. It’s not only the interest in the economic models that drives Tom to the next stage of his area of study. It’s the “related things”. He gets increasingly interested in people’s perception about international products and people’s reaction about certain commodities.

Tom’s workload is heavy, but his teachers are very supportive. He expects to develop a closer relationship with his American classmates and understand more about the American culture. In a word, Tom has undergone a transformation.

Preliminary Findings with examples of evidence

With research questions in mind, I conducted the initial coding of the interview transcripts. In terms of findings, I expect to confirm the assumption that the Chinese graduate students' educational backgrounds and learning experiences in Chinese social science programs conflict with their experiences in American social science programs. I also expect to find out, besides language difficulties, there may be other challenges students face and constantly learn to cope with.

Since interviewing is the major data collection method and due to time limit, I decided to read and code the transcriptions of the three interview transcriptions. The field notes and documents were only reviewed briefly and were to be analyzed later. The initial stage of data analysis enabled me to make the following list of assertions: 1) When prior knowledge of Chinese graduate students could be used as resources for their individual learning, students have positive learning experience. 2) Learning challenges include language proficiency in classroom discussions, lack of training in research skills, lack of exposure to current research done in the related fields, lack of cultural knowledge or understanding. 3) Have no close American friends among classmates, having no common topics with Americans. Friendship could only be kept at the superficial level. 4) All participants have been accustomed to Chinese teaching and learning styles. The open and individualistic oriented atmosphere in classroom brings them a great impact. They find it easy to take courses that require statistics skills. When it comes to using a reference list, using university facilities and writing a reference list using APA style, frustration might occur. 5) All participants were excellent students in their home country. Their learning challenges made them feel they were not so good now at least in the first year of the program. As soon as they overcame the frustration, they found it rewarding to have this learning experience. 6) When the interview was conducted in our own language, more pertinent information would emerge.

Assertion I: When prior knowledge of Chinese graduate students could be used as resources for their individual learning, students have positive learning experience. Taylor noted that his experiences at UGA was different from those of other Chinese graduate students. *"I already became quite familiar with substance, content of the course I was taking. ...So I didn't seem to encounter many difficulties in understanding most instructors we were talking about."*(Interview with Taylor, p.2, L95.) Taylor had worked for a training center for senior civil servants in China for 5 years and that was why he became *"quite familiar with the subject I'm*

studying now (Interview with Taylor, p.10, L483). As for Tom, his “*educational background is not necessary, not exactly the economics*”. He learned “*about business than the social sciences*”. Tom also told me that “*we have no courses related to other culture, like the social science about America, about Europe or something. You know, we have no such courses like that.*” (Interview with Tom, p.2, L68.) Lucy was more fortunate since she took some social studies courses in her undergraduate years. But she still had frustration. She related such frustration to “*a kind of disappointed with the educational background I have back in China. ...But how come that I am not familiar with the basics.*” (Interview with Lucy, p.5, L225.)

Assertion II: Learning challenges include language proficiency in classroom discussions, lack of training in research skills, lack of exposure to current research done in the related fields, lack of cultural knowledge or understanding. For all participants they acknowledged that they have encountered some learning challenges. Taylor, who was the most confident of his learning experiences at UGA, “*only had problem with one course. That’s mainly a theoretical class. You had to..do a lot of readings. Weber’s classical; some of the, some of the articles were from the one or two centuries ago. So it was quite difficult for me to..really understand the content of those articles.*”(Interview with Taylor, p.3, L106). Taylor felt that “*there isn’t enough time for me to finish all those readings* (Interview with Taylor, p.3, L132). Lucy wished that she “*was exposed to ..to certain kinds of, academic journal articles type back, in, in China...*” and she wished that even if she couldn’t have journal articles available, she should at least “*get exposed to ..to what academia kind of worldwide are engaged in doing.*” (Interview with Lucy, p.6, L.232). Tom admitted, “*I cannot say I understand totally about the American culture*” and English language learning is not “*a real learning in English. It’s just to prepare for the test*” (Interview with Tom, p. 4, L146). As a result, Tom had some difficulties in “*some special terminology in the economics, or in the statistics.*” He had to “*read book and articles and even write something to refresh, and to learn this, this kind of language used by the researcher in our area*”. (Interview with Tom, p.4, L162). Besides English and special terminology in his own area, Tom has to acquire new statistics skills as well as skills of “*how to read the reference list*”(Interview with Tom, p.4, L175).

