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MAKING MEANING OF CHINESE
INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS'
EXPERIENCES IN THE JOURNEY OF
LEARNING ENGLISH IN THE UNITED
STATES

Feng Qi

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**MAKING MEANING OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE
STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES
IN THE JOURNEY OF LEARNING ENGLISH
IN THE UNITED STATES**

by

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on how Chinese international graduate students make meanings of their experiences through everyday social communication with native English speaker to make adjustment to their new lives. Grounded on Vygotsky's sociocultural theoretical framework, this study is conducted by the case study method to present the target group of students' understanding of barriers encountered in social communication and their interpretation of the relations between self and the environment. Perezhivanie shed light on exploring the participants' different attitudes and interpretation of the same life issues with the increasing length of residence in the United States. By experiencing a range of emotions generated in social communication, the participants' perezhivanie undergo changes, which assists them to achieve clear

self-identification, adjust their performance in social life, and make adjustment to the target sociocultural environment.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Background

“I feel nervous and uncomfortable during the class break in classroom. I don’t know whether I should talk to persons sitting next to me, or whether they want to talk to me. If they don’t, I don’t want to bother them. If I want to converse with them, I don’t know what topics are appropriate because I know they are different from us.”

This was the experience and feeling the first time I found myself in a classroom in the United States. It illustrates anxiety, discomfort, and hesitation, but also desire to communicate with others.

This is not a unique instance. As reported in Open Doors conducted by the institute of International Education, over 328,000 Chinese students were studying in the United States. China remains the leading place of origin for students coming to the United States for the seventh year in a row, in which 37.5% are graduate students (Opendoors, 2016). It is well known that the development of both English proficiency and cultural knowledge are the two most important barriers for Chinese international students to overcome. However, it is certainly not the whole story of how adult international students adapt to their new lives in a new social environment. According to Gardner (1985), there are two sets of learning outcomes: linguistic and nonlinguistic. English learning is not simply a process of language improvement. It also is an outcome of nonlinguistic changes, which may include self-perception,

positioning, as well as the way people make meanings of their everyday lives in a variety of discourses.

A person is driven by an internalized cultural logic and by a social situation (Holland, 1998). How to be involved in a target society and participate in social and cultural activities is one of the most common problems for Chinese international students in English-speaking countries. Numerous language learners have a sense of disconnectedness and limited access to a social life in the target society, even though they may have achieved great improvement in English proficiency and high academic performance in universities. This situation leads to serious consideration of whether there are other obstacles, in addition to language proficiency, that negatively impact social participation and achievement of full membership in the target social environment.

It is very common to hear Chinese international students in the United States express expectations and feelings about their daily experiences and their surroundings. What can be drawn from their stories and experiences assists English international students to better adjust to the target society and also improves quality of their second language education.

Some previous studies have explored how ESL learners negotiate their native and target cultural knowledge with the development of second language development as immigrants (Iddings & Christina, 2007, Igoa, 2003; Spotti, 2007) and international students (Gao, 2011; Marshall, 2010; Tamly, 2009). Few studies have explored how they establish and negotiate meanings of their daily life experiences and what

influences their communicational experiences could exert to social participation, self-labelling and positioning, especially focusing on Chinese international students at the graduate level in the United States. It has become clear that Chinese international graduate students are quite diverse from immigrants and other ESL learners in terms of cultural background, level of education, motivation, expectations, and socioeconomic status.

This study is designed to bridge the gaps by researching how Chinese international graduate students in the United States perceive themselves and make meaning of their experiences through their social interactions in real-world situations. It provides students who are currently enrolled in academic or language programs in U.S. universities with opportunities to share and exchange their experiences and feelings, which assists them as they attempt to obtain a better and deeper understanding of who they are, what they have done, and what the world that they are exposed to are. This study also contributes to help Chinese students who intend to study in the United States to obtain a basic impression of what the real environment is and what they can prepare for in academic, cultural, and social aspects for future adaptation to the lives in the United States.

Research Questions

The research questions of this study are as follows:

- What are the gap(s) between Chinese international students' original expectations and reality of social interactions with native English speakers in the United States.?

- What are the attitudes that Chinese international students take towards the label of ESL learners?
- How do Chinese international graduate students make meaning of their lived experiences to better adapt in the U.S. societal environment?

Outline of the Chapters

There are five chapters in this dissertation. Chapter one introduces the background, the purpose of this study, and the research questions.

Chapter two reviews the analysis of second language acquisition from sociocultural perspective and also provides a rationale of the pioneer research regarding meaning-making of lived experiences with the English language development. It starts with reviewing the essence and significant factors included in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT), such as mediation, internalization, and ZPD. Based on this foundation, the study takes a close look at SCT that is specifically related to second language learning. In addition, the third place in the field of second language learning is applied to explore the participants' social adjustment to the target environment. The last section of this chapter is the discussion of the three relative studies that utilized a sociocultural theoretical framework to research second language learners' social communication with members of the host country.

Chapter three describes the research methodology that is employed to conduct this study. Questionnaire, individual interviews, and the group discussion are the three sources for data collection in this qualitative quasi-case study research. As the theoretical foundation that guides this research, Vygotsky's perezhivanie is also

explained in this chapter, through which the participants' social communication is analyzed from the perspectives of individuals' emotions and the relations between self and environment. Followed by the theoretical framework, the researcher states why narrative analysis is utilized to explore the participants' communicational experiences. This chapter ends with the researcher's positionality and trustworthiness establishment.

Chapter four is composed of three main sections: problems in communication, self-identification, and participants' interpretation of social adjustment. First, this chapter illustrates the most reflected factors that influence the participants' social communication with members of the host country. By exploring their emotions and dynamic *perezhivanie*, the researcher shows how they interpret and react to barriers and problems encountered in their social communication. Second, the participants' self-identification is presented through their interpretation of the label of ESL learners. Third, the concept of "third place" is utilized to explore what extensive social adaptation to the target environment means to the participants and what kind of social adjustment they would like to achieve.

Chapter five is the conclusion. The researcher answers the research questions, using the findings drawn in chapter four. In addition, the limitation of this research is also discussed in this chapter.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sociocultural Theory in Individual Development

Second language acquisition (SLA) has been profoundly theorized from different perspectives, such as linguistic approaches (Chomsky, 1975, 1980; White, 2003), cognitive approaches (Morita, 2000; Piaget, 1960, 1971), and sociocultural approaches (Lantolf, 2009; Thorne, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). Debate about these different approaches has continued for decades, without wholehearted agreement. The difficulties lie not only in the differences in paradigms and theoretical constructions, but are also due to inseparable connections to psychology, linguistics, education, and sociology. In addition, different from first language learning, second language learners have an already-existing system that includes ethnic linguistic, cultural and social knowledge. In this situation, how second language learners deal with the new language and culture, while confronting the old ones, is another factor that makes SLA more complex.

This study focuses on second language learning from the sociocultural perspective, instead of looking at it as an acquisition of new linguistic knowledge alone. In other words, the focus are shifted from language structures or language in mental processes to the use of socially and culturally appropriate language in academic and societal discourses.

Sociocultural theory (SCT) builds a solid foundation to understand human psychological processes and language learning and development, which continued today to have strong influences on classroom teaching and learning today. SCT

sprang from the work of Vygotsky, his collaborators, and Vygotskian's followers in the 1920s and 1930s; they argue that "individual development cannot be understood without reference to the social and cultural context within which it is embedded" (Duschl & Hamilton, 1997). Lantolf and Thorne (2000) stated that "SCT is grounded in a perspective that does not separate the individual from the social and in fact argues that the individual emerges from social interactions and as such is always fundamentally a social being" (p. 213). Social interaction is to individual development what soil is to the growth of plants.

Vygotsky (1978) formulated the genetic law of development on two planes: "First it appears on the social plane, then on the psychological, first among people as an interphysical category and then within the child as an intraphysical category" (p. 57). First, social interactions with others and the outside world are one of the determining factors of individual development. According to John-Steiner (1991), "The routine arrangements and interactions between children and their caregivers and companions provide children with thousands of opportunities to observe and participate in the skilled activities of their culture" (p. 351). Through effective and constant involvement and communication in joint social activities, the novice is provided more opportunities to absorb new knowledge and to practice to be a more proficient and skilled learner.

"First it appears on the social plane, then on the psychological, first among people as an interphysical category and then within the child as an intraphysical category" (p. 57). First, social interactions with others and the outside world are one

of the determining factors of individual development. Zuengler and Miller (2006) argued that Vygotskian SCT is fundamentally concerned with understanding the development of cognitive processes. They point out that “distinctiveness from traditional cognitive approaches can best be highlighted by citing Vygotsky (1979, p. 30): “the social dimension of consciousness [i.e., all mental process] is primary in time and fact. The individual dimension of consciousness is derivative and secondary (p. 38).” Therefore, from a Vygotskian perspective, SCT does not exclude cognitive function. It admits that it is an important component that completes the genetic law of individual development. His SCT contains a strong influence from both social interactions and cognition to individual development.

Mediation and Internalization

Mediation, as a central concept of Vygotsky’s view of cognitive development, means that human beings purposefully interpose tools between them and their environment, in order to modify it and to obtain certain benefits. Minick (1987) defined mediation as “the processes by which socially meaningful activities transform impulsive, unmediated, and natural behavior into higher mental processes through the use of instruments or tools” (Eun & Lim, 2009, p. 15). Lantolf (2000) states that “we use symbolic tools, or signs, to mediate and regulate our relationships with others and with ourselves and thus change the nature of these relationships” (p. 1). He compared tools or artifacts to physical objects, such as paper and pencil, to help remember what to purchase at the store. Mediation, in this case, could be considered as a bridge that

helps to simplify the learning processes and to build a more direct connection between self and the world.

In addition to mediation, another component of SCT is internalization. Based on Vygotsky's genetic rule of development, it asks how individuals transit from the social to the psychological stage and from the interphysical to intraphysical category. Simply stated, the transition processes are processes of internalization. Through participation in social activities, learners can "synthesize several influences into their novel modes of understanding and participation (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). They also argued that "by internalizing the effect of working together, the novice acquires useful strategies and crucial knowledge" (p. 194). Winegar (1997) defined internalization as a negotiated process that reorganizes the relationship of the individual to one's social environment and generally carries it into future performance (Zuengler & Miller, 2006, p. 203). Internalization is a psychological process in which individuals absorb and digest external connections between self and environment and convert them into part of themselves. Gonzalez Rey (2009) understood the concept of internalization as "the unity between external operations and psychical phenomena" (p. 63). "Any higher mental function was external and social before it was internal" (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 197). Vygotsky (1978) conceptualized internalization as an "internal reconstruction of an external operation" (p. 56).

Language is a psychological tool that leads to inner or mental transformation in thinking, such as higher thought and concept development, which is achieved through a process of internalization (Ehrich, 2006). Vygotsky (1986, p. 86) pointed out that

along with the internalization process, there are three forms of speech: “external speech, egocentric speech, and inner speech.” Jones (2009) explored Vygotsky’s concept of internalization, arguing that

Through a process of internalization, external or social speech is transformed from a directly interpersonal, communicative means of regulating and directing the child’s behavior into inner speech, the medium of the child’s own personal consciousness and will and of his or her capacity for purposeful and independent action. (p. 167)

In the initial stage of development, people have to rely on external operations in order to think and behave, being driven by social communication with others. We start learning more skills and strategies to regulate and direct ourselves. In the process, the speech forms also do not remain the same, when internalization is processed and achieved. Vygotsky (1986) perceived language development as a process that begins through social contact with others and then gradually moves inward through a series of transitional stages toward the development of inner speech. External speech, as a starting point, develops to private speech and finally evolves to inner speech that “guides people’s actions purposefully and self-consciously” (Jones, 2009, p. 167). As a member of a family, a group, and a society, engaging in social communication within various discourses trigger not only cognitive and cultural development in the initial stage of one’s life, but also provide sources and preparation for children to take on more responsibilities, tasks, and roles as social participants in the future. Simultaneously, cultural, linguistic, and behavioral models as well as

social rules and constraints are gradually internalized to form and develop the foundation and prototype of their own system of knowledge. SCT balances, external meaningful social interactions and internal self-processes of what has been observed and learned, which illustrates that “knowledge is internalized of social activity” (McLeod, 2007).

Second Language Acquisition from Sociocultural Perspectives

Vygotsky’s genetic law of individual development can also be applied to language learning. Language learning is a process of internalization of external codes, models, and relations, but never is limited to it. Instead, language learning is also a product of social interactions and practices. Valdés and Figueroa (1994) indicated that:

[W]hat it means to know a language goes beyond simplistic views of good pronunciation, “correct” grammar, and even mastery of rules of politeness. Knowing a language and knowing how to use a language involves a mastery and control of a large number of interdependent components and elements that interact with one another and that are affected by the nature of the situation in which communication takes place. (p. 34)

Language learning is learning a system that includes linguistic knowledge as well as embedded cultural and social models, roles, and rules. Exchanging information is the most basic function of language. Language, as one of the higher-level cultural tools, “serves as a buffer between the person and the

environment and acts to mediate the relationship between the individual and the social-material world” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2000, p. 198-199). Language, either the first or second language, is utilized as a tool to mediate and modify the relationship between internal thinking and external environment as well as the connections between self and the world.

It has been widely accepted that second language learning differs from first language learning. One of the major differences is that when individuals learn a second language, they have their native language that is already-existing and mature. “People, irrespective of background, do not come to the language learning task empty handed: in their efforts to figure out how the new language is used by its speakers, they are guided by prior social, linguistic, and general world knowledge” (Wong Fillmore, 1991, p. 52). Due to the experience and knowledge of their first language learning, second language learners are well trained to look for and learn new words and structures that are the most important and that are urgent for survival in their first language. The first language comes between the immediate environment and the second language (Kang, 2007).

From the SCT point of view, thinking and speaking are closely related. Bakhurst (1991) related thinking and speaking and argued that “thought is completed through speaking, and speaking is the manifestation of thought” (Kim, 2011, p. 286). Referring to the processes of internalization, second language learners have the mature and completed system of their ethnic language that functions as inner speech to guide mental functioning and behaving. With deeper exposure to the target

language and more intensive communication with native speakers and the surroundings, it is assumed that knowledge of the target linguistic structures, meanings, pragmatic knowledge, and cultural knowledge go through a transitional stage from social speech to egocentric speech, and finally to inner speech along with the process of internalization. Second language learners may acquire and interpret new information and the new language in a different way through internalization. The relationship between learners' existing first language and newly acquired second language may also undergo changes. Differences in different fields may in turn change the way that second language learners perceive themselves, the world, and the relationship between the two. "When we communicate socially, we appropriate the patterns and meanings of private speech and utilize it inwardly to mediate our mental activity" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2000, p. 202). In an ideal situation, the internalized second language knowledge gradually comes to inner speech that supports and guides second language learners' sophisticated high-level mental functions and actions.

Zuengler and Miller (2006) summarized sociocultural perspectives on language and learning and asserted that "language use in real-world situations is fundamental, not ancillary, to learning" (p. 37). SLA may start with learning grammar knowledge, such as language structures and semantic meanings of words, phrases, and sentences in classroom contexts. However, based on sociocultural approaches, social interactions and participation in meaningful social activities exert strong and determining influences to second language learning. Thorne (2001) argued that language is "socially constructed . . . referential and constructive of social reality" (p.

225). Whether what they have learned in classroom contexts is applicable and sufficient is tested through the usage of second language in the real target environment. SLA is an ongoing learning process in which second language learners understand, learn, and internalize the new language, semantic and pragmatic meanings, and embedded cultural and social knowledge from meaningful participation in a variety of social activities in their everyday lives. With the development of the learning processes, internalized knowledge is applied to the real societal environment as a way to build and negotiate the connection between individuals and external environment. Second language learners are not passive learners of a new language but instead are active participants, mediators, and producers in the process of SLA.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Vygotsky's well-known concept of ZPD assists to achieve a deeper understanding of the significance of social interactions in second language learning and development from the sociocultural perspective. Vygotsky (1978) defined ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Individuals, if working in collaboration with people who are more capable, are able to achieve higher and better performance in internal development. "Learning awakens a variety of internal development processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peer" (p. 90). When working independently, second language learning is limited to

internal psychological processes of linguistic knowledge and concepts. Being isolated from native speakers and the target societal environment, sources of information, observable external operations, and from meaningful input and output in the environment are sharply reduced, which negatively affects learners' development of a second language as well as the perception and interpretation of self and the world during interactions. Zuengler and Miller (2006) argued that ZPD is "the concept of what an individual can accomplish when working in collaboration with others (more) versus what he or she could have accomplished without collaboration with others (less)" (p. 39). Therefore, interaction and collaboration with native English speakers is an effective way to develop skills and strategies related to linguistic, cultural, and social knowledge.

In terms of ZPD, development can be predicated in advance for any given learner on the basis of one's responsiveness to mediation" (Lantolf, 2000). In other words, ESL learners may need external assistance to accomplish one task in the initial developmental stage. However, with collaboration, it is predicted that language learners are highly possible to do the same task successfully without help in the future. Therefore, collaboration and cooperation are considered to be tools that international students can utilize to minimize the gaps between native and target systems of knowledge, and simultaneously, to maximize their capabilities and potential to learn and develop their second language and to build social relationship with others and the environment.

The Third Place

How do we judge if one achieves better adjustment to the target cultural and social life? Are English proficiency and mastery of the target cultural knowledge and social norms the standard? Does thinking and behaving in an American way represent the full involvement in the target country? In the following sections, we could receive answers to these questions through analyzing their narratives of how they consider and interpret their current and ideal social communication.

It seems to be natural to categorize people who speak different languages in the U.S. as native English speakers and nonnative English speakers. Speaking professional English as what native speakers do usually is regarded as a desirable goal that international students pursue. The English language plays an important role in the reproduction of unequal social relations of power between native English speakers and non-native English speakers (Cook, 1988; Derrida, 1989; Naysmith, 1987; Nieto, 2000; Pennycook; Phillipson, 1988). Speaking native or native-like English places international students to a superior stage in academic study, everyday life, and future career. From this point of view, it seems natural to consider that native English is better than nonnative English. To follow this logic, the more international students participate in social communication and social activities, the better they make adjustment to the target environment. However, the plausible classification in language and social communication hardly addresses any aspect of one's subjectivity, emotions, perceptions of self and the environment, and adaptation to the new life, which are the critical factors for exploring the lives of international students in the

target society. Considering the oversimplification, the concept ‘third place’ can be employed to analyze the dynamic and intricate issue of international students’ adjustment to the target societal environment.

In the third place, the learner is no longer in the first-language realm, but has not yet fully reached the English space (Hayat, 2011).” To extend it to cultural fields, according to Bhabha (1994), “third place refers to an in-between place, an ‘interstitial passage between fixed identification which opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy’” (p.4). Pegrum (2008) argues that intercultural competence deemphasizes the acquisition of a native-like identity and encourages the learner to carve out a ‘third place’ (Kransh, 1993) from which he or she will be able to negotiate and mediate between the native and target cultures” (Oshashi, 2009:2). In the L2 learning context, third place is considered as a symbolic ‘meeting place’ where L2 learners of various cultural backgrounds open their minds and freely explore interculturality, thus potentially transcending their culture boundaries (Crozet and Liddicoat, 1999). In third place, neither ethnic nor target language and culture knowledge is overemphasized. To be completely assimilated to the target culture and firmly entrenched in the original cultural are not encouraged and advocated. Instead of abandoning the ethnic culture to fulfill the so-called being native or native-like, the concept of third place emphasizes the negotiation and combination of ethnic and target cultural tradition and features.

