



Understanding Intercultural Experiences of Chinese Graduate Students at U.S. Universities: Analysis of Cross-Cultural Dimensions

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to analyze the experience of international graduate Chinese students in the U.S. The methodology included a focus group (n=8) and personal interviews (n=8) conducted at a southeastern university. This study revealed how international Chinese students dealt with differences in expectations for the classroom environment, excellence in schoolwork, and nonverbal norms during their time studying in the U.S. Gender theory and cross-cultural dimensions were utilized to explain the study results. The findings were consistent with three cross-cultural dimensions of Hofstede's theory: Power Distance, Individualism versus Collectivism, and Indulgence versus Restraint. The study revealed that despite some cultural shifts demonstrated by newly introduced dimensions Collectivism-Individualism and Duty-Joy, cultural differences still caused challenges for the study participants. The results of this study provide additional insight into the behavior and acculturation process of international Chinese students and illustrate the benefits for universities to develop positive and productive experiences for these international students.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication, International Chinese Graduate Students, Hofstede, Power Distance, Individualism versus Collectivism, and Indulgence versus Restraint.

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1. Introduction

An increasing number of international students are studying in the U.S. to earn college degrees and enhance intercultural understanding (Institute of International Education (IIE), 2019; Stevens, Emil, & Yamashita, 2010). International students provide many benefits to the American education system and economy. In addition to increasing diversity on campus, international students strengthen America's economy through scholarly research, developing patents, and creating knowledge-based products and services (Chellaraj et al., 2008). In 2018, "the total contribution to the U.S. economy by international students was estimated to be over \$45 billion" (Bastrikin, 2020). Despite the rapid development of social media and the exchange of information worldwide, international students still experience acculturation and adjustment challenges when studying in the U.S. (Yan & Berliner, 2011; Yang, 2018). These challenges can have a negative impact on their "academic success and social well-being" (Campbell, 2015). Studies indicate professors and advisors play a key role in the acculturation process of international students (Han et al., 2017; Macgregor & Folinazzo, 2018). Therefore, gaining a better understanding of international students' cultural backgrounds could provide additional insight into their behavior in the classroom, as well as relationships with their host classmates, professors, and advisors. This knowledge could also have a positive impact on the involvement of international students in academic life and assist in facilitating the adjustment to an unfamiliar environment. Finally, understanding cultural differences could help American professors establish positive relationships with international students and develop a healthy and productive classroom environment. During the last decade, Chinese students represented the largest share of international students in the U.S. (IIE, 2021). The stereotypical image of these Chinese students is smart and hard-working, as well as shy, silent, and passive (Bartlett & Fischer, 2011; Ruble & Zhang, 2013). The aim of the present study is to examine the personal, firsthand experiences of international graduate Chinese students in the U.S. to better understand their cultural background and behavior. This study allowed participants to voice concerns and challenges experienced in an unfamiliar environment, as well as an opportunity to explain their communication behavior in the classroom environment. Finally, this research provided additional insights that highlighted cultural sensitivity to establish mutually beneficial relationships between Chinese students and their U.S. hosts.

1.1. International Students In The U.S.

The increasing presence of international graduate students at American universities is providing a more culturally diverse experience in higher education institutions (Campbell, 2015). The total

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number of international students in the United States during the academic years of 2006/2007 to 2018/2019 consistently increased, demonstrating an annual positive change for this twelve-year period. Enrollment almost doubled, rising from approximately 582,984 international students to approximately 1,095,299 (IIE, 2019, 2021a). China has remained the largest source of international students studying abroad in the United States since the academic year of 2009/2010 (IIE, 2021b). This trend continued through 2020/2021, indicating that the greatest enrollment of international students was from China (34.7%; IIE, 2021b). This diverse student group brings global perspectives to our U.S. educational environment and a background of knowledge, specifically in the science fields for doctoral programs (Knox et al., 2013; Sato & Hodge, 2009). International students also contribute other benefits to the American economy and education system. There is a positive impact on the development of American colleges and universities due to the enrollment of international students by providing greater revenue, opportunities to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, and exchange of unique perspectives. Many universities focus recruitment efforts on mainland Chinese students since they value the reputation and quality of U.S. degrees and are able to afford the cost of studying abroad. Accordingly, “more than half of Chinese students interested in U.S. universities can afford to spend at least \$40,000 annually on tuition” (Nelson, 2013, para 9).

