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Adapting Together: Chinese Student Experience and Acceptance at an American University

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Chapter 10: Adapting Together: Chinese Student Experience and Acceptance at an American University

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Introduction

Chinese students are currently the largest group of international students, with over 230,000 studying in the United States (IIE, 2013) and nearly 700,000 studying at foreign universities worldwide (UNESCO, 2014). In the United States, this number has risen dramatically in the last decade; in 2000, there were only around 55,000 Chinese international students in the country (IIE, 2000). This rapid growth has created a demand for universities to better understand Chinese international students' affect, behaviour and cognitive adaptations to better serve their needs during this transition. To address this, we focus this chapter on the extent to which Chinese international students perceive they are accepted at an American university.

In China, feeling accepted by the campus community is important as there is a long tradition of developing social and political ties through universities (Gold, Guthrie, & Wank, 2002). Despite this, a number of studies find that many Chinese international students face obstacles to integrating with their host campus communities (Williams & Johnson, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Among American students, there is also persistent assumption that Chinese students do not interact with host national students (Ruble & Zhang, 2013). Further,

studies suggest that key factors to developing acceptance on campus in the United States are student involvements with extracurricular organisations (Astin, 1984; Moore, Lovell, McGann, & Wyrick, 1998; Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010) and contact with host national students (Noh & Kaspar, 2003; Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Zimmerman, 1995). However, few studies have explored how these two factors relate to the Chinese student experience with their campus communities abroad.

In order to examine the complex international student acculturation process, recent studies have applied the affect, behaviour and cognition approach (ABC; see Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). The ABC approach (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008) considers three components of responses to new academic environments: coping and adjustment (affect), cultural learning (behaviour) and social identification (cognition). Although the ABC model is complex and comprehensive, in this chapter we narrow our focus to examine specifically how affect and behaviour conditions, such as involvement in clubs and friendship networks, influence cognition (i.e. self-perceptions of acceptance at their host university).

Thus, we consider whether Chinese students perceive that they are accepted at their host university. If so, what are the most significant factors that influence this attachment? Additionally, do campus involvements and diverse friendships influence Chinese students' (perceived) acceptance at American universities? In line with recent studies (Rienties & Nolan, 2014; Summers & Volet, 2009; Volet & Jones, 2012), we conducted a mixed-methods design with 74 first-year Chinese students at the University of Kansas and applied the ABC model to address these research questions.

This chapter proceeds as follows. The first part is the literature review and summary of the affect and behaviour conditions that influence cognition (social identity), as well as the theoretical framework. The second part reviews hypotheses, research design and methodology. The third part analyses descriptive and statistical data, as well as a discussion of the results. The final part is the conclusion, including the implications and limitations of the study.

Literature Review

Many studies have highlighted that international students in general face substantial academic, social and psychological adjustment difficulties during their transition (Berry, 2001; Gareis, 2012; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Misra, Crist, & Burant, 2003; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). Chinese students in particular are shown to struggle with making connections with their campus communities (Gareis, 2012; Williams & Johnson, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Research on this topic tends to be divided into three areas: social support (affect), student interaction (behaviour) and social identification (cognition) (Zhou et al., 2008).

Affect conditions are related to stress and coping models, especially support systems for sojourners (Adelman, 1988). In this regard, it has been shown that strong friendships are a positive support mechanism for international students' adjustment (Noh & Kaspar, 2003; Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Zimmerman, 1995). The literature particularly illustrates that strong friendships with students from the host culture are key to international student integration with the campus community (Amir, 1983; Basu & Ames, 1970; Y. Y. Kim, 1988; Li & Gasser, 2005;

Olaniran, 1993). Indeed, strong host population friendships are noted as a top indicator of sojourner satisfaction with their experience abroad (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Rohrlich & Martin, 1991; Searle & Ward, 1990). The assumption, thus, is that international students who demonstrate closer connections with host university students should feel more accepted by their campus communities (see also Chapter 2).