To generalize the theoretical framework utilized in this study, the negotiation of the established and newly-acquired meanings is not a problem of “1 + 1 = 2.” The

simple combination of old information and new information cannot explain the complex processes of how international students perceive self, the environment, and lived experiences, in which language, culture, social values, and communication interplay. International students' meaning-making is process that includes changes in mental, material, and social worlds, which is the outcome of the mediation and internalization of newly-acquired knowledge as well as conflicts between their past and present.

Relative Research in the Sociocultural Perspective

In light of SCT, many researchers have conducted studies of how adult ESL students become comfortable, as a result of their development of second language proficiency, with their lives in English-speaking countries. I looked into three studies that utilized a sociocultural theoretical framework to explore this issue.

Hye Yeong Kim's research (2011): ESL students' participation in communities of practice in classroom contexts

Kim viewed learning as a social and cultural act and discussed the factors that cause international graduate students to struggle and the ways in which they deal with such problems in light of SCT. She found that "the limited extent of English skills and their lack of shared enterprise and repertoire in the community" are among the main reasons that limit international students' engagement and communication with native English speakers in classroom discourses. "In addition to linguistic difficulties, aspects of the learning environment, including class interaction, cultural knowledge and

relationships with others, also affect their learning experiences and identity formation”
(p. 291)

To find what obstacles that international graduate students confront in the real-world situation, Kim collected data for one year through multiple methods, including formal and informal interviews, classroom observation and student journals. According to Kim, her participants’ stories were analyzed in keeping with SCT, viewing language as a significant way to control their social and cognitive activities. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, language functions as a tool to mediate the relationships between self and the world (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). However, when applied to SLA, Kim found that “language is often considered a simple way to describe their thoughts rather than as a tool that can mediate their thinking and control their behavior” (p. 286). Considering the close relationship between thinking and speaking, Kim concluded that “the real challenge for international students is not to transfer their already-formed thoughts into sentences in the second language; rather, it resides in the fact that the learning processes are mediated by sociocultural artifacts, in this case, the second language” (p. 286).

Tae-Young Kim’s study of relationships among second language learning, self- perception, and motivation (2009)

Kim (2000) focused on SLA from the perspective of self-perception in second language and motivation of learning L2. She conducted this study by utilizing Vygotsky’s SCT to explore the relationship among second language learning, dynamic L2 learning motivation, and the motivational self system on adult ESL

learners. Based on SCT, “L2 learning motivation is a dynamically evolving processes” (p. 148), which is “constantly influenced by the interaction between L2 learners and their immediate surroundings” (p. 134). She argued that the key for distinguishing L2 learners’ motivation and motive is “the learners’ specificity and persistence of their L2 learning goal” (p. 147). The understanding of the importance of L2 learning and efforts made to connect L2 learners’ life condition to L2 learning and use are critical to the creation of L2 motivation.

Also viewed from an SCT perspective, Kim discussed L2 learners’ self-perception and believed that “language learning is not a simple change of speech medium but gradual transformation from and an L1 self to an L2 self” (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). She also applied Dornyei’s motivational self system to SLA, arguing that appropriate L2 learning experience is significant to transform from ought-to L2 self (“negative consequences coming from not achieving sufficient L2 proficiency” (p. 136) to ideal L2 self (“desirable future images after attaining L2 proficiency” (p. 135).

Methodologically, Kim used longitudinal interviews over a period of 10 months to track the changes that occurred with her participants. The degree of internalization of social external reasons to learn English was positively related to L2 self and L2 learning motivation. Kim found that ought-to self and L2 learning motive both represented less-internalized external social causes to learn English. “Only when L2 learners personalize and internalize the external reasons for ESL learning, can they

possess promotion-based ideal L2 self and transform their L2 learning motive into L2 learning motivation” (p. 148).

Yang and Kim’s (2011) sociocultural analysis of second language learner beliefs

Framed in SCT, Yang explored changes of second language learning beliefs and their impact on L2 learning behaviors in study-abroad contexts. Different from studies that viewed beliefs as stable and isolated phenomena that are extractable from learners’ pencil-and-paper responses (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003), Yang and Kim regarded second language learner beliefs as dynamic, which situated them in the context of social interactions. A socially informed perspective was adopted in their study, which assists to addresses “learner beliefs are viewed as emergent in social contexts and reshaped through specific instances of social interactions” (as cited in Wood, 2003). Considering Vygotsky’s concept of mediation as the foundation, people can use culturally organized symbolic tools to regulate and promote intellectual development. They believed that in addition to the traditional view of seeing learning as an accumulation of knowledge, participation and the transformation can be involved in cognitive development. The processes are termed remediation. Cole and Griffin’s (1986) definition of remediation are used: “a shift in the way that mediating devices regulate coordination with the environment.” Yang and Kim argued that “L2 belief changes can promote L2 remediation processes, because the changes of learner beliefs can invoke a tension between the environments and learner perception, leading to qualitatively different actions” (p. 326).

Yang and Kim recruited two participants who were international students studying in an ESL language school. They used multiple data sources that included autobiographies, journal entries, interviews, and stimulated recall tasks to track the changes of learning beliefs before and after the students' real study-abroad experiences. Guided by Vygotsky's SCT, they found that (a). "learner beliefs are constantly (re)shaped in accordance with L2 goals and in the context of social interactions" and (b). learners' belief changes represent remediation processes between the learner and the L2 learning environment, showing the learner's agentic efforts to reconstruct the relationship between learner and the L2 learning environment" (p. 332). Stories of Yang's two participants show that due to unfamiliarity of the target environment, second language learners may have expectation of what their future study and life would look like. When their expectation mismatches the real-world situation, they may change their original L2 beliefs, which triggers them to rethink the purpose of their second language learning and remediates the way in which they, as social beings as well as second language learners, participate in the social activities in the target environment.

In this study, the three suggestions were adopted to explore how Chinese international students perceive and make meaning of their lived experiences along with second language learning in the U.S. environment. First, in order to explain why Chinese international students commonly share a similar sense of confusion and frustration in the target society, we must understand that in addition to English skills and proficiency, the lack of enterprise and repertoire shared and valued by the

mainstream group as well as the limited access to achieve membership of local communities are important factors that impede them from actively and efficiently participating in social interactions and practices (Kim, H., 2011). Second, the question of “Does motivation influence social interactions?” is discussed in this study. To create motivation that positively drives SLA, whether L2 learners internalize social external causes to learn English is worth mentioning to gain a deep understanding of self-perception and second language development (Kim, T. 2009). Finally, by uncovering the gaps between second language learners’ expectation and feelings and understanding of their studying and living in a real societal environment (Yang & Kim, T, 2011), we can attain a better picture of how Chinese international students mediate and negotiate their thinking and behaving as well as their ethnic and target system of knowledge for better adaptation to their new lives.

CHAPTER III: METHDOLOGY

With the objective to present an in-depth depiction of Chinese international graduate students' meaning-making processes of lived experiences through daily interactions, this study adopted a qualitative design. Then, because there are the multiple social settings where they acquire knowledge and values, the study utilized a quasi-case study methodology and its related techniques as the research framework. The case study methodology traces the processes through which the target students face risks and opportunities and through which they constantly fight, negotiate, modify, and construct self-perception and their understanding of the world in which they live.

This chapter details the methods and how the study was conducted, including the conceptual framework, research methodology, data collection processes and analysis, participants and the context of the study.

Research Methodology

Based on the complexity and diversity of the meaning-making of Chinese international students' daily experiences in the U.S. societal environment, a quasi-case study method is employed in the proposed research for holistic exploration of this issue. "Case studies are analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods." Case study is utilized to ensure "whatever you collect will likely come from a real world setting rather than the research rooms of a university psychology department" and "give a better understanding of the phenomenon in

context” (Willis, 2008. p. 211). Yin (2009) made a similar argument: The case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events—such as individual life cycles, small group behavior, school performance. . . ” (p. 4). Within real life discourses, how the target students behave, express themselves, interact with others, and negotiate and modify the meanings they assigned to their lives are presented.

Willis (2008) stated that “qualitative case studies are a powerful way of developing alternative forms of knowledge—adductive, phonetic, practical, context-dependent and they are also a convenient way of organizing research that involves collecting and interpreting a range of data” (p. 221). Exploring an inherently variable process of making meaning of lived experiences that is filled with negotiation, modification, adjustment, and construction, requires multiple approaches to uncover an all-sided picture of daily communication and practice on the target group of this study. This study utilized questionnaires, interviews, and group discussions to collect data that to some degree fitted the unique strength of its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence (Yin, 2009, p. 11).

Case studies provide researchers with a way of developing an understanding of an issue from various perspectives. How the target group acquires new knowledge from the constant meaning-making processes in social environments and how newly-acquired knowledge constructs their meaning-making processes could be interpreted from diverse ways depending on the different social roles (student, friend,

or organizer) assigned and on the different contexts involved (school, classroom, or community).

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed in sociocultural theory. Two aspects of Vygotsky's theory were used to make up the framework for this study—first, his concept of the system of meaning created by the unification of the thinking and language and second, his concept of *perezhivanie*.

Vygotsky defines and categorizes “meaning” from different perspectives, including lexical meaning, meaning in social contexts, meaning in language use, and meaning that is internally appropriated and incorporated through the sign operation into an individual's system of meaning (Mahn, 2008, p. 26-27). The system of meaning provides a foundation for the analysis of how individuals make meanings of their lived experiences. “Meaning in social contexts” refers to the way in which knowledge and concepts are conveyed in an individual's particular sociocultural context (Mahn, 2008, p. 28). Adult international students have already formed their own ways of thinking and behaving in social settings, which contributes to constructing their established but developing system of meaning. Through active involvement in social activities in the new environment, Chinese international students recognize and gradually generalize the new social customs and values as well as understand the environment to which they are exposed. Generalization of the new system functions to mediate the differences and conflicts that people encounter in their daily lives. Due to vast differences across cultures, it is predicted that Chinese

international students are likely to experience a variety of emotions caused by the gap between their expectations and the reality of their experiences, the changes in social settings in which they are involved, the language that is spoken, and the interlocutors with whom they interact. The tension between students' past histories and the present discourses (Holland, 1998) occur when their original system of meaning is not applicable to the new context. It compels international students to explore the possibilities of rapid adaptation, often acting with confusion and hesitation in their social language use.

Continual learning, internalization, and attempts to adjust to new societal patterns through social practices are considered effective ways to achieve better involvement in the wider target society and to frame their lives. According to Vygotsky (1978), internalization takes place through an internal reconstruction of an external operation. New information, such as the target language, culture, social values, and features of identity, is internalized through everyday usage and social practices in international students' future lives.

An important question is raised: How does the new system coexist and work with the already existing system to guide a person to think and behave as a social group member in a culturally and linguistically different social context? Vygotsky's "system of meaning" mentioned above—internally appropriated and incorporated through the sign operation—is instructive with regard to changes in identity among Chinese ESL students in the United States. According to Vygotsky:

Meaning that is internally appropriated and incorporated through the sign operation into an individual's system of meaning is influenced by the social situation of development—who is interacting with the individual and what is the meaning being conveyed. There is a constant interplay between the individual's system of meaning and the sociocultural system of meaning that is communicated through the sign operation. In analyzing external sociocultural meaning, the focus needs to extend beyond just the meaning of a particular word and include the process through which meaning is conveyed through phrases, sentences, idioms, metaphors, and larger texts and is internalized into the individual's system of meaning. The concept of “sense” is used by Vygotsky to help explain the internalization processes—the processes through which sense both develops and is developed by the system of meaning. (Mahn, 2008, p. 25-26).

Constant interplay between the sociocultural system of meaning and the individual's system of meaning (Mahn, 2008) functions to influence how international students perceive themselves, their past experiences, and the external world. Simultaneously, in the process of adjustment, the lived experiences, either positive or negative, and the environment in turn strengthen and deepen the internalization and understanding of culturally and socially constructed systems of knowledge and values.

The dialectal relationship between the internal thinking processes and external social environment is the core of Vygotsky's concept of perezhivanie. What does 'perezhivanie' mean? We could start with the semantic meaning of this Russian word. Robbins (2007) analyzed the corresponding verb "perezhivat" as to "be able to survive after some disaster has overwhelmed you over-live something." She continues by explaining perezhivanie as "a state of mind in which we are excited, worried, nervous, suffering from something" (No page number).

Stanislavski (1949) explained perezhivanie in the dramatic system as follows:

Perezhivanie is a tool that enables actors to create characters from their own re-lived, past lived-through experiences. Actors create a character by revitalizing their autobiographical emotional memories and, as emotions are aroused by physical action, it is by imitating another's, or a past self's, physical actions, that these emotional memories are re-lived. (No page number)

This metaphor helps us achieve a deeper understanding of what perezhivanie means. Mahn and John-Steiner (2002) described perezhivanie as "the ways in which the participants perceive, experience, and process the emotional aspects of social interaction" (p. 51). We could find striking similarities between actors and international students. International students, when exposed to a new environment, borrow their original system, which include attitudes, identities, linguistic and cultural knowledge, and past experience as foundation to face new situations. On this base, they could mediate, negotiate, and recreate new images or perception of self and new meanings of the world. As Robbins (2007) explained:

(P)erezhivat means, if you look at it closely, that you have passed as if above something that had made you feel pain There, inside of a recollection that we call an “again living” – lives your pain. It is the pain that doesn’t let you forget what has happened. And you keep on coming back to it in your memory, keep living through it over and over again, until you discover that you have passed through it, and have survived. (No page number)

International students, in order to survive, have to put themselves into others’ shoes. They sometimes abandon or hide qualities that do not fit the new environment, and they sometimes add and perform some characteristics that are appreciated and valued by the dominated group in the target society. Going through the process, the students might experience a sense of confusion, frustration, and loss. However, negative emotions or the “pain” may be relieved at some degrees, until they find a way to adjust to the new surroundings and their new lives.

Therefore, we could see that *perezhivanie* is not a concept that describes an invariable and static process or situation. Vygotsky (1999) argued that “the psychology of the actor expresses the social ideology of his epoch and...it also changes in the process of the historical development of man just as external forms of the theater and its style and content change” (p. 240). The individual development is strongly impacted by the changes of the external world. To utilize this argument in exploring the issues of adult international students’ social communication, the participants experience changes in psychology and their understanding of social

communication, when the changes in environment continually exerts influences to them. According to Smagorinsky (2011),

The environment takes on different meanings and plays different roles for the individual at different ages and stages of development, and thus child's relationship to the environmental factors changes over time. (p.337)

Hence, the concept of perezhivanie emphasizes the continuous development of a dynamic change process, in which individuals construct and reconstruct the interplay of emotions, self, and environment, as they come across various barriers and conflicts in social life. In other words, with the accumulation of communicative experiences, the relations between individuals and the environment as well as their perception of the connections are dynamic, which, in turn, determine and guide their performance in everyday social life.

Referring to the essence of the concept of "perezhivanie," Vygotsky (1935) argued that "it is a unit where, on the one hand, in an indivisible state, the environment is represented,...and on the other hand, what is represented is how I, myself, am experiencing this" (p. 5). Perezhivanie is about not only internal thinking processes of perceiving self and the surrounding reality, it also is the dialectical relationship between self and environment.

The emotional experience [perezhivanie] arising from any situation or from any aspect of his environment, determines what kind of influence this situation or this environment will have on the child. Therefore, it is not any of the factors in themselves which determines how they will

influence the future course of his development, but the same factors refracted through the prism of the child's emotional experience [perezhivanie]. (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 338-339)

No matter what changes occur in inner aspects, such as self-perception and the way individuals interpret their past experiences, it has to be closely related to the external environment where individuals continually test whether they could find a better way to survive. An important aspect of perezhivanie is that the way that an individual perceives and experiences the environment also influences the environment. "The environment determines the type of development depending on the degree of awareness of this environment which the child has managed to reach" (Vygotsky, 1935, p. 10). Even for the same environment or situation, different individuals may achieve a different understanding and interpretation, due to their age, familiarity to the environment, and other relevant factors.

Method

Participants

A total of three Chinese international students at the graduate level were recruited for this study. Two of the participants were female and one was male, ranging from twenty-six to thirty-three years old. They have lived in the United States for over three years. They are enrolled in a university located in the U.S. Southwest, majoring in engineering, computer science, and physics. With the completion of their master's degree in China, they decided to come to the United States to pursue doctoral degrees.

Two of the participants had previous experiences living and studying in U.S. universities as exchange students for one year.

Data collection

Because all participants are native Chinese speakers and have proficient English proficiency, different options of languages, such as Chinese, English, and code-switching, were offered to participants when conducting individual interviews and focus-group interviews. Participants may choose the language in which they feel comfortable to speak. By doing so, participants are able to give more thoughtful and deeper insights to describe their experiences and feelings. Second, free language choice also helps to create a more comfortable environment where it is possible to diminish division between the interviewer and interviewees and to maintain closeness and familiarity.

In this study, data were gathered in the following ways: questionnaires, independent interviews, and focus-group interviews.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires are necessary tools to collect general and basic background information for this study. As the starting point of collecting data, the purpose of using questionnaires is to gather straightforward information relating to participants' basic personal information, such as age; year(s) of schooling in a U.S. university; previous English learning and educational experiences; their own judgment of their current English proficiency in speaking, listening, reading and writing; motivation; and academic or career goals.

A questionnaire was distributed to members who have registered in the email list of Chinese International Students Association in a southwest U.S. university. Students on that list were given one week to fill out the questionnaires. The answers assisted the author of this study to measure whether they meet the recruitment criteria of current academic status, English proficiency, and familiarity of the surroundings. In addition, the purpose(s) of pursuing higher education in the United States also provided the researcher with an initial and brief basis of the possible relationship between motivation and the meaning-making process of Chinese international students.

Interviews

Interviews are important sources of data that provide massive amounts of information on how the participants understand and articulate themselves as well as their attitudes towards their external life. The three interviews were conducted throughout the research process, each lasting approximately 70-80 minutes. All interviews were semi-structured, which “provides for consistent investigation of particular topics with the participant and basic introductory questions, but also affords flexibility to engage in natural conversation that provides deeper insight” (Sullivan, 2005, p. 46). As Yin (2003) suggested, one of the techniques that can be used in interviews is that the researcher may ask the respondent to propose insights into certain occurrences and may use such propositions as the basis for further inquiry. The more the interviewees say, the more interviewers attain.

The first interview focused on the general situations of the participants' lives in the United States. Participants described how they generally feel about their current lives so far in America. For instance, have they already passed the transitional period and become used to the target academic and societal lives? Or do they continue to have difficulties fitting in with the target environment and continue to feel a strong sense of separation and disconnectness? Then, the major difficulties and problems they have overcome and those they continue to struggle with also were discussed in this interview. Participants were asked to illustrate the efforts they have made to deal with the problems they have confronted. Additionally, they were asked to deduce and summarize what the primary reasons that precipitate these obstacles. Through the answers provided by participants, the researcher defined the most basic and significant factors that influence Chinese international students' adaptation to the target lives, in both the initial and current stages. From the expressions of their feelings, we may see what and how they face and react to different obstacles in different stages and also what problems are easier or more difficult to be overcome.

The second interview was about the participants' social interactions and social network building in various contexts, such as classrooms, after-school environment, and workplaces. Participants described their communication with both native and non-native English speakers, such as the topics they usually talk about and feelings when conversing, how to address communication breakdowns, and social activities in which they participate during their leisure time. In addition, by asking questions, such as who they prefer to live with or talk to, native English speakers, international

students from other countries, or Chinese peers' clues became apparent to explore how participants build social networks and find ways to learn and understand the local cultural and social norms. Furthermore, participants were asked to illustrate some major differences between the ways they talked to native English speakers and to their Chinese peers. This interview aimed to present how Chinese international students at the graduate level acquire the new system of meaning and values as well as combine their ethnic and target systems through daily interactions and practices in the target society. By asking participants to provide actual examples and experiences of their own and/or of others, participants expressed the most overwhelming factors that prevent fluent communication and active participation in social activities. The researcher gathered information about how the students believed the social roles they play in social interactions and practices as well as how they actually behaved in real-world situations establish and make meaning of their lives.