1.2. The Role Of Professors In International Students’ Acculturation And Academic Success

Adapting to new social and physical environments requires specific skills from international students to be successful in an unfamiliar environment (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Although students may experience stress as they begin working in a new institution and adapting to a new educational environment, moving to a new country during their college careers is even more stressful (Kim, 2012; Myers-Walls et al., 2011). International students experience a range of challenges in academic and social life resulting from a different language, as well as cultural, personal, and financial issues (Bista & Foster, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2011). Academic success can be affected by an unfamiliar classroom environment, teaching practices, and program requirements (Jackson et al., 2013; Rawlings & Sue, 2013; Telbis et al., 2014). Students often struggle with different expectations relating to curriculum content, pedagogy, assignment formats, and relationships with faculty and American classmates (Holmes, 2004; Lee & Rice, 2007; Wu, 2015). Their social well-being is frequently influenced by the degree of difficulty adjusting to the local community and making friends with Americans, which is sometimes hindered by the lack of understanding regarding social norms and/or inadequate English proficiency. Other challenges include communication barriers, heightened anxiety, self-doubt, depression, identity issues, reduced confidence, and limited employment opportunities due to student status (Campbell, 2015; Kuo, 2011; Sherry et al., 2010). Professors and instructors play a crucial role in the successful acculturation of international students. The importance of student-advisor relationship was explored by Knox et al. (2013), who conducted a study among Asian graduate students participating in a counseling psychology doctoral program. Findings revealed that some participants did not receive the expected emotional and social support on how to handle the demands of academic programs or how to prepare for future careers. On the other hand, advisors who had previous experience with international students were more proficient and supportive. Heng (2017) conducted research among 18 first and second-year Chinese students and found at least half of the participants wanted professors and host peers to demonstrate more interest in their culture and backgrounds. Some international participants hoped professors would take their cultural backgrounds into consideration for teaching and assessment and could be more patient with initial adjustments, particularly relating to communication challenges.

2. The Purpose Of This Study

Based on Chinese students representing the largest number of international students in the U.S., this present study gives voice to the challenges experienced by this group. It seems reasonable that common assumptions and stereotypes of Chinese students being shy, passive, and silent (Bartlett & Fischer, 2011; Ruble & Zhang, 2013), “do not have an opinion, do not know how to express it, or do not want to be heard” (Heng, 2017), could have a negative impact on the experiences of Chinese students in academia. In addition, these beliefs could prevent international students from revealing their full potential and reduce contributions in the classroom. The findings of this study highlight specific communication between Chinese students and university members providing a greater understanding of differences in cultural background, behavior in the classroom, and professor-student relationships. While several studies examine the experiences of international undergraduate students (Lin, 2009; Yang, 2018), little attention focuses on international Chinese graduate students. Therefore, the aim of this exploratory study is to address a broad research question:

RQ: What challenges do international Chinese graduate students experience while studying in the U.S.?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

To explore this research question, the study was conducted with a total of 16 international Chinese graduate students in a U.S. southeastern university. Students were recruited to participate in a focus group interview or

individual face-to-face interviews. Eight master's degree students participated in a focus group interview, including seven females and one male. In-depth interviews were conducted with a combination of eight master's degree and doctoral students (100% female). Students did not participate in both stages of the data collection. All participants spent approximately one year in the U.S. To protect the privacy and identity of participants, pseudonyms were used when reporting the results of this study. The data collection and analysis demonstrated sufficient data to address the specific research question. Categories were well developed, relationships among these categories were appropriately established, and no new or relevant data emerged regarding additional categories. A total of 16 participants provided sufficient data enabling theoretical saturation where "new pieces add little, if any, new value to the emergent analysis" (Tracy, 2013).

3.2. Data Collection

This study included two separate parts of data collection. In the first part, researchers conducted a focus group interview. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling where participants were identified based on who fit the study's criteria. In turn, these individuals suggested friends or peers to participate in the study. A focus group provided the best opportunity to gather specific information from participants addressing the research question. The focus group interview provided insights generated by group interaction and explored relevant experiences as the group effect revealed insightful self-disclosure. Several participants knew each other, and answered some questions enthusiastically, which led to a fruitful discussion. The focus group lasted approximately ninety minutes. Although a focus group can help participants share similar experiences, some could feel embarrassed to discuss personal details in front of others. Therefore, to provide better insight and greater depth of international student experiences, the second part of this data collection – face-to-face interviews – was conducted to also address the research question. A convenience sample was initiated to recruit students for personal interviews. Participants were asked a series of broad questions regarding their experiences as international graduate students in the U.S., allowing for and encouraging participants to "speak the truth as they know it" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Participants were encouraged to explain their thoughts, feelings, and experiences focusing on being an international student. Personal interviews lasted approximately forty to ninety minutes. Focus group and personal interviews were conducted in English as participants were graduate students at an American university, and all were competent in English. Prior to beginning the focus groups and individual interviews, participants were asked to sign consent forms, and permission was obtained to audio record these discussions for the accuracy of the analysis.