Despite this, many international students have demonstrated a tendency to make friends with students from their own countries (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002), particularly Asian students (Hendrickson et al., 2011). In the United States, international students also face barriers to forming strong friendships with American students (Gareis, 2012; Stewart & Bennett, 2005), especially students from China (Brien & David, 1971; B. Kim, Atkinson, & Umemoto, 2001; Yan & Berliner, 2011). Gareis (2012) demonstrates that this could be due to a number of reasons, including language proficiency or differing cultural values. Indeed, language proficiency is considered an important behaviour aspect in integration with the campus community (Furnham, 1993); see also Chapter 2) but can be used as a deficiency model (see Chapter 11). For instance, Zhang and Goodson (2011) find that English language proficiency is an indicator for international students' sense of belonging and acceptance at American universities. Chinese international students in the United States also find themselves immersed in a starkly different culture. For example, Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) highlight that the United States, which is highly individualistic, is culturally dissimilar from China, which is highly collectivist. Thus, it can be considered whether Chinese students' perceived acceptance within their host university community increases with more opportunities to practice English and learn about the local (American) culture.

Behaviour aspects are often associated with Astin's Theory of Involvement (1984), which argues that learning occurs both inside and outside the classroom. He defines student involvement as 'the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the academic experience' (p. 297). Interaction with the larger campus community is widely believed to positively influence the academic experience (Moore et al., 1998; Russell et al., 2010; Severiens & Wolff, 2008), as well as promote perceived acceptance at the institution (Edwards & Waters, 1982; Tinto, 2012; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009; Wortman & Napoli, 1996). In the United States, the Theory of Involvement often translates to club membership, leading many American universities to adopt student involvement and leadership into their mission statements (Astin & Astin, 2000; Boatman, 1999). However, research in the United States tends to assume that club participation is universally beneficial for all students, thereby ignoring the effects that culture might have on campus involvement.

Finally, cognitive adaptation aspects are related to social identification theories, where the key component is perception of in-group versus out-group (Tajfel, 1981), see also Chapter 1-2. According to Tajfel (1978, p. 67; cited in Turner, 1982, p.21), identity in relation to the community is defined as the individual's knowledge that 'he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance.' In cognitive terms, community can be defined as 'two or more individuals who share a common social identification of themselves or, which is nearly the same thing, perceive themselves to be members of the same social category' (Turner, 1982, p. 15). For Chinese international students, this is their perceived acceptance at the host university (Gold et al., 2002).

Study

Hypotheses and Research Design

The basic assumption in the literature is that Chinese international students are not socially integrating with their American campus communities, and this negatively influences their overall feelings of acceptance. In general, literature suggests that campus involvement and friendships with the host population, concepts grounded in Western notions of civil society and diverse group membership, will increase perceived acceptance. The ABC approach provides us with three sets of hypotheses to examine these assumptions. First is the Affect Hypothesis; HA: Students whose social needs are met will have strong feelings of acceptance. This hypothesis draws upon stress and coping models (Adelman, 1988).

Next, we have four Behavioural Hypotheses. HB1: Students who are more actively engaged in English language use will have stronger perceived acceptance, as suggested by the literature (Gareis, 2012; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). HB2: Students involved in campus clubs will have stronger perceived acceptance, as argued by the Theory of Involvement (Astin, 1984). HB3: Students who have strong friendships with American students will have stronger perceived acceptance. However, for HB4: Students who have strong friendships with other Chinese students will have weaker perceived acceptance. These hypotheses are also supported by current research (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Searle & Ward, 1990).

Finally, the Cognitive Hypothesis, HC: Students who engage with learning about American culture will feel more accepted, as suggested by Ward and Searle (1991).