The third interview focused on the expectations of participants' social lives inside and outside of school, on a description of the real circumstance, and on the major differences between the two. The theme of the second interview is "gaps" – the gaps between Chinese international graduate students' expectations and the real situations in terms of the comprehension of cultural and social norms, social environment, and social status. First, the researcher asked participants to describe the expectation of the schedule of a typical day, and then their expectation of an ideal social life in the United States. Through description and comparison, participants found similarities and differences of their social lives between expectations and reality. Second,

focusing on differences, participants said whether they have the willingness to close the gaps, what they have done, and how their efforts work to minimize the gaps. Another focus in this interview was about participants' self-positioning. The participants first were asked to identify their social status and then whether they match that their self-identified social status. In addition, they described how they felt about being an international student or a second language learner. As a follow-up question, participants answered how they perceived and felt about the word "ESL learner" or "international student" and whether they have any negative experiences or inequality caused by the labels.

In addition to their answers to the specific prepared questions, the researcher asked participants to expand the interviewee's horizon to narrate relevant experiences and stories. For instance, the research asked whether they have heard and seen relevant examples or stories of others. Then, the research asked questions like— how they think of their stories or if they were in their situation, how would they react and respond to the specific event. When viewed from the perspective advocated by Walford (2001), every person who is interviewed carries their own construction of what "an interview" actually is. He compares interviews to a talk show where "the 'host' gradually encourages the 'guest' to tell interesting stories about themselves or their friends and acquaintances" (p. 85). The role may be considered one of an 'informant' rather than a respondent (Yin, 2003). Certainly, the premise is that the extended and flexible information provided by interviewees must be related to the topic being discussed.

To create a comfortable and relaxed environment where participants can freely narrate their experiences and feelings, participants have a choice of speaking in Chinese or in English. This choice can encourage participants to talk without considering whether they express themselves correctly and thoroughly in English.

Participant Observation

Participant observation is another significant method in case study research, which was utilized in the study and contributed greatly to data collection. Macionis and Plummer (2005) defined participant observation as “a form of sociological research methodology in which the researcher takes on a role in the social situation under observation” (p. 65). Participant-observation is a special mode of observation in which people are not merely a passive observer but are playing a role during the process for better understanding the context and the phenomenon. Sitting in a corner and monitoring participants’ talk and behavior may cause discomfort, or even wariness, which restrains informants from opening up and expressing themselves. By assuming the role of a real participant during the process, participants’ feelings of being monitored and overheard can be released at different degrees.

There was one participant observation conducted throughout the research process, which was an hour and a half. The four participants in this study were gathered for a group discussion to share and discuss how they perceive and make meaning of what they have come across recently in classrooms, workplace, or other off-campus contexts with native and nonnative English speakers. Prior to holding the group discussion, the researcher briefly introduced the theme of the meeting to

discuss how participants situate and identify themselves in the target society through different language use, such as Chinese, English, or code-switching, in various social discourses. During the discussion, each participant was responsible to answer every question. Because participants can hear others' responses to the questions, they might have different opinions and attitudes about the same event. In this case, between each question, the researcher gave the group five to ten minutes for open discussion, in which participants were free to exchange feelings, express agreement or disagreement, argue, or conduct in-depth discussion. Participants can choose to speak either Chinese or English, or may code-switch. The group discussion was arranged during either lunch time or dinner time in students' lounges, cafes, or restaurants; the session lasted approximately an hour and a half. The entire process of the group discussion was recorded.

The author of this study acted as a participant during the group discussion sessions and was responsible for asking questions to the whole group and encouraged participants to express and argue. The roles of peripheral-member-research that means to "observe and interact closely enough with members to establish an insider's perspective, without participating in the activities of the core group" (Alder, 1994), were utilized in this study. The first principle of being a qualified observer is to be objective, to avoid blending personal bias and thoughts to the real situations. Objectivity cannot be guaranteed under complete participation with abundant chances of self-articulation and performance. Moreover, the substance of data collection is always to listen and to collect the participants' voice. Therefore, being a participant in

the conversation for the researcher does not mean engaging in every activity completely. Rather, it takes serious consideration to know how far and how deep an observer can go during the process of observation.

Methods of Data Analysis

When dealing with huge amounts of data collected from a variety of sources, determining how and when to organize, code, and interpret is significant, and to some extent, determines the findings. Raw data must be managed according to a methodical, logical, and rational system for analysis and interpretation. Yin (1994) argued that “data analysis consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating, or otherwise recombining the evidence to address the initial propositions of a study” (p. 109). The process of analyzing data can be described as the combination of top-down and bottom-up: critical information that represents the essence of the issue is picked up from general to specific; the specific units of focused messages are synthesized to form a general pattern and categorization to induce commonalities and findings.

This study depended on Yin’s analytic strategies for data analysis. According to Yin (2003), analytic strategy aims to “treat the evidence fairly, produce compelling analytic conclusions, and rule out alternative interpretation” (p. 111). Suter (2012) stated that “making good sense of data as it comes in (its interpretation) is a process of organization, reduction, consolidation, comparison, and reconfiguration” (p. 360). Facing a large amount of raw data, how to generalize information that is the most representative of a theme or supportive of an argument is the key factor during data analysis.

One of the main purposes of this study is to explore the gaps between Chinese international students' expectations and reality of their social communication with native English speakers. A timeline can be set up to compare and contrast their previous and current feelings of their social interactions after years of exposure to the target environment. The moment that they arrive in the United States can be determined as the time boundary. Based on this, the data was divided into two units: The first unit was Chinese international students' expectations of what their social interactions would be before their arrival in the United States. The second unit was their real social interactions after their arrival. In addition, in order to explore how the three participants make meanings of their lived experiences, it is critical to consider how their native and target systems of knowledge are negotiated and constructed.

Techniques of data analyzing followed five steps: (a). get to know your data, (b). focus the analysis, (c). categorize information, (d). identify patterns and connections between categories, and (e). interpretation—bring it all together (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). First, I read transcribed data collected from the questionnaire, independent interviews, and group discussion in order to ensure a complete understanding of participants' narration. Through the process of reading and rereading, possible categories, such as social interactions, self-identification, and social network building were created. The next step was to create similar patterns. For instance, when discussing the factors that influence participants' adaptation to the target circumstance, participants might consider some factors as the main reasons that cause problems. Then, looking for possible relationships between categories was

another main task. Whether one category can explain the other, one can determine the other, and whether one is positively or negatively related to another were the focus in this step. Finally, the data was interpreted from a comprehensive perspective by considering the established categories, patterns, and internal connections.

Suter (2012) stated that “making good sense of data as it comes in (its interpretation) is the process of organization, reduction, consolidation, comparison, and reconfiguration” (p. 360). Data collection and analysis do not have to follow the sequence of collecting first and coding second. Rather, a better method of data management and analysis is to make the two processes occur simultaneously (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam, 2009).

Narrative Analysis

How do we track if there is any change in Chinese international students’ original and current perception of making meaning of their lived experiences? To answer the questions, it is important to listen to the participants’ stories to understand what they have experienced and how they have been changed. Mahn (2012) argued that people use “internal narratives to explore their own internal and external worlds as they develop their identities and construct their worldviews.” According to Labov (1972), “Narrative is considered as one verbal technique for recapitulating experience—in particular, a technique of constructing narrative units that match the temporal sequence of that experience” (p. 4). Digital Humanities (2000) said:

A narrative is some kind of retelling, often in words, of something that happened. The narrative is not the story itself but rather the telling of the

story. . . . While a story just is a sequence of events, a narrative recounts those events, perhaps leaving some occurrences out because they are from some perspective insignificant, and perhaps emphasizing others. (para. 4)

Fina (2003) summarized previous pioneering studies and argued:

Prototypical narratives, or stories, are narratives that tell past events, revolve around unexpected episodes, ruptures or disturbances of normal states of affairs or social rules, and convey a specific message and interpretation about those events and/or the characters involved in them.

(p. 14)

The way Fina defined narrative expands narrative from the simple focus on storytelling itself and the narrator's self-concept and internal psychological expression to how narratives relate to social rules and how narrators apply cultural and social knowledge to attain an interpretation of stories.

According to Pradl (1984), narratives facilitate the construction and maintenance of knowledge of the world – meaning making – and are “the repository of our collective wisdom about the world of social/cultural behavior; they are the key mediating structures for our encounters with reality” (as quoted in Mahn, 2012).

People tell who they are and what they do in stories. Narratives, in addition to the functions of information exchange and personal analysis at the psychological level, also provide a context and opportunity for narrators to position themselves and others, and to modify, negotiate, and construct meanings of their experiences and the external world.

Narratives provide useful data because individuals often make sense of the world and their place in it through a narrative form (Feldman & Skoldberg, 2004). Narrative can be loosely defined as a sequence of event, experiences, or actions with a plot that ties together different parts into a meaningful whole (Franzosi, 1998). Therefore, narrative analysis is the perfect methodology to uncover the ongoing process, in which individuals relate the barriers and challenges they encounter in the target social life. Through narratives, we can tie their examples and the fragment of their stories to draw a whole picture of how they make meaning of their lived experiences through social communication. In addition, narrative analysis enables the researcher to study how the target group of students continually modifies and reconstructs their new system of meaning and perezhivanie as the length of stay increasing. According to Feldman & Skoldberg (2004), through the events the narrative includes, excludes, and emphasizes, the storyteller not only illustrates his or her version of the action but also provides an interpretation of evaluative commentary on the subject. Narrative analysis plays a significant role to track how the participants' perceptions of self and their experiences of the environment changes and how these changes influences their performance in social communication and engagement.

Research Positionality

What are my own attitudes toward the issue being researched? This might be the most common question asked by researchers to themselves. The answers can be employed to compare and contrast with the participants in the research process. At different degrees, the researcher's own background and preconceived ideas may

impact on the study being conducted. By sharing similar linguistic, cultural, and ethnic background knowledge with participants, Chavez (2008) believed that “insiders can understand the cognitive, emotional, and/or psychological precepts of participants as well as possess a more profound knowledge of the historical and practical happenings of the field” (p. 481). At the risk of being suspicious of objectivity, as a member of the in-group, I am more able to detect connotations hidden in words and nonverbal expressions. This assists me to put myself in the participants’ position and attain a better understanding of their feelings and situations in which they are involved.

However, the perceived cultural, ethnic, and racial knowledge may also obstruct the research process and even the final results. The researcher’s interests can overshadow the interests of those participating in the research (Milner, 2007). This can be compared to one’s first language, which plays both a positive or negative role in second language learning. Similarly, the findings of a study also, to some extent, may be influenced by the researcher’s view of the issue, with one’s own preconceptions and experiences, as well as with the roles the research plays in the research process. Ganga and Scott (2006) used the term “diversity in proximity,” which effectively means this:

As insiders, researchers are better able to recognize both the ties that bind us and the social fissures that divide us. Our insider status can make us accepted within the group, but it can also affect the way in which others perceive us within this relatively close social world. (p. 2)

Being a Chinese international student, I have similar experiences with the participants recruited in this study, such as going through the transitional period, feeling homesick, and studying and living with stress and a sense of separation and marginalization. However, how these participants overcome these problems and connect to the surroundings may be different from mine. I don't use my experiences as a standard to judge whether they deal with the obstacles in the right, appropriate, and effective ways. Throughout the study, my position is as a patient listener and observer who objectively retell the stories by using the participants' words without making assumptions, judgment, and over interpretation. I show utmost respect and understanding to participants without bias. I try to understand the participants' experiences through their perspectives, not mine. In short, maintaining objectivity is always the first policy during the entire research process. A true reflection of participants' lives and voices through the researcher's neutral stance is the foundation of research.

Trustworthiness

To increase the credibility of this research, I made a voluntary statement of my own experiences in the interviews to ease the participants' nervous emotion. This is especially important when the participants had concerns to illustrate their negative experiences. Sharing my own experiences contributed to close the gaps between the participants and the researcher. It also created relaxed communicational atmosphere, in which the participants were more likely to express their true emotions and the whole picture of their stories.

Then, to make the data more credible, the author sent the copies of the transcript to each of them for member checking. They were encouraged to examine whether the transcript were correctly and thoroughly represented. All the interviews were mainly conducted in English, except when they had difficulties in articulating themselves in English. Code-switching between the two languages assisted the participants to express themselves accurately and completely. Also, code-switching minimized the errors caused by translation. Their narratives in Chinese and the corresponding English translation were all highlighted for participants' member checking. Besides the transcript, the author also sent the conclusion parts to the participants for comments and member checking. The participants were asked to comment on whether the findings were comprehensively represented their experiences, emotions, and claims in an appropriate manner.

A group interview was also conducted, in which the participants exchanged their experiences, attitudes, and emotions. The three participants were acquainted with each other. In an open and relaxed environment, they discussed similarities and differences of their experiences and emotions as well as expressed agreement and disagreement with each other's words, which increased the credibility of data.

To get rid of researcher's bias, a volunteer from Tai Wan who had also lived in the United States for over 4 years helped with data categorization. The worksheet with some of the participants' narratives that were randomly selected and various themes was sent to her for member checking. She was asked to categorize the quotes into

proper themes. The researcher and the volunteer were quite the same on the data categorization.

As a Chinese international student at the graduate level who has been exposed to the American sociocultural environment for several years, I count the participants' communicational experiences as a personal favor. As mentioned in the previous section of research positionality, as a researcher, taking neutral ground is critical to avoid personal bias. I have clearly noticed that the participants' experiences and emotions cannot be interpreted and valued by simply applying my own personal experiences. I have kept this idea in mind throughout this research.

Chapter Summary

This study, framed in SCT, considers the processes of making meanings as dynamic and ongoing, which is strongly influenced by social interactions. Utilizing quasi-qualitative case study research, the study aims to explore Chinese international students' meaning-making of their everyday experiences and composition in relation to second language development and social practice in complex discourses. When conducting this study, the insideness positionality of the author played both positive and negative roles to data collection and data analysis. The researcher minimized the possible bias caused by the identity of the insider of the Chinese culture. The research also showed full respect and understanding to participants as well as to their beliefs and attitudes without bias.

CHAPTER 4 DATA ANALYSIS

Social communication is essential for international students to survive in a new cultural and social environment. International students bring into full play their initiative to interact with host-country peers to satisfy various demands, such as academic learning, daily task performance, and the building of interpersonal relationships. Adjusting to the target environment is determined by a variety of influential factors. A great deal of research has been conducted to illustrate that international students share common difficulties in the target environment, such as pressure from course work, homesickness and loneliness (Kennedy, 2002; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002); language deficiency; and isolation from the majority group of people (Leder & Forgasz, 2004; Will, 2016). By exploring international students' participation in social communication, we can achieve a deeper understanding of how international students learn and practice newly acquired knowledge in real-world contexts; how they interpret the relationship between self, others, and the external environment; and how they make meaning of their daily life experiences.

This chapter includes three sections: influential factors that impede social communication, such as English language and cultural knowledge; *perezhivanie* in social communication; and self-labelling. The chapter started with the participants' learning and adoption of the English language and with the target cultural knowledge in the process of social communication with the host country representative, which are the two most reflected factors that impact social communication in their narratives. Followed by international students' negotiation and mediation of the two

systems of cultural knowledge, the interplay between emotions and the environment, based on the concept of Vygotsky's *perezhivanie*, also was discussed in this chapter. In the participants' stories, the two factors—self and environment—are contacted, influenced and, to some extent, are a cause-and-effect of each other. In addition to the mutual influences between the two factors, how participants process emotions and how emotions affect their future task performance in daily life also are depicted. Moreover, how participants treat the same issue in different ways was addressed in this section, such as responses to interlocutors' negative attitudes, being lost in communication, and less common topic sharing. In the last section of this chapter, the author illustrated how the participants built their awareness and their interpretation of how they labelled themselves and how they defined an ideal life as their length of stay in the target country grows along with the development of the target environment knowledge.

The focus of this chapter is to explore how Chinese international graduate students make meaning of their life experiences. One direct quote from each participant that summarizes and reflects the general perception and attitudes toward their social communication launches each subject's story. In the following sections, this study concentrates on the factors that improve and impede participants' social communication, how social communication benefits and affects the participants' sociocultural adjustment to the target environment, and how they perceive their roles and relations with their external environment in social communication.

Language Proficiency and Social Communication

It goes without saying that significant English proficiency is critical to the successful adjustment of international students to American cultural and societal life. According to Hayes and Lin (1994), language barriers negatively impact international students from participating in social interactions with American peers and local communities. Several questions are raised: How does English proficiency affect daily communication? How do international students handle emotions that are generated in social communication? What influences do emotions exert on social communication?

Based on the narratives of the three participants, English proficiency is reported to be one of the most common and critical influential factors that determines the effectiveness of their social communication with native English speakers. In this section, this study compared and contrasted the participants' social communication related to their English learning and practice in academic and social discourses.

Lee: 'Language is still a visible barrier.'

Lee is a male graduate student who has resided in the United States for more than six years. (The names of the subjects in this study have been changed to protect their anonymity.) Prior to embarking on his Ph.D. program, he once spent six months in the United States as an exchange student. After that, he returned to China and obtained a bachelor's degree in computer science. After graduation, he decided to return to the United States to further his education to accommodate his future career.

"I thought my English is quite well before I came to the United States, because I passed the IELTS and GRE test with good scores. And also, I was an exchange

student and lived here for half a year. I know I may have some problems to speak and write, but I think I can understand what American people say. . . . I mean, at least, most of what they say. I think I can speak good English after I stay in the United States for a couple of years.”

In general, prior to his arrival in the United States, Lee had enough confidence in his English proficiency to cope with daily tasks. Yet, he also had concerns about expressing himself when taking part in social communication with native English speakers and about recognizing the differences between English in daily communication and the English he was exposed to in the exams he had taken and passed prior to moving to the United States as well as in the language he had been exposed to in English textbooks he had read and studied. Therefore, Lee predicted that he may experience difficulties in learning and using English. He anticipated that his English proficiency would improve over time with exposure to the target linguistic environment and with regular practice and participation in daily social communication. However, what he anticipated and what he encountered were not the same. The following statements reveal how the language barriers affected Lee’s everyday social communication and life.

“I think my English is quite well and actually I can understand every . . . almost everything . . . most of what they teach . . . the lecture in the classroom. So I think I get more and a greater confidence in class. But in chatting, sometimes I am not sure what they mean. And also, I found I cannot even find a single word to express myself appropriately in some cases. . . . I thought my English is sufficient

to communicate before I came to the United States. But sometimes in restaurants, even if the waiter shows me the menu and I see the ingredients, I still don't know what the dish is about. Even worse, I still don't understand after the waiter's explanation. That's embarrassing. This is because I am not familiar with the words of dishes or ingredients they say. So I think this is all about language ... I mean the words. ”

“I think my English is much better than before. At least, I am not afraid of speaking English. I can understand American people, but sometimes it is still hard to find appropriate expressions or words to express my feelings. It is different from Chinese language. You can use some slangs, idioms, or popular internet language. I can only say or describe something in a very simple way. I mean I cannot use very special or vivid words and phrases to describe something to make it more interesting. I think my English is still a visible barrier in the communication process”

Lee said he had made progress in his English proficiency after frequent practice with native English speakers. However, he also admitted that the English language is still the main barrier that impedes his social communication, even after six years of exposure to the English language environment. He evaluated his English proficiency in various contexts, showing strong confidence in his academic English, but less confidence in daily social communication. When conversing with native English speakers, Lee's undermined self-confidence can be observed. When ordering food in a restaurant, he said he was disappointed with his English proficiency. Even more

frustrating, he said, was his lack of ease in expressing himself and communicating with others. Frustration is also caused by the gap in the English proficiency between Lee's expectation and real situations. In addition, he said he realized that his English proficiency did not improve rapidly by continued practice and longer exposure to the target linguistic environment, as he had expected before his arrival in the United States. He continued to have difficulty with choosing appropriate and accurate words and expressions.

