HOW CULTURAL VALUES SHAPE CHINESE STUDENTS' ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

by

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(Under the Direction of Sharan B. Merriam)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of cultural values in shaping Chinese students' online learning experiences in American public universities. Three research questions guided this study: How do Chinese students experience online learning in U.S. public universities? What are the socio-cultural factors that impact Chinese students' online learning? Finally, how do Chinese students negotiate cultural values and learning styles in their online learning?

A qualitative methodology was employed for the research design, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews were chosen for data collection. Eleven Chinese graduate students from six public universities in the Southeastern United States were selected and interviewed about their online learning experiences. All participants were Chinese graduate students from mainland China pursuing their graduate degrees in the U.S., and having taken at least one online course during the past three years. For the purpose of this study, an online course was defined as one in which more than 75 percent of the course hours were delivered through the Internet. The eleven interviews were transcribed by the researcher himself, and data was analyzed using the constant comparative method to generate major themes.

Data analysis revealed that Chinese students' online learning experiences are characterized by feelings of greater control over their learning, use of various forms of learning community or support, a need to manage their learning, and by the impact of technology, instructor and classmate. The second category of findings delineated the socio-cultural factors that shape Chinese students' online learning. The major socio-cultural factors include language, U.S. instructional style, and the Chinese cultural values and school norms. Impacting by Chinese values, Chinese students perform a different learning style than their American classmates in an online environment: silence or passive learning, hardworking and diligent, formal and content-oriented discussion, deference to teacher, concern for others, and worry about losing face. With regard to the third research question on negotiating cultural values and learning styles in their online courses, Chinese students first had to acknowledge and reflect on the differences between U.S. and Chinese instructional styles, and then they learned and practiced new strategies for their online learning.

Based on the findings, three conclusions were drawn from this study: Chinese students share experiences common to all online learners, and they experience some unique features of online learning; Chinese cultural values including collectivism, hierarchical relationships, conservatism and conformism, harmony-seeking, face-saving, and valuing effort and diligence, shape their online learning experiences and behaviors in a significant way; and their online learning in U.S. universities is a process of cultural negotiation and construction.

INDEX WORDS: Online Learning Experience, Chinese Students, Cultural Values, Online Courses, U.S. Universities, Adult and Distance Learning

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF TABLES

Page

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Computer and Internet technologies have evolved and expanded exponentially during the past two decades, significantly changing the ways that people live, work, and study. Nationally and internationally, businesses use the Internet or intranet to deliver training and services. Educational institutions create and implement more online courses to meet the various needs of increasingly diverse students. Virtual universities compete for the lucrative training market (Perley & Tanguay, 1999). Online learning, due to its flexibility in time and location, economical administration, and capability to satisfy the special needs of the learners, is becoming a new alternative in higher and adult education.

Teaching beyond the traditional campus and classroom is a worldwide phenomenon. According to a recently released survey study (Babson College and the Sloan Consortium, 2004), 81% of higher education institutions in the United States offer at least one fully online or blended course. The percentage increases to 97% for public institutions. Over 1.6 million students took at least one online course during the fall of 2002. These data match accordingly with the popularity of Internet usage in the United States. By May 2004, there were 202 million Internet users in the U.S, roughly equivalent to 70% of Americans using the Internet daily (Internet World Stats, 2004). People's attitudes toward online learning have become quite positive over the past decade. According to the Babson and Sloan study, a majority of academic leaders (57%) believed that the learning outcomes for online education are equal to or even superior to those of face-to-face instruction. With online for-profit universities such as Phoenix, Capella, and

DeVry expanding, conventional universities in the U.S. are turning to blended or "hybrid" teaching, which combines the face-to-face and online approaches for a better learning outcome (Dziuban & Moskal, 2001; Young, 2002).

Online learning can trace its origin to distance education, which has developed and served adult learners for over 150 years (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Distance education is defined by the separation of teacher and student in time and/or space, the volitional control of learning by students rather than instructor, and a noncontiguous communication between student and teacher that is mediated by print or some forms of technology (Garrison & Shale, 1987; Keegan, 1986). Not until the 1980s, with the formation of moderated newsgroups, was the formal use of the Internet for learning established (Hill, Wiley, Nelson, & Han, 2003). The well-recognized three generations of distance education are correspondence education, broadcast and Television technologies, and telecommunication and information technologies (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Currently, distance education has expanded to the Internet to the extent that in some settings, the terms distance education and Web-based courses are considered synonymous (Eastmond, 1998). The development of online learning has been driven by the rapid development of information and communication technologies, economic globalization, and demographic changes in the workplace (Moore, 2001)

Adult learners constitute the main population for online learning. Moore and Kearsley (1996) indicate that "around the country and around the world, most distance education students are adults between the ages of 25 and 50" (p. 153). A survey study of their attitudes toward online learning revealed that 54% of working adults believe that college courses offered via the Internet are the future of higher education (Pastore, 2000).

More than half (53%) of the respondents said the biggest benefit of taking courses online was the ability to work from home, while 19% cited the time saved from not having to commute (Pastore, 2000). All of these reports suggest that online learning is increasingly recognized as a viable educational option by adults in the United States.

Earlier studies have compared the performance of distance learners to that of the traditional face-to-face learners (Moore & Thompson, 1999; Russell, 1998). Russell collected 355 research reports, summaries, and papers from 1928 to 1998 on the effects of various kinds of distance education. He found that there was no significant difference in learners' achievement between these two modes, a conclusion which has became a widely accepted consensus on distance learning among researchers. However, Russell's study has been criticized by some scholars for bias in research methods and for over-generalizing the conclusion (Maushak, Chen, Martin, Shaw, & Unfred, 2000; Ramage, 2002). Generally speaking, attitudes have been very positive and supportive toward online instruction (Chang, 2000).

Online learning relies heavily on advanced computer and Internet technologies. Contrary to the belief of many people that technology is culturally neutral, technology is not neutral or value-free at all (McLoughlin, 1999). McLoughlin reminds us that technology is itself a cultural amplifier that transforms the nature of human productivity. It can also quantitatively change the process of cognition and amplify the cultural dimensions of communication, task analysis, and problem solving. In fact, the World Wide Web has been designed and strongly influenced by White, Western, industrialized ideologies and reflects the cultural orientation of rationalism, supremacy of technology, and a linear way of thinking. Rogers and Steinfatt (1999) discuss the consequences of the

rapid growth of the Internet and the capability of American business and media to export news and programs with images of U.S. culture throughout the world. They point out that many developing nations see themselves as victims of this cultural colonization. McIssac (2002) believes it is impossible "to have a culturally neutral global network" (p. 19). Thus, the metaphor of a global village may be just a myth.

Online education, a learning approach developed by the Western countries and currently adopted worldwide, reflects an industrialized model of large-scale, distributed education and a tradition of individualism (Robinson, 1999). The development and interests of individual students are deemed the prime goal of distance education. Learning online promotes the learner-centered instruction and learners' self-directedness and self-reflection practices, which are the main focuses of the major adult learning theories, such as andragogy(Knowles, 1980), self-directed learning(Grow, 1991, 1994) and transformation learning(Mezirow, 1991). Otto Peters (1993, 1998) believes distance education is the most industrialized form of teaching and learning developed in the West. He points out that lifestyles and learning habits of disciplined adults in industrial societies are the psychological necessities for distance learning. Kearsley (2002) asserts that online learning is not good for every culture, especially for less developed countries. Robinson compares the Western values espoused in distance education and Chinese educational values and notes a series of differences and discontinuities. All of these findings lead to questioning cultural issues when applying distance education techniques to cross-cultural or multi-cultural settings.

The relationship between culture and learning has been widely studied in the fields of multicultural education, adult education, and distance education. Most often,

culture has been treated as a factor, along with others that influence the learning behaviors of a particular group of people. However, culture is not merely a minor factor or an issue that is related to a particular group of people. Every person lives in and stands for his or her own culture. As DuPraw and Axner (1997) maintained, culture is central to what we see, how we make sense of what we see, and how we express ourselves. Anthropologists Kevin Avruch and Peter Black (1993) emphasize that culture provides the "lens" through which we view the world, the "logic" by which we order it, and the "grammar" by which it makes sense. As a social and cultural being, an adult is shaped and constrained by his or her culture in every aspect of his or her life. As Lockes states (in Guy, 1999), "Culture is baked into the daily bread of a people's life" (p. 7).

Culture is a popular yet ambiguous concept in our language system. Different people use different layers of meaning to describe culture. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) summarized more than 160 definitions of culture, explicitly reflecting the complexity of this term. A well recognized definition is provided by Banks and Banks (1997). They define culture as "the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one (group of) people from another in modernized societies" (p. 8). Hofstede (1991) compares culture to an onion in that peeling off outside layers of rituals, heroes, and symbols, one can reach the core of value. Value, according to Hofstede (1980), refers to "a broad tendency to prefer certain states of affairs over others" (p. 19). Cultural values have served as a standard to judge situations, to interpret meaning, or to direct people's daily behaviors. Some classical cross-cultural studies (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Kluchhohn & Strodbeck, 1961; Schwartz, 1987, 1990, 1994) enrich our understanding of the nature of diverse cultures and cultural values.

In adult education, even the major adult learning theories have traditionally been based on one culture, usually the White, male, and Western European culture (Amstutz, 1999; Pratt, 1991). Recently, however, culture as an important contextual factor that influences adult learning has caught some researchers' attentions. Caffarella and Merriam (2000) criticize the adult learning theories such as andragogy, self-directed learning, and transformational learning theory for being based on individual and psychological process regardless of the context and background of the learners. Guy (1999) believes the idea of a generic adult learner with certain universal characteristics and traits has been rejected by most researchers: "In each case, the particular socio-cultural context in which learners exist and act strongly influences the motivations, needs, goals, and perspectives that learners bring to the learning environment" (p. 94).

A series of empirical studies also reveals the important role of cultural values in shaping the learning process of adults from non-Western backgrounds (Alfred, 2003; Hvitfeldt, 1986; Merriam & Muhammad, 2000; Pratt, 1991, 1992). Hvitfeldt (1986) provides an earlier qualitative study that explores the relationships between learning behaviors and cultural values in adult education. After observing an American basic education class for newly immigrated Hmong people, which is a minority group from Southeast Asia, Hvitfeldt found that Hmong adults' learning behaviors, such as reliance on external referents, achievement as group cooperation, and a holistic rather than analytic perceptual style, significantly reflected their community life in a preliterate and pre-technical society. Pratt (1991, 1992) conducted several studies with Chinese adult teachers and learners, finding that Chinese adult learners have different attitudes and concepts about learning and education than do Westerners. Pratt argues that these

concepts are compatible with and possibly derivative of cultural, social, political, and economic factors within China. Similarly, in their study on learning activities of old Malaysian adults, Merriam and Muhammad (2000) found that Eastern cultural values, such as collectivism, hierarchy, relationship orientation, and valuing face and religions, shaped the way these older adults learned.

Cultural issues are not resolved in a high technology environment. In fact, they seem to penetrate into all aspects of technology-supported education. As Joo (1999) states, "Although the Internet breaks down technological barriers to international exchange of information and communication, it does not eliminate cultural obstacles – in fact, in many cases, it appears to add to them" (p. 249). She identifies five aspects where cultural issues may come into play: content of materials, power of the media, writing styles, writing structures, and Web design. Palloff and Pratt (2003) add to this list with the role of student and instructor. The instructor and the learners, as cultural beings, bring their cultural values and social identities into the online teaching-learning transaction.

Students from different cultural backgrounds challenge online teaching with their different learning styles and special needs. As a result, an instructor teaching in a multi-cultural class must be sensitive to various cultural issues and keep an open mind to cultural differences. Ziegahn (2001) points out that adult educators can "become more sensitive to cultural difference in the classroom by first examining the cultural values that underlie their preferred methods of teaching" (p. 4). Henderson (1996) suggests taking an eclectic approach that allows for variability and flexibility in the design of learning resources. This approach calls for reflecting the multiple and diverse cultural realities, including a variety of cultural ways of knowing, interacting, learning, and teaching, as

well as promoting acceptance of and equity for a variety of learning outcomes. Similarly, McLoughlin and Oliver (1999) advocate several design principles for a culturally inclusive curriculum for online learners, such as adopting a constructivist epistemology, designing authentic learning activities, creating flexible tasks and tools for knowledge sharing, providing different forms of support, establishing responsive roles and responsibilities, and providing flexibility in learning goals, outcomes, and assessment modes.

From the above discussion we can see that the importance of cultural issues is becoming increasingly acknowledged by scholars and practitioners in adult education and distance education. Much still remains unknown, however, especially with regard to the variety of cultural issues from learners regarding different cultural backgrounds (Guy, 1999). In online education, most of the studies on cultural issues have focused on technological or instructional design for a multicultural population. Less attention has been given to participants' learning experiences (Hara & Kling, 2000; Ku & Lohr, 2003), especially those of learners from different cultural backgrounds.

With the rapid economic development and Open Door policy of China, more and more Chinese students are coming to the United States to pursue their graduate study. According to the Open Door 2004, an annual report on international education published by the Institution of International Education (IIE, 2004), 572,509 international students attended colleges and universities in the United States in the 2003-2004 academic year, and 57% of those students came from Asia. A total of 61,765 students came from mainland China, almost doubling the number in 1993-1994. Another statistic from the Ministry of Education of China indicates that 189,000 Chinese students have traveled to

study in the U.S. to study since 1978, making the U.S. the country with the largest number of Chinese overseas students ("U.S. ranking," 2002). The background that Chinese students bring to the United States is an educational culture that developed thousands of years ago, well before Copernicus (1473-1543), Pestalozzi (1746-1827), Froebel (1782-1852), Dewey (1859-1952) and other Western educators developed their education theories.

According to Nisbett (2003), Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.) influenced Chinese pedagogy in the same way that Plato (428-348 B.C.E.) and Socrates (470-399 B.C.E.) influenced Western pedagogy. The thoughts of Confucius were recognized, valued, and inherited, becoming the ethical and social norms of Chinese society for generations. These values and norms have permeated geographically across the border of mainland China and have widely influenced many East Asian countries, including Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, and Japan, as well as overseas Chinese. In addition to Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism have influenced the formation of Chinese social norms and cultural values as well (Yick & Gupta, 2002).

Although the differences between East and West have been known for many years, systematic research on the cultural differences began only in recent decades. A series of studies has been conducted on mapping national cultures from some derived general dimensions. For example, through a factor analysis of cultural averages, Hofstede (1980, 1984) derived four common dimensions, which are individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity. The Chinese Culture Connection (1987), a group of cross-cultural researchers led by Michael H. Bond, identified a new dimension from their study on Confusion heritage cultures. They called

it Confucian Work Dynamism, which refers to an employee's devotion to the work ethic and respect for traditions. Schwartz and his colleagues (1987, 1990, 1994) have identified seven cultural level value types: conservatism, harmony, egalitarian commitment, intellectual autonomy, affective autonomy, mastery, and hierarchy. In these studies, even using different dimensions and terminologies, Chinese culture was generally described as being hierarchical, collectivist, conservative, conformist, harmony seeking, masculine, and valuing learning and education.

Influenced by these cultural values and other factors such as social norms, political ideology, education systems, and economic conditions, students from Chinese societies demonstrate a different learning style than Western students. Kember (1999) summarized six characteristics of Chinese students from Hong Kong – reliance on rote learning, extrinsic motivation, high levels of achievement motivation, high achievement, excellence in group projects, and willingness to invest in education. Chinese classrooms often have a large class size of usually 40 to 50 students, sitting quietly and listening attentively to the teacher's presentation. Students stand up and ask questions only when they are required to do so. This reflects the cultural values of respecting authority and collectivism. Pratt, Kelly, and Wong (1998) investigated Chinese teachers' teaching and found that there is a profound respect for a teacher's fundamental knowledge and well-defined roles or responsibilities for both parties. In their study of Chinese students who were learning English as a foreign language, Wen and Clement (2003) found that Chinese students were so accustomed to the teacher-centered class that once they were in the student-centered class, they complained that too much time was being wasted and

insisted on more lectures from the teacher. Peters (1998) asserts that Asian students basically are other-ruled rather than autonomous learners.

Chinese students' passive and receptive learning style is clearly demonstrated during their attendance at Western universities (Feng, 1991; Lin & Yi, 1997; Liu, 2001; Pan, et al., 2003). Liu studied the classroom communication patterns among Asian students in an American university and found that Asian students tend to have few communications with either their instructor or their classmates and keep silent in class. He argues that "the socio-cultural factors combined with linguistic and affective factors are instrumental in shaping the characteristics of Asian students' classroom communication patterns" (p. 176). Lin and Yi (1997) also found that international students from Asian countries are reluctant to share their feelings or emotions and express their opinions or opposition to anyone in the classroom.

There are only a few studies concentrating on Chinese students' learning in an online environment. Tu (2001) found that Chinese students in the U.S. classrooms may not take the initiative in online interactions. They need more support from instructors and require a higher degree of teacher immediacy (Powell & Harville, 1990). They are more sensitive to privacy and the possibility of losing face (a feeling of being shameful) in group discussions (Shih & Cifuentes, 2003). A survey study of online teaching in Asian open universities indicates that Asian students, including Chinese students, do not like voice contacts with their teachers and fellow students, even in their own cultural context (Zhang, 2003).

In addition, some research suggests that Chinese students may be marginalized in their online learning in the context of American universities (Jun & Park, 2003; Tu, 2001).

Jun and Park observed six Asian students' participation in bulletin board discussions in two online courses. They found that these international students initiated far less discussion than did American students. Most of their posts were replies to others with sympathetic language that supplemented rather than contradicted, and they frequently used powerless language such as disclaimers, hedges, and tag questions. The authors attribute their findings to the students' language barrier, lack of knowledge about American society, and cultural issues.

From the above, we can see that when Chinese students come into the West, they bring their unique cultural values and learning styles with them. Chinese culture has the characteristics of collectivism, respect for hierarchy and conformity, and Chinese students are featured as passive, receptive, and respectful learners. When they study in Western educational institutions that espouse autonomy, self-development, and two-way interactions, the result is low participation in class communication and marginalization with regard to classroom activities. These facts appear to play out in face-to-face classrooms as well as online environments.

Even though there have been some initial attempts to understand Asian students' online learning behaviors (Peters, 1998; Robinson, 1999; Shih & Cifuents, 2003; Tu, 2001), much reminds unknown about Chinese students' online learning (Ku & Lohr, 2003). Specifically, how do Chinese students adapt to the individualized electronic environment? How do they negotiate their cultural values and learning styles in their communication with the instructor and their classmates? How could the online class be developed to be more culturally inclusive to Chinese students? All of these questions call for further research to unlock the riddles around Chinese students' online learning.

Statement of the Problem

Online learning has become an innovative approach to adult education and an alternative to traditional classroom instruction. Due to its flexibility in time and location, economical administration, and ability to satisfy the diverse needs of adult learners, online learning has been widely applied in institutional instruction and corporate training in the United States. As an industrialized approach developed in Western countries (Peters, 1998), online learning represents a particular constellation of values in education that emphasize individual development, learner-centeredness, autonomy in learners, learner choices, active learning, dialogue, and two-way communication (Robinson, 1999). Thus, when Asian learners participate in online programs developed in the West, there are likely to be difficulties stemming from differences in learning styles, culture, and language (Treuhaft, 2000).