Method

To explore these hypotheses, we looked at the final measurement in our study, which was collected at the end of the academic year in April. This questionnaire was part of a larger research study, where we adopted a mixed-methods design with three original questionnaires administered to the same respondents over the course of one academic year with supplementary interviews of select participants. We opted to create a unique survey as it allowed for more specific and detailed questions about student involvement and friendships as it related to their campus community at KU. In this study, we will only focus on the final survey because we are primarily interested in the ABC of our Chinese international students after one academic year, as this would give them sufficient time to get used to living in an American context. This study is based on a set of questionnaires (as highlighted in the *Instruments* section), and we recognise further analysis of the survey instrument will be necessary to confirm its validity, preferably with factor analysis.

Setting and Participants

The sample consisted of first-year Chinese international students who initially registered for the autumn 2013 term at the University of Kansas (KU), a public university in the Midwest region of the United States. The relative number of Chinese students at KU mirrors national trends in the

United States. In 2014, the university had 778 total degree-seeking Chinese students out of 2,114 international students overall (HESA, 2014), comprising 37% of the international student population. For the 2013 autumn term, there were 149 degree-seeking, first-year Chinese students who qualified to take part in this study. At KU, students are required to demonstrate English language proficiency before registering in academic coursework. Those who do not score high enough on the university's English examination upon arrival are required to take remedial English courses first, which are divided into five levels. In this study, participants included both students enrolled in the remedial English programme and those already enrolled in regular academic coursework.

In this study, 59% of the participants ($n = 44$) were male and 41% of participants ($n = 30$) were female, with varied ages ($M = 22.49$, $SD = 2.98$). Participants in this study were seeking a variety of academic degrees, including undergraduate ($n = 33$), Master's ($n = 21$) and PhD ($n = 20$). Finally, 33% of participants ($n = 45$) were enrolled in remedial English language classes, while 55% ($n = 42$) enrolled directly in academic coursework.

Instruments

Surveys

The ABC approach and current literature shaped the questionnaire design. Each questionnaire had around 40 questions in a variety of forms, including Likert scale, open-ended, multiple choice, dichotomous and contingency questions. The final questionnaire, which is used for

analysis in this study, had 38 questions. Some questions included multiple sub-questions, which means that altogether 68 individual data points were collected from the final survey responses. Throughout the full longitudinal study, all of the questions related to the research questions in this study were asked at all three time intervals. However, demographic details were only collected once and questions were edited to reflect the change in time period. Questionnaires were written in English and translated to Chinese by a native speaker with professional translation experience. Surveys were then crosschecked with an additional native speaker, but no disagreements were found. Each question was presented to questionnaire respondents in both languages and most respondents chose to answer open-ended questions in English; any questions answered in Chinese were translated by the same native speaker.

Eight key constructs relating to our research questions are represented by questions in the final survey, which are described in detail in Table 10.1. First, we are interested in Chinese students' perception of their English language use and skills, which is demonstrated by eight survey questions (construct 1). Next, Chinese students' relationships with Chinese (construct 2) and American students (construct 3) are reflected by six survey questions each. Involvement in campus clubs (construct 4) was also the subject of one survey question. Next, we considered students' engagement with learning about American culture (construct 5) with five survey questions. Additionally, students' overall happiness with their experience on campus (construct 6) is demonstrated by four survey questions. Finally, we considered Chinese students' perceived discrimination by the campus community (construct 7) with four questions, as well as perceived acceptance within the campus community (construct 8) with four questions. In this sense, five of the constructs (constructs 1-5) are process variables that measure student behaviours and choices

during their first year abroad. The remaining three constructs (constructs 6-8) are outcome variables, which measure students' perceptions of and satisfaction with their experiences.

We recognise that future studies will be necessary to further verify the underlining assumptions of these constructs, preferably with factor analysis. However, the high Cronbach alphas (ranging from .73 to .89) for each individual construct (listed in Table 10.1) indicate reasonable reliability.