3.3. Data Analysis

Participants' audio-recorded focus groups and face-to-face interviews were transcribed. All names used on the audio recordings were changed to pseudonyms once the recordings were transcribed. Application of grounded theory developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was utilized in this study, "researchers collect data, engaging in open line-by-line analysis, creating larger themes from these data, and linking them together in a larger story" (cited in Tracy, 2013). A constant comparison analysis of data was followed by reviewing transcripts, notes, and observations to identify recurring patterns. The transcripts were examined using an open coding method, which involved identifying phrases or events that appeared to be similar and grouping them into conceptual thematic categories. This process included primary-cycle, secondary-cycle, and axial coding (Tracy, 2013). During primary-cycle coding, data were examined for identification of words and phrases or "first-level codes" (e.g., smiling, an embarrassment in the classroom, cultural shock, guilty if not working hard), which allowed for capturing the basic processes and events in the data. During secondary-cycle coding, first-level codes were critically examined to organize them into interpretive concepts. This stage of data analysis allowed for the identification of analytical "second-level codes" or focused codes that served to synthesize the data and identify patterns within the data. Finally, during the axial coding stage, researchers identified codes that continually reappeared in the data to form specific "categories." Codes were systematically grouped together under categories that make conceptual sense. This process provided the organization of codes into interpretive concepts and allowed for generating the following thematic categories to explain differences in the classroom environment and attitudes towards classwork excellence, leisure time, and smiling: (1) Hierarchy, (2) In-Group Behavior, (3) Gender Roles, (4) Attitude Towards Classwork Excellence and Leisure Time, and (5) Unaccustomed to Smiling (see Appendix A, Table 1: Coding Results, Categories, and Theoretical Framework).

4. Theoretical Framework

While the grounded theory was initially utilized to code and interpret the data, applying Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Gender theory was beneficial to explain why some attributes and characteristics of Americans' everyday life were surprising and even unexpected for international Chinese students studying in the U.S.

4.1. Hofstede's Cross-Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) noted people learn unique cultural norms in society during childhood. Knowledge and understanding of these norms become enhanced when social practices within cultures are

continuously communicated (Hofstede, 2011). Hofstede and his colleagues revealed that there are some cultural elements that members of nations have in common, while other cultural characteristics make members uniquely different. Six cross-cultural dimensions were introduced that demonstrated the major similarities and differences on various cultural and organizational levels: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism versus Collectivism, Masculinity versus Femininity, Long-term versus Short-term orientation, and Indulgence versus Restraint (Hofstede et al., 2010). Although some scholars argue Hofstede's work needs to be updated (e.g., Baskerville, 2003; Jones, 2007; McSweeney, 2002), the concept of cross-cultural dimensions is "considered a reliable proxy by numerous researchers in [numerous fields]" (Pikhart & Koblizkova, 2017) including intercultural communication, cross-cultural management, and cross-cultural comparison among college students (e.g., Sándorová, 2021; Gut et al., 2017; Sierra-Huedo & Foucart, 2022). In the present study, international Chinese graduate students discussed several cultural and communication differences that astonished and challenged them during their time studying in the U.S. Analysis of this data revealed communication differences aligned with a number of Hofstede et al.'s (2010) levels of cultural dimensions, including Power Distance, Individualism versus Collectivism, and Indulgence versus Restraint.

Power Distance is "related to the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality" (Hofstede, 2011), which could be presented on various levels in society: family (e.g., parents-children, husband-wife), organizations (e.g., supervisors – subordinates), state (e.g., authorities – citizens). Power distance can be observed in all cultures; however, it can be higher or lower power distance in different societies. *Individualism versus Collectivism* is the "degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members; [i]t has to do with whether people's self-image is defined in terms of "I" or "We"" (Hofstede Insights, n.d., para. 5). In individualistic societies, members are generally more self-centric and are expected to look after themselves and family members. In collectivistic cultures, the bonds between group members are very strong. These members often have extended families that take care of them for a lifetime (Hofstede et al., 2010). *Indulgence versus Restraint* is "related to the gratification versus control of basic human desires related to enjoying life" (Hofstede, 2011). Some characteristics of more indulgent societies reveal a higher percentage of people who are happy and place higher importance on life-work balance and leisure. In contrast, people in restrained societies are more pessimistic, greater importance is placed on work than leisure, and adopt stricter sexual norms than in wealthy countries (Hofstede et al., 2010). Recently, Beugelsdijk and Welzel (2018) re-examined Hofstede's dimensions to explore the nature of cultural change along these dimensions. The scholars collapsed Hofstede's six-dimensional framework into a three-dimensional framework. The first dimension, Collectivism–Individualism, mimics Hofstede's Individualism dimension and correlates with Power Distance. The second dimension, Duty–Joy, captures Hofstede's Restraint–Indulgence dimension. The third dimension, Distrust–Trust, is closely related to Hofstede's Uncertainty Avoidance dimension. These dimensions will be addressed in the present study.