This is not to say that Lee has made no progress in his English proficiency. With the increasing length of residence in the United States, his English has improved. More importantly, he overcame his nervousness when speaking English. He had a greater confidence in his English linguistic knowledge and communicative competence, confirming his improvement in English proficiency.

However, a relatively limited vocabulary, he said, is still the primary factor that contributes to the challenges he faces in social communication. When he used the Chinese language, he said, he could speak with confidence and richness, using slangs and idioms in Chinese. However, in trying to speak English, he had difficulties in finding appropriate words and expressions to articulate himself, not to mention that his vocabulary lacked vitality and richness. To Lee, language was a way not only to share a message, but it was a way to convey one's feelings, life attitudes, and personal characteristics. To him, the richness and diversity of language stimulated interlocutors' interest and initiatives to participate in interactions with him, which benefited his social communication and the building of interpersonal relationships.

However, due to his deficiency, his language performance was limited to simple descriptions of issues rather than the articulation of emotions and reflection of personal characteristics, which to some extent plays a negative role in his social communication.

Ming: 'It is a learning process.'

Ming is a female graduate student in physics and has been in the United States for four years. After she received her bachelor's degree, Ming decided, without hesitation, to pursue a doctoral degree in the United States.

“The decision (of studying abroad) was made at the moment when I got the offer. So I was happy about I got some place to go. I was little worried because I have never been there. It is totally a new environment for me. I wasn't hesitating, but I was a little worried, because it is my first time going abroad. I think my English is OK. I am not in English major, and I worried about if I can express myself clearly. I am still nervous when I speak English, although I have learned English since junior school. But I still made decision to go to the United States for a doctoral program.”

Ming's determination to pursue a doctoral degree was not weakened by her worries of her deficiency in English and by the new environment in which she found herself. She worried about whether she could articulate herself in English when she would speak with native English speakers. She said that before she traveled to the United States, she was nervous about speaking English, which shows that she lacked confidence in daily communication. She likened the challenge of learning everyday

English in social communication to the challenge she once faced in learning what she called academic English. The two are very different, she said.

“Language in class is not so difficult, because you know most terminologies. But when I make presentation in class, I am nervous. I don’t know how to talk at this moment. When I was thinking, I could not speak well.”

“The part that would be really difficult for me is I am always thinking the most accurate expressions to express myself. So I am a little bit nervous. It happens all the time, actually. When I can’t find the word, I try to describe it with simple words. I will try to give some hint. If they can find the answer, that will be good. If they couldn't figure out what I was trying to say, I feel a little embarrassed and frustrated. After the conversation, I will remember what they said about the word that I don't know. It is a kind of learning process.”

“There are always misunderstanding. Sometimes I couldn't figure out, because I’m not sure what the word really means and what exactly they are talking about. Sometimes if it really matters, I will try to ask, like, ‘Can you explain what that word mean?’ But if it is nothing important, people just get over it very quickly. I will choose to ignore it.”

Ming said there clearly was a difference in the proficiency of her academic English, everyday English, and conversational English. She had confidence in her academic English, except when she made presentations in English in her class. She had less confidence in the ability of intercultural communicative. It was a lack of ability in processing English input and output simultaneously, she said, that impeded

her social communication. Her deficiencies in English contributed to her nervousness and lack of confidence. Ming's attempts of making clarification aim to make herself understandable and maintain effective and fluent communication.

Ming's nervousness in class presentations and in social communication has continued and has not improved much, even after years of exposure to the target linguistic environment. It is conceivable that her nervousness exacerbated her self-articulation and social interaction. Although Ming said it embarrassed her that she had problems in communication, it seems that she did not seriously struggle with the issues. Instead of being strongly influenced by frustration and nervousness, she converted the negative emotions to power that motivated her to improve her English proficiency by learning English from her interlocutors. From this perspective, it was the communication challenges that boosted her English language development. She considered it as a learning process and realized the challenges were inevitable. It was not essential, she came to realize, that it was not necessary that she fully comprehend every verbal interaction. That attitude helped her maintain a manageable comfort level in social communication, in which she did not feel a great deal of pressure.

Shan: 'I was trained to speak English in this way.'

Shan is a female graduate student in computer science and has lived in the United States for three and a half years. Prior to embarking on her graduate studies, she was an exchange student in the United States for a half year. She decided to continue her studies at the same university where she had been enrolled as an

exchange student. Here is how she described her journey of trying to improve her English prior to leaving China.

“I know the first thing I have to deal with is English. Not just for the entrance exam I need to pass for American university application, but the future study and life in the United States I knew I will go abroad for my study after graduation, so I think I paid much more attention to English learning than the other college students. I know my English is far from enough, but I think people will understand me. I may not speak perfect English, but I am easy to be understood. If I stay in the United States for a long time and I get a lot of chances to talk to American people, I think I will make progress.

To adjust more easily to the academic environment and sociocultural life in the United States, Shan tried to prepare well for dealing with the English language. She felt confident in expressing herself and in how she would manage daily tasks in English. She believed that her English proficiency would be enhanced as she communicated more and more with native English speakers. Prior to her arrival in the United States, she realized the necessity and importance for international students of social interaction with host-country peers as a key factor in adjusting to a new life. Such a realization indicated that she had a clear perception of what she needed to do to improve her English proficiency in social environments.

She described the factors that impeded her progress in improving her English as well as identified the factors that affected her English proficiency in social communication.

“At the beginning, the most difficult part is the language problem. Even though I learn years of English before I came here, in reality, people usually speak very . . . in a very fast speed. So I cannot always know exactly what they mean. You know, you need to invest your time in getting used to that kind of speed. This is the initial problem I encounter. But even for now, I think I have made great progress, but sometimes, I still cannot catch every word. “When I talk to my colleagues or classmates, especially when I try to describe something, I feel it is very hard for me. For us who aim to pursue an academic degree in the United States, we are usually trained by explaining a fact, not describing a story or something like that. For example, I want to explain a question in my area, like a model. I won’t have any problem at all, because I have been trained for several years. But if asked to tell a story . . . it is hard for me. It probably is because our description is too dry. There is no way for me to vividly tell a story.”

Shan also came to a realization similar to that of Lee and Ming about the differences of English proficiency in academic contexts and in everyday, social contexts. One of the benefits of her previous training, she said, was that she had some confidence in her academic English. However, it was the very academic English that blocked the ease with which she was able to communicate socially in the United States. The way she would explain a model in academic English was not workable when she attempted to articulate herself in social contexts. Shan found that she sometimes was obsessed by the challenges of trying to accurately and thoroughly express herself. The word “dry” does not only mean the lack of ability in vividly

describing an event; but also in expressing emotions in social interaction. Shan considered communication with native English speakers to be like stating facts in strict academic discourse, rather than sharing information, emotions, and attitudes that one exchanges in casual conversation. Such “dry” English may decrease both parties’ willingness and interests in participating in conversations, which no doubt impedes her efforts to feel comfortable in social situations. The differences between the English that Shan mastered and the English used by native English speakers in actual linguistic environment contributed to hardships for her in her thoughts and emotional expression. She found herself continually trying to analyze how her English deficiency impacted her social communication. For example:

“I think it is mainly about my English that I cannot make conversations long. If I communicate with Chinese people, maybe at the very beginning, I may not know the person whom I talk to, but I’m confident to make the conversation better even when I may say something wrong to them. But when talk to Americans, and I say something wrong or some words that offend her, I mean unintentionally, it is hard to explain it. It is hard to imagine that I fix the problem or misunderstanding by my problematic language proficiency.

Shan ascribed her English deficiency as the primary reason for why she cannot conduct long conversations with native English speakers. Causing misunderstanding and making unintentional offensive remarks worried Shan when she conversed with native English speakers. With those fears always present, it was no surprise that conversations in which she engaged might not be conducted in a natural and relaxed

fashion. Shan admitted that she believed she could not freely express her attitudes and emotions, because of the self-imposed pressure of trying not to make mistakes.

Compounding the anxiety when she realized she had made a mistake was that she lacked the confidence to explain and clarify herself. The more Shan talked, the more worried she was about making even more mistakes. From this perspective, it is understandable that Shan would rather engage in brief conversations to minimize the likelihood of making mistakes.

In summary, all three participants realized that English deficiency is one of the most influential elements that plays a negative role in social communication. Having a relatively limited vocabulary, which all three participants said contributed to the challenges of improving their English proficiency, affected their exchange of attitudes and emotions, all of which affected the building of personal relationships.

The three participants also said they had unpleasant communication experiences, due precisely to their English deficiencies. Facing difficulties and problems in social communication, they said, triggers frustration, embarrassment, and anxiousness. Such reactions had them questioning their English proficiency as well as their abilities and skills in social communication. It goes without saying that self-doubt and self-denial affect fluency and one's confidence in subsequent interaction with members of a host country. Additionally, fears of making mistakes limited their language performance in social communication. The adverse effects were demonstrated not only in their fluency in social interactions but also in the depth of conversations and their initiatives in social communication.

All three participants predicted that initially that they would experience difficulties in English learning and practicing English. Yet they also believed that as their knowledge and comfort level with English and with the U.S. social environment developed, their English proficiency would improve. However, they continued to experience greater challenges with their English deficiency than they anticipated, even as they had spent more time in their target environments in the United States. Although all have made progress in English proficiency through continual practice in various discourses, speaking English with host-country peers is still a major barrier that impedes their self-articulation and sociocultural adaptation.

English deficiency not only influences information exchanging, but also the true display of one's personality. Two of the three participants ascribed the shortage of variety of topics as one of the reasons of them not being able to carry on long and deep conversations with native English speakers. They said they lacked the ability to make their words attractive and interesting, which decreased their interlocutors' willingness to engage in conversations. In other words, the efforts they made to achieve the accuracy and richness of their language aimed to motivate their interlocutors to participate in interaction with them. The versatility and descriptive nature of one's language often reflects personality and therefore, is closely related to the building of personal relationships.

Cultural Adaptation and Social Communication

In addition to English language proficiency, cultural adaptation is a common barrier that international students must overcome in their host country. Many studies

have shown that cultural differences exert a strong influence on international students' adjustment to their new cultural environment (Kim, 2001, 2008; Berry, 2005; Ward, 2008). Rooted in one's blood, international students become accustomed to performing daily tasks by adopting their ethnic cultural knowledge into their new cultural environment. It is understandable and foreseeable that persistence of adopting ethnic norms and rules in a different sociocultural environment can cause problems. Therefore, adoption and adaptation of new cultural norms, along with the maintenance of one's original cultural system, is a great challenge that international students face in their host cultural society. Cultural adaptation is one of the most common challenges reflected by the participants of this study. In the following narratives, the participants demonstrate the close connections between culture and social communication. Cultural differences and cultural conflicts are inevitable, and they are experienced by different participants at different degrees.

Lee: 'Culture is the biggest barrier for me.'

Lee noted that differences in American and Chinese cultures are one of the most difficult barriers to overcome in his sociocultural communication and adaptation to his life in the United States. Cultural differences, he noted, would be inevitable. To rise to the challenge of coping, he tried to prepare prior to the United States.

“I went to some websites to see what the students already in the United States do, what they think, and what they share with each other about dos and don'ts. And then, I have some classmates in the U.S. . . . I asked them about suggestions about the American culture. At first, maybe you think you can overcome it, but

after you experience it, you are going to find out, actually, it is not what you thought. The [cultural] differences still exist, even after living in the United States for several years.

“I think the most challenging thing . . . is how to get involved in the U.S. culture. We grow up in a different culture, so that the way we express ourselves is different and very hard to change. The ways we are doing things and thinking are totally different from people living here. The cultural differences still exist, even after living in the United States for several years. I cannot avoid it. I think it is quite normal for international students. Before I come to the United States, I knew there is a pretty big gap between cultures.”

Lee prepared by asking people who had lived in the United States. He thought that he could achieve assimilation in the American culture after a certain length of time and exposure to the host cultural environment. Yet after several years' residence, he realized the assimilation would not occur as rapidly as he had hoped. He believed that learning and applying the target culture norms in real-life situation seemed to not have a direct connection with time of residence in the target country. Over time, he did achieve a clear realization that the gaps between his ethnic and target cultures cannot be eliminated, only minimized.

“Those (cultural differences) are all tiny things in your life, like food. . . .I think it is very hard to take all these new and different cultural things as common and natural as your native one. My native cultural knowledge is deep in my heart and gene, which is something that cannot be changed. I have got used to the way of

how I think and act in my native culture. I have grown up with the Chinese culture. If asking me to accept some new things, like new ways of thinking, attitudes toward some events, and lifestyle, I, sometimes, may resist these new things from my bottom of my heart. It is out of my control . . . I mean unconsciously. I think there is no necessity to force myself to make some changes to adapt to the new environment.”

Lee admitted cultural differences exist in every corner of his daily life. It felt unnatural, he said, to try to adopt American cultural norms when performing daily tasks. The strong influence of his ethnic culture, he believed, was the reason for the difficulty in adapting. It was the unconscious resistance to adoption and application of the target cultural norms that pulled against his ethnic culture. Obviously, Lee experienced hardship in processing and negotiating the ethnic and target cultural systems of knowledge. The following quote shows how his ethnic cultural knowledge affected his social communication and life.

“I share a house with other students from the United States and Vietnam, when I just got here. I had a very big argument about cooking with the landlord. She was quite picky. She didn’t allow me to cook Chinese dishes in her house, because the cooking smoke makes her house dirty. But I think I have the right to cook any kind of dishes. When I argue with her, I speak very loudly. I think I need to fight for my rights and I am really very angry. But the landlord thinks I speak loudly because I lack of self-confidence. Speaking loudly is to hide my mistake, which shows my lack of self-confidence. I . . . don’t know what to say. I mean I don’t

understand why she thinks so. And later, I guess it is maybe cultural differences.

So we couldn't understand each other.”

He continued the story with obvious complaining emotion:

“I am Chinese. I can only cook Chinese food, otherwise, I have to eat in the restaurant or call out. At first, I tried to cook less. For example, I only cook at weekend. For the other days, I ate outside. I tried to explain to her and guarantee I will clean it if I make the kitchen dirty. But she still didn't let me cook. I think I gave in to her, but she was still very mean to me. We had a lot of argument and even went to a lawyer. She didn't understand that is how to cook Chinese. I know this is about cultural differences, but I cannot change my food and cooking habit, just because she doesn't like it.”

Lee understood that the primary causes of the clash between him and the owner of the house were cultural differences, specially, the differences in cooking habits. When two parties apply their cultural knowledge individually to an international student, they may have different interpretations and resolutions. In this situation, conflicts could be expected. Lee's thoughts and actions were guided by his Chinese culture. In this case, his cultural differences contributed to the conflict with his landlord and did not make it easy to resolve their conflict. Lee understood that the problem could be solved in a spirit of compromise, which would have been to follow the landlord's rules. He tried to ease the tension but also believed he could not simply stop preparing his Chinese meals. He struck a medium by cooking only on weekends. To him, that was his attempt to find a balance, a compromise. Doing this could be

interpreted as a way to process and negotiate ethnic and target cultural norms that clearly existed by him and his landlord. On one hand, he made changes to assimilate to the new cultural norms. On the other hand, his insistence on continuing to eat and prepare his Chinese food indicated his attempt to maintain some of his ethnic cultural conventions.

What Lee attempted to achieve was not simply maintenance of one culture and abandonment of the other but integration of the two cultures. No matter whether Lee successfully solved this problem, it can be seen that he was willing to make changes to overcome barriers and conflicts caused by cultural differences. The changes and efforts were intended to achieve better cultural adjustment to the target environment.

Ming: Inside, I am totally Chinese.

Ming discussed relations between cultural differences and social communication by summarizing the general situation of her cultural adjustment to the United States.

“Things that I cannot control are the barriers between the two cultures. I had a hard time of adapting to the culture here, I mean to learn the culture and live in this cultural environment. You know, I have to stay in the environment. I mean . . . I have 22 years living in China. And I have been here for more than five years. Inside, I am totally Chinese.”

Ming clearly pointed out that she experienced hardship in learning American cultural norms and adapting to vastly different cultural environment. her difficulties, she said, were due to strong influences exerted by the Chinese culture that was deeply rooted in her blood. It seemed that she did not undergo many changes in thinking and

behaving, even after five years of exposure to the target cultural environment. She still was not well-prepared to resolve cultural difficulties encounters in her daily life. An incident that occurred in her fourth year of living in the United States continues to strongly affect her social communication.

“Before I came to the United States, I asked my teacher and friends who have lived in the United States for years about what can or can’t talk, such as privacy, religion, and political matters. I have tried to stick to these rules these years. But in the year of 2012, it is the year of president election. My colleague who is American asked me whether I went to the station to vote. I said I am not American citizen. She said she has to go to vote now, because it is the last day for vote. When she came back to the office, I asked her who she voted. She said she doesn't want to tell me. Her words hurt me and make me very embarrassed. I didn't mean anything. I am not even curious about who she voted. I am just casually and unintentionally asked to avoid silence. So I just turn around and continued my work. But what she said really hurt me and made me feel I am the person who is very curious about others’ privacy. I mean I didn't even notice this is privacy. She made me feel I crossed the line. She was not comfortable and me neither.”

Ming had tried to prepare herself for American cultural conventions before her arriving in the United States. She knew that she would face challenging cultural differences. Therefore, she actively asked what topics are or are not appropriate to talk about in daily social interaction with native English speakers. Her preparation,

she hoped, would prepare her for recognizing target cultural norms and to avoid breaches of privacy or offensiveness. However, even though she subjectively kept cultural constraints in mind, she remained unprepared to resolve dilemmas she faced in the real-life cultural environment. In her, asking someone about how they voted was just like an innocent conversation about the weather. The interlocutor's response to her unintentional violation of her associate's privacy was unexpected, which resulted in her embarrassment and distressed emotions. Her reaction to her interlocutor was to do nothing but end the conversation. The negative emotion is not limited to Ming. She clearly felt that her interlocutor was also uncomfortable about Ming's inquiry. Even worse, the interlocutor's response to Ming hurt her self-esteem, which impeded Ming's initiatives and willingness to continue the conversation.

Here is another example of how cultural differences present challenges for the newcomer to the United States.

“It doesn't matter whether you like it or not, or you understand it or not. This is the way American people do. I can't ask them to think in my way; because I am in the United States I have to learn to think and do in their way by gradually learning their culture. So I tell myself that I need to change the original way or I need to get used to some new cultural rules. However, even if you pay much attention to the differences between the two cultures and the new culture knowledge . . . you have tried your best, it doesn't work well. I feel like I am still me without a lot of changes in my ways of thinking and doing things. I learn their

language. I learn the culture, but I don't use it freely. I cannot represent American culture. I always represent Chinese culture.”

Ming came to realize that she might never be completely assimilated to American culture, primarily in how she thinks and behaves. Repeatedly, she emphasized the strong influences exerted by her ethnic culture on her attempts to recognize American cultural knowledge learning. She had to change, she realized, to better culturally adjust. Also, she attempted to learn and apply newly acquired cultural knowledge as much as she could. However, she still struggled to achieve the “perfect cultural adjustment.” Based on my interactions with Ming, I might even surmise that she lacked the conviction to fully assimilate to American culture. The Chinese culture continued to guide her thoughts and task performance. Her ethnic culture and target culture functioned as separate systems, without much negotiation and integration, even with the gradual development of her mastery of American cultural knowledge and more time she spent as an inhabitant of the American cultural environment.