<Table 10.1 here>

In addition to the survey questions listed in Table 10.1, we also asked questionnaire respondents on a multiple-choice scale whether they attended a range of campus or community-specific events. Participants were able to select more than one answer to this question. The first questionnaire in the overarching study was given at an induction programme for new Chinese students at the beginning of the autumn 2013 term in August. Participation in the study was not a compulsory part of the induction programme. A brief description of the study was given to all in attendance in both English and Chinese, and then any students interested were directed to a separate room during the lunch break to complete the consent process and fill out the first survey. Altogether, 86 students in attendance opted to join the study. Two additional electronic questionnaires were sent to the same respondents via email addresses they provided near the end of the autumn 2013 term in December and near the end of the spring 2014 term in April. It is this final questionnaire, distributed in April, which is the subject of the present study. Twelve respondents did not complete the third questionnaire in the series. Therefore, data from 74 respondents were analysed for this study, an 86% response rate from the original sample. All

three surveys were approved by KU's Human Subjects Committee in accordance with International Review Board standards.

Interviews

Fifteen participants were selected for an in-depth interview near the beginning of the spring term in February. A quota sampling strategy was used to select interview participants based on gender, age, study level and academic discipline. Interviews were conducted by the primary researcher and were semi-structured; however, questions were adapted, deleted or added in response to the dialogue as needed. Using emergent theme analysis based on preliminary analysis of data from the first two questionnaires, we identified eight key themes (as highlighted in Table 10.1), which informed the construction of the interview questions and analysis of the qualitative data. The interviews took place in a private room, lasted approximately one hour each, and were audio recorded. English was the primary language used in the interviews. Although supplemental explanations or definitions were offered in Chinese by the interviewer, only two students asked for clarifications. Participants were also given the option to review the transcript of their interview and make clarifications or additions, but only one participant opted to do so.

Results

Table 10.1 provides an overview about the Chinese students' questionnaire data. First, in terms of perceived language use and skill, using a Likert response scale of 1-4, respondents noted moderate agreement to survey questions related to their use of English in their social lives

(questions 1.1, 1.2, 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, and 1.8), and demonstrated an active engagement with English language learning (questions 1.3 and 1.4). Chinese students in this study also demonstrated strong connections with their Chinese peers (questions 2.1, 2.2, 2.5, and 2.6), although these connections did not appear to be through active effort (questions 2.3 and 2.4). On the other hand, strong connections with American cross-national peers were not demonstrated (questions 3.1, 3.2, 3.5, and 3.6) and, again, respondents did not demonstrate an active attempt to connect with them (questions 3.3 and 3.4). Similarly, very few respondents participated in campus clubs (construct 4). However, respondents overall still felt that they had actively attempted to learn about American culture during their time abroad (questions 5.1, 5.2, 5.4 and 5.5), despite a lack of participation in cultural events (question 5.3). Although respondents were moderately dissatisfied with their current social lives (questions 6.1 and 6.2), they still felt generally positive about their choice to study abroad (question 6.3) and their choice of institution (question 6.4). Finally, respondents did not feel discriminated against (construct 7, M = 1.81, SD = 0.53), and perceived they were accepted within their campus community (construct 8, M = 3.12, SD = 0.53). Using a cut-off point of 2.6, 89.2% of Chinese students in this study felt accepted at KU.

We first conducted basic bivariate analysis to look for simple correlations between the eight constructs, which is detailed in Table 10.2. Our analysis indicated that English language use and skill significantly and strongly correlated with perceived acceptance, happiness with the campus experience, engagement with American culture, and friendships with American students. The use of English also negatively correlated with perceived discrimination. Similarly, connections with American host students strongly correlated with club participation, engagement with American culture, happiness with the campus experience, and perceived acceptance, while it negatively

correlated with perceived discrimination. Interestingly, club participation only correlated with friendships with American host students, and did not correlate with perceived acceptance or happiness with the campus experience. Additionally, connections with fellow co-national Chinese students only correlated with engagement with American culture.