As more Chinese students pursue their studies in the U.S. and other Western countries, the popularity of online learning poses a major challenge to them and their traditional ways of learning. Chinese students are accustomed to teacher-led, passive, and single direction communications, and collective ways of learning, where they act as respectful listeners and reticent knowledge absorbers in the class (Kember, 1999; Liu, 1999; Watkins & Biggs, 1999). These learning behaviors reflect the primary Chinese cultural values such as collectivism, hierarchy, harmony seeking, conservatism, and abasement. These cultural values can be traced back to the historical traditions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism that have been developed in China and have a profound impact on East Asia for thousands of years. These values are contradictory in every aspect to the individualized and egalitarian Western values (Hofstede, 1980, 1984).

The role of social and cultural issues in adult learning has attracted the attention of a number of researchers in adult education (e.g., Guy, 1999; Merriam & Muhamad, 1999; Pratt, 1991) and distance education (e.g., Gunawardena, Wilson, & Nolla, 2003; Joo, 1999; McLoughlin, 1999; Tu, 1999). Previous studies have found that people from different cultures have different concepts of learning and that they learn in different ways. However, most often, the research on relationships between cultural values and learning has been limited to studying the learning behaviors in traditional settings. Recent research on Asian students' online learning has provided only some anecdotal data, personal accounts, and partial conclusions. There are few empirical qualitative studies focused on Chinese students' learning experiences in online environments. Thus, this study focused on the interaction between Chinese cultural values and online learning approaches from the perspective of Chinese students' learning experiences in American universities.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand how cultural values influence Chinese graduate students in their online learning in American public universities. In order to accomplish this purpose, the following three research questions were addressed:

1. How do Chinese graduate students experience online learning in an American public university?
2. What are the socio-cultural factors that impact Chinese students' learning online?
3. How do Chinese students negotiate their cultural values and learning styles in their online learning?

Significance of the Study

This study can bring both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of adult education and distance education. The exploration of Chinese cultural values, as well as Chinese students' learning behaviors, can expand the horizon of adult learning theories based on Western cultural values and ideologies. By analyzing the social and cultural factors that influence Chinese students in a non-traditional learning environment, this study will examine related theories in recognizing the importance of contextual forces, especially that of the cultural perspectives on adult learning. This research will also contribute to distance education. From the unique learning experience of Chinese students in their interactions with technology, the instructors, and their American counterparts, we can better understand how cultural factors interact with technology. By attending to learners' differences, this study will contribute to the development of distance learning theories.

The practical implications of this study are two-fold. First, from studying the concrete learning experiences of Chinese students in their online courses, adult and distance educators can gain a better understanding of the unique cultural values and learning styles of their Chinese students, decreasing some miscommunication and misinterpretation in a cross-cultural context. As a result, a culturally sensitive teaching approach could be developed for both online and face-to-face classes.

Second, by examining Chinese students' online learning experiences, this study can provide some suggestions for universities in China and other East Asian countries, to develop online learning to serve the increasing demands of adult students in these areas. To distance educator and policymakers in China, this empirical study can also provide

suggestions for developing tailored online learning programs for Chinese students. The adoption of theories and models of distance education from the West, without considering the cultural values and other contextual factors that characterize Chinese students, may lead to a low quality of online education, or even failure. Thus, it is essential and indispensable to attentively consider the cultural differences between the East and West when adapting online learning techniques from the other countries.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of cultural values and social factors in shaping Chinese students' online learning experiences in an American public university. Three research questions guided this study: (a) How do Chinese graduate students experience online learning in an American public university? (b) What are the socio-cultural factors that impact Chinese students' learning online? (c) How do Chinese students negotiate their cultural values and learning styles in their online learning? This chapter explores the literature on Chinese students' online learning from the broad areas of distance education, adult education, cross-cultural studies and multicultural education. The review of the literature was organized into the following five sections: online learning for adults, cultural issues in adult/distance education, cultural values and Chinese values, Chinese students' learning, and a chapter summary.

Online Learning for Adults

With the advancement of information and communication technology, online learning, a new form of distance education, has undergone an unprecedented development in every layer of postsecondary education. In the United States, conventional universities implement more and more online courses as alternatives to traditional face-to-face courses or adopt hybrid courses that combine classroom instruction and online learning to serve diverse learners (Young, 2002). A number of commercial online universities have developed and expanded rapidly. For example, the

University of Phoenix offered 54 online degree programs and enrolled 132,700 adult students nationwide in 2004, a 46% increase compared to 2003 (Apollo Group, 2004). In the field of business, more than one thousand corporate universities have recently emerged, delivering their training courses to employees and clientele through the Internet or intranet (Allen, 2002). As Moore (2003) points out, "the first years of the new century have seen a new, unparalleled willingness to consider the benefits of teaching outside the classroom and beyond the campus. The idea of distance learning seems to have finally entered into the educational mainstream" (p. ix).

Online learning comes into people's lives more quickly and more broadly than they often anticipate. Statistics indicate that teaching at a distance is widely used by university systems. A recent survey of 4130 institutions by the National Center for Education Statistics (2003) provides ample evidence to this trend: (a) fifty-six percent of all 2-year and 4-year degree-granting institutions offered distance education courses in 2000 – 2001; (b) ninety percent of public 2-year institutions and 89% of public 4-year institutions offered distance education courses in 2000 – 2001 ; (c) an estimated 127,400 different distance education courses intended for any level or audience were offered by 2-year and 4-year institutions during the 2000 – 2001 academic year; (d) in the 12-month 2000 – 2001 academic year, there were an estimated 3,077,000 enrollments in all distance education courses offered by 2-year and 4-year institutions. Most of these distance education courses used the Internet as an essential tool for teacher-student interaction.

The increasing popularity of online education is also apparent within the University System of Georgia as well. According to a recent report (Advanced Learning Technologies, 2004), the number of online courses in 34 colleges and universities in

Georgia has dramatically increased from 898 in 1998 to 3928 in 2004, and students' enrollments in online courses increased by almost five times to 64,484 in the past 6 years. Online learning has become an indispensable alternative to the traditional classroom teaching model for many campuses.

This growth is not limited to the United States; teaching beyond the brick and mortar is a worldwide phenomenon. In Australia, the University of South Queensland uses online learning to serve 75% of its non-traditional students (Taylor, 2004). The leading institution of distance education, the British Open University has gradually updated its courses into the online format (Miller, 2000). In China, since the launch of the Modern Distance Education Project by the Ministry of Education in 1999, 69 top universities had implemented online courses and programs and registered 1.37 million students by the end of 2002 (Li, Liu, & Huang, 2004).

The extensive implementation of online learning in educational and business settings is driven by the rapid development of information technology, economic globalization, and demographic changes in the workforce (Moore, 2001; Morrison, 2003). The emerging knowledge economy requires that education become a lifelong event rather than simply a four-year terminated degree. Data indicate the number of adult students has increased significantly in the past 20 years, with approximately 50% of all college students in the United States were 25 or older (Daniel, 2000). Adult students usually have a family, a job and multiple social roles. They can not afford to leave their jobs and learn full-time on campus as the undergraduates do; learning online or studying in a distributed way is the best solution to satisfiy their educational needs. In the following paragraphs, I

will delineate the field of online education from its definitions, its history, and some key theories of distance education.

Definitions of Online Learning

Online learning has many names and faces, such as computer-mediated learning, Internet-based learning, web-based learning, electronic learning (eLearning), and virtual learning. Although slightly different in usages and contexts, these terms share some common characteristics. That is, they all rely on computers and the Internet to deliver the content and realize communications between instructor and learners who are physically separated. It is an innovative instructional model tracing from the tradition and broad discipline of distance education.

Distance education is defined by the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) as "institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructor" (in Schlosser & Simonson, 2002, p. 4). Keegan (1986) identified four main elements from previous definitions of distance education: (a) the separation of teacher and learner, which distinguishes it from face-to-face education; (b) the influence of an education organization, which distinguishes it from private study and self-taught programs; (c) the use of technology media to unite the teacher, learners, and content; and (d) the provision of two-way communication which distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education. Thus, we can define online learning as an instructional model offered by educational institutions, that is characterized as the separation of teacher and learners, use of technology media to deliver learning content, and two-way communication. Distance education includes both distance

teaching and distance learning. Distance education refers to the development, design, management, and evaluation of instruction. The utilization of these learning experiences is distance learning (Schlosser & Simonson, 2002).

A variety of practices can be attributed to the umbrella concept of online learning. Eastmond (1998) describes three different types of Internet-based courses, each of which requires students to learn in a different manner. The first type is represented by traditional distance learning courses such as a correspondence or video course that is supplemented by using the Internet. The second type is computer conferencing courses, where the Internet is the primary means of course delivery. Such courses are characterized by greater interactivity between students, with a need for more reflection and collaboration. The third type is virtual courses where most or all aspects of the courses are delivered online. In another model, Driscoll (1999) categorized instructional delivery using the World Wide Web (WWW) into four broad types: (a) Web/computer-based instruction, (b) Web/electronic performance support systems, (c) Web/virtual asynchronous classrooms, and (d) Web/virtual synchronous classrooms. Synchronous learning refers to real-time, instructor-led online instruction in which all participants are logged on at the same time and communicate directly with each other. Asynchronous learning is learning in which interaction between instructors and students occurs intermittently with a time delay. Since many educational institutions use the blended model of instruction, which includes a face-to-face part and an online part, the University System of Georgia defines those courses with more than 50% of instruction delivered through the Internet as distance learning courses (Advanced Learning Technologies, 2004).

The Generations of Distance Education

The tradition of using distance education for teaching adult students can be traced back to correspondence instruction at least 160 years ago (Moore & Kearly, 1996). Garrison (1985), Nipper (1989), and Bates (1991) proposed a three generations theory to describe the evolution of distance education. The first generation is the correspondence model, which depends on print materials to deliver instruction. In 1840, English businessman Isaac Pitman offered shorthand instruction via correspondence through the newly established penny post system. Since then, correspondence courses have gradually become a popular method of learning, especially for working adults.

The second generation was broadcasting or multimedia model, which includes the radio, television, or audiotape incorporated into the print materials. The establishment of the British Open University in 1972 and its wide application of multi-media into distance teaching was the benchmark of this generation. The Open University brought heightened prestige to distance education and spurred the establishment of similar institutions in industrial nations such as West Germany, Canada, and Japan, as well as in less developed nations such as India, Pakistan, and China (Schlosser & Simonson, 2002). According to Denial (1999), the former president of British Open University, there are 11 distance teaching universities established, each with an enrollment exceeding 100,000 students. He called those distance universities "mega-universities."

The third generation emerged as the application of telecommunication and information technologies that delivery the instruction asynchronously to learners. The formal uses of the Internet for learning were not established until the 1980s with the formation of moderated newsgroups (Schrum & Berenfeld, 1997). Australian scholar James Taylor (2001) further differentiates his fourth and fifth generations from the third

generation. According to Taylor, the fourth generation is called the flexible learning model, and combines CD-ROM interactive multimedia and Internet-based delivery of asynchronous learning. Many universities have begun to use this model to offer online courses to their students. The fifth generation, which Taylor calls intelligent flexible learning model, utilizes the automated response system to enhance the fourth generation. Specifically, the teacher-student interactions are stored in a relational database, which further provides a rich resource for new students' inquiries by using key word matching.

Theoretical Analysis of Distance Education

Although the practice of distance education has existed for more than a century, the theoretical analysis of distance education had not been undertaken by leading scholars until the 1970s. A theory is important for exploring the nature of distance education as well as directing its practices. Holmberg (1986) believes that theory "will lead to insights telling us what in distance education is to be expected under what conditions and circumstance, thus paving the way for corroborated practical methodological application"(p. 3). In his landmark book *The Foundation of Distance Education*, Keegan (1986) classifies theories of distance education into three groups: theories of independence and autonomy, theories of industrialization of teaching, theories of interaction and communication.

The theories of independent study were initiated by Charles Wedemeyer and his student Michael Moore in the 1970s. For Wedemeyer, the essence of distance education was the independence of the student. He proposed the separation of teaching and learning as a way to break space-time barriers. For Wedemeyer (1981), an ideal independent study system should have the following characteristics: (a) the student and teacher are separated;

(b) the normal processes of teaching and learning are carried out in writing or through some other medium; (c) teaching is individualized; (d) learning takes place through the student's activity; (e) learning is made convenient for the student in his or her own environment; and (f) the learner takes responsibility for the pace of his or her own progress, with freedom to start and stop at any time. Moore (1994) also emphasizes the autonomy of the learner. For him, there is a gap between teacher and student in distance education, so the student must accept a high degree of responsibility for the conduct of the learning program. The autonomous leaner needs little help from the teacher. On the other hand, the system should provide for two-way communication (dialogue) and be responsive to the need of the individual learner (structure).

A theory of industrialization of teaching was developed by Otto Peters of Germany. He conducted an extensive analysis of distance teaching organizations in 1960s, which led him to propose that distance education could be analyzed by comparing it with the industrial production of goods (Peters, 1993). He believed that from many points of view, conventional, oral, group-based education was a pre-industrial form of education. This implies that the distance teaching could not have existed before the industrial era. Using economic and industrial theory, Peters proposed using terminology such as rationalization, division of labor, mechanization, assembly line, mass production, standardization, concentration, and centralization for analyzing the process of distance education. He concluded that for distance teaching to become effective, the principle of division of labor must be a constituent element of distance teaching. The teaching process is gradually restructured through increasing mechanization and automation. Peters wrote:

> Distance education is, indeed, a typical product of industrial society. This not only applies to its inherent industrial principles and trends but also to the fact that distance education has been capable of meeting educational needs typical of an industrialized economy and that it could attract and keep highly motivated students who wish to improve their vocational or professional status as well as their income, sacrificing their leisure time for gratifications often delayed for many years. (p. 239)

Holmberg's (1986) theory of distance education, which he calls guided didactic conversation, relates teaching effectiveness to the impact of feelings of belonging and cooperation, as well as to the actual exchange of questions, answers, and arguments in mediated communication. Holmberg offers six assumptions for his theory: (a) the core of teaching is an interaction between the teaching and learning parties; (b) emotional involvement and personal relation are likely to contribute to learning pleasure; (c) learning pleasure supports student motivation; (d) participation in decision-making concerning the study is favorable to student motivation; (e) strong student motivation facilitates learning; and (f) a friendly, personal tone and easy access to the subject content can facilitate student learning. Based on these assumptions, Holmberg formed his theory:

> Distance teaching will support student motivation, promote learning pleasure and effectiveness if offered in a way felt to make the study relevant to the individual learner and his/her needs, creating feelings of rapport between the learner and the distance education-institution (its tutors, counselors, etc.), facilitating access to course content, engaging the learner in activities, discussions and decisions and

> generally catering for helpful real and stimulated communication to and from the learner. (p. 123)

An overview of the definitions, generations, and theories of distance education reveals it to be an instructional model developed in the industrial Western societies during the last century and applied worldwide in recent decades. The wide application of online learning in education and business is fueled by technology development, economic globalization and knowledge requirements from the workplace. It evolves with the development of modern technology, and online education represents the most advanced stage of distance education. Its theories, either Peters's (1993) analogy to industrial mass production or what Wedemayer(1981), Moore(1994) and Holmberg(1986) emphasize as the features of independence, learners' autonomy, interaction, or didactic conversation, reflect a strong sense of individual-oriented, mutual communication and humanism philosophy of the Western culture. As Robinson (1999) analyzes the cultural property of distance learning:

> The focus on the individuals is strong in Western models of open and distance education. This arises partly as a counterbalance to the industrialized nature of large-scale distance education, but also from a tradition of individualism in much Western educational philosophy and psychology (the latter especially has focused much research on individual differences). The development and learning of individual students is a prime goal in open and distance education. (p. 34)

A deep understanding of the history and nature of distance education, as well as the latest online learning often raises a question for many scholars (Peters, 1998; Robinson, 1999; Kearsley; 2002). The question is whether online learning is suitable for

other cultures, especially non-Western cultures. For example, Kearsley(2002) believes online learning "prepares employees and students for a culture where they will have extensive interaction with computers, using them for work and recreation, but this is not representative of less developed countries" (p. 43). Thus, he believes online learning is not for all cultures.

Cultural Issue in Adult and Distance Education

The relationship between culture and learning is an important topic in adult education and distance education. According to McLoughlin (1999), "culture and learning are interwoven and inseparable" (p. 232). As a social being, everyone lives in his or her own culture. DuPraw and Axner (1997) maintained that culture is central to what we see, how we make sense of what we see, and how we express ourselves. Hofstede (1991) expresses similar ideas and believes that culture is so fundamental to us that "no part of our lives is exempt from culture's influence" (p. 170). Guy (1999) also maintains that every aspect of adult life is shaped by culture, and he further points out that education has served as a vehicle for defining the cultural values that people hold or that they view as central to being successful in their society. Based on their extensive research on learning styles, Dunn and Griggs (1995) conclude that each cultural group tends to have some learning style elements that distinguish it from other groups. In the following two subsections, I will review how cultural issues have come into being a key topic in the fields of adult education and distance education.

Cultural Studies in Adult Education

In adult education, a series of learning theories have been developed to understand the nature of adult learning during the past three decades. Andragogy was

known to be the first theory developed for adult learning. Knowles (1980) defined it as the art and science of helping adults to learn in an attempt to make a distinction from pedagogy, which refers to the education of children. His five assumptions of adult learners actually reveal the characteristics of adult learning: (a) as people mature, they become more self-directed, (b) their life experiences are valuable resources for learning, (c) their learning becomes oriented to the development of their social roles, (d) they wish to apply knowledge immediately, (e) and their learning orientations shift from subject centeredness to problem centeredness. Self-directed learning theory is another popular theory that focuses on the learning process of adults and includes a series of concepts by different researchers (Knowles, 1975; Grow, 1991, 1994; Tough, 1971). It advocates that learning occurs as a part of daily live of adults. Learning should be systematic, self-planned and self-realized, and independent on an instructor or classroom. Grow's (1991) Staged Self-directed Learning Model analyzes the different stages of self-directed learning of adults. This model can facilitate instruction to adult learners with appropriate strategies for each stage. Transformational learning theory, articulated by Mezirow in 1991, is about change – the dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see the world and ourselves. Learning is not merely adding to what we have known. As Clark (1993) further explained, "transformational learning shapes people; they are different afterward, in ways of both they and others can recognize" (p. 47). Transformational theory reveals the cognitive process of adult learning. In this process, perspective transformation is achieved through critical reflection and action.

Andragogy, self-directed learning, and transformational learning are the three key theories in the arena of adult education. Focusing on characteristics of adult learners,

adult learning processes, and cognitive aspects of adult learning respectively, these theories have provided some insights and contributed to our understanding of the learning process of adults, which can be further applied to the practices of online education.

However, the major adult learning theories were also criticized as being built on the so-called mainstream culture – that is, the white, male and Western European culture (Amstutz, 1999; Lee, 2003; Pratt, 1991). Caffarella and Merriam (2000) analyze the long tradition and historical focus on individual learners in adult education. They group andragogy, self-directed learning, and transformative learning into the category that assumes that learning happens "primarily internally" (p. 56) regardless of the situation and background of the learners.