4.2. Gender Theory

In addition to Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Gender theory was utilized as a conceptual and analytical approach to understand the interaction between women and men in different social settings (Ferree, 1990; Kim et al., 2004). Gender theory focuses on how specific behaviors and roles are appropriated to different genders, how labor is divided to symbolically express gender difference, and how diverse social structures beyond families incorporate gender values and convey gender advantages (Ferree, 1990). It is important to note that traditional Chinese society and family are influenced by Confucian philosophy, which involves a strict observance of human relationships within a hierarchical society. One of the main principles of the Confucian family is a gender hierarchy that relates to the strong patriarchal family norms and provides Chinese fathers and husbands with enormous power over the mother and wife (Kim et al., 2004). In a traditional Chinese family, women have been expected to depend on their male relatives: "maidens obeying their fathers, wives obeying their husbands, and widows obeying their adult sons" (Shu et al., 2013). Although roles and beliefs about gender have shifted considerably in the last half-century, especially in countries where women's participation is necessary for economic development (Stork & Hartley, 2014), male dominance in communication and relationships can be still observed in Chinese culture.

5. Findings

5.1. Differences In The Classroom Environment

5.1.1. Hierarchy And In-Group Behavior.

Several participants mentioned classroom relationships between professors and students in the U.S. differed from relationships they experienced or observed growing up in China. One participant commented she was surprised that professors encouraged students to participate in discussions and express their own opinions. In China, students were expected to listen to the professor and not make any comments. She described her experience as "really striking:"

If you go to the classroom, it is more about a teacher, a professor, and what a professor and teacher say, and they are hesitant to...kind of speak out.... Also, Chinese people value...how to say...moderation. You do not want to stand out.... It is totally different from American classroom. It was a cultural shock; I was not use to that kind of classroom where students participate and discuss very actively. They come

up with any thought they have. I always kept quiet. Even though I had some thoughts, I was scared to look stupid, and that my thoughts are not very insightful.... I learned that many Chinese students have this cultural shock (Ming, personal interview).

Another interview participant shared being embarrassed not because of being unprepared with her assignment, but because she did not want to be impolite to the professor voicing her opinion in class. It is not a cultural norm in the Chinese classroom environment to share thoughts in front of a person who holds a higher position, or to step out of your group:

If the professor ask question to you, no one would stare at the professor. Everyone would somehow hide. I do not know why, but everybody does that (Li, personal interview).

Even after class, students tend to ask classmates first to clarify some issues, rather than the professor. However, after some time in this new class environment, participants felt more comfortable expressing their opinions or sharing thoughts. These comments illustrate examples of high power distance related to the teacher-oriented classroom environment as a characteristic expected by Chinese students and can be explained by the Power Distance dimension. China has a very high score on the Power Distance scale (80 out of 100) and the U.S. has a fairly low score on the Power Distance scale (40 out of 100). This higher ranking of China on the Power Distance scale indicates that China represents a society that believes inequalities among people are acceptable. Because of the high power distance in China, the classroom is teacher-centered, strictly ordered, and communication is initiated by the teacher (Hofstede et al., 2010). The professor is an authority figure who tends to be somewhat strict. Chinese students call professors by their full names and expect professors to lecture and tell them specifically what they need to know. The classroom is a formal atmosphere, and Chinese students do not expect open discussions with professors for fear of questioning their authority and effectiveness (Hui, 2005). In the lower power distance for the U.S., classrooms are typically student-centered, and teachers appreciate and encourage student initiative, which fulfills the goal of progress towards independent thinking (Hofstede et al., 2010). College students expect to be treated more as equals, whose needs and rights are to be respected similarly to others. Consequently, students often feel free to complain to and about teachers (Stork & Hartley, 2014).