Another characteristic of Ming's cultural adjustment is worth mentioning: Her learning American culture does not guarantee that she will adopt it, but it helps her attain a deeper understanding, tolerance, and appreciation of a new culture. Her practice of American cultural norms in social communication and life was not proportionate to the increased mastery of American cultural knowledge. Ming said she simply lacked the experience to apply her newly acquired cultural knowledge to daily tasks. Her progress was the cultural knowledge itself—what the features of the

new culture were and what cultural differences lie in— but not how to adopt the new cultural norms to guide her thinking and behaving.

Shan: I still follow my own way to communicate with native English speakers.

Similar to the other two participants, Shan experienced similar difficulties in cultural adjustment. She started her story of trying to learn American culture by describing how she prepared herself before her arrival in the United States:

“I learned some American culture from some American movies and TV series before I came to the United States . . . and also some are from a cram school for English learning and training for students who are willing to study abroad. There are many teachers who have oversea studying experience. But when I came here, I found the preparation is useless. I still have a lot of problems of learning the American culture.

Shan’s strategy is common among Chinese international students. Prior to her arrival in the United States, what knowledge she was able to pick up was what is typically found on the internet and from people who have lived in the United States. Nonetheless, she still had difficulties in adapting to the target cultural environment. Her preparation for cultural differences did not prepare her for dealing with daily tasks. The cultural challenges she faced were beyond her expectations. For example:

“There was a time . . . that my adviser finished his trip from Euro. When I finished my reporting to him, he said nothing. He said nothing! You know the silence is very embarrassing. I thought I did a really bad report. Why didn't he say anything? He didn't say even a word. After that, he told me: ‘I’m sorry. I didn't

catch you. I am too tired, because of the trip. I was still very worried about that. I thought he didn't satisfy with my work. He indicated it by saying nothing. He may think my work is meaningless or I didn't do the job very well. Since he didn't want me to feel very bad, he said 'I am very tired' to comfort me. But I changed my mind, until another time when he discussed with me about another project. He told me that 'I think you didn't make any progress in your work.' From then on, I know if he thinks I am not doing very well, he will tell me directly. Back to the previous experience, he said nothing because he is very tired. That's why he didn't catch what I was saying. He meant what he said. I mean the characteristics of Chinese culture lead to the different ways of expressing things.”

The Chinese culture, she said, exerts a strong influence over her learning and practicing American cultural norms in her everyday life. Applying her Chinese culture to the American context simply is impractical, she found. The Chinese cultural system of knowledge functioned as the guiding principle for Shan's thinking and behaving, and that caused problems and conflicts in daily social communication.

According to Shan's narratives, fewer misunderstandings and difficulties caused by cultural differences occurred less often during her frequent social communication with her adviser, in which she gradually achieved a deeper understanding of American ways of expressions. The more she interacted with her host peers, the more cultural knowledge she attained, and that contributed to fewer cultural conflicts.

“I am from China and Chinese people always think about meanings behind words. After several times, I found it is not necessary. People here always try to

speak the word directly. If it is ‘A’, it just means ‘A.’ If he thinks you did a bad job, he will just say out, like ‘work harder.’ In Chinese culture, we usually express ourselves in a gentle and indirect way. We expect others to understand meanings behind words. So I still follow my own way or the original way to communicate with others who are not from the same culture. That’s why I sometimes misunderstood what my adviser means.”

Shan compared and contrasted the different ways of expression between the two cultures: In Chinese culture, people usually express their opinions in an indirect way. Interlocutors are expected to understand meanings behind words. In contrast, people in the United States prefer to express themselves directly. Therefore, it is not a surprise that misunderstanding would occur when Shan communicated with host-country peers by reverting to Chinese ways of expressions. She realized the fundamental reason of the problems in her communication with her adviser, arguing that people think and behave in different ways, guided by different cultures. Shan’s story reflected how she negotiates and integrates the two cultural systems of knowledge as well as how she manages the cultural challenges by adopting the target cultural norms. Therefore, it goes without saying that social communication played a critical role in her understanding and appreciation of the target culture as well as in her cultural adjustment to the new environment.

By exploring the three participants’ narratives, it is clear that each predicted they would experience cultural differences in the new environment during their lengthy transitional period. Learning American culture through different channels before

arriving in the United States is one way to decrease the cultural misfit as well as to avoid unpleasant experiences. However, their preparation was inadequate in helping them resolve problems in the real-life situations. Recognizing how different the two cultures are as well as how difficult the cultural challenges can be overcome is essential. Social communication with host-country peers can make a positive difference. In this study, the three participants made it clear that they had unpleasant experiences in social communication. Conflicts were more outstanding, when they adopted their ethnic culture to daily task performance.

When students do not interact with the host culture, they fail to learn sociocultural rules for effective interaction and follow their own cultural rules, which results in communication problems (Chap-delaune & Alexitch, 2004). As shown by the three participants, strong influences exerted by their ethnic culture are the major reason for hardship in trying to adopt the target culture. Even with a deeper understanding of the target culture, the new comers still experienced difficulties in adopting the target cultural norms. A factor that can make the change more manageable is how much and how readily the participants engage in social communication with members of the host country, which can ease the adoption of the new cultural characteristics. The difficulties, on one side, cause international students' negative emotions, which decrease their initiatives and willingness to engage in social communication. On the other hand, the difficulties will make it likely that the students compared and contrasted, which can improve the negotiation and integration of the two cultural systems.

According to Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004), cultural adjustment is influenced by social interaction. Students experience less culture shock if they interact with their host-country peers (Andrade, 2009). Two of the three participants in this study clearly demonstrated that their understanding and tolerance of cultural differences were enhanced when they communicated frequently with native English speakers. They experience a changing process, in which they are initially overwhelmed and even shocked when face to challenges and problems caused by cultural differences. It also was beneficial, they found to recognize and then attempt to deal with the problems and conflicts. Then, they also learn lessons when they failed to overcome a barrier and thus attained a deeper understanding of how to manage themselves in social situations.

Instead of only trying to learn about the target culture from textbooks and others' experiences, it is more practical and effective to learn by one's own experience in the real-life situations. It is the frustration, loss, and pain experienced in daily social communication with host-country representatives that is especially beneficial to international students, so that they could understand, appreciate, and adopt cultural norms and conventions in a deeper sense. The lessons they learn from real experiences as well as from their emotions and attitudes, in social communication, accelerated the negotiation of the two cultural systems.

Perezhivanie

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Vygotsky's theory of perezhivanie is applicable and significant to study how international students develop their linguistic,

cultural, and social practices and norms through daily social communication. The goal is to achieve sociocultural adaption in the target environment. As Vygotsky (1994) explains,

An emotional experience [perezhivanie] is a unit where, on the one hand, in an indivisible state, the environment is represented, i.e., that which is being experienced— an emotional experience [perezhivanie] is always related to something which is found outside the person— and on the other hand, what is represented is how I, myself, am experiencing this, i.e., all the personal characteristics and all the environmental characteristics are represented in an emotional experience [perezhivanie] (p.341).

When exposed to the target environment, people may encounter various challenges and deal with emotions caused by either successes or frustration. The crux of the matter is that whatever the situation, the influence of the environment depends not only on the nature of the situation itself, but also on the extent of the child's understanding and awareness of the situation (Clara, 2016). This argument is also applicable to explore how international students interpret and process life issues and emotions.

As time goes by, the three participants have gradually achieved better mastery of the English language, American culture, and social norms of the target country by experiencing various situations, in adversity as well as prosperity. They have attained more opportunities to apply their newly acquired knowledge and skills learned from their lived experiences. However, they continued to face with new challenges and

difficulties. Based on the narrative of the participants of this study, the most frequent problems occur in daily social communication, which is typical of international students. Different people deal with the same issue in different ways, influenced by their personal perezhivanie. Perezhivanie is the idea that “one and the same objective situation may be interpreted, perceived, experienced, or lived through by different learners in different ways” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 354). In the following sections, the author will present the three participants’ perezhivanie through the ways they explored and applied appropriate or practical methods to solve common barriers in social communication and how perezhivanie affects individuals’ performance in future events. The participants may have different perceptions and ways of dealing with daily life, in which they may experience various emotions in a conversational environment that is either tense or comfortable.

How different interlocutors’ attitudes influence me in social communication?

In addition to English proficiency, shared cultural background, communication skills, and willingness to participate in interactions, the author believes that a sense of acceptance is another determinant factor relevant to effective social communication with members of the host country. In the author’s point of view, the acceptance or a sense of approval is not limited to whether one’s personality is likeable. More important is whether the international student feels respected and welcomed. According to Andrade (2009), interaction with representatives of the target language and culture impacts affective factors related to acquisition. All participants expressed the importance of interlocutors’ attitudes to their motivation in participating in social

communication. In other words, whether the participants have a willingness and confidence to get involved in social communication is largely dependent upon the other party's interests and attitudes. Therefore, when participating in social communication, interlocutors' attitudes should be seen as a crucial factor of social environment, which strongly influences the participants' perezhivanie. In the following narratives, we could see how the participants differently reacted to their interlocutors' attitudes, influenced by their past experiences and personality.

Lee: "The conversation does not depend on me, it also depend on them."

In describing his communication with American peers, Lee pointed out the importance of participation of both parties in a conversation.

"Sometimes when I talk to others, like American people or students, we just greet and not talk a lot. And sometimes, if I don't keep talking, they don't talk to me. I wished we could talk more. So the conversation does not just depend on me, it also depends on them."

Lee ascribed one of the reasons for unsuccessful communication to his interlocutors' inactive attitudes. Sometimes, he said, he felt disappointment and resignation about his interlocutors' reluctant attitude. At the same time, he also said he wished his interlocutors would show more effort and willingness to share a conversation. His desire of communication, he said, was not always accepted by his interlocutors, which he said hurt his feelings and affected his willingness to engage in conversations at that moment and later. Lee experienced a range of emotions: Lee was hopeful to conduct a long and pleasant conversation with his interlocutor by

expressing “I wished to talk more”. Then he realized that his interlocutors undertook fewer roles than what he expected in communication. Lee expressed his disappointment and discontent by “If I don’t keep talking, they don’t talk to me”. In addition, Lee did not incline to take the main roles all the time, especially when the other party showed less initiative in communication. Therefore, due to the differences between his expectation and the reality, Lee was likely to experience emotional transformation, when facing interlocutors’ negative attitudes.

Lee described a workplace scenario to illustrate the importance of his interlocutors’ attitudes to his performance in social communication.

“In my office, there are two colleagues. One is an exchanging scholar and another is an American girl. We talked a lot in our office. We talked about her cat, her vacation, her study, her family, and so on. She is very talkative. Once we talked about her cat, she showed me a picture of her cat and then we started a long conversation. She is very nice to me. When I talk to her, I feel I am kind of more relaxed. When she is talkative, I am also very talkative.”

Obviously, motivated by his interlocutor’s active participation, Lee showed more interest and a greater willingness to communicate with his colleague. Compared to another attempt in another scenario, it was obvious to see the changes in his initiative and performance in social communication. Lee interpreted his colleague’s interest in conversing with him as a way of showing well-meaning and generosity. In a relaxed atmosphere, he was motivated to actively participate. His colleague’s positive attitudes were stimulus to the display of his personality. It seems that Lee considered

their communication as one friend to another, rather than the stilted conversations that one party or the other forces. Lee had clear perception of his social relationship in the conversations between him and his colleague. It is understandable that the conversational environment must be natural and continuous, with little studious maintenance by the both parties. Lee's expectation of conducting continuous conversations was coincidence with the real situation, which assisted the achievement of fluent and successful interaction.

Considering interlocutors' attitudes as a constituent element of social environment, Lee's perezhivanie underwent changes when he had pleasant talking experience with native English speakers. The transformation of Lee's perezhivanie certainly influenced the display of his personality, from introverted and passive to exocentric and talkative; his performance in the current and subsequent social communication from being less motivated to more active; the interpretation of his social position in communication, from playing a supportive role to a leading one; and the understanding of the social environment, from an unglamorous working context to a relaxed and hospitable surrounding.

In addition to interlocutors' interests in participating in conversations, Lee argued that different ways of talking also represent interlocutors' attitudes, which also play an important role in his own willingness and performance in social communication.

“Sometimes when they [native English speakers] talk to you, I can feel they intentionally slow down their talking speed. Maybe they are considerate. They

may think you are an international student and your English is not as good as theirs. They slow down to make you comfortable. But from the other side, I can . . . maybe I am thinking too much, but . . . you just have a feeling that they want to talk to you, but sometimes if they speak normally, they kind of exclude you. Maybe I think too much. But if that is the situation, I would be very angry about that. ”

Lee considered the speed at which one speaks as a way to express interlocutors’ attitudes. He has conflicting feelings about speaking speed. He appreciated their consideration and feels offended by different treatment. Earlier in this document, he said that language proficiency was a barrier that influenced his social communication. From this perspective, one might believe he would be thankful that his interlocutors were understandable and thoughtful by slowing their normal speech pattern. That did indeed give Lee more time to become accustomed to the new language as well as to better understand others’ words. However, as reflected about his thoughts, he sometimes, interpreted the slow speed as a way to distinguish native English speakers and second language learners. In this situation, he wondered if their slow speaking speed was meant to exclude him. If this is the case, Lee’s emotions may change from amicability to hostility. It is predictable that communication was not even possible to be conducted in that situation. The changes occurred in emotions certainly influenced his *perezhivanie*. Lee may interpret his social position in the conversation to be marginalized, which certainly played negative roles to his performance, intrapersonal relationship building, and his understanding of the environment.

To a great extent, Lee's narratives indicated that can be inferred that there was a correlation between Lee's initiative and his interlocutors' attitudes: When interlocutors actively participate in conversations, Lee was more talkative, comfortable, and proactive. A relaxed environment and others' attitudes encouraged Lee to get involved in the conversation with a more positive attitude and relaxed emotion, which boosted his performance in social communication and increased his interest in participating in subsequent conversations. The circle between self and environment, the two constituting aspects of perezhivanie, was created, which benefitted Lee's active engagement in social communication. However, when interlocutors showed less desire to get involved in conversations, he tended to react passively. Then the conversation was hard to conduct and maintain. If in such situations, the tense environment and Lee's participation were mutually reinforced. In summary, Lee emotionally experienced conversations with native English speakers. His initiatives in social communication, to some extent, were determined by his interlocutors' attitudes toward him and their conversations. The dynamic emotions influenced by his interlocutors' attitudes changed Lee's perezhivanie, which determined his own attitudes and engagement, the display of his own personality, the interpretation of the relationship between self and others, as well as the understanding of the social environment.

Ming: "I don't quite care about their attitudes."

Different from Lee's sensitivity to interlocutors' attitudes, Ming placed the effects of others' attitudes toward her performance in communication to a subordinate place.

"I heard some of other Chinese students saying that they met some American people who don't like to talk to them or never talk to them for some reasons.

This happened to me also. If somebody ignores me, and I just ignore him. Maybe they are not in good mood or for some other reasons, but it is not necessarily anti-China. I don't try to understand why some American people do so. I mean I don't quite care about this. "

According to Ming's description of her indifference, it seems that the interlocutors' attitudes were not the most influential factor affecting her willingness and initiative in social communication. When discussing how she reacted to others' negative attitudes or ignorance during communication, she said "if somebody ignores me, and I just ignore him." Ming seemed to play a tit-for-tat game, responding the same manner her interlocutor did. Therefore, Ming also emotionally experienced the situation. Based on how her interlocutors conversed with her, Ming presented corresponding emotions that influenced her performance and self-identification of her social position in the conversation. In other words, guided by her dynamic *perezhivanie*, Ming showed different degrees of initiatives and engagement in social communication. She ascribed interlocutors' lack of interest in communication to their personality and mood at the moment. Their negative attitudes were not related to

hostility to Chinese students, she believed. In Ming's case, others' attitudes were not a primary factor that determined her participation in social communication.

“I don't talk a lot to people that I am not familiar with . . . I don't have a lot of close friends here. In my department, there are a lot of international students and American people. I talk to some of them, but it is like general talk, and mostly about the academic work. Most of time, I just stay in the lab doing experiment. We don't talk to each other. So if people don't talk to me, I don't think much about why, but just think it is his or her personality. And when I don't talk, it doesn't mean I don't want to talk to someone, but I prefer to stay alone. It is the same for other people. When American people don't talk to me, I won't think they dislike me. Maybe they are just shy or are not good at communicating with other, like me.”

The degree of one's familiarity with other people and personalities were the primary reasons, rather than interlocutors' attitudes, for her choosing sometimes to simply not communicate much. In other words, how she interpreted the relationship between herself and the other party was the determining factor of her participation and performance in social communication. Distinct from Lee's interpretation of interlocutors' negative attitudes, assuming native English speakers would exclude members of other cultural groups through their attitudes shown in communication, Ming tended to ascribe interlocutors' minimal interest in communicating to her to personality and their mood at that moment. Interlocutors' negative attitudes were not interpreted disrespect or dislike. All in all, Ming's initiative in getting involved in

social communication was determined by her relationship with her interlocutors, not of the attitudes taken by her interlocutors.

Shan: "I always feel like there is a wall between both of us."

In Shan's narrative of her communication experiences, the determinant influences of interlocutors' attitudes toward her participation in social communication was obvious. In describing her reactions to different attitudes of native English speakers in her real-world social communication, she said:

"If I have problems, they [her American colleagues or classmates] will help me out. But they won't have a real and deep conversation with me about their own experience of how they deal with some similar things. Just because of this, it makes me feel hard to open my mind and talk. For example, I just start my new life here and I don't quite understand what you say because of my English. I discussed this with them [her American roommate], she just smiled to me and say this very politely: 'Don't worry. It will be better.' But we are not like friends, for example, asking you what happened, or what makes you feel this, or how she would handle the situation, if she were in my position. And I always feel like there is a wall between both of us. After she said, 'Everything will be better,' she just stood up and said she had to go for class. I didn't even have the chance to continue our conversation. So after this, I may feel like she is not very interested in talking to me or know my problem or my life. So I tried once, and I won't bother her the second time, because . . . I think this would bother her."

That comment revealed that Shan wanted to interact and attempted to build a friendship through interaction with her interlocutors. But her interlocutor's attitudes and ways of expressions weakened her initiative and willingness to continue social communication. Clearly, Shan not only was disappointed about her roommate's reaction, but also with willingness to build a friendship with her. From Shan's perspective, she interpreted the answer, "Don't worry, it will be better," as an inconsiderate response, which inferred that her roommate showed little interest in participating in this conversation, not to mention to build deep personal relationship with her. Since it was in the dormitory discourse and between roommates, the conversation was expected by Shan to be friendly and helpful, in which her roommate would sincerely comfort her with attention, understanding, and care. However, when Shan's expectation did not meet the real situation, her *perezhivanie* was replaced. Initially, Shan interpreted her roommates' reaction as a way to show exclusion, which caused Shan's embarrassment and disappointment.

Even worse, this situation and the transformation of her *perezhivanie* blocked the subsequent interaction with her roommate. Vygotsky (1994) argues that "the emotional experience (*perezhivanie*) arising from any situation or from any aspect of his environment determines what kind of influence this situation or this environment will have on the child" (p.339). As Shan said, "I tried once, and I won't bother her the second time." Her words reflected not only her less initiatives in conducting subsequent conversations with her roommate, but also in building social relationship

with her. The wall was built by both her roommate and Shan, which separated them into two different worlds. In Shan's words:

“The first time I came here is as an exchange student. To know more about the United States or American people, I lived with an American roommate. But after a while, I found these Americans didn't play with us at all. They have their own circle. They are nice and also say hi to you, but I just feel it is very hard to join in their circle.”

Shan repeatedly expressed her strong willingness to build personal relationships with her host-country peers, especially at the initial stage of her life in the United States. However, she gradually found that the attitudes shown by the host-country peers were the major impediments in conducting communication with them.