Assertion III: Chinese graduate students have no close American friends among classmates. They share few common topics with Americans. Friendship could only be kept at the superficial level. Taylor had some real good friends among his American classmates. But actually Taylor admitted, “*I think it is really difficult to establish some real deep relationship with American students*” (Interview with Taylor, p.9, L431). He explained further, “*I think, one reason*

might be the cultural background. You are interested in different things. For example maybe they are interested in football or baseball. And you don't care about it at all. They you have nothing to talk about. No common interests. That might be one reason" (Interview with Taylor, p.9, L442). Lucy also noted that *"they (Americans) tend to be trying to keep certain relationships on certain levels only. ...And as a second year student, I think it is very normal for you to be hard to make friends with just any American student"* (Interview with Lucy, p.13, L592).

Assertion IV: All participants have been accustomed to Chinese teaching and learning styles. The open and individualistic oriented atmosphere in classroom brings them a great impact. They find it easy to take courses that require statistics skills. When it comes to using a reference list, using university facilities and writing a reference list using APA style, frustration might occur. Tom had never taken any research method courses in China. He couldn't *"understand why in, in social sciences, not not, we need a lot of these (statistics and math) skills to handle the data on some crazy math"* (Interview with Tom, p.10, L432). When he decided to take those courses, he found it easy, because *"you know our Chinese students have comparatively higher skills of math, for the mass and statistics."* Tom's undergraduate program was more business-oriented. At UGA, he found it a big challenge for him even to *"read the reference list" and "to write a correct reference list"* (Interview with Tom, p.4, L177). Lucy also experienced quite some frustration at the beginning of her program. *"I was, I...I was given a topic but I didn't know what I am supposed to do with the topic and how to relate the journal articles...That was the kind of frustrating experience I had in the social sciences, at the beginning of the social science study. ..."*(Interview with Lucy, p.5, L196).

Assertion V: All participants were excellent students in their home country. Their learning challenges made them feel they were not so good now at least in the first year of the program. As soon as they overcame the frustration, they found it rewarding to have this learning experience. All my participants came from prestigious universities. In China higher education is still an opportunity available to elitist group of students. Those who made it to come across the borders to study at an American social science program are creams of the crop. Lucy was disappointed that her home institution did not provide the educational background she lacked. *"Social science is not, to be frank, is not (a) well-developed subject in China"* (Interview with Lucy, p.4, L166). Toward the end of our interview, Lucy shared with me her research design with great confidence. She was no longer that frustrated graduate student. She overcame those challenges. To Tom, the learning experience was more than just rewarding. *"That's revolutionary. I think. That is*

revolutional, especially for me. I want to pursue a career in research” (Interview with Tom, p.7, L277).

Assertion VI: When the interview was conducted in our own language, more pertinent information would emerge. As soon as the tape recorder was turned off, Tom regretted that he should have chosen to speak Chinese in the interview. This is an important issue to my research. As the researcher, I had a hard time making this decision. At the beginning of the pilot study design, I attempted to find out how hard it was for participants to express themselves in English. Conducting the interview in English certainly intimidated Tom and I did not succeed in obtaining an interesting narrative talking to Tom. This would be further discussed in the next part of this project.

Analysis of interview transcripts and the review of field notes and documents also showed that using statistics for research design poses a challenge to Chinese graduate students who major in social science here. Graduate advisors need to recommend such courses to Chinese students as early as possible in their program so as to prepare them for better understanding the researches done in quantitative paradigm. With good background in math, Chinese students face fewer problems taking courses in statistics than taking highly theoretical methodological courses. This probably explains why they are more willing to conduct research using statistical methods.

Part IV: Reflection on Process

I wish I had started the literature review much earlier than this semester. Without the support of a body of literature relevant to my research topic, my study looked like a neophyte surveyor trying to measure the territory that had long been well explored and illustrated on the published map. Research gaps identified by other studies should guide my study. The literature review training I had in another course has been very helpful to identify such gaps. I would like to conduct an on-going literature review as I learn to design my study.

Interviewing participants has been both an excruciating and exciting experience to me. If this sounds contradictory to you, I mean what I said. My first interview with Tom could be the example of my excruciating experience, for at that time, my research questions and interview questions were ambiguous even to myself. Many times I led the participant into the foggy tunnel and both of us had to struggle a lot to make sense of where we were heading.