In addition, these findings were consistent with the Individualism versus Collectivism dimension. In collectivist societies, people belong to “in groups” that take care of them in exchange for loyalty. China is a highly collectivist culture and has a very low score on an Individualistic scale (scoring 20 out of 91), whereas people act in the interests of the group and not necessarily for themselves (Hofstede, 2011). This can be observed in Chinese students’ behavior: “I will do as others do.” This is reflected in the quieter behavior of Chinese students in the classroom as they want to follow the group norms: Chinese students are more modest than American students, whereas they are reluctant to embarrass or offend peers and teachers (Chan et al., 1999). Based on research by Beugelsdijk and Welzel (2018), China demonstrates a very slight shift towards Individualism along a new dimension Collectivism-Individualism (out of 120 points): 20 in the initial survey and 25 points in the last survey; the U.S. demonstrates a larger shift towards Individualism over the time: 50 points in the first survey and 65 points in the most recent survey.

5.1.2. Gender Roles

The “shyness” of the female participants in the classroom can be also explained by the influence of the strong “hierarchical” system in their society. The study revealed the influence of gender differences on Chinese students’ behavior in the classroom. Some female focus group participants noted they would wait until male classmates spoke first, and then they would feel more comfortable to share their opinion or ask and answer a question. The interviewed female participants were surprised that American female students are very independent not only in a classroom setting, where they can freely communicate their opinion, but especially in romantic relationships. One of the interview participants mentioned she noticed in romantic couples in the U.S. a “girlfriend” has her own attitude towards what to do and how to do something. In contrast, in China, a girlfriend usually consults her boyfriend and follows his advice:

American girls are tougher than Chinese girls.... American girls are tougher in relationships. They can be dominant. There are some girls in China, who are dominant, but mostly men are dominant in relationships. In China, a girlfriend listens to whatever her boyfriend tells her. If it is cold, but the boyfriend says that you look good in this skirt, and we are going to meet my friend, I want you to wear this skirt. She is freezing, but she will show up in this skirt. I do not know whether American girls would do that, it seems they would not (Meng, personal interview).

The “shyness” of Chinese female participants in the classroom communication and social setting can be explained by Gender theory evaluating existing gender differences in China. The traditional Chinese society that is influenced by Confucian philosophy follows strict hierarchical principles with male dominance. This approach towards relationships in society explains some level of inequality existing in gender communication. Accordingly, a typical young Chinese woman is a complex combination of a strong patriarchal culture and modern values of gender equity (Gang & Guiyang, 2000). Chinese women were taught to believe males were superior, and as a result, demonstrated some lack of confidence in higher education and the workplace (Gang & Guiyang, 2000; Stork & Hartley, 2014). In contrast, many young American women in the classroom were ambitious, assertive,

and performance-oriented. Often U.S. women, especially those well-educated, were likely to believe that “power should be distributed equally, jobs and pay should not be influenced by gender, and family responsibilities should be shared with men” (Stork & Hartley, 2014).

5.2. Differences In Classwork Excellence, Leisure Time, And Smiling

5.2.1. Attitude Towards Classwork Excellence And Leisure Time

Participants expressed contradictory opinions about attitudes towards classwork and leisure time. Based on the information provided by mass media, Chinese students thought American students did not work hard at school. However, when attending universities in the U.S., Chinese students found that American students spent a lot of time and energy earning their degrees. Dissimilar attitudes towards classwork were the primary differences pointed out by the international Chinese students. Many participants commented that they would stay late working on assignments, while American students often went out and had fun. One interview participant noted that sometimes she stayed late on campus to focus on classwork, not because she had a lot of work, but because she would feel guilty going out. Several comments from focus group participants confirmed this observation:

They (Americans) can separate work and life very clearly. And people respect their private time....it is different (in China). Because many people just overwork. Most people’s cell phones are always on 24 hours for work. Their boss can call them any time. They just mix work and private life together (Yu, focus group).

Other participants commented they like the way Americans value their spare time and work-life balance: “They can separate work and life very clearly. And people respect their private time” (Li, focus group). Some of the participants commented despite the fact that American students work very hard and care about grades, they always have time for parties: “As for the party, I live in the [place], my neighbors always hold parties at home, which makes a lot of noise” (Yuan, personal interview). “They [Americans] often go out and have fun. In contrast to China, people mostly concentrate on work, and work very hard” (Meng, personal interview).