Amstutz (1999) further critiques the cultural limitation of traditional adult education theories:

> Many of these theories tend to be ahisotical and acontextual, they attempt to explain individualistic ways of knowing and define knowledge as a set of verifiable truths that arise from one culture (usually white, male, and Western-European). These 'truths' are then generalized to include 'truths' from all other cultures, making the assumption that the 'right' way to know things is acceptable only through one hegemonic filter. (p. 19)

Standing from the perspective of an immigrant adult learner, Lee (2003) critiques andragogy for its inattention to the roles of the historical and socio-cultural context of diverse learners and for the overgeneralization of characteristics of the privileged group to most adults in American society.

Pratt (1991) analyzed critically the underlying cultural assumptions of the andragogy theory of Malcolm Knowles:

> This particular view of adult education espouses, at least implicitly, a set of beliefs about the nature of adults as learners, motives for learning, appropriate types of relationship[s] between teachers and learners, and the nature and role of self-concept within the educational process. Its proclaimed goals are the "democratization" of education and the empowerment of the individual; and its methods of collaboration and choice are coupled with a profound appreciation of individual differences. This is embedded within a cultural commitment to individual autonomy and the right to choose as central values to be protected and promoted. Thus, it is no accident that such a conception of adult education, as a set of beliefs and a way of practice, has taken root and flourished in the soil of Jeffersonian democracy. The strident individualism of the United States, with its constitutional proclamation of individual rights, has indeed been fertile ground for such growth. (p. 303)

Echoing to the theoretical critiques, some empirical studies have further revealed how socio-cultural background affects people's learning processes and outcomes. In an earlier empirical study, Hvitfeldt (1986) observed an American basic education class for newly immigrated Hmong adults and found that their learning behaviors are significantly influenced by their preliterate and pre-technical culture and reflected their interdependent community life. In the classroom, they show a respectful and submissive attitude toward the instructors, rely on external referents, achieve tasks through group cooperation, and demonstrate a holistic rather than analytic perceptual style.

Pratt (1990, 1991, 1992) conducted several studies on Chinese adult teachers and learners. He found that learning for Chinese people was understood as the acquisition of knowledge or skills from others, a fulfillment of responsibility to society, and a change in understanding of external things and oneself, while teaching was recognized as the delivery of content, the development of character, and a type of relationship. Pratt believed that these concepts are compatible with the cultural, social, political, and economic context of mainland China. Quite similarly, in a study on learning activities of elderly Malaysian adults, Merriam and Muhammad (2000) found that their learning is significantly shaped by Eastern cultural values such as collectivism, hierarchy, relationship orientation, and valuing face and religions. For instant, they consider learning as "a highly social activity where they enjoyed being a group and related to other learners as much" (p. 59). They also see learning "as a responsibility and a means of giving back to their communities" (p. 60). Their learning to be a good community member and better serving the local people clearly reflected the collective and interdependent culture of Eastern society.

Alfred (2003) explored the learning experiences of Anglophone Caribbean immigrant women in postsecondary institutions. Serving as both researcher and participant, Alfred interviewed 15 individuals for this qualitative inquiry. The findings reveal that culture and early schooling socialization in their country of origin have significantly influenced these adult immigrants' learning experiences in the United States. Having assimilated indigenous knowledge from their families and local communities and been socialized in the teacher-directed and selective British education system, these women became silent knowers who preferred learning through lectures and written

exercises to learning from dialogues in class. To voice their opinions in class, to challenge the authority of instructors, and to participate in the discussion were contradictory to their silent learning style and difficult for them.

The examination of cultural assumptions and limitations of adult learning theories and exploration of the role of socio-cultural context in its influence of the learning processes of adult learners from different societies deepen our understanding of the adult learning process and expand the horizon of adult education research. Culture as an important contextual factor that influences adult learning has been considered by many researchers. Guy (1999) points out that the idea of a generic adult learner with certain universal characteristics and traits has been gradually rejected by most researchers in adult education and that socio-cultural context strongly influences the motivations, needs, goals, and perspectives of the learners during their learning process.

Cultural Issue in Distance Education

Cultural differences do not disappeared by introducing a high technology platform and formulated learning materials in distance education. The Internet breaks down the barriers of distance and time and allows people from different nations to study in the same class. However, the obstacles from cultural differences hinder the dream of teaching globally to people from different counties. Further analysis finds that culture penetrates into every aspect of technology-based education. Joo (1999) identified that the content of material, power of the media, writing styles, writing structures, and web design all reflect some cultural values and can impact student learning. Palloff and Pratt (2003) believe the role of teacher and student is also a source of cultural difference that may come into play. Both teacher and students bring their unique cultural values and social issues into the

online learning environment. According to Wilson (2001), "The displacements in time and place that have traditionally defined distance education have now been joined by a third one: cultural distance" (p. 52).

Several strategies have been suggested as to how instructors can be sensitive to cultural issues when teaching in a multi-cultural class online. Ziegahn (2001) suggests that adult educators should first examine the cultural values underlying their teaching methods, thus becoming more sensitive to the cultural differences of their students in the class. Henderson (1996) suggests an "eclectic approach" which calls for reflecting on multiple and diverse cultural realities, including a variety of cultural ways of knowing, interacting, learning, and teaching, as well as promoting acceptance of and equity for a variety of learning outcomes. McLoughlin and Oliver (1999) advocate a dozen design principles for a culturally inclusive curriculum for online learners, such as adopting a constructive epistemology, designing authentic learning activities, creating flexible tasks and tools for knowledge sharing, providing different forms of support, establishing responsive roles and responsibilities, and providing flexibility in learning goals, outcomes, and assessment modes.

Gunawardena, et al. (2001) conducted a study employing a mixed methods design to determine if there are differences in perceptions of online group process and development between participants in Mexico and the United States. Survey data indicated significant differences in perceptions for the norming and performing stages of group development. The groups differed in their perceptions of collectivism, low power distance, femininity, and high-context communication. National differences, rather than age and gender differences, accounted for the differences observed. The differences

between the Mexican and U.S. groups in how they view the relationship between teacher and students was reflective of Hofstede's (1991) findings on power distance. However, the results also indicated that even in high power distance countries like Mexico, the anonymity provided by the online environment may play a role in creating a more democratic learning environment. Focus group participants identified several factors that influence online group process and development: language, power distance, gender differences, collectivist versus individualist tendencies, conflict, social presence, time frame, and technical skills. Pincas (2001) notes that in most cases where students are working in an cross-cultural context, they need to find a balance between adapting to different social and cultural interactions in English and maintaining a secure sense of self as a member of their national culture.

Distance educators are beginning to realize the importance of cultural differences of their students and they advocate building culturally sensitive learning environments to accommodate various students. Gunawardena, Wilson, and Nolla (2003) note there is little published research on the cultural aspects of online learning and teaching and that there are few research-based studies. They also suggest that future researchers need to "conceptualize identity issues in cross-cultural studies to go beyond simplistic stereotyping and use qualitative methods to understand how people define themselves" (p. 771).

In summary, the importance of cultural issues is becoming increasingly recognized by scholars and practitioners in adult education and distance education. A review to the major adult learning theories such as andragogy, self-directed learning and transformational learning reinforces the assumption of "western" nature of many learning

models, such as the emphasize to individual's interest, self-directedness and self-reflection. Furthermore, there is still much unknown, particularly with regard to the variety of cultural issues of learners with different cultural backgrounds (Guy, 1999). In online education, most of the studies on cultural issues have focused on technological or instructional design. Less attention has been given to the participants' learning experiences (Hara & Kling, 2000; Ku & Lohr, 2003), especially those learners from different cultural backgrounds.

Cultural Values and Chinese Values

Culture is a complex concept that has been defined by many people in a variety of ways. There is little consensus on one single definition. Anything commonly shared by a group of people and distinguishing them from other groups – from food, clothes, music, art, and language to habits, etiquette, and customs – can be labeled as culture. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) once summarized more than 160 definitions of culture, explicitly reflecting the broad range of this term. The multi-layered and non-static nature of culture was best described by Vinken, Soeters, and Ester(2004) in their statement that "cultural is conceptualized as a phenomenon lacking coherence, full of complexities, something that is dynamic, continuously changeable, fundamentally fluid, and endless multiplicit" (p. 6). In the following section, I will first discuss the definitions of culture and cultural value and then review some major studies on cultural values and Chinese cultural values in order to describe the major characteristics of Chinese culture.

Definitions of Culture

A classic definition of culture was provided by Edward Taylor (1871), who defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals,

law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p. 1). A more inclusive definition was initiated by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952):

> Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values. (p. 181)

This definition treats values as the fundamental core of a cultural system, which leads people to see beyond the various phenomena of culture. Similarly, Geertz (1973) emphasizes culture as a symbolic system and adds on the inherited characteristic. For him, culture is "a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge and attitudes towards life" (p. 89).

To capture the nature of culture, Useem and Useem (1963) simply define culture as "the learned and shared behavior of a community of interacting human beings" (p. 169). Another succinct but widely referred to definition is from Hofstede (1984), who states that "culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another" (p. 51). This definition captures another key characteristic of culture in distinguishing people as the insiders and outsiders of a culture. A more recent definition of culture by Banks & Banks (1997) demonstrates that people focus more and more on the internal essence rather than the external expressions of culture:

> The essence of a culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements, but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies; it is not material objects and other tangible aspects of human societies. (p. 8)

This definition is reminiscent of that of Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) in indicating that the values are the core or important components of a cultural system. From the above definitions, we can summarize the main features of culture. First, culture is a shared symbolic or meaning system. Second, culture is formed through a rather long period and passed from generation to generation. Third, culture "glues" a group of people together and directs their ways of living and behaving in a similar way. Fourth, culture distinguishes one group of people from another. Fifth, value or belief is the core of a culture.

According to Hofstede (1991), culture is like an onion – a system that can be peeled, layer by layer, in order to reveal the content. Cultures consist of values, rituals, heroes, and symbols. Values are seen as relatively fundamental compared to rituals, heroes, and symbols and are situated at the core of his model of culture. A value, in his words, is "a broad tendency to prefer certain states of affairs over others" (Hofstede, 1991, p. 8). Values represent the ideas that people have about how things "ought to be." As such, Hofstede also emphasizes the assumption that values strongly influence behavior. Merriam and Muhammad (2000) generally define cultural values as "emotion-laden, internalized assumptions, beliefs, or standards that shape how we interpret our life experience" (p. 46).

Classical Studies on Cultural Values

How cultural values shape people's daily lives and behaviors is a significant question that many anthropologists and cross-culture researchers have explored. Kluchhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) well-known research raised people's awareness of the taken-for-granted cultural values that are unconsciously absorbed since childhood. They studied five culturally distinct communities in the Southwest region of the United States to explore the impact of culture on the differences in value orientations. In their findings, they identified five universal problems common to most cultural communities and possible responses to each of these problems. The questions and corresponding responses are as follows:

- What is man's assessment of human nature? Evil, neutral, good-and-evil, or good;
- What is man's relation to nature? Subjugation-to-nature, harmony-with-nature, or mastery-over-nature;
- What is the temporal focus of life? Past as tradition-bound, present as situational, or future as goal-oriented;
- What is the group's principal mode of activity? Being, caring little about achievement, being in becoming, stressing inner development, or doing as emphasizing material success; and,
- What is the modality of the group' relationships to others? Linearity as authoritarian mode, group-oriented, or individualism. (p. 453)

The five questions focus on the five main aspects of people's lives – respectively, the human nature, the man-nature relationship, time orientation, mode of activity, and social relationship. Different cultural groups might have different answers to the five universal

questions. For example, Mexican American communities tend to be present-oriented and group-oriented, which sharply contrasts with the future orientation and individualism stressed by mainstream U.S. culture. The value of being in harmony with nature prevails in Asian and Native American communities, which dramatically conflicts with European Americans' master-over-nature mindset (Ortuno, 1991).

The most influential research on national cultures was conducted by Hofstede (1980, 1984, 1991), a Dutch scholar who was active in a broad range of social science disciplines. Through a survey study on work-related values of over 100,000 employees of a large company operating in 40 countries, he derived five dimensions from a factor analysis of cultural averages. The dimensions are individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and long/short term orientation. Those dimensions are defined as follows:

- Individualism versus collectivism: In individualistic cultures, people tend to perceive themselves as individuals rather than as part of a group, while in collectivistic cultures, people see themselves as members of a group and give high priority to group interest.
- Power distance: Power distance refers to how a society accepts the unequal power distribution. In high-power distance cultures, power differences and social hierarchies are accepted.
- Uncertainty avoidance: This refers to the negative reaction to ambiguous or risky situations. People in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance are more reluctant to take risks, change, or accept new ideas.

- Masculinity versus femininity: Masculinity refers to a cultural orientation toward a clearly distinct gender role, whereas femininity reflects an overlap in gender role.
- Long-term or short-term orientation: Long-term orientation stands for the fostering of virtues oriented towards future rewards, in particular, perseverance and thrift. Short- term orientation stands for the fostering of virtues related to the past and present, in particular, respect for tradition, preservation of 'face' and fulfilling social obligations.

The fifth dimension was also called Confucian work dynamism. Hofstede (1991) added it to his original four dimensions based on a study by a research group called the Chinese Culture Connection (1987). Hofstede's dimension has been widely used as a framework for cross-cultural research and was also critiqued as a target by other researchers.

Another series of representative studies on multicultural values were carried out by Schwartz and her colleagues (1987, 1990, 1994). Schwartz is an Israeli social and cross-cultural psychologist. For her, culture is a complex, multidimensional structure and values are the core of culture. Schwartz (1992) defines values as "the criteria people use to select and justify actions and to evaluate people (including the self) and events" (p. 1). Starting with a thorough review of previous works and a theoretical mapping statement of the value domain, Schwartz (1994) identified seven culture-level value types: conservatism, harmony, egalitarian commitment, intellectual autonomy, affective autonomy, mastery, and hierarchy.

- Conservatism: values emphasizing the status quo, propriety, and avoidance of actions or inclinations that might disturb the others.

- Intellectual and affective autonomy: viewing the person as an autonomous whole pursuing his or her own goals.
- Hierarchy: value type stressing the legitimacy of hierarchical roles and resource allocations; it refers to the self-enhancement pole with emphases on achievement and power, together with.
- Mastery: emphasis on active mastery of the social environment through self-assertion.
- Egalitarian commitment: value type exhorting voluntary commitment to promoting the welfare of other people.
- Harmony: value type emphasizing harmony with nature and social harmony (helping others, social justice).

Different from the dimensionist researchers who search for the common and fundamental elements of diverse national cultures, Hall (1976) divides cultures into two major categories: low-context cultures and high-context cultures. The difference rests on how much the listener knows about the subject matter under discussion. People from a low-context culture tend to use a direct verbal expression style that emphasizes situational context, explicitness, self-expression, verbal fluency, eloquent speech, and direct expression of one's opinions. People from high-context cultures often use an indirect verbal expression style that puts less emphasis on explicit verbal messages, relies heavily on contextual cues in conveying important information, values harmony, uses ambiguous language and silence in interactions, and avoids saying no directly. According to Hall (1976), low-context cultures include the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, most of Western Europe, and Scandinavia. Typical high-

context cultures include Japan, China, Korea, Latin America, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, Vietnam, and most of France.

Many cross-cultural researchers have identified the huge cultural differences between the East and West. The former is usually represented by Chinese culture or Confucian Heritage Culture (a term used in Southeast Asia and Australia that refers to the societies influenced by Confucian tradition). The latter is represented by the United States and European counties. Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1997) compared the values differences between the West and East Asia in their research on international business behaviors. As can be seen in Table 1, the East Asia and the West have many differences in every aspect, from religion, beliefs, philosophy, values, and social type to business rules. Yin and Yang are seen by Chinese as two cosmological forces which drive the universe, while here Yang represents morality and benevolence and Yin represents formal law and justice.

Table1. The Value Differences of East Asia and the West

The West	East Asia
Supernatural religion	Secular humanism and enlightenment
Belief and faith	Paradigmatic assumptions
Cartesian dualism	The way of complementarity
Values as things	Values as wave-forms
Cultures and values – Yin	Cultures and values – Yang
Pioneer capitalism	Catch-up capitalism
Finite games	Infinite games

Based on Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1997)

Chinese Cultural Values

The origin of Chinese values can be traced back to Confucian classics from 2500 years ago. The thoughts of Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.), who was a philosopher and

educator, were valued, recognized, and inherited, becoming the ethical and social norms of Chinese society for generations. These values and norms have permeated geographically across the border of mainland China and have widely influenced many East Asian countries, including Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, and Japan, as well as overseas Chinese. Some scholars (e.g., Watkins & Biggs, 2001) have used the term Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC) to name these societies. Early research on Chinese culture was dominated by Western scholars (Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Schwartz, 1994; The Chinese Culture Connection, 1987) who used survey studies and participants sampled from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Only since the 1980s, when China opened its doors to the outside world, has research using participants from mainland China begun to increase. In recent years, scholars from Taiwan and mainland China have begun to contribute to the research on Chinese cultural values.

In Hofstede's studies, some dimensions are common to the three Chinese societies of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore – namely high power distance, low individualism and moderate masculinity. As can be seen in Table 2, three Chinese societies are compared with that of the U.S from four cultural dimensions. The numbers are the rankings of each nation or area. Since his study includes 53 nations, the rankings range from 1 to 53. For the dimensions of uncertainty avoidance, Singapore and Hong Kong show a low level, while Taiwan shows a medium level. However, all of these index levels are contrastive to the United States and most Western countries, except France. Hofstede's model provides a good framework and structure for further cross-cultural research and is frequently referred to by follow researchers.

Table 2. The Rankings of Three Chinese Societies on Hofstede's Four Cultural Dimensions

Ranking	Power-distance	Individualism	Masculinity	Uncertainty avoidance
Hong Kong	15-16	37	18-19	49-50
Singapore	13	39-41	28	53
Taiwan	29-23	44	32-33	26
USA	38	1	15	43

Based on Hofstede, G. (1991).

The Chinese Culture Connection (1987), a group of researchers led by Michael H. Bond, challenged the Western style of Hofstede's (1980) survey. They constructed a Chinese Value Survey (CVS) using 40 items of Chinese traditional adages and administered it to university students in 22 countries around the world. Through ecological factor analysis they found four dimensions of cultural valuing, which were labeled as integration, Confucian work dynamism, human-heartedness, and moral discipline. Three of these factors were significantly correlated with Hofstede's three dimensions. However, the factor of Confucian work dynamism, which refers to employees' devotion to the work ethic and their respect for traditions, was unrelated to any of Hofstede's dimensions. They believe that this was a unique factor among Asian cultures. The three Chinese societies scored low on integration, high but scattered on Confucian work dynamism, scattered on human-heartedness, and average on moral discipline.

In Schwartz's study (1994), her sample included three participants from mainland China and they produced similar results. Specifically, they scored especially high on the importance attributed to hierarchy and mastery values, low on the importance of

egalitarian commitment values, and average on the autonomy-conservatism dimension. These studies indicate that the four Chinese societies present very different profiles, except for the measure of hierarchy, for which they all scored high.

With the increasingly frequent exchanges between the East and West and globalization, and partly inspired by these cross-cultural studies, many scholars have demonstrated great interest in Chinese cultural values in recent years. Researchers have found Chinese cultural values do impact a broad area of people's behaviors, such as consumer behaviors (Yau, 1994; Yau, Chan & Lau, 1999), human resource development (Earley, 1994), life experience interpretation (Lee, 1997), job interview performance (Wong & Lai, 2000), organizations' quality climate in the workplace (Noronha, 2002), medical attitudes and health behaviors (Xu, 2004b), and practices about death and dying (Yick & Gupta, 2002). These studies expand people's understanding of Chinese culture and how it influences Chinese people's daily lives.