Compared to her high willingness to talk, attitudes of host-country peers played a more determinant role in Shan's involvement in social communication. In her perspective, she ascribed the reason of the existence of a “wall” to interlocutors' minimal interest in conversing and building friendships with her. The “wall” also separated her from participating in her roommate's social circle. Shan noticed that American peers have different social circles and shared few common interests with her. To make matters worse, they did not even attempt to build connection with her, Shan believed. She interpreted her interlocutors' negative attitudes as a way to exclude her from their circles. Her interlocutor closes the door, so that she could not enter their world.

We could see the changes that occurred in Shan's attitudes about social communication with native English speakers. Her initiative and willingness to communicate with her roommate also influenced her *perezhivanie*. She changed from actively conducting and participating in communication to intentionally decreasing the frequency of interaction to avoid bothering her roommate. The disconnection between her and her roommate was caused by both parties: The roommate developed a negative attitude, and Shan developed her own reluctance to communicate due to reasons cited earlier mentioned. Shan's engagement in social interaction was decreased by the constitutive factor of the environment— her interlocutors' negative attitudes as well as the personal characteristic— her dynamic *perezhivanie*, formed on her prior experiences.

Emotion, cognition, and personality are intertwined with sociocultural-historical context (Smagorinsky, 2011). This argument explained why different participants have different interpretations of others' attitudes, the situations, and the environment. Various attitudes of interlocutors are critical factors that influenced the participants' emotions and *perezhivanie*.

What do I do when I am lost in communication?

Due to language proficiency as well as to differences in cultural and social norms, it was not a surprise that international students may not follow the pace of their interlocutors in social communication. As shown in the previous section of language proficiency and social communication, all three participants said that they had and still have difficulties in understanding others at different degrees, even with

years of exposure to the target country. However, when exploring how they dealt with those situations, it was interesting to find that a common solution they shared to ensure fluency of interaction was to pretend they understood rather to ask for clarification and explanation.

Lee: "They may feel tired talking to me."

Lee described how he usually deals with not fully understanding everything that his interlocutors are saying.

"Sometimes when they talk about something I really don't understand, maybe I just say nothing, but smile. I pretend I understand. Sometimes, I know the general ideas, but not every single detail. It is very hard for foreigners to get each word, isn't it? I may just answer them by saying 'Yeah . . . yeah'"

By responding with a perfunctory acknowledgement or smile to cover the fact that he cannot follow the pace of native English speakers in interactions, Lee said he simply chose not to ask for repetition or clarification. As long as it did not affect his understanding of the general idea, he did not pursue trying to fully understand the entire conversation. This can be seen as one of the reason for why Lee dealt with his loss in communication by pretending and responding in a casual attitude. He said:

"If I often ask them to repeat or explain what they mean, it makes the conversation weird. Just imagine, if someone who always ask me, 'What or pardon?' when talking to each other, I believe I cannot stand it. I think it is not interesting at all if the conversation is like this. Anyway, if everything needs to be explained, then communication is not communication but explanation. They must

feel the same as me. It is certain that they don't like me to keep asking what they mean. They may feel I am not good in English. I just feel a little upset, but I think it is understandable that an English learner is lost.”

Lee's pretending can be understood from two perspectives. First, he worried that his English proficiency might be questioned by native English speakers. Because English language proficiency is considered a fundamental skill to evaluate whether international students can survive in their academic and social life, others' questioning of his English proficiency would hurt Lee's self-esteem and confidence in social communication. Therefore, his pretending functions to minimize others' doubts about his English language proficiency and his ability to adapt to the target cultural and social environment. In addition, pretending preserves his self-esteem.

Second, pretending can be regarded as a way to avoid others' antipathy and impatience. Lee placed himself in others' position, assuming he would not tolerate frequent explanation and repetition during a conversation. He was concerned that his interlocutors would lose interest in conversing with him. He assumed that frequent interruption would affect the fluency of communication, interlocutors' emotion, and conversational atmosphere. Not only that, frequent interruption also could influence others' initiatives and feelings of interacting with him, which would be unfavorable for his subsequent communication and social circle building. Therefore, Lee attempted to maintain a comfortable environment by pretending, so that he and his interlocutors could enjoy the conversations.

To take one step further, the participants aimed to achieve equal social positions with native English speakers through pretending. When exposed to the group discussion discourse, Lee would not like his group members to place him in the subordinate position by reason of his English deficiency. A contradiction was seen in Lee's *perezhivanie*: his desire to achieve the equal social position with native English speakers and his incompetence in fulfilling this task. Lee interpreted that he was positioned in the subordinate place because of the minimal roles he was able to take in the discussion. This situation was seen as incapability and helplessness. Lee attempted to change this situation by pretending, through which he can maintain his engagement in social communication and gain more social status and power.

Ming: "I didn't ask, because I don't want to lose face."

Ming also described being lost in communication and how she dealt with that dilemma. She pretended that she was following the conversation, when in reality she was not.

"One time, my colleague said 'Talk to my hand.' I didn't know what it means, so it is very hard to continue the conversation. I was blind in my mind and didn't know how to respond. So I just smiled and said nothing, and I am embarrassed at that time. I didn't ask him what it means, because I don't want to lose face. I can tell the phrase he used is a very common expression in English. And it looks like he was joking. If I ask what the joke means, it makes them see me as a killjoy. I feel a little upset, embarrassed, and also disappointed to myself, but this is my fault. I cannot blame others. I mean this is my problem, which makes the

conversation short. I didn't work very hard learning some slangs or idioms. So that is what I deserve.”

Ming said that when she found herself lost in a conversation, she would smile to her interlocutor as a response. Her response may have misled her interlocutors to believe that she was following their words, but she explained why she would pretend. First, she worried she would lose face if she asked questions. She realized that the phrase she did not understand was a common one was used in everyday speech. She was afraid of others' questioning of her English proficiency, which would be embarrassing. If communication is frequently interrupted by explanation and clarification, the conversational atmosphere would be destroyed, spoiling both participants' enjoyment.

Ming explained of an occurrence in her weekly group setting:

“Someone was telling a joke, if the others all laughed, but me. It happens a lot in the weekly group meetings. I didn't get the point of jokes at all. I didn't even realize he was telling something funny. I was confused. I was frustrated. Because this is my own problem, I cannot blame anybody else. I cannot blame Americans why they switch the topic from academic things to jokes or why they speak so fast. Sometimes, even if I know what they are talking, but I just react slowly. I mean, when you listen to a joke, I have to translate it into Chinese, and then react. So sometimes, I laugh later than the others. Or I may laugh with them, but I don't get what they mean. But I pick up the words or expressions that I know and try really hard to put them together to know what they mean. I think this can help me

improve my English, right? Anyway, I don't want to ask what they mean every time when I don't understand. I don't want to break their talking and I want to be the same with them in their eyes.”

Ming's pretending also could be interpreted as a way to achieve equal membership. Ming considered the discourse of the group discussion as a place where she can articulate herself and compete with others. The discourse brought pressure to bear upon her. Even though Ming had negative emotions caused by her inability to understand everything being said, she still attempted to cover herself in communication by pretending. Often asking for clarification could lead to others questioning her English proficiency and academic ability, which she believed could compel others to lower their estimation of her abilities and her social position. Being considered an equal in all ways was important to her, she said. She wanted to be considered a member of the group, to be able to engage in all activities, to be as competitive as everyone else, and to be at the same social position with other group members in the discourse of group discussion.

In Ming's *perezhivanie*, we could see her intention to get involved in social communication and achieve equal social position with her interlocutors on one side, and her inability to conduct fluent and successful interaction with her interlocutors on the other side. Ming considered this situation as incapability, helplessness, and separation. However, it is the situation that motivated her to improve her English proficiency, as what she said. This was considered by Ming as the good effect of the situation. She tried to cobble scraps of a conversation to achieve general

understanding in communication. The efforts she made to keep up with the pace of her interlocutor reflected on her strong self-esteem, her seriousness in pursuing full engagement of the discussion, as well as the equal position with interlocutors in social communication. In her evolving perezhivanie, her lost in communication was not only the indicator of her English deficiency, but also chances given to her to become more competitive in learning English and gaining social position.

Shan: “The word ‘listener’ sounds negative for me.”

Similar with Lee and Ming, Shan also found that pretending was a tool she used when she found herself lost in social communication. Pretending also had value in situations in which she had limited knowledge, she said. She once found herself in a conversation about sports, and she was lost.

“One day my colleagues and I went out for a meeting at a restaurant. We just casually chat. They were discussing football. They looked so interested in talking about that. Since I know nothing about football and I am not a sports person, I just sat there and said nothing. I pretended I understand what they were talking about. I felt bad.”

Due to the lack of knowledge in the sport field, Shan had hardship in engaging in the social interaction. She seemed to separate herself from the interlocutors and the discourse by saying “I just sat there and said nothing”. In Shan’s perezhivanie, she realized the contradiction between other group members’ enthusiasm as opposed to her lost, silence, and separation in a warm conversational atmosphere. The opposition

in her perezhivanie elicited her negative emotions of confusion and frustration. Shan continued to describe the situation as followed:

“One guy asked me a question about football. And I just smiled, because I didn’t even understand what he was asking. You know the environment is suddenly frozen. I was very embarrassed and didn’t know what to do. It was silent and everybody was waiting for my response. Maybe he wanted to ease the embarrassed environment, then he said ‘You can be a good listener.’ I know he meant well, because we work together in the same lab. And we talked a lot before. But the word ‘listener’ sounds very negative for me. I think ‘listener’ means a person who can do nothing but listen. I didn’t feel better. Actually, I felt much worse. I felt a little insulted. I flushed to the ears and felt very embarrassed. Maybe I was too sensitive, but I did feel so at that time.”

Although Shan considered her interlocutor’s response to her silence as inoffensive, it still hurt her feelings and self-esteem. She interpreted the word ‘listener’ as a negative label that placed her in a lower social position, which caused and aggravated her passive emotions. This was true, especially in the limelight. She described the situation at the moment by saying “the environment is suddenly frozen”. In the context of group meeting, the emotions Shan experienced were from frustration, when she was not able to participate in the conversation, to embarrassment and even insults, when she was labelled as a listener. In her evolving perezhivanie, her lost in communication did not just represent her English deficiency, but others’ misunderstanding of her personality, questioning of her social communicative

competence, and misidentification of her social position. The entire experience was a blow to her confidence, which was expected to affect the subsequent communication.

To sum up, when one finds herself lost in communication, asking for clarification may be the first choice that comes to mind to solve problems. However, based on the three participants' narratives, each chose to pretend full comprehension of their interlocutors' speech. Ways of pretending, such as remaining silent, nodding, smiling or even offering a perfunctory response, aim to hide the fact that the listener has lost track of the conversation. The three participants realized that English deficiency and the lack of knowledge in a specific field were the two main reasons that caused hardship in following interlocutors' pace in conversations. Although the reasons that caused their loss in communication were different, all expressed the same passive emotions. The negative emotions also were elicited by interlocutors' positioning and attitudes toward their loss and pretending. Pretending, therefore, was a strategy they used to protect themselves from injury to their self-esteem and from being placed in an inferior social position.

One common feature found in the three participants' reactions to their lost in communication was the effect on their subsequent communication. They said:

“I guess they may feel tired talking to me, if I keep asking what they mean

For example, if I talk to a Chinese language learner who often asks me to repeat my word or explain what I mean, I may be patient at the beginning. But if it is always like that, I may get bored” – Lee.

“Similar situations (loss in communication) have happened a couple of times. After that, my colleague and I talk to each other less than before. Sometimes when two of us are in the office, we either just talk about something about our work or just keep silence. I feel embarrassed to stay with her alone. I think she feels the same” –Ming.

“I have this kind of experience (loss in communication) several times before. I just say nothing or smile when I don’t understand what they are talking about. But I guessed that others would think that I don’t like her or him or I am not interested in what they talk about. They could misunderstand me” – Shan.

They all realized that their unpleasant experiences and the negative emotions elicited by the situations blocked the building of personal relationships with their host country peers. Prior experiences caused changes in their perezhivanie, as addressed above. In their evolving perezhivanie, they reinterpreted the relations between them and interlocutors and situations. Guided by their changes in perezhivanie, the participants did not simply see social communication as a way to exchange information and feelings, but show more concerns about causing problems, such as the interlocutors’ less interests, impatience, and misunderstanding. It is without saying that their worries negatively affected their engagement in social communication and the building of social circles. The less communication also influenced their interlocutors’ initiatives and willingness in communication. Therefore, the changes did not just occur in the participants’ perezhivanie, but also in their interlocutors’ one. From the position of the interlocutors, because they could not attain adequate

information from the participants' responses, misunderstanding could result. Shan expressed concern that her interlocutors would misinterpret her silence as a way to show disagreement or minimal interest. If this was the case, interlocutors' motivation to converse with her also would decrease. It seems that pretending was the very last choice made by the participants, since they all realized the negative effects exerted on their subsequent communication. Pretending raised an initial communication breakdown between them and their interlocutors, which led to changes in their emotions and perezhivanie. The evolving perezhivanie, in turn, influenced the interpretation of the connections among, self, others, and the environment of both the participants and their interlocutors.

How do I feel when we share no common topics in communication?

Based on the participants' narratives, it was found that in addition to English proficiency and differences in cultural knowledge and social norms, whether the parties of a conversation share common topics was another critical factor to successful communication. This was especially true when we explored the international students' cross-culture communication. In the following section, the participants described how they dealt with the situation, in which conversations were not possible, due to a lack of common topics.

Lee: "I tried very hard, but it is weird that I cannot find any interesting topic."

Lee described a scenario in which a conversation was a struggle because of his lack of knowledge a topic.

“During the lunch time, all the Chinese students in our lab go to the lobby to have lunch together. We sit together and chat with each other, such as food, study, and life. I remember there was an American colleague coming and sitting with us. Then we thought it is not appropriate to speak Chinese in front of him, because he does not know the language. I really want to talk to him. I tried very hard at that moment, but it is weird that I cannot find any topic to start a conversation with him. So I just asked him about his lunch. After that, all of us kept silence. I felt like we are in different worlds. I asked my Chinese colleagues why they didn’t talk to him. They said they didn’t know what to say. It was very quiet and everybody just ate their lunch. I think you can imagine what the situation looks like, right?”

Based on Lee’s description, we could compare the atmosphere over lunch break before and after Lee’s American colleague joined the group. It was clear that before his American colleague’s participation, people were talking with each other with a wide range of topics in a warm atmosphere. The relaxed and pleasant conversation environment was interrupted at the moment of the American’s participation. Although Lee showed a willingness to converse with him, he could not think of a topic that would interest both parties. Lee had different performance when conversing different interlocutors in the same discourse. The role Lee took was from one of the participants in the conversation among Chinese students to a representative of the Chinese group who acted as an ice breaker to ease the silence and change the embarrassing situation. Although he attempted to start a conversation, it seems that he

did not raise the interest of the both parties. Lee emotionally experienced the dynamic talking environment from warm to frozen. He initially showed strong desire to invite his American colleague to join in the conversations. However, due to the lack of common topics, Lee's intention was not implemented. Therefore, the distance between his intention and his inability to fulfill the target caused his perezhivanie transformation. Lee did not interpret the reason of the failed communication to the lack of common topics only, but a matter of membership, social position, and identity by saying "I felt we are in different worlds".

This example shows the interplay between personal characteristics and social environment. The less communication resulted in the embarrassing talking environment, in which the both parties experienced negative emotions and perezhivanie transformation. The uncomfortable environment, in turn, deteriorated the communication between the two parties.

The difficulty in finding a topic to take about was not unique to Lee, it also happened to his Chinese colleagues, who also turned silent when his colleague arrived. They also did not know what to say or how to start a conversation in the presence of the American colleague. Therefore, it can be deduced that finding a common topic for a conversation is not uncommon in social encounters between Chinese international students and American peers.

Ming: "The conversation between us cannot last or go in a deep sense."

Ming also noted that one of the factors that impeded fluent communication with native English speakers was a shortage of common topics. She shared an experience,

in which the topics were the determining factor to social communication and social circle building.

“I worked in a computer lab. When my colleagues asked me out, I just refused their invitation without thinking. Sometimes I even made up some excuses . . . like I have a quiz or a paper due tomorrow. I don't want to go out with them. One reason is that we don't talk much when we are at work. So we are not familiar enough to go out. Our working environment is very relaxed and open, you can just do your own homework or talk to each other. But we don't talk a lot, because we don't have a lot of topics that could interest both of us. I feel we cannot talk in a deep sense. For example, one of us watches a funny video and then asks the other one to come and join. But we may only say three or four sentences about it. I feel it is not a real conversation. The conversation between us cannot last or go in a deep sense. If I talk to a Chinese colleague, maybe we start talking with ‘A,’ but end with ‘D’ that is not related to ‘A’ at all. You know, I think a real conversation should be like this. If I talk to my colleagues in the lab, I feel we start with ‘A,’ and we end at ‘A’ in a minute.”

Ming's refusal to her colleagues' invitation seemed to be involuntary, without consideration. She not only gave up the opportunities to engage in communication, but also resisted building friendship with her American colleagues. Fewer common topics that could raise the interest of both parties were among the reasons. In Ming's *perezhivanie*, she did not even see the conversations with her colleagues in the workplace as real ones. Ming considered that communication as not the kind of

genuine conversations that friends hold. The conversations between her and the American colleague were brief and relatively shallow, which contributed to her evaluation of the relationship between them as not being closed enough to evolve into a social relationship that included going out together. Rather, the workplace was simply seen as a place where Ming and colleagues conduct conversations only related to academic and work issues. However, Ming interpreted that real conversations were supposed to carry on in a cordial and friendly atmosphere, in which friends can share a wide range of topics. To study the changes in her *perezhivanie*, it is not surprising that Ming resisted to participating in social activities and joining in their social circle.

In addition, Ming particularly mentioned her working environment as relaxed and open, which implied that she expected frequent, natural, and deep conversations would occur. She interpreted that the environmental characteristics should be a stimulus, not the interference, to conduct friends' talk. Based on Ming's personality discussed in the previous section of how Ming reacted to her interlocutors' negative attitudes, it can be concluded that Ming's introverted personality is another key reason of her resistance of her colleagues' invitation.

Being repeatedly resisted by Ming, her colleagues would also experience *perezhivanie* transformation. They may interpret Ming's attitudes as simple refusal of their invitation due to time conflicting to resistance of building personal relationship with others. Social communication and friendship can be caught in an inflationary spiral. Therefore, sharing few common topics, accompanied by her personality caused

Ming's fluent social communication, the degree of engagement in social activities, and the building of social circles with native English speakers.

Shan: "The harder I tried to think of a topic to discuss, the less I could say."

Shan described examples of unsuccessful communication, showing the determinant effect exerted by a lack of common topics to her motivation and interests in conversations with native English speakers.

"When I am really in a conversation with my American colleagues or classmates, I found the harder I tried to think of a topic to discuss, the less I could say. This situation makes me feel nervous and frustrated. When I chat with other Chinese, I never intentionally think of what I should say. We just have a natural and relaxed conversation."

Shan showed strong willingness to engage in social communication by making efforts to think of common topics that interested both parties. However, her initiative did not contribute to improving her social communication with others, due to in the difficulty of finding common topics. Instead, she found that the harder she tried, the less she said. The lack of common topics as well as efforts she made to look for topics compounded the pressure she felt. Therefore, in Shan's perezhivanie, she recognized the contradiction between her willingness of communication and her inability to search topics to conduct conversations with native English speakers. The contradiction elicited negative emotions, such as nervousness and frustration, which in turn affected her performance in subsequent communication.

Similar to the other two participants, Shan also made a comparison of the communication between her and American peers versus her and Chinese people, arguing that topic richness and variety was the major difference. Shan used the words “natural” and “relax” to describe the conversations between her and Chinese people, whereas “nervous” and “frustrated” described conversations between her and native English speakers. Experiencing emotional transformation, Shan attributed the uncomfortable conversational environment to her hardship in talking in a wide range of topics and communicating in a deep sense. As opposed to the communication between her and Chinese people in the natural and relaxed environment, her negative emotions in communication with American peers would be magnified, which certainly decreased Shan’s interests and willingness to communicate with host country peers.