Both the U.S. and China are success-oriented and driven societies. The need to ensure success can be demonstrated by the fact that many Chinese will sacrifice family and leisure priorities to work, as leisure time is not considered to be important. For example, “service people (such as hairdressers) will provide services until very late at night; the migrated farmers will leave their families behind in faraway places to obtain better work and pay in the cities. Another example is that Chinese students care very much about their exam scores and ranking as this is the main criteria to achieve success or not” (Hofstede Insights, n.d.). Therefore, the participants of the study demonstrated a high-performance-oriented behavior and made their work an important priority. Chinese students were surprised that American students “work hard and play hard” (i.e., maintaining work-personal life balance and spare time is important). The difference in attitude towards leisure time can be explained by the cross-cultural dimension - Indulgence versus Restraint. The issue of happiness has been a subject focused on by scholars. Hofstede et al. (2010) found happiness at the national level correlates to the perception of life control and attitude towards leisure. He further conceptualizes life control as the opportunity to live one’s life the way one wants, “without social restrictions that curb one’s freedom of choice” (p. 281). Leisure is considered a personal value. Hofstede et al. claimed that happiness, life control, and the importance of leisure are strongly interrelated, and can be defined as a societal dimension focusing on indulgence versus restraint. Accordingly, “*indulgence* stands for a tendency to allow relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun” (p. 281). In contrast, “*restraint* reflects a conviction that such gratification needs to be curbed and regulated by strict social norms” (p. 281). Hofstede et al. (2010) also note that “societal restriction not only makes people less happy but also seems to foster various forms of negativism” (p. 289). The core characteristics of indulgent societies are happiness, merrymaking with friends, spending, consumption, and the importance of leisure, such as in South and North America, Western Europe, and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa (Hofstede et al. 2010). Restraint-orientated societies are those countries where people enjoy their lives less and live under the pressure of conservative social norms, which prevails in Eastern Europe, Asia, and the Muslim world (Hofstede, 2011; Tantekin et al., 2011).

The findings of the present study were consistent with Hofstede’s (2011) scale, reflecting that the U.S. is high on the Indulgent Scale (scoring 68 out of 100), and China is low on the Indulgence Scale (scoring 24 out of 100) (Hofstede Insights, n.d.). Thus, the United States’ high score on the Indulgent dimension demonstrates that American society represents an “indulgent” culture. This combination of a success-oriented and indulgent society is reflected in the behavior of the American students observed by the idea of working and playing hard. In contrast, China’s restrained society does not put much emphasis on leisure time: “People with this orientation have the perception that their actions are restrained by social norms and feel that indulging themselves is somewhat wrong” (Hofstede Insights, n.d.).

5.2.2. Uncustomed To Smiling

This study revealed another confirmation of China as a restrained society, demonstrated by the attitude of participants towards “smiling.” Participants were very much surprised by seeing so many smiling faces in the U.S. “You will not see many smiling faces around in China.... Many people are smiling here [in the U.S.],” remarked

one of the participants. Another student tried to explain this situation, claiming that there were too many people in China, and everyone was focused on work. Therefore, many people do not smile at strangers. This statement was also consistent with the indulgence versus restraint dimension, as one of the characteristics of an indulgent society is a lot of smiling faces. People were more relaxed in their daily routines and generally happier than people in a restrained society where smiling was considered as suspect (Chudnovskaya & O'Hara, 2022; Hofstede et al., 2010). Chinese graduate students experienced some challenges in the U.S. since findings demonstrated the differences in core characteristics of these two opposite cultures. Two primary characteristics of an indulgent culture are the high importance of leisure, and smiling is considered as a norm. In contrast, restrained cultures are characterized by lower importance of leisure, and smiling is considered as more suspect. Based on research by Beugelsdijk and Welzel (2018), China demonstrates a slight shift towards Joy on a Duty-Joy dimension (out of 100 points): 27 points in the initial survey and 40 points in the last survey. However, this score is still below the average and reflects the characteristics of a restrained society. The U.S. demonstrates a very slight shift towards Duty in this dimension and still represents a highly indulgent society: 82 points in the first survey and 80 points according to the last survey.

6. Discussion

The findings of the present study were consistent with previous research addressing specific cultural differences experienced by international Chinese graduate students when studying in the U.S. This study confirmed cross-cultural dimensions by Hofstede et al. (2010) Power Distance, Individualism versus Collectivism, and Indulgence versus Restraint. Gender theory can be used to help explain challenges experienced by participants of the focus group and personal interviews. Although previous research addressed cultural differences for China relating to Power Distance and Individualism versus Collectivism, fewer studies focused on an Indulgence versus Restraint dimension. The present study demonstrated challenges experienced by these participants reflecting Chinese students that represented a highly restraint society who navigated their path in an extremely U.S. indulgent culture. An important contribution of the present study is utilizing more recent cultural dimensions by Beugelsdijk and Welzel (2018), intended to re-examine Hofstede's dimensions and explore the nature of cultural change. The results revealed that although slight changes occurred along cultural dimensions measured by additional elements, Duty-Joy, China remains a highly collectivistic and restrained society, while the United States continues to represent an individualistic and indulgent society. Another element of this study provided insight into specific behavioral patterns of Chinese students in the U.S. classroom environment. This knowledge could be helpful for professors and host universities to apply teaching strategies that benefit this international group of students. Based on these findings, "shyness" and "silent" behavior does not mean Chinese students were not well prepared for classes. "Being in a shade" is a sign of respect towards professors since these students reflect high power distance characteristics, where they were expected to be silent towards an older and higher ranked person.