In his research on the relationship between Chinese customer behaviors and cultural values, Yau (1994) adopted the value orientation model of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) and summarized 12 Chinese values related to the five orientations. These values include harmony (with nature and people), abasement, respect for authority, group-orientation, valuing face, past-time orientation, and the doctrine of mean. Lee (1997) studied the role of Chinese cultural values and how these values influence Taiwanese Chinese adults in the interpretation of their life experience. Referring to Chen's (1989) framework regarding cultural values and counseling, Lee identified six cultural values in her phenomenological study of 12 Chinese adults from Taiwan. The four common values included respecting authority, maintaining harmony, valuing study

and degrees, and putting men above women. The two values mentioned by a few participants were acknowledging fate and admiring nature.

In their study of Chinese-Americans' attitudes regarding death rituals, Yick and Gupta (2002) found that these attitudes are rooted deeply in Asian cultural values such as filial piety, centrality of the family, and emphasis of hierarchy. The researchers also summarized nine main traditional Chinese cultural values and norms: collectivity, emphasis on family, hierarchical social structure, specific gender roles, face saving, harmony and conformity of behavior, emphasis on paternal lineage, importance of filial piety, and restrained and indirect communication styles. Based on the Chinese Cultural Connection's (1987) survey of 40 Chinese values, Fan (2000) amended another 31 to the original list, resulting in 71 core values of Chinese culture from eight aspects: national traits, interpersonal relations, family/social orientation, work attitude, business philosophy, personal traits, time orientation, and relationship with nature. Fan attempted to describe a whole picture of Chinese values, but his findings are too fragmental and detailed to be easily used for further study.

The research on Chinese cultural values from Taiwan and mainland China, although still rare, has increasingly contributed to people's understanding of cultural differences. For example, Yang (1993), a Taiwanese scholar, believes the Chinese have a typical social orientation in contrast to the individual orientation of Westerners. This social orientation can be represented as four sub-orientations: family orientation, relationship orientation, authority orientation, and otherness orientation. Zhai (2001) has analyzed the change of Chinese values from a historical perspective. He believes that Chinese values have experienced historical changes from the religion conciseness

orientation (ancient time - Spring and Autumn period/ 770-476 B.C.E.), the ethic orientation (Spring and Autumn period - Opium wars/1840), the cultural orientation (1840-1949), the political orientation (1949-1978) to the economic orientation (1978-present). In a qualitative study of how Chinese people see the traditional values of Yi (righteousness or morality) and Li (benefit or utilitarianism), Lu (1998) revealed that the current Chinese society demonstrates a strong tendency of moving toward utilitarian individualism in value orientation and social relationship.

Through a review of the definitions of culture and cultural values, the classic studies on cultural differences, and descriptions and Chinese cultural values, we can see culture as an omnipresent and fundamental social phenomenon, related to everyone and shaping every aspect of people's lives. Cross-cultural studies by Hofstede (1980, 1991), Bond (1986), Schwartz (1987, 1992, 1994) and Hall (1976) extend our understanding of complicated cultural differences and pave the way for further study. Chinese cultural values are characterized by collectiveness, hierarchy, seeking harmony, conservativeness, and valuing education. These values impact Chinese students' learning behaviors and can be reflected by their ways of learning.

Chinese Students and Their Learning

More and more Chinese students come to the United States to pursue their higher education. In the academic year of 2003-2004, there were 61,765 overseas students from mainland China, placing China among the leading origins of international students (Institution of International Education, 2004). Another statistic shows that 189,000 Chinese students have gone to study in the U.S. since 1978, placing the U.S. first as the country of destination for the largest number of Chinese overseas students (People's

Daily Online, 2002). Influenced by Chinese cultural values and social traditions, Chinese students bring with them a different learning style from their American classmates, which inevitability cause them to confront a series of difficulties in their adaptation to the American social and academic culture (Feng, 1991; Liu, 1999; Wan, 2001). In this section, I will begin with a brief description of the social background associated with Chinese students, which are as important for understanding Chinese students as the cultural factors. Then the characteristics of Chinese students' learning styles will be discussed. How Chinese students learn in an online environment will also be explored from the limited number of studies on this topic.

Social Background

The Chinese culture has been nurtured in the Oriental agricultural society for thousands of years. For a long time, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism have been the three main schools of thought that have tangled and formulated the unique Oriental traditions and social norms of Chinese society. They "mentally program" (Hofstede, 1980) Chinese people and become the "cultural gene" (Xu, 2004a) inherited from generation to generation. In the present society of China, these traditions still shape the social lives of Chinese people through artifacts, language, historical stories, habits, and rituals.

After the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949, China was filled with socialist ideologies that reflected Marxist doctrines. Mao Zhedong tried to uproot the hierarchical and conservative old traditions and create a new equal society. He initiated the Cultural Revolutionary Movement (1966-1976), which finally led the whole country into chaos. Only after the Open Door policy was implemented in the 1980s did the country begin to get back on the right track – a change from a politics dominated society

to an economics-centered one. These social factors, such as historical traditions, political ideology, educational system, and economical situations, influenced Chinese students by characterizing their thoughts as well as learning behaviors.

Historical traditions. Even though Confucianism is the main origin of many Chinese traditions, other philosophical or religious thoughts, such as Taoism and Buddhism, have also influenced Chinese society extensively. In fact, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism have intertwined and functioned as a social foundation to formulate Chinese values and beliefs that still influence people's thoughts and behaviors in the present society. Confucianism emphasizes peace, hierarchy, and order. Living in a period of economical, political, and moral dilapidation, Confucius advocated a highly structured and hierarchical society, where everyone was ascribed a specific role. Proper conduct would naturally flow from the structure. Taoism emphasized the independence of the individual and connection to the natural forces of life. Instead of trying to change the environment, Taoists focused on seeking harmony with the natural order of things. Buddhism came into China in the middle of the fourth century and became a dominant religion soon after. Buddhist doctrines are tied to the four noble truths: life is painful; pain originates from desires; to end a pain the desire must end as well; and the path to end a pain is righteous living (Lee, 1995). The ultimate state is Nirvana, which is a peaceful state, absent of desire. Life is viewed as a cycle and each state is tied to another.

Political ideology. China remains one of the few socialist countries. The political life is still an important part of Chinese people's present lives, especially for those students, officers, and workers in the national units. The Marxist doctrines and socialist theories are recognized as official ideologies. The other Western philosophies, especially

the idealism or anti-Marxism theories, were deemed problematic or scientifically wrong. Along with the historical tradition, the superior-inferior relationship is still the governing principle in official situations, where the subordinates should abide strictly by their leaders (Pratt, 1991). With the development of a market economy in the last two decades, the political propaganda has gradually faded out of common people's daily lives, but it still impacts Chinese people in some aspects.

Education system. Although the Chinese education system is currently under the process of transition and decentralization, it remains highly centralized and uniform, minimizing regional differences, promoting a single ideology, and serving the goals of socialist development (Robinson, 1999). The curriculum for K-12 is heavily controlled, with its relevance to practice and daily life having a low priority. School education emphasizes memorizing ideas, formulas, and theories rather than developing practical skills and critical thinking. The role of students is to listen attentively and to record the key points carefully from their teacher's lectures. Influenced by the Soviet Union's model, the subjects and majors system in higher education lean toward science and technology, which were deemed more useful and important than literature and the arts. The objective of school education is to train a new generation of ideologically trustworthy and technically competent Chinese for socialism (Zhou, 1988).

Economic condition. The Reform and Open Door policy have led China to transform its economy from a planned model to a market-oriented model since the 1980s. China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001 and became a member of the international business world. During the past twenty years, China's economy has kept a high speed of development with the average increase of gross domestic product (GDP)

per capita being around ten percent annually. China is attempting to transform itself from a predominantly rural to an increasingly urban and industrial society (Morgan, 2000). However, China is still a developing country and the average annual income of the people is less than 1000 US dollars in 2003 (National Statistic Bureau of China, 2004). In GDP per capita, China ranks 122 among the 231 nations and areas in the world (World Facts and Figures, 2004). There are still 150 to 210 million people in China, mostly living in rural areas, who are still struggling for their basic living needs and enduring a life of poverty (Wu, 2003).

All of the above social factors, including historical traditions, political ideology, education system, and economic conditions, together with Chinese cultural values, shape Chinese people in their daily lives, including their working and learning. It should be noted, however, that these traditional values and social factors are subject to change over time, with China continuously integrating itself into the international society and global economy. Fan (2000) believes the contemporary Chinese culture in Mainland China consists of three major elements: traditional culture, communist ideology, and Western values in more recent years.

Chinese Students Learning Patterns

The passive and receptive learning style of Chinese students has been observed by many Western researchers (Kember, 1999; Pratt, 1992; Watkins & Biggs, 1999). These characteristics include abiding by the teacher, relying on rote learning, being motivated extrinsically, being diligent, having high achievement, and being good at group projects. These differences from the Western learning style can be explained and analyzed from the unique cultural values and social context of Chinese society. Some recent research

breaks the stereotype of Chinese students and clarifies some misunderstandings about their learning. For example, Ho (2001) found teacher authority in China might not generate the negative effects to students' learning as it would in Western societies, and there is a strong emphasis on affective and personal relationships established through informal interactions after the class. Kember (1999) found that the memorization of Chinese learning can be accompanied by an intention to seek understanding and that Chinese students' achievement motivation has a more collective nature, which is different from the Western understanding.

A comparison between the Western education model and the Chinese education model can help us to understand their differences. Based on Robinson (1999) and Watkins and Biggs (1999, 2001), Table 3 summarizes a range of differences between the two educational models, from teaching content to evaluation to learning outcomes. As can be seen in the table, for example, the teacher in China is seen as an authority and primary source of knowledge, while in the West, the teacher acts as a facilitator and students control what they learn and how they learn. The learning process is characterized by dialogue and two-way communication in the West, while in China, teacher domination and lecture presentation is a norm. The key learning approach for Chinese students is memorizing and understanding, while Western students are trained to be critical and creative in their thinking.

Table 3. Comparisons between Western and Chinese Models of Education

	Western model	Chinese Model
Content	More open curriculum, multiple sources of content	More closed curriculum, restricted approved sources of course content
Teacher	Teacher as a facilitator or mediator; one	Teacher as an authority and main source

	source of information among many	of knowledge
Student	High autonomy, independent, and having choices	Low autonomy, dependent upon teacher, and having few choices
Process	Student-centered; dialogue and interaction encouraged; small classes, low reliance on face-to-face teaching	Teacher-led; reliant on well formatted lectures; large classes, heavy reliance on face-to-face teaching
Motivation	Valuing intrinsic motivation and personal interests	Dominance of extrinsic motivation
Learning approach	Highly value skills or critical thinking, low value on memorization	Emphasis on learning content; high value on memorization
Evaluation	Internal exam or based on regular assignments	External exam for ranking the students

Based on Robinson (1999)

Chinese people have different understandings and beliefs than the Westerners regarding teaching and learning. Pratt (1992) interviewed nineteen Chinese visiting scholars in Canada and 38 adult educators in China about their understanding of learning and teaching. He found that Chinese learners see learning as the acquisition of knowledge, a fulfillment of responsibility to society, and a change in understanding of external things and oneself. Teaching was described as the delivery of content, the development of character, and a type of relationship. Pratt believed these concepts were directly related to the cultural, social, political, and economic context of mainland China. As he further explains,

> There is an implied subordination of the individual to the expertise or wisdom of some external authority, either in terms of knowledge or morality. This is consistent with the culture that emphasizes unquestioning obedience to hierarchical authority within family and society. (p. 316)

After investigating a wide range of Chinese teachers, Pratt, Kelly, and Wong (1998) summarized three Chinese models of teaching: teacher as master, teacher as

virtuoso performer, and teacher as coach. The commonalities of the three models include a profound respect for a teacher's fundamental knowledge, clearly defined duties and responsibilities of teacher and students, and a mutual relationship and flow from perceptual, rational, and moral knowledge. These findings are in accordance with the fact that teachers have a high social status and are listed among the five categories of being the most respected by the society in traditional China, along with the God of Heaven, the God of the Earth, the emperor, and parents (Zhou, 1988).

Chinese classrooms are often dominated by a teacher within a large class size of 40 to 50 students, sitting quietly and listening attentively to the teacher's lectures. Students stand up and ask questions only when they are required to do so. In fact, students are not encouraged to ask questions when teacher presents in class. Instead, they can ask the teacher personally right after the class so that instruction will not be slowed down and the public time will not be wasted. Any challenging question is seen as an impolite or offensive behavior to their teacher. A dictum from Confucius is taken literally by Chinese students in their learning: respect your teacher and believe his instruction. A Chinese teacher from Taiwan reflected upon his early learning experience (Pan et al., 2003):

> What I was taught when I was young, of course is in the Confucius style. We were taught all the Confucius values. Like, we should respect our teachers. We should be humble. We should not speak too much. Just listen, don't talk too much. And don't try to raise too many questions; because some time we will think that you are not so humble to your teacher and we will train you such way, that silence is the go[l]d. Don't talk too much. So for most of the students from

> Taiwan, I bet it is also the case with those from China, it is ok for them to do the written test. But…it is not very creative…you just think alone. (p. 328)

Liu (2001) studied classroom communication patterns among the Asian students in an American university. Among the four patterns of total integration, conditional integration, marginal participation, and silent observation, he found a unique pattern of Asian students leaning more toward the end of the continuum – silence in class. He argues that "the socio-cultural factors combined with linguistic and affective factors are instrumental in shaping the characteristics of Asian students' classroom communication patterns" (p. 176). Liu also analyzed the different understanding of and use of silence between Asians and Americans. Silence in East Asian cultures is seen as an indication of strength, power, and disagreement, whereas in the Western culture it is seen as a sign of weakness, shyness, or trouble.

This difference is also reflected in self-disclosure during class communication. In Chinese culture, personal feelings do not seem to be important to others, and talking about personal emotions with unfamiliar persons may be regarded as showing weakness, losing manners, or seeking help from others. Chinese students seldom talk about personal feelings in class, but in the United States, self-disclosure is encouraged and treated as an involvement behavior (Dupraw & Axner, 1997).

In both classroom and social occasions, Chinese students are conservative about voicing their own opinions. Being polite, modest, and not going to the extremes are common attitudes. Being balanced in his opinions and avoiding losing face by making mistakes leads them to be more conservative in classroom discussions. Seeking harmony may lead Chinese students to stay away from public conflicts or arguments. They like

working in a group, relying on capable peers and following others without critique. In Eastern countries, the differences are best worked out quietly, as open conflict is considered embarrassing or demeaning (DuPraw & Axner, 1997).

Another tendency is that Chinese students generally focus on learning outcomes rather than learning process. For example, they usually pay more attention to exams and assignments than do American students. Shive and Row (1999) found in their study that Hong Kong students took the assignments more seriously than their American counterparts.

Liu (2001) critically analyzed the learning behaviors of Asian students in American classrooms and accurately described the situation of most Chinese students:

> These shared traits are reflected in the deeply rooted Asian concept of face-saving, the often-praised sense of collectivism demonstrated by following trends and avoiding confrontation with the teacher or other students, the sensitivity to interpersonal harmony, the blind obedience to the teacher expressed by listening attentively and concealing and tolerating disagreement, the sense of guilt in expressing disagreement with authority figures, and self-discipline in solving problems through reading the textbook. (p. 176)

Chinese Online Learners

Online learning has many differences compared to traditional classroom face-to-face learning. The differences include the following: the students sit at the computer and work alone by themselves; the conversation may not occur in real time; the text is generally the only material; non-verbal cues are absent; and contact with the teacher is

based on personal needs. It relies on more autonomous and independent learning skills, which might cause a conflict with many Chinese students' learning styles.

Although 67 public universities have developed some online courses in China since 1998, further study (Zhu, Gu, & Wang, 2003) indicates that most courses are "simply an extension of conventional classroom teaching" (p. 26) and the majority of teachers have not been ready to change their instruction. Online learning is just a way to increase the enrollment in universities in China, and the quality of education is not guaranteed (Wang, 2000). The model of online education has not been widely accepted in Asian countries compared to Western societies (Treuhaft, 2000; Zhu, Gu, & Wang, 2003). McCarty (1999) notes that while the Internet is very popular in Japan (second to the United States in usage), online courses have yet to appear, since "communicating through a terminal may be more comfortable to those used to an abstract way of thinking and an independent learning style, but both are alien to Japan historically" (p. 43).

For many Chinese students studying in the U.S., the increasing popularity of online learning in the universities posits a new challenge for them. There are few studies focusing on this topic; however, a few relevant research studies revealed some characteristics of Chinese students' online learning from anecdotes, preliminary observations and personal accounts. As in the traditional classroom setting, the language barrier is often a problem for Chinese students taking online courses in American universities (Jun & Park, 2003; Tu, 2001). Since online discussion is conducted in English, Chinese students' limited ability to communicate in English hinders their participation in group discussion and developing friendships with other students. On the other hand, since most the communication online uses only written language, Chinese

students may find the online communication to be less challenging since they need only to read and write messages, with no pressure to listen or speak. They have more time to think about the questions and prepare their answers, which leads to greater satisfaction.

A study of the online communication between Taiwanese students and their American tutors found that Taiwanese students dislike conversing with tutors from the U.S. as a large group in a public space because they are afraid of losing face in front of their fellow students and other tutors (Shih & Cifuentes, 2003). Some careless disclosures may put them in an awkward situation that will decrease or end further participation. In Tu's (2001) study, a participant described her experience by stating, "The teacher quoted my original message and sent it to all the recipients. I was so embarrassed. I hoped I didn't say anything improper or offensive. I understand that the teacher just want[ed] to save time" (p. 56).

A couple of research studies suggest that Chinese students may be marginalized in their online learning in the context of American universities (Jun & Park, 2003; Tu, 2001). Jun and Park observed six Asian students' participation in Bulletin Board discussions in two online courses. They found these Asian students initiated far less discussion than American students; most of their posts were replies to others with sympathetic language that supplements rather than contradicts. Further more, they frequently used powerless language such as disclaimers, hedges, and tag questions. The authors attribute these Asian students' online communication behaviors to their language barrier, lack of knowledge about American society, and cultural differences.

Similarly, Edwards (2002) presented a study about a postgraduate course for a group of human resource professionals from Ireland, England, and Singapore who used

an email list to discuss their networked learning. Contrary to the heated discussions in Irish and British groups, students from Singapore (most are Chinese) showed a lack of responses, with only two of the five persons replying with short messages. Further exploration indicates a cultural difference behind the discussion models. Singapore students "did not feel conformable challenging and arguing in public…[and needed] explicit permission and coaching to challenge tutors in particular" (p. 288).