<Table 10.2 here>

The four behavioural hypotheses suggest that language, club involvement and friendships are important predictors of belonging and acceptance. First is language with HB1: Students who are more actively engaged in English language use will have stronger perceived acceptance. Table 10.2 demonstrates a significant positive relationship between perceived acceptance and perceived use and comfort with the English language. This supports previous findings, such as Furnham (1993) and Zhang and Goodson (2011).

One of the key components of Astin's Theory of Involvement (1984) is participation with extracurricular organisations. There is an assumed positive and significant relationship between club involvement and acceptance. Thus, HB2: Students involved in campus clubs will have stronger perceived acceptance. Questionnaire respondents were asked at the end of the spring term about their participation in campus clubs, to which only 16% responded 'yes.' Table 10.2 also shows that there was no significant relationship between questionnaire respondents' perceived acceptance and involvement in campus clubs. However, it is interesting to note that there was a significant correlation between having connections with American host students and participation in campus clubs.

One possible explanation for the lack of club participation is the prioritisation of academic work over campus involvement, which was frequently cited by interview participants:

I really need to focus on my studies and it is a lot of reading and materials to do. That is more important than things that are for fun. (Participant 4, male, undergraduate, business major)

I came here to learn. That is my principal reason for being in the United States. Maybe if I came here for fun or leisure, I can join in with these things [campus clubs], but I'm not here for that right now. (Participant 14, female, undergraduate, social science major)

Some interview participants also explained that they felt their social needs were met without club involvement:

I thought about joining clubs, but when I got here I met a lot of other Chinese students instead. We get together on the weekends and play cards and cook for each other. Maybe I will think about joining a club again later, but for now I like my life here. (Participant 11, male, PhD, engineering major)

Indeed, despite seemingly low participation in official clubs, questionnaire respondents did note common informal involvements on campus throughout the academic year. These included welcome week events (43%, $n = 31$), sporting events (53%, $n = 39$), academic presentations

(54%, $n = 40$), and visits to campus museums (35%, $n = 26$). Questionnaire respondents also demonstrated some common informal involvements in the larger community, including visits to the cinema (35%, $n = 27$), the city centre shopping area (52%, $n = 39$), places of worship (47%, $n = 35$), the lake outside of town (28%, $n = 21$) and surrounding cities (58%, $n = 43$). When interview participants were asked who they would typically invite to these informal activities, the most common answer was small groups of Chinese friends.

Questionnaire respondents were also asked a series of agree/disagree questions about their connections with American and Chinese peers. On average, respondents rated moderate disagreement to statements about meeting and connecting with American students (see construct 3 in Table 10.1). This relates to HB3: Students who have strong friendships with American students will have stronger perceived acceptance Table 10.2 displays significant relationships between connections with American students and perceived acceptance. This suggests that connections with American students *do* play a role in feeling accepted on campus. However, respondents still demonstrated an overall feeling of acceptance within the campus community, despite a lack of strong connections with the American host population (see constructs 3 and 8 in Table 10.1), which suggests that Chinese students in this study were able to find alternative ways to create a positive experience abroad.

Having strong friendships with fellow Chinese students at the host university is assumed to hinder perceived acceptance, which is HB4. Table 10.2 supports this hypothesis by demonstrating no correlation between acceptance and connections with Chinese peers. However, Table 10.2 does demonstrate that connections with Chinese peers correlated with cultural

engagement and involvement, meaning that the co-national community supported students by aiding in their cultural exploration and understanding. This notion is also highlighted in the literature (see, for example: (Zhou et al., 2008).