Being reminded of this specific cultural orientation helps regarding realistic expectations of these international students when communicating in classroom discussions. Additionally, professors and advisors might need to use different strategies to motivate these students to voice their opinions. Because the majority of the study participants were female, the Gender theory was utilized to explain the behavior of Chinese female graduate students, who often are "shy" and/or embarrassed to voice their opinion. This behavior could be explained by the influence of Confucian philosophy on gender hierarchy in Chinese culture and society. Understanding this cultural orientation allows for hosts professors to encourage female students to take an active part in class activities and communicate that everyone's opinion is important for class discussions, although this is only one way for students to share their opinions. It is important host professors and peers are aware that a lack of smiling does not communicate negative attitudes or emotions from the international Chinese students. Since the Chinese are not encouraged to smile as often as Americans, this nonverbal orientation should not create a negative impression of these students. The present study also revealed Chinese students work hard on class assignments, and often feel guilty to use time for entertainment. This orientation could be stressful and cause burnout in international students. However, shyness and cultural embarrassment to talk to a higher-ranking person might prevent students from communicating concerns, thereby causing additional frustration and stress. Host professors and advisors could initiate discussions with students to verify if expectations are realistic and if support or assistance is necessary. As indicated by previous research, professors, advisors, and peers continue to be a strong support group for international students (Han et al., 2017; Heng, 2017). For example, college professors can utilize strategies offered by the "Critical Pedagogy" approach (Freire, 2016; Uddin, 2019), including various learner-centered activities, and initiate a dialogue with possibly shy Chinese students to involve them in class discussions and activities. These strategies aim to create "a free and fair classroom environment and communication are essential for learning, creating a space where the students are not afraid to ask any question" (Uddin, 2019). This classroom setting should encourage international students to be active learners and contribute to the knowledge-generating process in the classroom. It would be beneficial for international students to shift their perception of a teacher-centered education to a learner-centered experience. The present study revealed several cultural and gender differences specific to international Chinese graduate students. To make study abroad experiences more successful and productive for Chinese students, host universities should continue being sensitive to their specific needs of

international students by including this information in orientation programs. Heng (2017) found that Chinese students expect better academic support from universities, and students wanted to have “greater clarity on course availability/selection, facilities/classroom locations, as well as services and protocols for seeking academic and nonacademic help” (p. 842).

International student offices are another excellent source of support for Chinese students. Organization of university and intercultural events can provide greater participation in group activities with other international and hosting students, and perhaps reduce cultural shyness. It also allows this group to promote their cultural uniqueness while improving social bonds with their hosts and local community. Finally, continuing to provide information for host participants regarding specific cultural orientations of international students provides more insights into behaviors and expectations for establishing successful communication interactions while hopefully avoiding misunderstanding. Host universities play a special role in awareness and orientation for international students. It is important to address university policies and inform international students about local cultural opportunities. Mu and Yu (2021) noted that “Chinese students would benefit from a greater intercultural awareness and improved intercultural competence, thereby deepening their understanding of different cultures” (para. 41). Vijaya and Tiwari (2010) found “more sophisticated knowledge and training in intercultural communication skills and multicultural team building are important” (pp. 22-23), especially in the initial stages of an international experience in unfamiliar environments. They suggest social programs would be beneficial to students such as university dinners, events, or other activities in informal settings with representatives from the local community. Studies regarding international students’ difficulties in intercultural communication indicate that most international Asian students are usually “quiet and unsociable” (Xiao & Petraki, 2007). Therefore, socialization is an important part of the process to help international students feel more comfortable in a foreign environment and assist in leading to successful adjustment and acculturation while studying abroad (Wollebæk & Selle, 2007).

6.1. Limitations And Suggestions For Future Research

One limitation of this study is the small number of subjects participating in the focus group and interviews. Future research would benefit from a larger sample that includes both male and female participants. A second limitation is conducting this research in the southeastern part of U.S. where participants might experience different challenges if studying in other parts of the U.S. Future research should explore and compare the experiences of international Chinese graduate students in different parts of the U.S. to provide more generalized findings. A third limitation is that some cultural differences attributed to specific cross-cultural elements might occur due to other factors such as personality traits, application of English, or experience travelling in foreign countries. Future research could analyze the influence of personality traits (i.e., introvert/extrovert) on the level of class participation among international students. While all of the participants spoke English, some students commented it took them a while to understand the local language. One participant mentioned learning British English in China rather than American English and experienced an adjustment period before feeling more comfortable communicating in the U.S. Finally; future research could explore other issues beyond cross-cultural dimensions that could have an impact on the behavior and communication strategies of international graduate Chinese students while studying abroad.