Wang (2003) reflected on her frustrating experience as a Chinese graduate student from a team project including four American students in a course using online forum communication. Misunderstandings involving different roles, expectations, and communication can reflect cultural differences vividly:

> As a Chinese, I automatically put the teamwork as my first priority and I expected the whole team to be actively involved in the final product assembly. I became disappointed when what I expected did not materialize. When composing messages for other members, I was not explicit enough because I assumed that my team members knew what I meant.... Being Americans however, my team members might have perceived the teamwork as one of the many items on their agendas. They might or might not have gotten to the tasks depending on their individual priority. They might have even considered their individual parts of the team project completed with no further need for engagement. (p. 3080)

In summary, we can see that other than cultural values, a series of social factors also characterize Chinese students and may influence their learning. The Chinese educational model differentiate from the Western model in many aspects, Chinese students have different understandings of teaching and learning, the role of the teacher, and

communication style than do Westerners. Chinese students' passive and reticent learning style is directly related with their cultural values of hierarchical social role, collective awareness and harmony seeking in communication. In the online environment, their learning style is consistent with that of the face-to-face class. They are likely to be among the marginalized groups in the online discussions. Learning in an autonomous and independent way somewhat conflict with their customary way of learning.

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter broadly reviews the literature in four areas of research in order to set up the theoretical framework for the current study. First, the definitions, the generations, and major theories of distance education are presented to help understand the nature of online learning and its approaches to serving adult students. Second, the research on cultural issues in adult education and distance education are overviewed. In the third part, definitions of cultural values, research on national cultures, and Chinese cultural values are addressed. Finally, I discussed Chinese students and their learning patterns in both the traditional classroom and the online environment.

Online learning has experienced an unprecedented development in the arena of education and training in recent years. Universities implement more online courses for serving the diverse population of their students. Online learning is defined as the physical separation of the teacher and students and uses technology and media to deliver instructional content and realize the teaching-learning transaction. The development of online learning can be categorized into three generations based on the technology employed: print based, TV and broadcast based and Internet based. The theories of distance education, such as Wedemayer (1981) and Moore's (1994) independence study,

Peters's (1993) industrial teaching model, and Holmberg's (1986) guided didactic conversation, all reveal some basic features of distance education. These theories, according to Robinson's (1999) analysis, are established on the teaching experiences of Western developed countries and reflect a strong cultural and philosophical sense of individualism.

Culture and learning are interwoven and inseparable (McLoughlin, 1999). In the field of adult education, the awareness of cultural issues started from critiques to the limitations of traditional learning theories, such as andragogy, self-directed learning and transformational learning. Cafferalla and Merriam (2000) criticize these theories as neglecting the context of learning and the background of the learners. Amstutz (1999) and Lee (2003) point out these theories are based on the mainstream culture of the Western, White, and male population. Pratt (1991) analyzed the cultural foundations of andragogy as having been rooted in the soil of Jeffersonian democracy. This theoretical analysis was supported by other empirical studies (Alfred, 2003; Merriam and Muhammad, 1999; Pratt, 1990, 1991, 1998), which further reveals how cultural factors impact the learning process of learners from different societies. Cultural issues have begun to catch the attention of distance educators in recent years. For instance, Joo's (1999) and Palloff and Pratt's (2003) studies scrutinize the aspects of cultural issues that come into play in online courses. Henderson (1996) and McLoughlin and Olive (1999) suggest some principles on which to build a culturally sensitive online environment. These studies, however, either discuss the cultural issues from the perspective of course design or are based on cross-cultural comparisons; few studies have focused on the learning experience of the students.

Culture can be defined as the learned and shared knowledge, belief, values and habits (Krochber & Kluckhonn, 1952; Useem & Useem, 1963) which distinguish one group of people from another group (Hofstege, 1980). Values are the core part of a cultural system and serve as a standard for people to make judgments in their lives. Early cross-cultural studies (The Chinese Culture Connection, 1987; Hall, 1976; Hofstege, 1980, 1984; Schwarzt, 1987, 1992, 1994) attempted to map the diverse cultures into a few common dimensions using quantitative methods. Chinese culture was historically influenced by Confucius just as Western culture was influenced by Socrates (Nisbitt, 2003). The studies of Chinese cultural values from Hofstede (1980, 1991) reveal the characteristics of high power distance, low individualism, and moderate masculinity based on the data from the three Chinese societies. Later studies (Bond, 1986; Fan, 2000; Lee, 1997; Yick & Gupta, 2002; Yao, 1994;) have analyzed Chinese cultural values from the features of collectivism, hierarchy, orientation to harmony, abasement, and valuing face.

In addition to cultural values, social and contextual factors, such as historical traditions, political ideology, educational system, and economic conditions, also characterize Chinese students. Their learning styles show many different features from the students from Western cultures, such as viewing the teacher as an authority, valuing rote and passive learning, having external motivation, uncritically accepting the content, and having a single direction of communication. These learning styles may not lead to a poor learning outcome, as some Western researchers (Ho, 2001; Kember, 1999; Watkins & Biggs, 1999) clarified, but they do put Chinese students in an unprivileged place when they study in American universities.

In an online learning environment in the U.S., Chinese students' learning patterns seem to be in accordance with their behaviors in the traditional classroom. Language barriers are the first problem they confront (Jun & Park, 2003; Tu, 2001), although this may be lessened due to the lack of pressure to listen and speak. However, learning in an autonomous and independent way without the warm collective climate and the teacher's dominance, provides a substantial challenge to Chinese students. In their online courses, they seldom initiate discussions, respond with fewer and shorter postings, and feel depressed due to misunderstandings of cultural differences. From these partial observations and personal accounts, the evidence indicates that Chinese students have not adapted to online learning as well and as comfortably as their American classmates. However, since there are few studies focusing on Chinese students' online learning experiences, there are still many unknown questions about their online learning. In particular, current research needs to further explore how Chinese students negotiate their cultural values and learning styles in an online learning environment.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of Chinese cultural values in shaping Chinese students' online learning experiences in American university settings. The research questions guiding this study were: (a) How do Chinese graduate students experience online learning in American public universities, (b) What are the socio-cultural factors that impact Chinese students' learning online, and (c) How do Chinese students negotiate their cultural values and learning styles in their online learning? This chapter describes the methodology that was employed to explore these questions. This chapter is organized into the following seven sections: the design of the study, sample selection, data collection, data analysis, validity and reliability, assumptions and limitations, and a chapter summary.

Design of the Study

A qualitative approach was employed in this research since there are no existing theories or fixed models that explain the phenomenon. Rather than finding the causal relationships between multiple variables, this study aims to understand the processes of how Chinese students study in an online environment. According to Merriam (1998), qualitative research is interested "in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation" (p. 19).

Qualitative research is an umbrella term that comprises various approaches that are based on a set of common assumptions. A fundamental assumption of qualitative

research is that there is no absolute truth or objectivity, and that multiple realities are constructed and perceived by people through the process of interacting with their environment (Merriam, 1998). The philosophical foundation commonly associated with qualitative research is the interpretive research paradigm, which is grounded in understanding the process a phenomenon undergoes and meanings that are imbedded in people's living experiences. Unlike the quantitative research paradigm, which posits that one objective reality exists and that reality is quantifiable and measurable (Crotty, 1998), the qualitative paradigm allows researchers to inductively explore socially constructed meanings, not constraining them to fit within a predetermined set of categories of analysis (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research allows the researcher to conduct a more in-depth exploration of participants' experiences by collecting thick, rich data through interviews, observations, the collection of artifacts, and through other forms of data collection (Merriam, 1998). The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis in qualitative research (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Patton, 2002). Becoming immersed in the context of the data for a period of time, the qualitative researcher searches for a combination of themes, categories, concepts, tentative hypotheses, and even theories that can be inductively derived from the data.

A qualitative design best fit my study since it allowed me to conduct an in-depth exploration of a complicated phenomenon that has received little attention. That is, a qualitative approach enabled me to go beyond a superficial comparison of Sino-American cultural and educational differences to report Chinese students' online learning experiences. Qualitative research allowed me to employ an inductive research strategy and keep enough flexibility to analyze the themes, concepts, topics, and hypotheses for

understanding their learning experiences. As the primary data collection instrument, I reported the relevant information about the research context and participants, collected the richest data related to the topics, and sustained interaction with the data and participants during the whole process.

Sample Selection

The purpose of this study determined its sampling strategy: I used purposeful sampling for my research. As Merriam (1998) explains, purposeful sampling is most appropriate when "the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can learn" (p. 61). Patton (2002) notes, "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth" (p. 230). Information-rich cases are those from which the researcher can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry. Among the fifteen strategies summarized by Patton, the snowball sampling approach was the most appropriate for this study. In snowball sampling, the sample process begins by asking the first participant, "Who else has a lot of experience in online learning? Whom should I talk to?" By asking each participant who else may be a good addition to my study, I was able to accumulate a list of information-rich cases. Since I have lived within a Chinese student community at this university for several years and I am a member of the Chinese Student Union, I took advantage of my network and asked fellow students to recommend individuals who had taken online courses or were taking an online course by the time I collected my data. When I found I could not find sufficient participants from my university, I went to four neighboring universities to recruit research participants.

My research population was Chinese graduate students who have taken an online course at the U.S. public universities. I collected my data in the United States rather than in China. There are three considerations in doing research with Chinese students in the U.S. First, online learning in China is still in its infancy, and has been developed only in certain key universities. The quality of the software, instruction, and online support cannot be guaranteed. It would be difficult to find good online programs and a group of passionate online learners in China. Comparatively, online learning in the U.S. has become very common in the university setting. Second, the context of the American university provides a cultural reference for Chinese students to specify their own social and cultural problems. Third, the logistics of data collection favored U.S. universities over Chinese ones. It was convenient to contact and consult with my major professor and dissertation committee during the process of data collection in the United States, whereas returning to China would have made frequent contact with the committee extremely difficult.

I planned to select 10 to 15 participants from the population of Chinese graduate students who have taken an online course in a U.S. university. Since in qualitative research there are no specific requirements for sample size, sampling to the point of redundancy is an ideal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Lincoln and Guba recommended that sample selection "to the point of redundancy…. In purposeful sampling the size of the sample is determined by informational consideration. If the purpose is to maximize information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units; thus redundancy is the primacy criterion" (p. 202). Based on experiences from other doctoral research, 10 to 15 interviews seemed

likely to generate sufficient data. I ended up with 11 participants from six public universities in my study. In the later stages of the interviewing process, I found that my participants started to repeat similar topics and contents about online learning, indicating redundancy, and I decided to terminate the sample selection and interviews.

It was important to determine the criteria for selecting information-rich cases, or the "best" sample. Specifically, I was looking for participants who satisfied the following criteria:

1. Participants would be Chinese students who grew up in mainland China, were pursuing their graduate studies in U.S. public universities and who had studied in the United States for at least one year but no more than three years. Chinese students from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau as well as Singapore were not included in this study. Since those Chinese societies have been exposed to Western cultural influences for a relative long period of time, students from these societies may have a different understanding of Chinese cultural values than those from Mainland China. For setting the study year of the participants, it is because that new students who are in their first year are usually not familiar with the school system and teaching model and struggle with the course assignments and exams, while "old" students who have lived in the U.S. for more than three years may have adapted to American culture so well that they have lost their sensitivity to cultural differences and view their experience from a blended perspective. I tried to avoid both groups in this study.
2. Participants must have taken at last one online course during their studies in the U.S. In this study, an online course is one in which more than 75% of instruction

is delivered through the Internet, insuring that participants would have sufficient learning experiences with online communication and activities.

3. The sample group could represent a range of genders, ages, majors, departments, regions of China, and significant online experiences.

Based on these criteria, I started to search for qualified participants from the University of Georgia as my first stage of sampling. I contacted Chinese students and some teachers to ask who had taken online courses and would like to participate. I also posted a recruitment flyer on campus and at the Chinese Student Union BBS and Listserv to maximize selection. The content of the flyer was comprised of the purpose of my research, the criteria for participants, their responsibilities and benefits, and my contact information. The recruitment flyer is attached as Appendix I. According to the Office of International Education (OIE), there were 1444 international students registered at the University of Georgia in 2004 – 288 from mainland China and 40 from Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Macao. Chinese students were the largest international student group at the university. Their majors varied across diverse subjects and research areas, and their ages ranged from 23 to 40 years old.

From August to November, 2005, I received only 8 responses via email or telephone from Chinese students at the local university. Only three of them were qualified with regard to the sample criteria. Reasons for disqualification included not having taken an entirely online course, living too long in the U.S., and coming from outside mainland China. The second stage of sampling started when I became aware that I could not recruit enough participants from my home university. I then went to some other nearby universities to find students qualified for my research. Through contacting

their Chinese Student Unions or posting recruitment flyers on their BBS, I released the message to the Georgia Technology Institute, Georgia State University, University of Tennessee at Knoxville, the major public universities within the driving distance with large numbers of registered Chinese students (300 to 500). I received more responses this time, and I was able to select five more qualified participants from this group. Three more were recommended by friends or teachers from Kennesaw State University and Florida State University. All the qualified participants were recorded in my archive along with their detailed contact information for later interviews. I also retained some participants for backup in case any of these selected participants could not attend. The whole sample selection and following data collection processes took almost seven months to complete, from August 2005 to March 2006, twice as long as I had expected. There were a lot of moments of frustration where few of the participants contacted me even after I sent out dozens of emails, and there were also some happy moments when I received surprise emails from potential participants.

Data Collection

Of the various qualitative data collection techniques, semi-structured interviews and documents were most suitable for this research. I used in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the major data-gathering technique for my study.

In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were used as the primary method of gathering data. The interview has been called "one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow beings" (Frotana & Frey, 2000, p. 645). It has been so widely and extensively used to acquire information that the U.S. has become known as an

"interview society" (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Silverman, 1993). The interview was recently defined by DeMarrais (2004) as "a process in which a researcher and participants engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study. These questions usually ask participants for their thoughts, opinions, perspectives or descriptions of specific experiences" (p. 54). Maccoby and Maccoby (1954) defined the interview as "a face to face verbal interchange in which one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information or expressions of opinion or belief from another person or persons" (p. 499). Dexter (1970), Merriam (1998), and other qualitative methodologists view an interview as a conversation between two people that is focused on the research topic, or as Lofland and Lofland (1995) described it, "a guided conversation" (p. 18). Misher (1986) does not agree that an interview is simply an exchange of questions and answers by researchers and participants. He considers it to be a form of discourse in which the researcher and participants engage in co-constructing meaning within a particular type of social relationship. He argued that "even questions that are apparently simple in both structure and topic leave much room for alternative interpretations by both interviewer and respondent" (p. 45).

Considering that my research questions aim to identify Chinese students' perspectives and to acknowledge their learning experiences in online courses, as well as to determine how they negotiate their social and cultural identities within their learning process, the interview approach seems to fit the research purpose perfectly. These experiences cannot easily be observed or investigated from other records; the best way to get this information is to ask directly, and to let the participants describe what happened

in their online courses and how they make meaning of their experiences in those courses. As Patton (2002) has pointed out,

> We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe…We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point of time…We can not observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attached to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. (p. 341)

There are many ways to conduct an interview, ranging from a strict, structured interview to an entirely open-ended interview. In a structured interview, the researcher asks all participants the same series of questions in a well-prepared question guide, while the semi-structured interview is based on a general question guide that allows the researcher to use probes or follow-up questions to get additional information. I developed and utilized an interview guide with main questions, but used probes to pursue interesting and relevant questions raised during the interview. An interview guide provides topic or subject areas "within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject" (Patton, 2002, p. 343). Good interview questions should be "open-ended, neutral, singular, and clear" (Patton, p. 353). A probe, according to Patton, is "a follow up question used to go deeper into the interviewee's responses" (p. 372). As my participants may bring with them different learning experiences based on their personal backgrounds, different course content, and use of different Web tools, I needed to be flexible and sensitive to individual and diverse

topics. For these reasons, I selected a semi-structured rather than entirely structured or open-ended format. An interview guide including 14 questions was developed based on the three research questions (see Appendix II).

I interviewed 11 Chinese graduate students who had taken at least one online course in the U.S. I interviewed each participant for about one-and-a-half to two hours at a mutually convenient time and place. For example, interviews were conducted in a participant's apartment or office, or at a public place like the student center or coffee shop. I prepared a $25 Wal-Mart gift card or equivalent cash for each participant to compensate them for participating.

Each interview process began with an informal conversation to explain the research questions, to introduce the consent form and principles of confidentiality, and to gather the participants' demographic information. The consent form is attached as Appendix III. The informal conversation at the beginning functions to open the conversation and build rapport (Patton, 2002). I usually started by introducing myself and asked them about their recent life or learning progress. After the initial "ice-breaking" talk, I asked if we could start the interview. I referred to the interview guide during the process and used probes to explore relevant topics that emerged from the conversations. All of the interviews were audio-taped, and I also took field notes to help me record the context, body language of the participants, and any particular thoughts that came into my mind.

All interviews were conducted in Chinese, as it was the native language of both researcher and participants. Considering the different levels of English capability, conducting interviews in Chinese helped to facilitate the participants' understanding of

the interview questions and their ability to express their experiences, feelings, thoughts, and ideas deliberately in their own words. The interviews were recorded and carefully transcribed by the researcher. Transcriptions and coding were also conducted in Chinese. Only the quotations used in this dissertation were translated into English. The translation issues in this study are further explained in the next section.

Course-Related Documents

Course-related communication documents were planned for data collection as supplemental data in my study. One of the biggest advantages in using documentary materials is their stability (Merriam, 1998), as they are "produced for reasons other than research at hand" (p. 112) and not altered by the presence of the investigator. They are "objective" data sources compared to other forms of data, such as interviews or observation. The disadvantage of using documents is their incompleteness and the difficulty of fully understanding them from the researcher's perspective (Merriam, 1998). Since it was not practical to observe the online communication of the participants because of time and place constraints as well as ethical issues, course documents from the participants were used in order to understand their real communications in their online courses. These documents included their written messages in the online course, such as their discussions on the course bulletin board, their WebCT emails, public emails related to their coursework, and their assignments and projects. The discussions on the discussion board and the emails served as the best records of the cross-cultural communications, especially the different views, arguments, clarifications, and even misunderstandings, that may reflect different cultural values and beliefs.

I did ask participants to provide some course communication documents, especially the sessions they felt best represented the typical features of their online discussion contributions. However, the efforts to collect these documents were not successful for several reasons. The participants either did not keep those documents, or reported that their online sessions were closed by their instructors after the courses were finished. Still others felt hesitant and worried about the ethical issue of tangentially including other students' work in the study. One participant printed out some course discussions from their discussion board for me, and after reading them, I found they did not provide any more meaningful information than the interviews. Thus, after trying several times, I decided not to request any course documents from my participants. Therefore, the transcripts gathered from the in-depth interviews served as the only source of data analyzed in this study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis refers to making meaning of what people have told of their experience. According to Merriam (1998), data analysis is a complex process that "involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation" (p. 178). Through a rigorous and systematic analysis of the data, a series of propositions, statements of fact, themes, and conclusions can be inductively derived (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Patton, 2002). Merriam and Simpson (2000) suggest that data analysis occurs at the beginning, middle, and end of a qualitative research process. I chose the constant comparative analysis method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) as the primary method to analyze my interview data. According to Maykut and

Morehouse, the four main steps of constant comparative analysis are: (a) inductive category coding and simultaneous comparing of units of meaning across categories, (b) refinement of categories, (c) exploration of relationships and patterns across categories, and (d) integration of data yielding an understanding of the people and setting being studied. Data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection.