“I think one of the problems is about topics in conversations when I talk to American people. Sometimes they talk about something, but I don’t really like it. So sometimes I have to force myself to get into the conversations. I don’t really want to force myself to do anything. I don’t like it, but sometimes I have to do that. You know, it is very strange if two of you are in the same room but don’t talk to each other.”

To avoid the embarrassing environment caused by such silence, Shan forced herself to participate in conversations in which she had little interest. Without the strong initiatives of either party, such communication would be unnatural. Shan realized the opposition in her perezhivanie, that is her less willingness to

communicate and the necessity to communicate with her colleague for the building of social relationship. In other words, the communication with her colleagues was primarily interpreted by Shan as the compulsion to relieve an embarrassing atmosphere. This explains Shan's reluctant engagement in interaction with her American colleagues. Therefore, the comparison of the communication between her and her American colleagues versus her and her Chinese interlocutors caused Shan's emotional transformation. The contradiction in her perezhivanie blocked her social communication with the host country peers.

The three participants indicated that the richness and variety of topics were one of the major factors that influenced their social communication with native English speakers. There was concordance among their observation: The conversational environment between the participants and Chinese people was comfortable and relaxed with comfortable chatting on a variety of topics. Yet the environment between participants and native English speakers was nervous, with the participants having studiously sought topics to avoid an embarrassing conversational atmosphere caused by silence of both parties. In that situation, communication was not a natural process of feelings and attitudes being exchanged in a genuine and deep sense.

To summarize this session, interlocutors' attitudes, the participants' reaction to their loss in communication, and limited variety in common topics in communication were the three most reflected factors illustrated by the participants that caused their emotional and perezhivanie transformation. The dynamic emotions and perezhivanie, in turn, determined their performance in social communication, willingness of

building interpersonal relationship, and expansion of social circles with native English speakers in the target sociocultural environment. In this process, the participants may either overcome barriers or may struggle in a predicament. However, in either event, they could enrich their experiences and learn lessons from conflicts, a process that perfects their recognition of the relationship between themselves and the environment and improves their self-development and adaptation to the target societal environment. To conclude this section by citing the argument of Berry (1997), the students' process of adaptation of stress arising from their encounters with their new culture, in particular through key events that could be described as stressors, to which they sought coping strategies that eventually enabled them to adapt to varying degrees and successfully engage with the new culture and meet its demands (Tina & Lowe, 2013).

Self-labelling: How do I feel if I am labelled as an English as second language learner?

Through continual practice of the newly acquired knowledge learned from daily social communication and activities, the participants experience changed, not only in the development of knowledge in various aspects, but also their *perezhivanie* changed—their recognition of where they lived, who they were, and how they survived in the new societal environment. As illustrated in the previous section, *perezhivanie* represents the relationship between self and environment, which determines how individuals experience life issues in different ways. That leads to this question: How do the external environment and life experiences influence

self-positioning? In the following section, this will be addressed to present a vivid picture of international students' sociocultural adaptation to the target environment?

Lee: "I don't mind they call me an ESL learner."

By analyzing the connotation of the label of ESL learners, Lee illustrated his own perceptions of who he is, after years' of residence in the target sociocultural environment.

"They can consider me as an ESL learner or international student. Actually, I don't mind they call me an ESL learner. I am a Chinese. I am an international student in the United States. Then why can't they call me an international student? I don't think they (the terms of 'international student' and 'ESL learner') are positive or negative. They mean no harm, but there are differences. It emphasizes the differences between you and American people. I don't think it is something about racial discrimination, but more cultural differences. American people may treat me differently. For example, they may slow down or use some easy words. It is nice. But there are some disadvantages that are caused by the international student identity. For example, when some national labs pose their advertisement for recruiting, they are saying citizenship is required. The differences are very obvious in the job market. American students in electrical computer engineering are very easy to find a job after graduation. I know sometimes they got their tuition waived. I think it is much easier for American students with bachelor degree to find a job than international students who has a master's or even doctoral degree. So I work very hard to compete with them. Of

course, this is related to the major. So it is understandable, but makes me uncomfortable.”

Lee interpreted the two terms of “international student” and “ESL learner” as neutral and even positive, which did not imply discrimination. Rather, the two terms manifested varieties in ethnicity and culture. However, the differences in power behind the two terms were recognized by Lee. What the terms mean was dependent on what environment he was exposed to, Lee argued. In Lee’s *perezhivanie*, the identity of international student brought her benefits in the American cultural environment. If switch to the social environment, his *perezhivanie* experienced changes, in which he interpreted the term of international student as negative. Being labelled as an international student, he felt being treated differently in the social discourse. Hence, Lee’s interpretation of the two term of “international student” was seemed to have a relation of opposition and unification. Lee appreciated the benefits embedded in the labels, which assisted his comprehension of the English language and helped him to develop knowledge in various aspects. Lee also pointed out what he perceived as unequal treatment in career that he suspected was related to labeling international student. This belief could be interpreted as a sense of resignation and unfairness of being treated differently. He expressed his discontentment of being less competitive than American students in the job market, which motivated him to make endeavor to change his inferior social position in future employment. The efforts he had made to achieve equal opportunities as opposed to the real situation of

international students' inferior social status in the job market were the contradiction in Lee's perezhivanie.

Lee continued to illustrate the drawbacks of being labeled as an international student, he believed:

“I think international students don't have a lot of resources. We may have friends or families to help us when we have difficulties that we cannot deal with by ourselves, but here the only person you can rely on is yourself. We don't have many channels to gather information. These are difficulties or disadvantages for international students. So I have to work much much harder to find a job than American students.”

Lee believed the challenges he faced in the career were compounded by limited access to social resources attached to the label 'international student.' He compared and contrasted the situations when he was in trouble in China and the United States. Lee interpreted the situation as supportive in China as opposed to isolated and helpless in the United States. He realized that limited social resources impeded him to overcome difficulties encountered in his daily life. The changes in his perezhivanie required him to adjust the mood and make great efforts to cope in the target social environment without assistance from relatives and acquaintance.

Although the disadvantages attached to the labels “ESL learner” or “international student” were understandable by Lee, which did not ease his negative emotions. He believed that if he stood on equal footing with an American student, he deserved as much of an opportunity, due to his endeavors. Lee's endeavors were a sign of striving

for the same consideration and opportunities in the academic field and job market.

Lee articulated his aspiration of gaining more social power, status, and resources as an international student in the target sociocultural environment.

Ming: “I don’t feel I am lower than Americans, even though there are a lot of practical disadvantages.”

“I feel OK to be called an international student or ESL learner. I don’t feel I am lower than Americans, I mean . . . my status. But I have to admit that as an ESL learner, there are a lot of practical disadvantages, for example, in career. In my field, a lot of companies prefer to hire Americans. If they cannot find Americans, they will find international students. This is because there are a lot of jobs in my area (physics) have to do with national security.”

Although Ming believed she was equal in social status to members of the host country, she admitted the differences embedded in the labels of “ESL learner” and “Americans.” She said she believed that some Americans feel they are superior to ESL learners when it comes to one’s career. However, Shan showed understanding to inequality in the employment, arguing that it was related to national security. It seems that the advantage and superiority embodied in “being an American” did not result in Ming’s strong aversion to “ESL learner.”

“I can stay in the United States. I think I can find a job here after graduation and live here. But I can never become an American. And I don’t think it is necessary to be an American. You know, in China, when we start learning English, everybody has an English name. I only use my English name in English classes

in China. I never use my English name after I came to the United States, because a name was something that can identify you. When I come here, I want to go by my Chinese name to identify myself, to make me special. ”

Ming did not show a willingness to assimilate herself to become an American, even over the passage of time living in the United States and even though she admitted that being an international student could generate various difficulties. She did not feel a need to be assimilated to be an American, nor did she give up in trying gaining the advantages and superiority sometimes assigned to Americans. In her perezhivanie, her choice to work and live in the United States did not determine who she was and how she would like to live. Ming considered one’s name as a symbol to identify a person. She correlated English names to the American identities and culture connotations contained in American culture. She saw her Chinese name as a tag to indicate her uniqueness in ethnic, culture, and social background, which made her out of ordinary in the mainstream American society. Although she realized she might face disadvantages in her career, that did not influence her willingness to show a sense of pride in her Chinese culture and identity.

Shan: “I am a well-educated Chinese.”

Here is how she expressed her attitudes toward being identified as an “ESL learner” or “international student.”

“I think it is fine (to be called an ESL learner or international student). I wouldn’t say these terms are good or bad. I think it depends. At school, I think advantages are more than disadvantages. If you say you are an international student or ESL

learner, the American society would show more tolerance. They provide services and support on campus for international students. For example, there are a lot of tutors to help you edit the paper. And if you write a paper, professors won't be very picky on your grammar. And also, there will be someone who helps you with tax form. It is very sweet. And also, there are some international students' festivals. In the festival, they provide you a chance to show the cultural and national features of your country. I felt that I am valued and respected when they provide the services."

"Sometimes, I take a look at the emails sent from the president office. In their election for chair, they mentioned international students. When I see this, I feel I receive attention. It is just like the president election in United States. If you pay attention to one race, the candidates emphasize the right of African American. They mention and emphasize the improvement of treatment of African Americans in their declaration. At least you know that these African Americans have already become a big group. It receives attention and cannot be underestimated."

Shan differentiated what the two terms "ESL learner" and "international student" mean in various discourses. In the school context, she benefited from that, such as the assistance and services dedicated to international students only, as well as the tolerance and understanding she received from mainstream Americans. Shan appreciated the benefits, which provided her more space to her sociocultural adjustment. In Shan's perezhivanie, she interpreted the environment as open and friendly, in which she felt considered, valued, and respected. Therefore, she felt

comfortable and confident to present her unique ethnic characteristics in such a situation, which improved her willingness and initiative to engage in social communication and activities with native English speakers. She, as a member of ESL learner, was seen and heard in the target sociocultural environment. Shan stated that the advantage of being an international student or an ESL learner, to some extent, was superior to the disadvantages in the school context. Switch to the social discourse, Shan had different interpretation of the labels as follows:

“But in the real life, the gaps or differences still exist. For example, when looking for a job, it must be harder for international students than citizens. I got a lot of email about internship on our department email list. But for most of them, the minimal or the first requirement is citizenship.”

“Another example is about my performance at work as a research assistance. Even though I have made some progress on my work, I feel I am still out of their circles, the academic circle. I think besides my English, another reason is they still label me as a foreign student. Everything is with a foreign label. Maybe they will appreciate your hard work, maybe they will appreciate your great idea, but when they make some serious decisions, their first priority is native English speakers or American students, not me.”

She was certain to experience more disadvantages than advantages in the social environment, being identified as an ESL learner or international student. First, Shan said that inequality was caused by the labels “ESL learner” and “international student” in employment. She expressed resignation, because she was not even given

an opportunity to compete for an even internship position. Shan was beaten by the labels, she believed, instead of by other competitors. Then, Shan saw her experience of working in a research team as another example, saying she believed she was excluded from the core circle, even though her hard work and performance were appreciated. The labels placed her in an inferior position, where she had a less competitive power and had limited access to the circle core of the team.

The endeavor she made to achieve equal social position with host country peers and the approval of her colleagues versus the unfairness in the real situation was the contradiction in Shan's perezhivanie. Her discontentment was caused by the unequal treatment brought by the identity of international students. She considered herself to be isolated and marginalized by the mainstream group in the workplace. When switching from the comfortable school discourse where she was valued and respected to her workplace where she was placed in an inferior position, Shan experienced transformation in emotions and perezhivanie. It is understandable that Shan would be more motivated to engage in social communication in an open and relaxing environment, whereas less confident to perform daily tasks and conduct communication in an exclusive environment.

By analyzing various meanings contained in the two labels in a variety of discourses, Shan described how she would have preferred to be seen.

“As an international student, I don't want to be seen and treated differently, even though I said there are services provided for international students. I want to be treated equally as American people, but maintaining some special characters of

my own culture. It doesn't matter whether I was treated better or worse than Americans. I just want to be treated equally. I am a well-educated foreigner.”

Although her identity included being labeled as an international student and those very identities even entitled her to services provided by school, and sometimes even an understanding and tolerance from native English speakers, it was those very services that sometimes differentiate her and from her American peers. Shan particularly mentioned she would like to be identified as a well-educated foreigner, which represented her willingness to gain others' acceptance and approval of her endeavor. To frequently switch from one context to another, Shan formed an evolving *perezhivanie*: she would like to act as an international student who has unique ethnic and cultural features, but articulated equality in power and status in the social context.

In summary, the three participants all interpreted the labels “ESL learner” and “international student” as neutral terms that do not imply negative or discriminating connotations. Services and support provided for international students and the understanding and tolerance of members of the host country, they agreed, contributed to create a relaxed and comfortable environment, in which they could adjust to new life without much pressure. However, they also predicted that they would face disadvantages in seeking a career. The labels placed them in an inferior position in employment. Unequal treatment, competitive disadvantages, and limited access to social resources contributed to their feelings of helplessness, isolation, and frustration. Although the participants showed an understanding of different treatment attached to the labels in their host country, a desire for equal treatment was a common claim of

the three participants. The participants' evolving perezhivanie was constructed by their dynamic interpretation of the labels in various discourses, which emphasized the significance of both the maintenance of their cultural characteristics and articulation of unequal treatment in academic and social environment.

To understand how international students label themselves is critical to analyze how they make adjustments in their lives as well as the kind of living conditions they would like to achieve in the target environment. Based on the illustration of the three participants, to be assimilated into American culture and to become a native or native-like native English speaker were not the targets they pursued. Rather, they said they would like to maintain their ethnic cultural features and were proud of showing their cultural uniqueness in the target cultural context. Their persistence in maintaining and performing their ethnic culture represents not only their perezhivanie, but also directly helps to determine the kind of life they would like to live.

The Third Place

With the length of time they lived in the United States increasing and with the development of their environmental knowledge, international students formed dynamic perezhivanie, which guided them adapt socioculturally. Then, several questions are raised here: What does better sociocultural adaptation means? What are the standards to judge whether international students achieve better sociocultural adaptation? How do the participants of this study define and interpret better sociocultural adaptation?

The concept “third place” offers answers to these questions, and shed light on the participants’ understanding of the relationships between social communication and sociocultural adjustment. In the second language learning context, third place is considered as a symbolic ‘meeting place’ where second language learners of various cultural backgrounds open their minds and freely explore interculturality, thus potentially transcending their culture boundaries (Liddicoat & Crozet, 1999). The questions mentioned above will be discussed in the following sections.

Lee: “I want to live comfortably.”

By exploring Lee’s expected and real situations of his social communication and life, we saw changes in his perception of sociocultural adaptation to the target environment and adjustments he made to accommodate the changes.

“Before I came, I heard that there are many Chinese students who live on their own. I mean they still stay with Chinese, although they are physically in the United States I thought this is not good. I thought I would be different. I wanted to make some changes. I have to study and work here and deal with American people. I wanted to make American friends. I thought I will live freely as in my own country, feeling like I am not a foreigner. I think this is my ideal life in the United States. Anyway, I have to adjust myself to this country and do things in American ways. ”

Lee described the kind of life in the United States that he both expected and did not expect. Obviously, he had his own understanding of what life in America would be like and how he could achieve this target. Initially, he expected to assimilate into

the mainstream American group by expanding social circles with host-country peers and by adopting American ways of thinking and behaving when performing daily tasks. He simply interpreted assimilation to the American culture as good and isolation from the mainstream group as bad. Therefore, Lee thought assimilation to the target culture and host-country members were short cut to achieve extensive engagement in social communication and full adjustment to the American sociocultural environment. However, his real social life did not meet with his expectation.

“Well, I am living in the life that I didn’t like before my arrival. Life is different from my expectation. It’s hard to make American friends and get involved in the country. Most of my friends are Chinese. And also, I prefer to stay with Chinese people, because I feel more comfortable. So I think I still repeat those Chinese international students’ old ways. This is more because we (Lee and native English speakers) speak different language and come from different cultures.”

As time goes by, Lee’s perezhivanie was constantly changing as new experiences were encountered. He learned from various difficulties and problems in the real social communication with native English speakers. He realized that contradictions existed between his expected and real social communication as well as between his strong desire of assimilation and hardship in achieving full adaptation to the target social environment. Lee formed the evolving perezhivanie from the lessons and contradictions, reinterpreting “the ideal life” he envisioned as not easily fulfilled as he anticipated and not suitable for him by saying “I prefer to stay with Chinese people.”

In Lee's evolving perezhivanie, assimilation to the mainstream group was no longer his only pursuit. Instead, Lee redefined the "ideal life" from simple assimilation to the mainstream group to the achievement of mental satisfaction and comfort through maintaining interpersonal relationship with Chinese associates.

Lee continually illustrated how and why he changed his initial interpretation of the "ideal life" as follows:

"I may overestimate my ability to get used to the life here. Things are not easy as what I thought. When I am really in the environment, then I can feel how hard it is to do everything in American way to make friends with people who are different from you. So after years of life here, I think it is not necessary and meaningless to force myself to change to achieve the original target I set before. I realize that differences still exist; you cannot avoid them.

"I have lived here for several years. This proves that I can get used to the new life here. It is important to talk to your American classmates and colleagues, because you have to live here. I don't have to use American ways of thinking to deal with everything here. But I want to live comfortably."

It was frustrating and he was stubborn, he admitted to chase the so-call ideal life. Therefore, after years of exposure to the target life, the contradictions between what he was willing to do and his inability to achieve that target compelled him to reconstruct his perezhivanie. Lee abandoned his attempts to reach his original target, considering that it was meaningless and not necessary to live in the American way and to force himself to communicate and build deep personal relationships with native

English speakers, especially with people he had little interest in associating with. In Lee's evolving perezhivanie, assimilation to American culture was no longer was no longer a standard to judge Chinese international students' involvement and adaptation to the U.S. society. He preferred to follow his own feelings and to in a fashion that made him comfortable without too many limitations and pressure. Lee placed his personal feelings and willingness at a higher level than what was "standard." He decided he preferred a realistic and attainable "ideal life." Although he admitted the importance of ability in communicating and building a social connection with host-country peers, doing so did not conflict with his pursuit of the life he finally realized was attainable and realistic. Lee's dynamic perezhivanie is a sign that Lee reached the third place; he found that he did not need to force himself to engage in social communication and in which he had little interest, especially it doing so was primarily the purposes of full participation and sociocultural adjustment to the target environment. Also, in the third place, he could maintain and follow his own willingness to achieve an inner sense of belonging. In the third place, Lee's psychological and social needs were satisfied, which was his new definition of an ideal life.

Ming: "I talk to people when I want to talk. I only go the parties that I am interested in."

"Before I came to the United States, I think I will practice my English and get familiar with the environment through frequent communication with native English speakers. I need to take part in the activities as many as I can, so that I

can practice more and learn more and also know more people here. I didn't think whether I like it or not. I just took it as a task. The school holds a lot of activities every weekend. I remember I went to a lot of activities at the very beginning of my life here in the United States. I felt everything is new. But one semester later, I just got tired of those things. I kind of quitted. Maybe because of my personality, I am not a party animal. Now I only talk to people when I want to talk. And I only go to the parties that I am interested in.

“I think international students were very lonely and afraid of the new world, including me. We try to find some accompanys. I was trying to get rid of that feeling by taking part in those activities. After a while, I feel I am strong enough inside. Then I don't have to pretend to do things that I don't like. But I have to say that (participating in activities held by the school) is a good point that you can get into the American society at the first place.”