7. Conclusion

It is clear that the number of international students is increasing in the U.S. Therefore, it is important to explore the challenges these students face when studying in a foreign country. The present study revealed that the Gender theory and Hofstede et al.’s (2010) cross-cultural dimensions of Power Distance, Individualism versus Collectivism, and Indulgence versus Restraint explained some of the cultural differences and awkwardness experienced by these international students. Although these cross-cultural dimensions have changed slightly over time, the cultural differences still create challenges for Chinese students in the U.S. While most of us are familiar with stereotypes related to international Chinese students, it is important to link this information to theoretical concepts developed in the intercultural area. Being aware of specific cross-cultural elements, and their impact on international students can be beneficial for all participants. Orientations are beneficial to inform international students about the cultural norms and values of the host country, while socialization activities help international students to better understand the behaviors and traditions of host cultures and local communities. Hopefully, by focusing on sensitivity and awareness, international students will feel more comfortable in an unfamiliar environment, and host universities will continue to create a supportive and positive environment.

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Appendix A

First Level Coding	Second Level Coding	Categories	Theoretical Hofstede et al. (2010) Dimensions Gender Theory (Ferree, 1990)	Framework Beugelsdijk and Welzel (2018) Dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Embarrassed to participate in class discussions. ▪ Active U.S. students in class shock Chinese students. ▪ Chinese students not active in class. ▪ Chinese students expected to listen to professor. ▪ Chinese students find class environment shocking. ▪ Chinese students do same as what other students do. ▪ Chinese students will not ask questions in class. ▪ U.S. female students tougher and more independent than Chinese female students. ▪ U.S. female students more active in class. 	<p>Teacher-centered environment in Chinese class.</p> <p>Student-centered environment in U.S. class.</p> <p>Communication in class creates shocking experience.</p> <p>Chinese students uncomfortable participating in class.</p> <p>Moderation and low-profile Chinese norm.</p> <p>Chinese “in-group” behavior.</p> <p>Chinese female students shy in class.</p>	<p>Differences in classroom environment:</p> <div style="display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center;"> <div style="display: flex; align-items: center; margin-bottom: 20px;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-right: 10px;">Hierarchy</div> <div style="font-size: 24px;">➔</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; padding: 10px; margin-left: 10px;">Power Distance</div> </div> <div style="display: flex; align-items: center; margin-bottom: 20px;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-right: 10px;">In-Group Behavior</div> <div style="font-size: 24px;">➔</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; padding: 10px; margin-left: 10px;">Collectivism vs. Individualism</div> </div> <div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-right: 10px;">Gender Roles</div> <div style="font-size: 24px;">➔</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; padding: 10px; margin-left: 10px;">Gender Theory</div> </div> </div>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Chinese students feel guilty if party too often. ▪ Chinese students surprised that U.S. students work hard, but always have time for parties. ▪ Chinese students prioritize work first as their cultural norm. ▪ Leisure time is not very important for Chinese students. ▪ Chinese students surprised to see many people smiling. ▪ People do not smile at strangers in China. ▪ People in China focus on working, being serious, and not smiling. ▪ Most people in China do not smile at everyone. 	<p>Focus on hard work is Chinese norm.</p> <p>Work more important than leisure in China.</p> <p>Work/life balance demonstrated by U.S. students surprising for Chinese students.</p> <p>Smiling at strangers not Chinese norm.</p> <p>People often smile at strangers in U.S.</p> <p>Chinese students surprised to see so many people smiling.</p>	<p>Differences in attitudes towards classwork excellence, leisure time, and smiling:</p> <div style="display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center;"> <div style="display: flex; align-items: center; margin-bottom: 20px;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-right: 10px;">Attitude towards classwork excellence and leisure time</div> <div style="font-size: 24px;">➔</div> </div> <div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-right: 10px;">Unaccustomed to smiling</div> <div style="font-size: 24px;">➔</div> </div> </div>	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; padding: 10px; margin-right: 10px;">Indulgence vs. Restraint</div> <div style="font-size: 24px;">➔</div> <div style="border: 2px dashed red; border-radius: 50%; padding: 10px; margin-left: 10px;">Duty-Joy</div> </div>	