I started my data analysis simultaneously with my data collection. I used an interview log to record my first impressions of the interview, the relevant context information, the side topics not recorded in the tapes but relevant to the research, and my personal feelings of the meeting. During the interviews, I used field notes to record some key points, unique views from the respondents, and some personal thoughts. After finishing each interview, I transcribed it and wrote down my reflections on the bottom of the transcription. Each transcription was submitted to the interviewee in order to check for errors, misunderstanding and distortions in the data. These interview logs, field notes and timely transcriptions supported me in addressing my research questions and helped me navigate later interviews with adjusted questions or probes.

After finishing the data collection and transcription, I carefully read the research questions, interview transcriptions, interview logs, and field notes. After getting a thorough view of the data through repeated readings of the data documents, I then scrutinized each of the materials line by line and sentence by sentence, sorting out the units of meaning and coding them by topic, participant's pseudonym, and page number. The units of meaning must be the smallest units and "must be understandable without additional information" (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 128). They serve as the basic elements for defining larger categories of meaning in the next stage. In the later stage of

data analysis, I tried to develop larger themes by grouping the meaning units within categories, constantly comparing the similarities and differences of the content of the themes and units of meaning. As I moved gradually beyond an individual level of information and toward some common topics, the themes, categories, and columns finally turned into a higher order structure of topics, or propositions (Maykut & Morehouse). An important look- or feel-alike criterion, advanced by Lincoln and Guba (1985), was used in categorizing the data units. Namely: "the researcher asks himself or herself whether the unit of meaning on one card is very similar to the unit of meaning on another card" (Maykut & Morehouse, p. 136). I also used the computer to support me with managing the files in the data analysis process. I did follow up interviews with two participants and sent the raw transcripts to each participant to clarify and verify the interview data.

The whole data analysis process can be categorized into three phases or stages in my study. The first phase of data analysis started when I finished the first three interviews and transcriptions. Under the direction of my advisor, I used the constant comparative analysis method to start the analysis, referencing the three research questions as the major frames. I identified a series of primary themes on Chinese students' online learning experiences, influencing factors, and the negotiation process. For example, when discussing the learning experience, my first participant focused on her good and bad experiences of online learning, and their learning communities. Comparing the other two transcriptions, I tried to find if the same terms or topics were repeated. Responses such as "differences from face-to-face course," "good learning experience," "bad experience," and "challenges" emerged in the first phase of data analysis. I kept in mind these themes, switched probes a little bit to these topics, and continued through another four interviews.

In the second phase of data analysis, I tried to think from a higher perspective and use more inclusive concepts to summarize the multiple themes emerging from the data. Concepts such as "more learner control," "learning community (online or off line)," "deeper learning," and "negative experience" emanated from the descriptions of their online learning experiences. The final phase of data analysis occurred when I finished the last four interviews. Using the themes and topics from previous analysis, I checked the new data to see whether any new themes emerged, and how I could connect them and include them under the larger themes. Three final conceptual themes came into being from this research question: "more learner control," "learning communities and supports," and "demands on learning management." The three phases of data analysis appear to be a recurring process of searching for new themes and examples, comparing the differences and similarities between meaning units, and developing larger themes by grouping those units.

Translation was another major issue in my data analysis which must be addressed. Using both Chinese and English in the research created potential translation problems. As discussed above, the interviews were conducted in Chinese. The audiotapes from semi-structured interviews were faithfully transcribed into text in Chinese by the researcher himself. The data analysis and coding process also used Chinese. The findings and supporting evidence (i.e. quotes from interview transcripts) were translated into English when used in the dissertation. Since the researcher is fluent in both English and Chinese and has worked in both languages for several years, he did the translations with the assistance of a language expert. The language expert is a Chinese student studying and living in the same university. He specializes in both Chinese and English, with a

completed Master's degree in English and a nearly completed doctorate in Education. There were three possible translation issues to be considered during the whole process.

First, the interview guide was developed in English based on the three research questions. I translated it into Chinese for the convenience of the interview. The IRB and consent form were still in English. To ensure an accurate and exact translation, I asked the language expert to verify my Chinese version. Second, all of the interview data were transcribed in Chinese. Translating each interview report verbatim into English was deemed laborious and unnecessary. I analyzed each interview according to meaning and coded them with Chinese phrases. The main themes elicited from the analysis were verified by the language expert. Third, the quotes selected from the interview reports were translated into English and reported in the draft of the dissertation. I tried to interpret the quotes with fidelity and authenticity, being sensitive to the cultural differences in using words and tones. Again, I asked the language expert to check my translations with reference to the original reports. Here, a "back translation" strategy was used by asking the expert to translate back some of the English paragraphs into Chinese, which were then compared with the original ones. I also sent my findings report to two key participants to check the accuracy of my translations. Through negotiating the meanings and words of translation with the language expert and key participants, I tried to make the translations as accurate and as representative of the original Chinese data as possible. The review from the language expert and the use of participant member checks were both important for verifying my translations. As a bilingual person, I remain sensitive to word and phrase selection. I also tried to make my translations reflect participants' original meanings and styles.

There was also the issue of Chinese proverbs, idioms, and unique usages. These unique Chinese expressions are meaningful in a Chinese social context but may lose some meanings within an English context. For instance, some phrases might lose their styles, tones, or specific meanings when translated into English. In these cases, I either consulted a Chinese-English dictionary or discussed them with the language expert or other friends to determine the closest English expressions.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are the indices used to determine how "scientific" and trustworthy research is. Reliability refers to the degree to which the results are consistent with the data collected (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) or the extent to which a researcher's findings can be found again if a study is replicated. However, since human behavior is not static and there are many interpretations of a particular phenomenon, it is almost impossible to repeat a study in order to establish reliability in the traditional sense. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest thinking about the dependability or consistency of the results obtained from the data rather than demanding identical outcomes from other researchers. Merriam (1998) recommends using techniques such as specifying the investigator's position, triangulating data collection and analysis, and using an audit trail to ensure the dependability of the results.

Validity is comprised of two approaches – internal validity and external validity. Internal validity refers to whether research findings are congruent with reality (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Reality, based on the assumption of qualitative research, is holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing. It consists of multiple sets of mental constructions made by humans (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, the researcher needs to demonstrate that

he or she honestly and adequately represents informants' constructions of their views and experiences (Merriam, 1998). In Merriam's words, "validity, then, must be assessed in terms of somehting other than reality itself (which can never be grasped)" (p. 202). Various strategies have been proposed to improve internal validity, including triangulation, member checks, peer examination, and clarifying the researcher's assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). The use of triangulation can strengthen the validity of qualitative research by collecting and using multiple sources of data (Patton, 2002). According to Patton, triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods, using several kinds of methods or data, or including both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Denzin (1978) describes four types of basic triangulation: data, investigator, theory, and methodological. External validity or generalizability concerns the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations. Since qualitative study uses a purposely small selected sample, it is impossible to generalize statistically about the whole population. Merriam (2002) suggests using reader or user generalizability for qualitative research. That is, "readers themselves determine the extent to which findings from a study can be applied to their context" (p. 29). Thus, providing a rich and thick description of the context and research procedure by the researcher is an important strategy for improving the generalizability of qualitative research findings.

Merriam (1998) suggests a series of the following strategies to establish validity and reliability for qualitative research. First, it is important that the researcher to divulge his or her subjectivities, biases, assumptions, and theoretical orientation. Second, the researcher should describe in detail the social context from which the data will be collected and analyzed. Third, the researcher should describe the selection criteria and

how those criteria were derived. Fourth, the researcher should employ the triangulation approach by using multiple methods and sources to collect and analyze the data. Fifth, the researcher should member-check his or her data and interpretations. This requires the researcher to send the data and tentative interpretations back to some participants and ask if they are plausible. Finally, using an audit trail to describe in detail the researcher's data collection process, data categorization process, and the decisions that were made in each area, will also help enhance the reliability and validity of a study.

Some of these strategies were used to ensure the reliability and validity of this qualitative study. In particular, data triangulation was considered for use in my research, but for various reasons the course documents could not be collected. I also used member checks and peer reviews to enhance the data analysis process. I sent each of the interview transcriptions to the interviewee, requesting that he or she review the data. I corrected the errors, vagueness, and misunderstandings according to their feedback. Five of them sent me back their corrected version of the transcripts, and another three wrote brief emails to report some errors, while the other three did not respond. Since the research outcome was reported in English, I asked the language expert to check my translations to ensure faithfulness and appropriateness. I also asked two key participants to review my findings report, and confirmed with them that my analysis appropriately reflected their experience. Their feedback and critiques helped me to avoid my personal biases and prejudices. Due to time limitations, I did not perform a member check with every participant.

The recorded audiotape, the field notes, and the interview logs helped me to recall the whole process in detail and were incorporated into the audit trail – the detailed account of how the study was conducted. The peer review from the language expert and

my major professor, along with the member checks from some participants, supported me with the translation, constructed themes, and interpretations, increasing the trustworthiness of the study.

Assumptions and Limitations

Every researcher has his or her underlying assumptions regarding research. Agee (2002) argues that researchers bring with them a set of assumptions whenever they enter into a familiar setting. These assumptions could be a source of bias for the study (Merriam, 1998). In this research, I assumed that cultural values shape the Chinese students' online learning significantly, which results in their having different experiences, understandings, feelings and behaviors than their American counterparts. Further, I assumed that the Chinese students could be aware of and articulate their learning experiences from a cultural and comparative perspective through a well-designed inquiry guided by the researcher. That is to say, I assumed that the phenomenon was researchable. Being exposed to the two different cultures for years, I became aware of the Chinese cultural values that I have absorbed from my home nation, which affect my daily behaviors, attitudes, and communications with others. These ambiguous but omnipresent cultural values defined me as a Chinese person, different from people from other countries and even from Chinese Americans. My learning experiences in both face-to-face and online courses in the U.S. have given me many chances to observe how our learning patterns are different from those of our American classmates. As to the online learning experience, I still remembered how nervous and chaotic I felt when I used the WebCT system for the first time. I also had a wonderful experience with an entirely online course two years later when I studied instructional design with professor who was

experienced with the various technology tools. I had both good and bad experiences with online learning in the U.S., and I understood how technology, instructional design, language and cultural difference all drive the dynamic of online courses and shape students' learning experience. My assumptions about cultural issues are also supported by the literature, which suggests that Chinese cultural values influence almost every behavior of Chinese people, down to the most trivial. Therefore, both my personal experiences and my reading of other studies have led to my assumptions.

The potential limitations of this study come from the following factors. First, the selected sample of the participants is a limiting factor, since all the participants are graduate students at public universities in the Southeastern U.S. They were all from mainland China, highly educated, and relatively homogeneous. The conclusions generated from this sample would be different if applied to other populations, such as students from other teaching university backgrounds, less educated Chinese in the U.S., or Chinese students from outside mainland China. Second, the inter-cultural difference might be minimized, since part of the purpose of this study is to explore the differences between Chinese and American cultures. However, China is such a huge country that, despite their ethnic and class homogeneity, these participants come from different social, cultural and educational backgrounds, and might have a variety of understandings of what Chinese culture is. Third, the researcher's personal bias might influence the research as a whole. My understanding of the cultural differences based on my living and learning experiences in both China and the U.S. might affect the analysis of my research participants' experiences and viewpoints. As Peshkin (1988) states, this kind of subjectivity is "like a garment that cannot be removed," and it can "filter, skew, shape,

block, transform, construe and misconstrue" (p. 17) our understanding of the data. However, I tried to be conscious of the subjectivities and the limitations of the research and avoided making distorted analyses or over-generalized conclusions.

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter presented the methodological process and related techniques that were used to explore the online learning experiences of Chinese graduate students in American university settings, particularly the role of cultural values and learning styles in shaping their online learning experiences. The research design, sample selection, data collection, and data analysis of the research process were described. A qualitative research design was employed and data was collected through in-depth interviews, and supplemented with follow-up interviews. A group of 11 Chinese graduate students who have taken online courses in U.S. universities was purposefully sampled as research participants based on a series of criteria. Data analysis was conducted using the constant comparative analysis method. Since this research used both Chinese and English in data collection and outcome report, I used member checks, a language expert, and back translation strategies to ensure the accuracy and fidelity of translation. Methods of enhancing the validity and reliability of this research were explained, as well as the underlying assumptions and limitations of this study, as they are the key issues in the qualitative research process.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of cultural values in shaping Chinese students' online learning experiences in American public universities. The three research questions for this study were (a) How do Chinese graduate students experience online learning in U.S. public universities, (b) What are the socio-cultural factors that impact Chinese students' online learning, and (c) How do Chinese students negotiate cultural values and learning styles in their online learning? A qualitative methodology was chosen for the research design, and semi-structured, in-depth interviews were employed to collect data. Eleven qualified Chinese students were interviewed by the researcher according to a list of open-ended questions about their online learning experiences. This chapter begins with a description of the research participants, and is followed by findings reported in terms of each of the three research questions, with supporting data from the interviews.

The Participants

Research participants were purposefully sampled and selected in order for data collection. The eligible participants had to meet three criteria: They had to be Chinese students who grew up in mainland China. They had to be working toward their graduate degree in an American university. They also had to have taken at least one online course during the past three years in the United States. For the purpose of this study, an online course was defined as one having at least 75 percent of the instruction delivered through the Internet.

As illustrated in Table 4, the sample consisted of eleven participants from six public universities in the Southeastern United States. There were six female and five male, participants with ages ranging from 24 to 38 years old. They came from nine provinces or metropolitan cities in China, including Henan, Jiangsu, Sichuan, Hunan, Hebei, Jiangxi, Beijing, Tianjia and Shanghai. These nice hometowns represent both east and west, rural and urban areas of China. They were all graduate students – four masters and seven doctoral. Their majors cover a variety of areas, such as education, science and technology, business, and management, well representing the majors that Chinese students study in American universities. They were from six public universities, including University of Georgia, Georgia Institute of Technology, Georgia State University, University of Tennessee, Florida State University and Keneasaw State University. Most participants had taken only one online course; some of them had taken two or three. The online courses they had taken were not uniform but vary according to different technologies use and class organization. I had summarized five modes or categories for these online courses, from mainly using discussion boards, to employing pre-recorded online video, to synchronous teaching course. The brief description of the five modes and the participants for each category are listed under Table 3. A profile of each participant follows. For the purpose of confidentiality, pseudonyms were chosen by the researcher.

Gao

I interviewed Gao at Starbucks cafe on a Sunday afternoon. She is a friend at the same university and we have known each other well for several years. Our interview lasted approximately 90 minutes, at which time she had to leave for her weekend yoga course. We decided to meet at the downtown cafe to make our interview more formal

Table 4. The Profile of the Research Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Hometown	Education	Major	Online courses*
Gao	30	Female	Henan	3rd year PhD	Higher Education	Three, 1st mode
Du	25	Male	Jiangsu	2nd year PhD	Instructional Technology	One, 1st mode
Tong	30	Female	Beijing	Graduate, Master	Mass communication	One, 2nd mode
Yin	35	Male	Tianjin	2nd year Master	Industrial and Engineering	One, 3rd mode
Feng	29	Male	Hunan	3rd year PhD	Biomedicine	One, 3rd mode
Xin	24	Female	Sichuan	2nd year PhD	Psychology	Two, 4th mode
Chen	31	Female	Jiangxi	2nd year Master	Management	Three, 4th mode
Zhou	38	Female	Shanghai	1st year MBA	Business Administration	Two, 1st mode
Qiao	31	Female	Sichuan	Graduate, Master	Higher Education	One, 2nd mode
Kai	29	Male	Hebei	1st year PhD	Linguistic, Higher Education	One, 2nd mode One, 1st mode
Bin	30	Male	Jiangsu	3rd year PhD	Policy in Finance and Budgeting	One, 5th mode

*The five different modes of participants' online courses

Mode 1. Discussion board (asynchronous) + face-to-face meetings
Gao, Du, Zhou, Kai-2

Mode 2. Self-directed learning + online chatting + discussion board
Tong, Qiao

Mode 3. Video watching + face-to-face office hours
Yin, Feng

Mode 4. Synchronous instruction + video as backup + group email
Xin, Chen, Kai-1

Mode 5. Video watching + online chatting
Bin

than our ordinary chats.

Gao is a third-year doctoral student in higher education, and her research area is the management of higher education. She is a short, smart, and energetic 30-year-old woman. She studied public administration for her undergraduate at Zhengzhou University, Henan province, China, and went to Beijing Technology University (BTU) to work on her Master's degree after graduation. Her Master's study at the Higher Education Institute at BTU focused on educational economics and management. She came to the U.S. to pursue her PhD degree in spring of 2001. At present, she has completed all of her course credits and defended her comprehensive exams in last summer. Gao is writing her dissertation prospectus and hopes to defend it soon.

Gao took three online courses in her major area from 2002 to 2003. Her first online course, Assessment and Evaluation of Higher Education left her with a strong impression. Those courses were conducted via WebCT. Gao told me they primarily used the discussion board for class communication, but the teacher and students also met once a month.

After the original 90-minute interview with Gao, we had a follow-up interview in her apartment three months later. During this interview, she clarified some questions I had from the first interview. The data for her case included both the first and the follow-up interview.

Du

I met Du for our interview at his apartment on a hot weekend afternoon in August. He had survived his difficult first year of doctoral study in the U.S. and took time during the summer to learn to drive. We lived in the same student apartment community and had

several opportunities to talk with each other. He was very willing to help with my research when he learned about my research topic and discovered that I was looking for participants.

Du is a one of few "door to door" students in my study who had never worked fulltime outside school. He got his bachelor's degree in educational technology from Central China Normal University and participated in a five-year research project on information technology construction for K-12 education during his undergraduate study. With his professor and other fellow students, he tried to develop an online course for photographic technology. Du went to Shanghai to obtain his Master's degree at East China Normal University after he graduated; his major was still educational technology. His Master's thesis was an application study of desktop virtual reality in Web-based education. He also worked for a distance education technology company for a year on a part-time basis during his graduate study in Shanghai. Du came to the U.S. to pursue his PhD in the area of instructional technology in the fall of 2004, since he felt "the information and resources are very limited in China."

Du took an online course in his department during the spring semester. It was a doctoral seminar on the foundation of instructional technology, with his advisor as the instructor. The course was built upon WebCT, and they primarily used discussion board for class discussion. The teacher and students also met for a discussion and project presentation every three weeks. The online course gave Du an opportunity to experience online learning physically and to know what does and does not work based on theories and principles. Du did not enjoy his online learning very much. We had a one-hour follow-up interview two months later in his departmental office.

Tong

The appointment with Tong was postponed several times until we finally sat in her apartment and started the interview on a Friday afternoon. We reside in the same apartment building on campus, so we can see each other almost every day. Tong was a busy young mother with a one-year-old daughter. Her husband works as a post-doctorate at this university and was always occupied by his research. Tong told me her only available time is Friday afternoon when the child is asleep and her husband is having lunch out in his lab.

Tong had finished her Masters degree in mass communication at this university in the fall of 2005. She received her Bachelor's degree in political education at a university in Beijing and worked for one year as a staff administrator in Xiehe Medical College after she graduated. Tong's second job was as an office administrator in a company affiliated with the Department of Textile Industry. Her major responsibilities in this job were to organize exhibitions, arrange meetings, and coordinate other business activities. Tong came to the U.S. as a student spouse in 2000 when her husband began his PhD degree study in bio-chemistry at this university. She took the TOEFL and GRE tests and applied for her graduate study, enrolling in the College of Mass Communication and Journalism as a Masters student in the fall of 2002.