Ming recognized that social communication and activities were critical and essential to the development of the target system of knowledge and sociocultural adjustment. Before her arrival in the United States and during her initial transition period, taking part in social communication and social activities were what the new life like in her anticipation. Based on her tone, it seems that she was not genuinely interested in the social communication and activities. Rather, she initially considered social communication with American peers as a task to accomplish. She took advantage of social communication and activities to avoid the feelings loneliness and isolation. She also viewed social communication and activities as a way to expand her

social circles and achieve sociocultural adaptation. Therefore, it was understandable that Ming did not show keen interest in social communication and activities staged by school, when all of her demands were satisfied. Ming expressed her confidence in the mastery of the environmental knowledge and the ability in building social connection with host country members by saying “being strong inside”. In this situation, Ming constructed her evolving perezhivanie, interpreting the participation in social communication and activities as repeated and not necessary.

Ming also experienced dynamic emotions: She felt lonely and helpless when she first arrived in the United States. She was a newcomer who had desire to contact to the external world. Now, she saw herself as a social member who is confident to perform daily tasks by adopting her ethnic and target systems of knowledge. She also changed from a passive participant in social communication to a person who is freely to express her own interest and emotions. Ming’s perezhivanie does not mean that she locked herself inside a small circle or associates and friend and had no connection with the target environment. Ming reached a place in between—the third place, in which interaction with native English speakers and participation in social activities was no longer essential to her survival in the United States. Finally, she was able to pursue a life based on her own personal interests and emotions.

Shan: “Getting involved is the good thing, but not involved is not a bad thing.”

“Getting involved in the American society is good. But now, I am thinking actually it might not be that good as what I thought. Well, I can also say that getting involved in the American society is a good thing, but not involved is not

a bad thing. But what I thought before is being involved is a good thing, whereas not involved is a bad thing. Chinese can stay with Chinese. It is a matter that who you feel comfortable to stay with. Now, I feel that if you are not involved in the society of mainstream Americans, it is not a bad thing. We can stay with Chinese people only. But the premise is that you have the ability to communicate with Americans and get known their culture. I can also say that I am able to hang out or play with Americans. And the matter is that whether I want to hang out with Americans. Those are different.”

Shan experienced dynamic perezhivanie as she gained more experiences of social communication with members of the host country. Her initial pursuit of achieving full social adaptation to the target environment was contradictory to the real situation and her real feelings. Shan was no longer to judge her social adjustment to be good or bad. Rather, she considered whether she can gain mental satisfaction in the communication process as a critical indicator to her social adjustment. Admitting the importance of getting involved in the new sociocultural environment and building a social connection, in Shan’s evolving perezhivanie, she was able to believe that a sense of well-being was more critical than achieving a so-called successful adaptation with the stress that seemed to come with it. However, she emphasized the importance of being equipped with the ability to build social connection with members of the host country. Shan achieved the third place where she could converse with the Chinese peers, following her inclination, and conduct social communication with native English speakers to cope in the American sociocultural environment. Therefore, in

Shan's evolving perezhivanie, she considered the personal characteristics, her willingness and desire, and environmental characteristics, social expectation for an international student in the target country as a unity.

The three participants initially believed that an active social life in the United States was supposed to be rich and colorful, in which they frequently and actively participated in diverse activities. They saw themselves building close friendships with American peers, through which they would gradually achieve deep and successful social involvement in their target environment. This was considered to be an "ideal social life" for an international student. But as the weeks and months went on, they realized what daily social communication and activities with native English speakers were really like and what problems they had that might have impeded fluent interaction, such as language and cultural barriers, emotional transformation, and dynamic perezhivanie. In the participants' perezhivanie, their expectation to participate in social communication seemed to be contradictory to their declining interests in real-world situations. If that is the case, then the question arises: Just what should an international student follow, their self-interests or pursue practical needs? The third place provides a perfect answer to this question. In the third place, both needs can be satisfied. The participants made efforts to achieve a balance that guaranteed a more smooth and realistic adjustment to life in the United States, without violating their interests and emotions.

Participation in social communication and activities are the main channel to achieve social involvement. The quality and quantity of social communication and

activities are seen as the standard to judge whether one has achieved successful involvement in the United States. A study conducted by Ward (2013) regarding the adaptation of Asian Muslim youth in New Zealand found that individuals could also better adapt to the target cultural and social environment if they behaved or performed in their own way by adhering to their original identity and sociocultural norms and constraints. In the third place, the participants did not force themselves to participate in social communication or activities in which they were not interested. Therefore, the frequency of social communication, depth of participation in social activities, and assimilation of the American culture were not seen as the only criteria to one's adjustment and as an attainment of the final target. Emphasizing one's own feelings and free will and maintaining an ethnic identity were the new standard that guides the participants' thoughts and performance in everyday life.

Chapter Summary

The participants' dynamic *perezhivanie* modified and determined their interpretation of the social relations between self and interlocutors, identification of their social positions in communication, understanding of the situations and the environment, and subsequent performance in social lives.

According to Tian and Lowe (2013), communication is at the core of efficient and effective learning of new expectations, but it involves values, purposes, relationships and power, not just the 'mechanics' of language. (p. 595). International students' social communication is interwoven with complicated factors, such as initiatives, attitudes, performance, and emotions in their meaning-making process. In

this chapter, a picture of how Chinese international students faced and solved a variety of difficulties and conflicts was presented through the explosion of their experiences of social communication in the target environment. Not only has it reflected a process of their mediation and negotiation of their ethnic and target systems of knowledge, but it also reflected how they dealt with the relationship between self and the environment and how they lived their social lives within their own identity, guided by their *perezhivanie*.

The three participants said their social circle was limited to people from the same cultural background, because they found it was hard to immerse themselves with the mainstream group in a deep sense. According to Tian and Lowe (2013), there was evidence that international students find it difficult to create friendships with their host-country peers (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002; Jacob & Greggo, 2001; Parks & Raymond, 2004; Schutz & Richards, 2003), although such interactions benefit adjustment (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002). Their attempts to expand their social circles with members of the host country aimed to attain more opportunities to understand and appreciate local people and culture, which would benefit their sociocultural adaptation. But they gradually recognized that gaps existed in social communication and activities between their expectation and real situations, arguing that others' attitudes, the resolution of barriers and conflicts in daily life, self-labelling, and the ideal living conditions, guided by their dynamic *perezhivanie*, were all influential factors to their perceptions, thoughts, and performance. All of these factors were beyond their expectation before they came

to the United States. According to Smagorinsky (2011), “the environment takes on different meanings and plays different roles for the individual at different ages and stages of development, and the child’s relationship to an environmental factor thus changes over time (p.337). This argument is also applicable to Chinese international students: the longer they lived in the United States, along with their deeper understanding of sociocultural conventions and norms, the participants gradually found meaning in their experiences, either positive or negative, and form a changing *perezhivanie* that guides their interpretation of experience and daily performance.

By studying the participants’ narratives of communication in their daily social lives, their *perezhivanie* is represented through the characteristics of coping styles to various issues and through the mediation and application of the knowledge and lessons learned from their experiences. The changes in their *perezhivanie* can be represented by the three most common issues reflected in their narratives of their social communication: interlocutors’ attitudes, being lost in communication, and brevity of common interests. The three barriers encountered in social communication with native English speakers do not only present the participants’ communicative competence, but also reflect their living conditions and mindset. The differences and contradictions between their expected and the real social communication in the abundant communicational experiences caused emotional and *perezhivanie* transformation, which in turn, determined their performance in the subsequent communication, understanding of their social position, and social adjustment to the target sociocultural environment.

As the participants' knowledge of their target system developed, they were able to achieve a better understanding of who they are and the kind of life in America they could expect to live. By examining their perceptions of how they labeled themselves, it is apparent that assimilation to American culture was not the target they wished to fulfill. They were proud of their ethnic features and were willing to present their cultural uniqueness to the majority group in the United States. In the participants' perezhivanie, they did not interpret the term "ESL learner" and "international student" as labels with discriminating connotations, but considered them as the neutral description of their ethnical and cultural diversity. However, they also admitted that there were disadvantages and inequality embedded in the labels "ESL learner" or "international student." The most two common disadvantages mentioned were inequality in employment and in the possession of social resources. The participants realized the difficulties in achieving real equality, and hence, they claimed to be seen and heard. A range of emotions experienced in cultural and social discourses as well as benefits and drawback brought by the two terms nudge the participants to construct their evolving perezhivanie, in which they claimed equality in employment and social resources as well as respect and appreciation in their uniqueness and identity.

By understanding the participants' attitudes toward the terms "ESL learner" and "international student," we can see how they positioned themselves and how they anticipated being identified. This provided a foundation to study the social life they expected to experience. One of the changes that the three participants experienced was their attitude about the engagement in social communication—from proactive

participation, either sincerely or unwillingly, to moderate participation based on their feelings and needs. The changes occurred in emotions and *perezhivanie* assisted the participants to achieve the third place. In the third place, full adaptation was no longer the final target, which contributed to an easing of the participants' pressure. Personal willingness, interests, and emotions were considered to be a more important goal than was building to social connection with members of the host country. The third place provided the participants a buffer zone where they could ease their pressure, nervous emotion, and discomfort caused by the inequalities of expectation and reality in social communication. However, the participants were clearly aware of the significance of social communication to their sociocultural adaptation. In summary, they made efforts to achieve balance that satisfied their daily social communication for survival as well as their willingness to conduct meaningful conversations in a comfortable environment.

It is not contradictory to adopt the target system of knowledge, while maintaining the ethnic one. Instead of achieving full assimilation with the target system of knowledge at the cost of abandoning their ethnic language, cultural features, and social norms, international students could achieve their third place where they could negotiate and mediate the ethnic and target information, and finally could reconstruct their unique ways of communication beyond cultural boundaries. Negotiation and mediation of the two systems of knowledge advocated by the third place can provide to international students a broader stage on which to perform and to

be true to themselves. By experiencing differences and conflicts, they gained a deeper recognition of self, the external world, as well as the relations between the two.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Summary

Higher education overseas offers international students a totally new linguistic, cultural, and social environment, full of opportunities and challenges. They can attain more opportunities to be in contact with their target environment and host country representatives, which benefits their English language learning, understanding of the target culture, and construction of a new system of meaning by combining and negotiating their ethnic and target knowledge. A higher education abroad not only broadens one's horizon but also makes international students more competitive in the job market. Simultaneously, however, international students may also feel pressure to face and deal with numerous differences and barriers in various aspects of their new lives to achieve sociocultural adaptation in the target environment.

Communication functions as the critical way for international students to articulate themselves, negotiate and mediate the ethnic and target cultural and social norms, and process the relationship between self and the external world. In undertaking these complicated tasks, international students encounter challenges and barriers as well as experience complex emotions that complicate the performance of daily tasks and the perceptions of themselves and the surroundings. In the light of sociocultural theory, this study utilizes the concepts of system of meaning and perezhivanie to explore how the three participants overcame the common barriers encountered in communicative interactions, constructed self-positioning, and interpreted connections between self and the surrounding in the target sociocultural

environment. Different from previous research focusing on international students' English learning and social communication, this study employ the third place in the field of acquisition of second language and cultural knowledge to explore how they make meaning of their communicational experiences as they move through their social life. The utilization of the concepts of the third place and perezhivanie provides a particular perspective to compare and contrast the differences in the participants' interpretation of sociocultural adjustment before and after their lengthy stay in the target environment as well as to observe and analyze the ongoing process, in which they gradually groped an appropriate way to adapt to the target social life, influenced by their emotional and perezhivanie transformation as a continuous process.

The study was concluded by answering the three research questions as follows. The first research question is the gaps between Chinese international students' original expectations and the reality of social interactions with native English speakers. The first major gap reflected by the participants was the assessment of their communicative competence before their arrival in the United States and after living in the real social context. As expected, social communication can be impacted by English proficiency and cultural differences at the initial stage in one's life overseas. Along with their growth of knowledge of the American sociocultural environment, these barriers can be gradually overcome. However, beyond their expectation, they were still bothered by various problems that impeded their social communication after years of exposure to the target environment. Unpleasant experiences of communication, in turn, caused passivity by both parties in conversations, which

exerted negative effects on communication at that moment and beyond. Emotional aspects were not mentioned or even been anticipated by the three participants prior to their arrival in the United States. Second, the gap also existed in the perceptions and interpretation of relationships among self, others, and the external environment. The participants realized the complexity of social communication, because it was much deeper than mere language deficiency and mere mastery of the target culture. Moreover, negotiating the intricacies of the ethnic and target systems of knowledge, interlocutors' attitudes and interest in conversations, ways and abilities in solving problems, managing emotions during communication, and self-positioning were the main issues and challenges that were apparent in their narratives. These influential factors were evident only when the participants had extensive participation in social communicative activities, which could not be achieved through their imaginations and expectations prior to their arrival in the United States.

Additionally, a gap also existed in how the participants defined effective sociocultural adjustment. The more they participated in social communication, the better they grasped their new environment and deeper was the involvement they achieved. In their initial pereahivanie, they anticipated building a virtuous circle between their social communication and self-development of the target system of knowledge. Extensive participation in the target cultural and social environment was once set as a common pursuit, which guided their performance in social interaction and activities. However, even stick to this principle, the participants came to found themselves sometimes mired in non-fluent and inefficient communication. As the

three participants' mastery and understanding of the target system of knowledge developed, they were able to adjust their performance in communication, based on lessons they had learned.

The participants' *perezhivanie* underwent a changing process, which was modified and directed by the real social communication with native English speakers and emotions generated from either positive or negative conversational experiences. The changes occurred in *perezhivanie*, which was illustrated by Clara (2016) as "the semiotic transformation of one's *perezhivanie*, that is, the transformation of the prism through which one saw and understood his situation" (p.289). Founded on the experiences of the real social communication, the participants formed their evolving *perezhivanie*, considering frequent social communication with native English speakers not as the only measurement and sign of successful sociocultural adaptation. They redefined what social communication and sociocultural adjustment meant to them: They had to be equipped with the ability in applying newly acquired knowledge and building personal relationships through social communication with members of the host country. However, they preferred to conduct social communication voluntarily rather than by coercion. That is also to say social communication should be conducted on their free will, not forced by both their own anticipation and others' expectation on what international students are supposed to do. Although the participants no longer forced themselves to communicate with the host country peers for sociocultural adjustment, they repeatedly emphasized that social communication is the must-have ability for international students' survival and development.

Eventually, the participants' perezhivanie shifted from the original simple pursuit of frequent social communication and full involvement in the target social context to the exploration of ways that better fit their personality, willingness, interest, and emotions. They had gradually realized the significance of the unity of their emotions, interpretation of social adjustment, and the influences of the social environment, which is also the essence of perezhivanie.

How the participants processed and reacted to interlocutors' attitudes in communication also provided insights into the dialectical relationship between individuals' perezhivanie and their performance in social communication. Interlocutors' attitudes should be considered as a constitutive factor of environmental characteristics, which "interacted with the participants' personal characteristics and has the potential to elicit a different perezhivanie" in each participant (Adams & March, 2014). The interlocutors' attitudes were in proportion to the participants' initiative and performance in social communication. The more enthusiasm that the interlocutors had, the more confidence and initiative the participants showed, and it also became easier to establish a more comfortable conversational atmosphere. Simultaneously, the relaxed and pleasant talking environment alleviated the participants' nervous emotions and increased their willingness and interest in communication, all of which benefitted their extensive participation in current and future communication. Therefore, the dialectical relationship between self and the environment shaped participant's perezhivanie, which played a direct role in their performance in social communication.

Perezhivanie also shed light on the exploration of the second research question of what attitudes international students hold about the label of ESL learner. The changes in perezhivanie provided an opportunity for the participants to re-examine the position in which they identified themselves in the new sociocultural environment. By exploring how they interpreted the label of “international student” or “ESL learner,” we saw how they identified themselves and interpreted the relationships between self and the environment at the initial phase of their lives and after years of exposure to the United States. The three participants considered the labels as neutral terms that did not contain discriminating connotations. They argued that the terms represented only varieties in ethnicity and culture. Although they expected to achieve full sociocultural adjustment, assimilation to American culture was not the goal that the participants made efforts to fulfill. They gradually understood and appreciated the target cultural customs and norms, while they were proud of being representatives of the Chinese culture, asserting that it was their ethnic culture that made them special and unique in the target cultural environment.

Participants’ perezhivanie underwent changes, after attaining a variety of experiences in the U.S. social environment. They realized the disadvantages as well as differences in power possessed and social resources between mainstream Americans and international students. On one hand, the participants appreciated benefits embedded in the terms, such as support and services provided by the university and by host country peers. On the other hand, they also complained and worried about the possibility of unequal treatment they might face in their future career, arguing that

international students might have to make much greater efforts to achieve an equal opportunity to compete with their mainstream American classmates. Their attitudes toward the terms “international student” and “ESL learner” seemed to be a paradox. Their interpretation of the two terms changed from the simple cultural perspective to more complex academic, ethnical, social, and power ones. The changes in their interpretation also contributed to the transformation of their *perezhivanie*: they gradually understood that, as social members, they were not only the representatives of their ethnic culture in the target sociocultural environment. Maintaining ethnic cultural uniqueness was also not competitive as international students or ESL learners living in the American society. They claimed they have to conduct activities to fight for equal treatment and fair competition as they attempted to gain more social power, status, and resources. Therefore, their daily performance certainly was influenced by their evolving *perezhivanie*. The real sociocultural environment also required them to make more efforts to be more competitive in the American academic and social environment.

The third research question is how Chinese international students make meaning of their lived experiences to better adapt in the American societal environment. According to the participants’ narratives, being “Americanized” was not the pursuit and standard to judge whether international students were successful in sociocultural adjustment to their life and studies overseas. The participants’ identification of who they were assisted them to understand what kind of life they would like to live as well as how they performed daily tasks. The “third place” is a way that the participants, as

international students, obtained to survive in the United States as the development of their environmental knowledge and length of stay. Lo Bianco *et al.* (1999) argued that the third place is a question of finding an intermediary place between the maintenance of one's own cultural frame and assimilation to one's cultural frame. Therefore, they defined the third place as "a point of interaction, hybridity and exploration. It is not accommodation –though many intercultural encounters, for various reasons are of this kind –but an encounter" (p. 5). To adopt the third place, the participants, on one hand, lived as students who had to satisfy the needs of their academic, cultural, and social knowledge through social communication. On the other hand, instead of not bearing the burden of being fully assimilating to the target sociocultural frame and the achievement of extensive sociocultural adjustment, they also lived as social beings, participating in social interaction and activities in a more relaxed and joyful way.

All in all, the international students learned from barriers and challenges. They learned from frustration and pain. They elicited a range of emotions as they encountered difficulties in social communication and differences in their expectation and the reality in social communication. Their dynamic *perezhivanie* guided them to adjust their moods and performance, reconsider the relationship between self and the environment, and achieve social adaptation that they believed the most appropriate and comfortable to the target sociocultural environment.

Limitations

Limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, instead of studying large samples, this study examined a limited number of participants, which may not

generalize the group of Chinese international students at the graduate level.

Differences in educational background, personality, purposes of their overseas study, and future plans exerted various influences on the target group of students' social communication and sociocultural adaptation.

Second, the method of data collection was to conduct individual interviews and a focus-group interview. Whether their life experiences were thoroughly and objectively narrated cannot be tracked and verified. According to Warren and Karner (2010), there is an ongoing debate regarding interviews as a valid means to discover what is "true" and "objective" about life experiences (Sandel, 2014). To avoid the problem, observing real-life interactions could be conducted in future research, in which the author could attain more direct and precise feelings of what social communication between the participants and their interlocutors are.

Third, this study excluded the influences exerted by academic study, gender, and economic status, which may lead to limits in understanding the participants' social communication. The possibility that participants' relatively minimal participation in social communication and activities was partially caused by the burden and pressure of their academic study and economic status might have been neglected in this study.

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