Language was a major issue arising from the interviews. Before I went to the field, I thought I could analyze the interview transcripts in terms of language use if my participants could

speak English. I had planned to investigate how well their English was to enable them to express complex ideas in an interview on their learning experiences. Therefore before I started the interview, I always asked my participants if they would feel comfortable speaking English. All of them agreed to be interviewed in English. But as soon as I turned off the recorder, one participant told me that he felt intimidated when he had to speak English. I noticed this problem in the interview but neglected until the participant brought it up. In fact, the limited command of English did restrict my participant to share his learning experience freely. If I interviewed participants in our native language, I must have to face problems such as who should be doing the transcription, who should be doing the translation, or whether it is necessary to translate every interview for data analysis. However, should I only be concerned about what I could do about the data? How could I be certain that I was getting at the essence of the learning experiences of my participants? In another word, how could I guarantee the validity of such a study? One of the participants was concerned that he was not able to express him well in English. He chose to omit some complex ideas that he found hard to express. Such preliminary findings will hopefully shed some light on the methodological considerations I have to ponder about. I might start to look for existing literature on what others say about the language issue of interviewees and interviewers.

Reading through the transcripts while listening to the interview again and again, I found it hard to detach myself from the group of people I am studying. Remaining attached to the group, I have more sympathy rather than doubts in interpreting the meanings of my participant's experience. My analysis at this point may not be as objective as I hoped it would be. Besides, my attachment to the culture of Chinese graduate students made me lose a chance to perceive the experiences of this particular group of students from an outsider's view. To make this up in a future investigation, I decide to interview Chinese graduate students' American classmates and instructors to help me understand the culture of Chinese graduate students from different perspectives.

It has also been an exciting experience. Talking to my participants about their learning experiences across cultures, I shared so many things in common with my participants. Most of the time I felt that they did not see me as a researcher when I was interviewing and audio-taping them. They had shared many personal, positive and negative experiences with me. This kind of trust brings about the most invaluable data I could have as a researcher. The trust itself is data. I feel that I could not just easily walk away from their lives after the recorder was switched off. For the incoming international students next year, if we have any, I would like to set up a voluntary

support group among Chinese graduate students who are enrolled in master or doctoral level programs despite disciplines. In fact, the very first semester since I came to UGA, I talked about the idea with some graduate students. They all agreed that it was a great idea. But no one seemed to care to follow up on it. Even I myself became so occupied with coursework that I did not even think about that support group any more. The pilot study rekindled my interest in establishing such a group. I am also hopeful that some of the group members would become potential participants for my further study. I wish the learning experiences shared by Chinese graduate students as well as other international students could empower them in their academic endeavor. Isn't this one of the purpose of doing such an investigation?

During the research process, I did not find it hard to obtain consent of participants to conduct participant observation. Participants were all willing to share course assignments and course syllabus with me. But I did have difficulties getting authorizations from instructors concerned. Their concern was legitimate because my non-participant observation could be a disruptive force in their classrooms, especially when the instruction was conducted in the form of a highly interactive seminar. Since my study is mainly an interview research, I am considering not conducting participant observation unless I could really be a participant in the same class with my participants.

Throughout the process, keeping a research journal, having an encouraging advisor and having a supportive group around have been the most crucial elements accounting for any progress I made. Documenting the emotions and reflections on the research process helps me to develop reasoning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Both the instructor and the students in the research method class have been so supportive that without their insights and suggestions, most importantly, their encouragement, it would have been impossible for me to come to this stage of my study. I am going to miss them in the next stage of my project.

At this point of my study, I feel that my research question still lack a focus. For the next few months, I will keep reading the relevant literature for research gaps. It is my hope that I can nail down the broad scope of interests to a more specific research topic. I plan to interview 12-14 Chinese graduate students who are enrolled in a master's or doctoral social science programs. If I could find enough participants on campus, I would like to recruit some from other campuses. To get multiple perspectives, I would also like to interview faculty and American students about their experiences of working with Chinese graduate students in American social science programs. Doing a qualitative case study would not be easy, but it is worth doing if one feels passionate

about the learning experiences of Chinese graduate students in American social science programs. "Interviewing relationships between those of the same racial background but of different gender, class, and age can engender tensions that inhibit the full development of an effective interviewing relationship." (Seidman, 1991) When it is easier for me to build rapport with shared assumptions that come from common background, an effective interview will require me to create enough distance between participants and me to ask real questions and to explore, not to share assumptions.

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