Tong took an online course in Word Processing Applications in the fall of 2003. This course was primarily a technology course in which students learned how to use Microsoft Word to process information and to design various types of documents. Tong took this course since she wanted to learn some practical skills to complement her research. Her class used both discussion boards and chat rooms for class communication.

Most of the time, Tong studied chapter by chapter on a textbook according to the course syllabus and submitted assignments every week. The teacher was available via email contact for answering any questions. Tong thought this online course was one of the easiest courses she had ever taken, even though she did experience some difficulties. Tong notes, "Everyone can do it well if they only put the time forth."

Yin

Yin is a first-year Masters student in a top public university, and his major is system and industrial engineering. He contacted me when he read my recruitment flyer posted on a Bulletin Board System (BBS) for Chinese students at his university. We exchanged some emails to discuss the time and location for our interview and finally found a wood pavilion in a small park close to his apartment in Atlanta. He is a quiet and introverted middle-aged man, and he spoke peacefully about his background and learning experience.

Yin grew up in Tianjin, China and received his Bachelors and Masters degree in electronics and engineering at Nankai University, a top university in China. He went to Motorola Corporation and worked as a computer software engineer for several years. While at this job, he was sent to the U.S. to attend an MBA training program. He studied at and worked in Phoenix, Arizona and Austin, Texas for four years. Yin went back to China in 2000 and continued to work at a Motorola chip factory for about three years. He left Tianjin and took his second job at a computer software company in Shanghai for one and a half years. Yin came to the U.S. as a Masters student at the beginning of 2005, and he planned to graduate soon at the end of this year. Yin told me he was looking for a job in the United States.

The online course Yin took was on simulation. In this class, students learn how to use a major software application ("Arena") to design industrial assembly lines. The format of this online course was to use pre-recorded video clips, supplemented with face-to-face office hours. The students log online to watch the course videos by themselves, and then meet the instructor for their questions during the office hours. They can also post their questions on the discussion board, but this was not used much. The instructor was accessible to answer students' questions via email or by face-to-face office hours each week.

Feng

Feng was one of the three interviewees at a neighboring state university, and he almost did not make it into my study. We communicated for a while to set up a meeting but then he said he was too busy to meet me on that specific weekend. I did not want to lose him and sent a "last shot" email to him after settling down with the other two interviewees from his university: "I will drive six hours to meet you at your door tomorrow. Don't you really want to tell me your story?" His feedback was short this time: "OK, let's meet. I have an extra bed in my dorm; you can sleep overnight if you want." We had a very pleasant talk that Saturday night, sharing our laugh and tear stories of studying in a foreign country. Our interview took place at the breakfast table in his sitting room the next morning.

Feng is a third-year doctoral student in biomedicine. He is also pursuing a minor in statistics, as many Chinese students do. Feng received his Bachelors degree in mechanical design and a Masters in automatic control from Xi'an Transportation University. After he graduated, he went to Hong Kong as a visiting scholar at Hong Kong

Technology University for one year. Feng came to the U.S. in the fall of 2003 to pursue his PhD degree.

Feng had finished all of his required courses and had defended dissertation proposal in June. Having had his IRB form approved, Feng planned to collect data in the winter and to graduate in the following summer. Feng's dissertation research is part of a large research project. This supervisor of the project, who was also his advisor, paid his tuition and a stipend for his doctoral study. Feng felt lucky, since he does not need to work another job as a research assistant to earn his tuition.

Feng took an online course on linear algebra during the first semester of his doctoral studies. In fact, he was suggested to take this online course since he found himself totally lost at the beginning several times of the face-to-face meeting. "My English is too poor to understand the class," he said. Then the professor suggested that he watch the course videos and learn the topic by himself. Feng was happy by that he could watch the video multiple times until he understood the topic well. Feng said he frequently visited the instructor to ask questions during office hours. The online course solved Feng's language problem during his first semester, and he deemed it to be a blessing for him.

Xin

I interviewed Xin in a computer lab near his student apartment on a late Saturday afternoon. She was the first of the three participants I interviewed on my trip to the public university in a neighboring state. We exchanged some emails and phone calls to determine meeting date and time. It was 5:30 pm when we found each other and sat down by a desk in a quiet corner of a computer lab. Xin is a pretty young girl of the 80s

generation. Although Xin appears to be uneasy at the beginning for several minutes, our interview soon became a nice talk about her learning experiences.

Xin is a first-year doctoral student in the Department of Psychology. She is from Chengdu, Sichuan province, China. She did her undergraduate at a law school in Chengdu and graduated with a Bachelors degree in 2002. Xin came to the U.S. to study at this public university in the fall of 2003. Xin did not feel it was problematic to change her major from law to psychology.

Working in the major of educational psychology for her first year, Xin failed to receive an assistantship for the next year. “I felt that the sky was falling down during that period,” she said. However, she found a part-time job off campus during this desperate time. She decided to transfer to the Psychology Department, since this department had better financial support for graduate students, and she formally transferred to the department in the fall of 2005.

Xin had taken two consecutive online courses on SPSS software and statistics in her second year of study. The courses were taught synchronously via a template called Central 7.0. Students were advised to log online to participate at the class time twice a week. Since the whole class was also video recorded and uploaded online, students could watch those clips after the class if they missed anything or wanted to revisit a certain segment. Xin usually “attends” the class at home, and she said that she had never seen her professor, even after taking two courses with him.

Chen

My interview appointment with Chen was on 9:30 one Sunday morning. However, it was 9:20 when I finished the interview with Feng and left his building. It took me

another hour to locate Chen's residence building on the large campus that is nested in the big city. When we found a discussion room in the law library and started our interview, we went to the interview questions without much preliminary discussion.

Chen is a second-year Masters student majoring in management at this public university. She received both her Bachelor and Master degrees in information management at a university in Beijing. After she graduated, she went to Shenzhen and worked as an IT researcher for three years for Huawei Corporation, a well-known high-tech company in China. Chen came to the U.S. with her husband as a student spouse in 2002, enrolling in the Master's program in management in the university's business school in 2003.

Chen took three online courses from the department of statistics. They were in a similar format which instructors teach synchronously via Central 7.0 and students participate to the class at their convenient locations. The courses were also recorded and uploaded online for students to review after the class. The teacher also provided online and onsite office hours for answering students' questions.

Zhou

Zhou is a first-year MBA student at a state university in a suburb of Atlanta, and she is also the president of the Asian Students Association at this university. We met for our interview at the student activity center on their small yet beautiful campus. She is an extroverted and talkative lady and looks older than her voice sounds. After some preliminary chatting, she started to tell her legendary life stories and learning experiences.

Zhou grew up in Shanghai and received her Associate's degree from Shanghai Chinese Medical College. She worked in a hospital for two years and then got a chance to

work in Africa for another two years. She spent a short period as tourist guide for China International Tour Company before working for several foreign companies, such as Honeywell, Nestle, and Shanghai American School. She was in charge of the support service in the American School, which is an affiliate of the Shanghai American Embassy, and a hundred working staff reported to her as the vice-president. As she moved up the ladder, Zhou felt more and more pressure on her English ability, and she decided to go back to school to receive formal training in her interest area.

Zhou came to the U.S. in November of 1999 and enrolled as an undergraduate student in business management at a junior college in the fall of 2000. She transferred to her present university with several core courses credits, and she studied another two years to get her Bachelor's degree. Zhou applied to the MBA program afterward and was admitted in 2004. Because of her fluent English and rich working experience, Zhou was one of the few graduate assistants in this teaching university and a leader for the Asian students. Zhou planned to pursue her doctoral degree after graduating from her Masters program.

Zhou had taken two online courses during the previous two years at this state university. These courses were organized through the WebCT platform, and students mainly used the discussion board to communicate about course topics and their assignments.

Bin

Bin was introduced to participate in my research study by a mutual friend of ours, but we had not met each other before. We made some calls to discuss the meeting before I drove to Atlanta to his apartment on a Saturday morning. The interview was conducted

in the kitchen of his large apartment, which he shared with three other Chinese graduate students. Our talk was interrupted several times by the friendly greetings of his roommates.

Bin was a doctoral student in his third year at a state university located in Atlanta. His major was budget and finance. He had finished his comprehensive exams and entered into the stage of dissertation research. Before entering this doctoral program, Bin received his Bachelor's degree in English and literature from Beijing Foreign Language University and his Master's degree in public administration from Iowa State University. Bin had two years of working experience in local government in the Tianjin Economic and Technology Development District, where his job consisted of supervising and managing foreign investment projects. Bin came to the U.S. as a graduate student at Iowa State in the fall of 2001.

Bin took an online course on public finance and budgeting in his second year at Iowa State. The course was organized by using pre-recorded video clips for students to learn by themselves, and using online chat rooms for regular class discussion. Bin usually watches the lecture videos with three other classmates, and they participate in the discussion as a study group. Bin said that he had a strong resistance to this online course at the beginning, but he found it to be acceptable, with both advantages and disadvantages, at its conclusion.

Qiao

I didn't know Qiao until we sat down for our interview. She was introduced and brought in by a friend, Kai, who recently transferred to this Southern university and registered in the same department as Qiao. The interview was conducted in a downstairs

sitting room of Kai's apartment on a late winter afternoon. Qiao is a quiet young lady with a calm and low tone, although she articulates every word. Our talk began on the topics of living and learning overseas. Her emotional voice was just as humid as the weather that day.

Qiao graduated with a Master's degree in higher education at her present university, and she was going to study her PhD in a multi-cultural and language education program this coming fall. Qiao got her Bachelor's degree in business English from Chengdu Polytechnic University in 1998. After graduating, she taught as an English teacher of the same university for five years. Qiao felt bored in teaching grammar year after year, and she knew very little about the culture behind the language. She decided to pursue her Master's degree in the U.S. in 2003.

Qiao's first year of study in the U.S. was accompanied by frustration, sadness and tears. In fact, Qiao was one of the few Chinese students I know who experienced such a severe culture shock. The online course she took in her first semester seemed to be part of the cultural disorientation. This WebCT-based course was organized by self-studying according to the syllabus, participating in weekly class discussion via the online chat room, and using discussion board for questions and answers after class. Two years later, Qiao reflected the online course as being simple and useful, but says that at that time it was "a nightmare." She just could not cope with it when taking it because of the unfamiliarity of this instructional model and the various difficulties posed by technology, language, and culture.

Kai

Kai is an old friend. Our relationship can be traced to four years ago when we came to the U.S. and enrolled at the same university together. He was also one of the few Chinese students who received a university-wide assistantship. Kai used to work for his PhD in linguistics but found he did not really like this major. He changed his plan and graduated with a Master's degree in linguistics, and he then moved to this Southern university to work toward his PhD in higher education. We had many chances to get to know each other when we attended the social activities organized by the Chinese Students Union, including a weekend driving together to a coast city for a tour with other students.

Kai is presently a first-year doctoral student at this Southern public university. He received his Bachelor's degree in English language from Beijing Foreign Language University in China. After graduating, he went back to his hometown city and found a job at Heibei Metallurgical Industry Bureau. He worked there four years as an English interpreter dealing with import and export projects; he then changed to Hebei Chemical Industry Bureau and worked there for another three years. Kai's third job was as a faculty member at Hebei Technolgy University, where he taught English for six years, until he came to the U.S. to pursue his PhD in 2002.

Kai had taken two online courses during the previous two years, one at his former university and one at his present university. Thus, his online learning experiences came from the two courses from two universities. His first course on computer-based education was a synchronous teaching course in which he learned how to employ various software into instructional design within a short summer session. He recently took his second online course in the fall semester in his doctoral program. This was a WebCT-based

course. The instructor and students mainly use the discussion board and chat room for class discussion.

We sat by a table in a fast food restaurant nearby his apartment, starting interview as well as having breakfast together. There were few people in the shop that Sunday morning, but the background rock music made us to speak louder than usual to be recordable. It was truly a friend to friend talk even though it was a short one.

As can be seen from the above descriptions, the eleven participants in this research came from different backgrounds, studied different areas, and were at different stages of their graduate study. Their online courses and learning experiences vary widely. We met for the interviews in a variety of locations and time slots. However, they all grew up and completed their tertiary education in Mainland China, were working toward their graduate degrees in U.S. public universities, and have taken at least one online course during the past three years in the United States. These common features coincide well with the criteria for sample selection in this research.

Findings of the Study

Findings are reported and presented based on each of the three research questions guiding this study. As can be seen in Table 5, the Chinese students' experiences regarding online learning include feeling more control over their learning, experiencing various forms of learning community or support, feeling a need to manage their learning, and the impact from technology issues, instructor and instruction, and classmates. The second set of findings includes socio-cultural factors that impacted their online learning experiences. The major socio-cultural factors consist of language, familiarity with teaching style in the U.S., and Chinese culture values and school norms. The third

Table 5. Overview of the findings

1. How do Chinese students experience online learning?

More learner control in terms of
- Schedule and location
- Pace of learning
- Learning materials
- Depth of learning

A variety of forms of learning community and support
- Online community
- Offline community
- Casual network

A demanding experience of learning management due to
- Heavy workload
- Less direction from teacher
- Loss of context information
- Lack of self discipline or motivation

Impact of technology, instruction and classmates
- Technology
- Instructor and instruction
- Classmates

2. What are the socio-cultural factors that impact their learning experiences?

Language

U.S. instructional style

Chinese cultural values and school norms
- Silence/passive learning
- Hardworking and diligent
- Formal or content oriented
- Deference to teacher
- Concern for others
- Worry about losing face

3. How do they negotiate cultural values and learning styles in their online learning?

Acknowledging and reflecting on different teaching-learning styles

Learning and practicing new strategies for online learning
- Participate in mutual communication
- Engage in informal and collaborative learning
- Learn to be self-managed

category of findings examines the aspects of how Chinese students negotiate their cultural values and learning styles in their online courses. Two themes emerged from the data: the negotiation by acknowledging and reflecting on the different teaching-learning styles in the U.S. and China, and the learning and practicing of new strategies for their online learning.

Online learning experience

Four major features characterized Chinese students' online learning experiences. They have more or greater control over their learning in terms of time, place, pace, materials, and depth of learning; they experience a variety of forms of learning communities or support; they experience a demanding level of learning management due to the workload, less direction from the instructor, loss of reference to the context, and lack of self-discipline or motivation. The fourth aspect which characterizes their online learning experiences is the impact of technology, instructor and classmates, etc.

More learner control

A recurring experience of Chinese graduate students in their online learning is that they feel more or greater control over their learning. Even though their online courses were delivered in different modes and with different class dynamics, each participant described his or her good experiences of learner's control in terms of learning schedule and location, learning pace, learning materials, and the depth of learning.

Learning schedule and location. Almost all participants described the flexibility of online learning in its schedule or location. Gao said that she liked the clear-cut schedule of face-to-face class on one hand, but that "on the other hand, you expect you have a time to log online and start your learning whenever you want; you can enjoy a

flexible schedule." Du also emphasized the flexible learning time as an important feature of online learning, particularly when he had other pressing assignments, stating "then you can postpone your posting in this class a little bit; you can adjust your schedule." Du also said that, "you can do it at home in the evening. It doesn't matter how late it is." This feature made him feel very comfortable in his course. Similarly, Chen, who took the online course because she had to work as a graduate assistant in an off-campus office, said that, "the biggest flexibility is that you can download the course video and watch it on your own time." The online course Tong took allowed her to study on her own schedule, following the syllabus. As a young mother with a one-year-old daughter, she had to balance her time between studying and taking care of her family. When she had spare time, she just went further and completed more readings and assignments for the course, leaving more time for other course assignments and her family duties. She states:

> My pleasant experience seems to be that you can control the schedule. Sometimes, when you have other courses, or you have some pressing homework….Thus, I can finish the reading and assignments within two to three days, save them somewhere, and turn them in before the due dates. You don't need to worry about this course any more which leaves time for other assignments. I mean, you have a flexible timeline. You can control it a little bit. I feel this is wonderful.

Yin took an online course primarily using pre-recorded video for instruction. He believed that the flexible learning time is important, especially when he had other work to do, "I thus can watch the video tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow. There are no constraints on the time." He further explained the advantages of online learning:

> Using industry terms, you solve the problem of bottleneck of instruction. Thus, the class size is no longer the bottleneck of the instruction. The teacher's time still is a bottleneck, but it becomes more flexible. Whenever the students ask questions, the teacher does not need to answer them immediately; instead, he or she can answer it later via email. The teacher's instruction time can be disseminated.

According to Yin, the online course is not only flexible for the students, but also convenient for the teacher. Feng is a biomedicine student, and sometimes he has to commit himself to the experiments in his lab, which may lead to missing some classes. But for online courses based on class video, this is not a problem for him: "I can watch them whenever it is good for me. This is what I like most – any time you want to learn, this is my best learning experience." Feng also appreciates that online learning saves his time by keeping him from having to walk or ride to school.

Even though most Chinese students live on campus or nearby, riding to school is not a serious issue for them. They seem to enjoy the relaxing atmosphere of studying at home or self-selected locations. As Chen states, "The pleasant experience, for me is that you take the class by yourself at home comfortably, with nobody besides you." Thus, she doesn't need to "concentrate too much on the instruction" or "worry about the questions from the teacher." It saves her time riding to the classroom, and parking is no longer a problem. She further explains, "The best thing about taking class at home is that you can listen to the class as well as cook your lunch (smiling). You can drink some water or eat some snacks, and you don't need concentrate very much on the course."

Qiao took an online courses requiring synchronous discussion via the chat room each week, so her class time was static per week. But the freedom to select a learning environment was a good experience for her. She tells her experience in this way:

> The only pleasant thing is that you don't need to ride to school. But it can be said from two sides. On the one hand, I would like to meet the teacher and the other students in the classroom; on the other hand, I feel I don't need to sit in the class for one hour. You can take the class at home or in the library. There is NO strict requirement on the place. Of course, the class time is fixed. You can thus have the class at home with a cup of coffee in hand. You can also go to the library with some friends. I take my class while they surf the Internet at my side. Comparatively, the learning environment is pretty much relaxing.

Similarly, Kai also emphasizes the pleasant aspect of freedom of location. He states, "Since there is no requirement for the location, it makes you feel some degree of freedom. You can take it in the library or at home." He further explains how he located a learning place for his synchronous online course:

> I had no computer in my apartment, but I was within a walking distance from Aderhold[the College of Education building]. There are several computer labs in the building. I can find a lab there to start my class. Of course, I need to bring the earphone with me. Finding a lab with few students or even nobody, I can begin my class there. At least from this aspect, it is very independent, very casual and there is no restriction on it. I feel it is very flexible. During the class, you take it all by yourself, no teacher or other students around you physically; you don't feel

any pressure. Wearing the earphone, you find a comfortable seat for your online learning.

Pace of learning. Another feature of online learning is that it allows the students to learn at their own paces. They can move faster or slower according to their capabilities, interests, or schedule. They can stop their learning to check other references whenever they have any questions. Yin describes his experience in this way: "You have to adapt to the teacher's pace in the online learning, but if you don't understand, you can stop [the video] anytime to check some reference books and come back to continue your class." Feng took a very difficult course of linear algebra in his first semester of doctoral study, but his English was too poor then to follow the instruction. The teacher then suggested him using the online learning approach. The self-controlled learning pace solved his language barrier and caused him to have a more pleasant learning experience. He states, "I watch it through before the class. Usually, I cannot understand the content completely….but I can find a time to read the book and watch the video again." This arrangement helped him to learn the content of this course, which was impossible in the face-to-face class. Tong also mentioned that sometimes she went ahead of the schedule and completed her learning tasks, which saves her time for other duties or coursework.