This suggests that friendships with fellow Chinese students may play a positive role in students' experience abroad, an idea that was supported by our qualitative analysis. Indeed, a number of responses during the in-depth interviews noted that connections with Chinese peers better served their social or psychological needs:

> *My experience is that even though my classmates are mostly American students, I make friends with them as study buddies, maybe to study for tests or something like that, but it's not like hanging out besides studying. My Chinese friends are the ones that I can really share my days and experiences with. When I'm homesick or had a bad day, I'd rather talk to my Chinese friends about it.* (Participant 3, female, undergraduate, business major)

> *I wish I had more Chinese friends, actually. When I get together with American friends, I feel like I am struggling to find common points, I don't learn too much from them like my Chinese friends.* (Participant 2 male, undergraduate, social science major)

Another explanation for why Chinese students feel accepted by the campus community despite few connections with host students could be their engagement with learning about American culture. After all, it is suggested that greater understanding of the host country helps international

students (sojourners) better cope with adjustment and make a successful transition (Ward & Searle, 1991). This is our cognitive hypothesis (HC): that students who engage with American culture will feel more accepted. In our study, there were strong, positive correlations between cultural engagement and perceived acceptance (see Table 10.2), which supports this hypothesis. Similarly, students in the in-depth interviews often mentioned that not actively engaging with American culture made acceptance more difficult:

> *The cultural differences have a lot to do with what you do after class when you aren't studying. Like in China, people watch popular shows on TV and everyone talks about it online and in their daily lives. But here if you are not watching American shows or if you don't attend to the social life here, it's hard to talk about it and you don't have anything in common with Americans.* (Participant 3, female, undergraduate, business major)

Thus far, the descriptive data and bivariate analysis has revealed a story about Chinese students at KU who had negligible involvement with official clubs and few close American friends, but nevertheless perceived acceptance within the campus community. Linear regression analysis also supported this story, as highlighted in Table 10.3. We looked specifically at two of our outcome variables (our acceptance and discrimination constructs) to determine whether they could be predicted by our process variables (constructs 1-5). In this case, we found that a full 64.8% of the variation between respondents could be explained by English language use, engagement with American culture and, surprisingly, *not* participating in campus clubs. In the absence of a bivariate relationship between club participation and perceived acceptance in our study, there is a

negative relationship when holding levels of English use and engagement with American culture constant.

<Table 10.3 here>

One explanation for why club participation discouraged perceived acceptance might be that new experiences involved in club participation, such as culturally-specific topics and complex English language use, were overwhelming for Chinese students in this study. This was often discussed in the qualitative interviews:

> *It's hard for me to understand what they are talking about. For instance, I went to a political group because I like politics, but I don't understand politics in the US very well. I tried to understand what was going on, but it's really, really hard to just sit there for hours and not lose your attention.* (Participant 9, male, Master's, engineering major)

A second regression analysis was conducted with discrimination as the dependent variable. This time, only English language use was a significant factor, explaining 13.8% of the variation.

Interestingly, neither connections with host national American students (HB3) nor fellow Chinese students (HB4) were significant factors in either regression analysis. However, our bivariate analysis did find strong correlations between friendships with American students and increased perceived belonging, as is also suggested in literature (Rohrlich & Martin, 1991; Searle & Ward, 1990). This suggests that more studies will be necessary to further unpack the complex

relationships that Chinese international students have with host national students, particularly in different contexts.

In our study, however, acceptance was primarily a product of cultural immersion through the use of English language and engagement with American culture. These findings support our HB1, that students who are more actively engaged in English language use will have stronger perceived acceptance. Similarly, these findings also support HC: that students who engage with American culture will feel more accepted. At the same time, our analysis challenges HB2, that students involved in campus clubs will have stronger perceived acceptance. Despite a lack of strong connection with host students and campus involvements, Chinese students in this study still perceived acceptance within the campus community. This was further apparent in qualitative analysis of the in-depth interviews:

When I am on campus, I see everyone here is wearing Jayhawk [the university symbol] things and I have to think, 'Wow, this is my school and this is my life.' I take a lot of pride in being here and being a part of this school. (Participant 9, male, Master's, engineering major)

I am a part of the university because I am contributing to make it a better place of academic study. It is becoming a part of me and reforming me. (Participant 6, male, undergraduate, natural science major)

Interview responses also highlighted that the experience of cultural immersion may, in the larger context, lend to Chinese students' satisfaction with their university experience and add to their perceived acceptance:

I know I won't stay in the United States [after university is finished], but when I go home I'll always think about my time here. I'll always be a part of the KU family and I think anywhere I go if I meet people who went to KU, we will have something in common and something to talk about. (Participant 14, female, undergraduate, social science major)

Altogether, these findings have interesting implications for our Affect Hypothesis (HA), as students in this study *do* feel that they are accepted in the larger campus community, despite difficulties with making connections with the larger campus community. Rather, acceptance in this study was demonstrated through cultural immersion, rather than cross-national friendships and club participation, which is unlike the assumption in current literature.

Discussion

The literature suggests that campus involvement, particularly through campus clubs, (Astin, 1984; Edwards & Waters, 1982; Tinto, 2012; Wortman & Napoli, 1996) and friendships with the host population (Rohrlich & Martin, 1991; Searle & Ward, 1990) strengthen students' feelings of acceptance at their institution. However, this was not the case for students in this study. In the absence of campus involvement and diverse friendships, Chinese international students in this study found alternative ways to feel accepted at their institution. Rather, they demonstrated that

their feelings of acceptance were best developed through immersion in the local (English) language and (American) culture, irrespective of individual group membership or diverse friendships.

Although campus involvement and friendships with the host population have previously been considered essential components to a satisfactory campus experience in the United States, this study highlights that another important aspect to consider are the benefits that international students gain from the immersive experience of simply being abroad. By building co-national communities and experiencing the campus and community together through informal involvements, non-Western students may be able to strengthen their perceived acceptance and overall satisfaction with their university experience in absence of formal club associations or strong diverse friendships. The findings of this study, thus, are at odds with the current literature and suggest potential flaws in currently assumed theories. One explanation could be that the Western cultural lenses and assumptions often used to observe the international student experience are culturally biased and, therefore, incomplete. However, more research on this topic will be necessary to determine how generalizable these findings are in other contexts.

Limitations

In this chapter, we applied the ABC approach to a unique survey of Chinese students to describe and analyse their campus involvements and social networks at an American university. The application of the ABC approach offered a framework to examine several theories and provided a more comprehensive picture of students' feelings of acceptance during their experiences

abroad. However, several limitations of this study are recognised. First, it is important to keep in mind that this study was conducted with a relatively small number of students at one university in the United States. Repetition of the study in multiple contexts will be important to determine the generalizability of present findings. Second, this study used an author-created questionnaire as its primary measurement. Although the high Cronbach alphas suggest strong reliability, further analysis of the instrument will be necessary in the future, particularly using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. Also acknowledged is the potential of a non-response bias from students who chose not to participate in the study and may have demonstrated more variance in their university experience. We also did not examine how experiences may differ between students at various levels of study. Finally, keeping in mind the acculturation process, some answers in this study may be skewed due to acculturative stress or adjustment frustrations. We have primarily focused on student self-perceptions of their experiences abroad, and it is worth considering in future studies how these ratings may change over time (or even day-to-day).

Implications for the ABC framework

The ABC framework currently focuses on acculturation as a process of integration with the host community and culture. However, this study brings into question how students' feelings of acceptance and overall satisfaction with their university experience fit into currently understood acculturation models. After all, this study demonstrates that international students can feel accepted in the absence of strong connections with the host campus community. Chinese

students in this study did not find acceptance through host national connections and active campus participation. Rather, by encountering new language and cultural experiences as a result of simply 'being abroad,' Chinese students in this study were able to feel accepted within their community and satisfied with their experience. Thus, the ABC framework might consider the question: if a student feels positively about their university experience despite obstacles to integrating with the pre-established campus community, is that enough?

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