For those courses using video as an approach to presenting learning content, the participants like the repeatable instruction and they feel they can fully control their learning pace. As Xin states, "The biggest difference I feel is that you can repeat listening to the instruction. This is impossible for other regular classes. You can get it back if you miss anything." The repeatable instruction also leads to a less anxious learning atmosphere. Like Chen said, "Because I know this course will be recorded, if I do not

understand something fully, or I miss some parts, I can go back to listen to it. Thus, I feel I don't need to concentrate on the teacher's instruction or taking notes." She believes, "The best effect of [online] learning is that you can repeat."

The learning pace, in particularly the communication pace, is slowed down in the asynchronous online courses, which mainly use the discussion board for class discussion. The asynchronous discussion allows students to have much time to prepare and post their discussion, which leads to a higher probability of them being involved in class discussions. Bin explains this advantage:

> I think when you discuss with other students online, you use typing to discuss, it gives you more time to think over the questions. For our international students, this can help to overcome some of your weakness in oral expression. Thus online learning has some more advantages than other approaches of instruction. The probability of your participation is greater than that in face-to-face classes. Because you need to think how I express this question clearly and accurately in those classes, the barriers are overcome a little bit in the online course.

Gao also likes the way she can have some control of the communication pace as an international student. She believes that it makes her discussion more deliberate and solid in content:

> It gives me sufficient time to think about the questions (pause). Thus, I become confident when I post my discussion, with a sense of achievement. It is easy to follow others' talking in the classroom. You feel you have to say something, right? Then you say something coming into your mind. But in the online course, I feel

> all the discussion is through my careful thinking and deliberation; thus I think the discussion through postings is more solid.

Learning materials. For the online courses, the instruction and class communication are all based on certain forms of electronic materials. Much course content is delivered and exchanged through recorded media or written documents. Gao enjoyed the written discussion and states, "For the face-to-face class, the communication is ended with the class. You may leave nothing on your mind afterward." But for the online course, the discussion "will be there all the time." The postings are updated constantly, and the discussion continues and expands out of the normal class time. Gao feels that she gets more information from online learning than from a face-to-face class.

For those using pre-recorded video as a major course content delivery approach, the continuous availability of the online instruction gives them full control of their learning. Bin states that he can always go back to check the video if he missed some content. He gives an example of falling asleep during the course, and then turning back to watch it again. Nothing is lost. He feels this is one advantage of online learning. Feng also states, "If I did not understand the first time, I watch it a second time, then a third time. I can watch it as many times as I want." Learning online makes him feel very comfortable. He doesn't need to worry about the difficult sessions that he can't understand, since "they are always there." He compares the video instruction with the book that is always tangible and reliable:

> Yes, I think it is more like a book, a live book. A book gives me a feeling of tangible, ok, black words on the white paper. Here, I mean, I still have the pressure when reading; I try my best to understand the content. But if there is a

> part I can't understand, I can read it again. Online learning is very similar to books. I try my best to learn it, but if I don't get it, it is always there.

Yin tells that he has saved all of the course documents and materials in a big folder on his laptop. All of them are well kept for further reference, and they are valuable as a substantial record of his learning. Xin also mentions that she downloaded all of the course videos into a hard drive. She feels "then they belong to you, you can watch them at anytime." Even for the online courses that she took last year, she plans to find a time to watch them again. For Chen, the repeatable course videos helped her to take a more complete class notes. As an international student with limited English comprehension, she cannot follow the teacher's instruction well, particularly when the teacher speaks too quick or unclearly. However, with the assistance of the course videos, she can complete her class notes:

> When you replay the video, you can make notes on his lecture; you can write down his words, the instructional content, since there are explanations to variables in this statistic course, such as what is the dependent variable and what is the independent variable. If you cannot understand the content in the face to face class, you miss it. But you can make notes when you replay the video.

Depth of learning. The control over their learning allows Chinese students to learn more or to dig deeper into the content of their online courses. Even though not every student talks about this advantage, some students report that they experience better and deeper learning in their online courses. For example, Feng feels that he has "learned much more from the online course" and that he has "not missed any important parts of

this course." He further explains how his learning from this online course positively affected his following courses:

> In general, I feel I have learned much from this course. I have almost grasped all the content. I watched it several times and have not missed any point the teacher deemed important. The courses I am taking, such as Engineering Analysis and some other courses, are all based on this online course. Since the knowledge I learned from this course is very solid, when I take these later courses, others may think they are difficult, I can still clearly recall most of content [from linear algebra]. For me, this is the deepest impression.

Feng feels that he has learned the content three times by himself, "it equals to the effect that you listen to the teacher's instruction three times. The feeling is totally different from the learning in the classroom." Similar to Feng, Gao also believes she has learned "more than in the face-to-face class in both depth and width." The self-paced online learning gives her a solid understanding of the content, and it also cause her to engage more in the class discussion:

> In the classroom, you understand the questions but have no time to think about the answer. When you get your answer, they will say, "Sorry, we have already passed that." But in the online course, you have enough time to think about the questions; then your postings are more deliberate, not just speak something coming to your mouth. Therefore, in the classroom, you feel you have to say something. But in the online environment, since it gives you time to think, you feel. "I have something to say." This is a significant difference.

Yin also thinks that he has learned a little bit more than in the regular face to face courses, but it may also relate to his particular interest to the content of his online course. He explains that while he has to pay attention to listening to the instruction as well as taking notes in a regular class, he can copy screens or make notes easily in the online course. This helps him focus better on learning content. For Kai, he not only learns the subject content from this online course, but also the teaching approach and other relevant technology skills. He explains:

> In the course I took at UGA, I was very excited at that time. Since this was my first time taking an online course, I thought it was fresh and interesting. I have never had this kind of learning experience in either China or the U.S., and I am curious about the content, as well as the approach and process. There is always something new for you to learn; I mean, not only the content, but the procedure and approach. In particular for online communication, I try to compare it with face-to- face instruction to find the differences. There are some aspects out of your imagination.

From the above summary, we can see that Chinese graduate students feel a greater control over their learning in online courses. They enjoy the flexible schedule and location, self-adjusted learning pace, substantial learning materials, and they likely experience deeper and better learning in their online courses.

Various forms of learning communities or support

Learning and interacting with other students in the online courses, Chinese students establish various relationships or friendships. Besides the greater control over their learning, the participants reported they have experienced different forms of learning

community or support in their online courses, which can be categorized as online community, offline community, and casual network.

Online community. Online community is characterized by a student's frequent interaction in the online environment, a close relationship with others, and peer learning from others through discussions, debates, or collaborative projects. Gao describes how the learning community was important for her study. Her example can be seen as a good example of online community:

> After all, the online course is different from a correspondence course, where all students face one instructor. In the online environment, you face a community. Your learning relies on your peers to a great extent. I feel I was very lucky that my classmates were very mature, sophisticated in every aspect, and take this course seriously too. They posted a lot of discussions, which made you feel that you were in a good learning environment. This is very important. If everyone submit posts just for completing the homework, it is meaningless. You can learn very little from others if there are no deliberate postings.

Gao further explains how the students develop a close relationship with each other through the online learning:

> My classmates are very intimate with each other. The atmosphere is very pleasant. Gradually, I was getting involved with them after the mid-point of that semester. We are not only an intellectual community, but also a strong social community. I got knowledge of some very close friends though taking this online course. We keep a good relationship still today, and we hug each other when we meet. This is an enjoyable aspect.

According to Gao, the online discussions in her classes were not limited to the course content, but covered a variety of topics in a very casual atmosphere. As she says, "Sometimes, they make fun of each other, and look very social, telling jokes. Sometimes, they discuss serious topic…even though not all of the topics are directly relevant to the course content, they talk about them too." That makes her feel that the "discussions are very light-heated, very casual, the atmosphere is pleasant."

Like Gao, Tong also describes how the teacher and other students were supportive to her learning and how they helped with each other in the online environment:

> That is to say, he [the instructor] is very helpful and supportive, and he trusts you too. The atmosphere is lovely. If one student has a question, the others will post to answer it. When I have a question, others suggest to me the possible answers, and they post their replies vigorously.

She further tells how their teacher makes their first class into a face-to-face meeting where students get to meet each other. This meeting helps to build the learning community:

> In our first class, we went to the classroom for a meeting, and the teacher asked us to introduce ourselves. Then two people meet in a group and talk with each other, and then introduce his or her peer to other students. This is an opportunity to get to know each other, to know who is who. Then the rest of the class time, we meet online during the discussion.

But obviously, the online community in Tong's class is not as strong and close as that in Gao's class. The intimate relationship was not established. She says, "But I cannot remember who is who at the end of this class. There are too many people, and we don't

have much communication." Tong feels most of their discussion focuses on the course content, there is little off-topic social communication.

Du does not describe how they develop relationship in their online community, but gives an example of how they discuss or debate with each other online. He says:

> Let me give you an example. I don't know if it is an appropriate one or not. When we discussed about the forms of learning, one classmate said, "I hope we instructional technology people can clarify this question, what is formal learning, and what is informational learning." Then I said, "This categorization is meaningless – what is formal and what is informal – that learning is a just process. You think taking a class is a formal learning? Is my logging on the Internet formal or informal learning? How about talking with other people and learning how to better communicate with others, the living ability?" Someone agreed, and someone disagreed. We have many of these kinds of discussions.

Du also tells of discussions on other topics such as the importance of technology in instructional design. It seems that there is a lot of agreement or disagreement, like online debates. But when being asked if students get angry or "fight" during the discussion, he said it does not happen in his class, in which all the classmates are quite open-minded:

> People here are very open-minded for discussion; they take it easy. You talk about your ideas, and I express my thoughts. I tell why I do not agree with you, and you defense….Some people have good points, where I agree with him on one side, but I emphasize the other side. People are all open-mined; there is no quarreling or getting angry. None of these kinds of things happen.

For Zhou, the online community has two faces. On one hand, she enjoys learning from others by reading the online discussions; on the other hand, she feels sad for some students' irresponsibility and prejudices. She explains how she learns from the online discussions:

> When I got stuck in my assignment, I liked to read the discussions from other groups. Sometimes, we talk about different steps in one question, sometimes, we discuss different questions. That is, group one discusses a topic, and group two discusses another topic. When we discuss the same question, I usually check and read the other group's postings. This should not be counted as cheating, right? It will give you some inspirations, the directions of the discussion, how to think about the topic…. I enjoy the reading very much.

Zhou also tells how she feels sad when some students scold her or disagree her opinions because of their prejudices during the online discussions:

> Yes, they have some prejudices, and I was unhappy about that, whether online or offline. But in the online environment, since you can't see their faces, there is no face-to-face conflict, but it may hurt you more, since everyone can access it. When face to face, it happens between two persons in a special moment. It will disappear after this particular moment. But in an online environment, you can see this post all the time. So I often 'fight' with them online.

From the above, we can see that in an online community, students usually have intensive discussions, help and support each other, and develop relative close relationships. Most of their communication occurs online. These characteristics are different from offline communities in several aspects.

Off line community. For this kind of community, most communication between students occurs through an offline, face-to-face basis. They usually study or work as a small team with several classmates, helping each other with their learning assignments or preparing for exams together. This kind of community more often than not appeared in the video-based science or technology related courses. Yin describes his group of classmates, which includes several Asian students:

> I think my English is good, and I can talk with American students or students from Europe. But because of the cultural tendencies, Asian students like to join together, and we think in a similar way. Therefore, Asian students are working harder, so we can have some deeper discussions when we talk together.

They usually use email, MSN, or the telephone to contact each other, but for the project, they may meet in the department lobby for a face-to-face discussion. Yin says:

> If we want a formal discussion and have more people, like three to five, we will make an appointment. We will meet in the lobby at the department building. If there are just one or two people, we talk with each other online via MSN or through a phone call, asking "Hi, did you finish your assignment?" or something like that.

Yin feels the face-to-face discussions are more efficient for their group project, "since group projects need everyone's contribution," They can easily discuss on "who will be responsible for which part or see who has any new ideas." Otherwise, "it is easy to have a misunderstanding that leads to delay."

In Xin's class, students are encouraged to do all of their assignments or projects collaboratively in small groups. While communicating a great deal online, they have meetings based on the need to finish the homework:

> We two or three students usually do the homework together. Sometimes, we meet to discuss the homework. We meet occasionally and go to a lab together to discuss how to complete it. Most of our discussions are though email. He sends me a copy of the assignment; if I feel there is some problem, I will tell him to revise it. He asks for my opinions, I send it back with my thoughts, and we submit it when he feels it is ok. Just like this. We usually meet for the final project, and we seldom meet for regular assignments. We just use email to discuss.

Xin also discusses one of her classmates who studies well gave her support, particularly when she had difficulties in her statistics class: "Actually when I come to the difficult questions, I will ask the student who learns well, ask if he has time to teach me somewhere."

In Feng's course, four Asian students who selected the online learning approach group together for discussions. He explains how they got to know each other and came together:

> The other two students are Indian. They probably have the same problem [of language] if they study in the regular class. Through watching the videos, they could learn better. We are not assigned by the teacher, but we know each other is learning through the same approach. We usually meet before the exams to have some discussions. At that time, when we all started our studies at UT first year; some students were required to take ESL, English as a Second Language. So I met

> the two Indian students there. The other Chinese student, he is actually Chinese, but he is a permanent resident, therefore he can speak both Chinese and English. Sometimes he translates the English into Chinese for those things I did not understand well. The challenges posed by English are overwhelming at that time.

Feng further explains their discussion focus on the examination content and how they usually meet before exams:

> Yes, the main purpose of the meeting is to discuss the key points on the exams. That is, those that could be the critical parts and are most likely to be tested. That is all we discuss, no other content. We don't focus on one concrete question, but discuss which sections or topics could appear on the exams, to see if we know those sections well.

Similarly, Bin's group consists of other three classmates who are all international students living on campus: "Our group had three people including me, three or four? Oh, four members. Yes, there were three Chinese and one Russian. Because we all live on campus, it is convenient for us to be in the same group." They sometimes watch the video lecture and have discussions together:

> In that course, we watch the course videos individually at the beginning. We decide to meet later in one member's home to watch together. Yes, we make an appointment to study the lecture together. We discuss what this sentence means, what that means. We have some discussions during the lecture, and we discuss the content at the end of the lecture too.

For the offline communities, it can be seen that the Chinese students often group with several other international students, either assigned by the instructor or assembled

voluntarily, to meet for class discussion in a face-to-face manner at their own selected time. They also have online discussions for regular contact, but the offline group discussion seems more critical for their learning.

Casual network. For the casual network, students usually find support and help from a capable classmate or experienced friend for completing their coursework. Their contact with others is based on their need and situation, and there is no predictable regular communication between them and other classmates. In her online statistics course, Chen often communicated with her Chinese classmates via the telephone about their assignments, but they rarely met online or face-to-face to study. She explains:

> Actually, there are not several others; we have just one to two people, who often communicate with each other through the telephone. We seldom meet face to face for assignments. People are always busy on this and that and do not take this course too seriously. We usually do the assignments by ourselves, and then talk about it via phone call. We will have some further discussions if there are different outcomes, or check the book or consult the teacher to find the problems of our different answers. Since this course does not encourage teamwork, the instructor wants you complete the work by yourself.

Chen presents two reasons for their relying on a casual network: discussions on assignments among students are discouraged in this course, and it is more efficient to chat with another Chinese student to solve the problems:

> In one class, a classmate said we could come to his office and discuss the homework at a regular time each week if we were interested. But I did not attend. I felt it was a waste of time. It is slow to communicate with American students.

> Chinese students usually discuss with other Chinese fellows. Yes, there are quite a few Chinese students taking these courses, and thus we have some communication.

When she can't get support from others, Qiao usually finds help from a classmate who happens to work with her in a campus intern job. She states:

> I went back to ask my roommate. She is also a new student, and she did not know about WebCT. I have no other place to find help, but I had an internship during that semester, and I happened to have an American classmate to work together with. Therefore, I talked with him about my problems, asking him what is Blackboard and what is the discussion board and these tools. He brought his laptop with him, and he told me how to use the tools, and showed me step by step.

This kind of help is not on a regular basis, but Qiao said she was very thankful at that time. She said, "This was just an intern job; we couldn't meet every day, so this kind of help is limited, too. But I was very grateful for him."

Similar to Qiao, Kai found support from a capable friend for his online course in instructional technology. With the support from this friend, he could finish all design projects timely in this intensive summer course. He describes about this friend in this way:

> No, he is not a classmate, but a good friend. He majored in instructional technology and knows much more than me. So I often consult with him if I have difficulties, Hahaha(laughs), to disturb him. It was luck that I could find him at that time and that he was not very busy. Otherwise, if I could not find him or he didn't have time, I would have trouble completing the projects in a timely manner.

From the descriptions above, we can see that Chinese students experience different online communities and learning support. For Gao, Du, Tong, and Zhou, their online learning was accompanied by frequently discussion and a mutually supportive online community; For Yin, Feng, Xin, and Bin, they usually learn together with other classmates in a small group and met for discussion in a face-to-face manner. Chen, Qiao and Kai found support from their capable classmates or close friend when needed. There are many reasons accounting for the formation of different online communities and support, such as the technology chosen, the instructional design, the class dynamic, and the student population.

A demanding experience of learning management

The third feature of Chinese students' online earning experience is the demanding experience of learning management due to heavy workloads, less direction from instructor, loss of contextual information, and lack of self-discipline or motivation.

Heavy workload. Participants reported that there is a heavier workload in their online courses compared to their face-to-face course. Gao describes how her experience of "anytime learning" became more like "all time learning":

> For the face-to-face course, you go to the classroom at a regular time and finish all the reading the previous night, right? But for the online course, you find that your workload concerns you all the time. Because the postings are updated all the time, you need to read them constantly. Then you find you spend a lot of time online. You need to keep on checking the posts. I don't like the schedule, staying online all the time.

Gao feels that the biggest challenge for her taking online courses is the workload. There is no clear timeline for her study, "You spend more time on posting; your posts will be better in both quality and quantity." She also tells how she has learned to manage his course workload from her own experience, and she spends a half hour every day for her online course. Du had a similar experience to that of Gao. He also felt that the online course takes more time and effort for the Chinese students:

> I feel that Chinese students like me need to spend a lot of time on the online course. For the course of three hours per week, I spend one to two days to prepare for it. Yes, you need to read the posts, and you need to reply them…. Sometimes you feel it is difficult and very time-consuming.

In Yin's online course using video for content presentation, he also reports that he spends more time than face-to-face class. He explains:

> A video of 55 minutes, you need to watch it one and a half or two times. It may take you a longer time. You may want to skip some content you know, but you dare not, since you worry about if there is anything new to come. So your online learning usually takes 1.5 to 2 times more than face-to-face class time.

Like the above three participants, Zhou also described how the workload made her "out of breath" and "too anxious to cry" at the beginning of the course. She tells:

> The professor's requirements are so demanding. He requires a lot of reading and writing. There are 3 hours of in-class lecture and 3 hours out-of-class online assignments. He said 3 hours, but I spent almost 9 hours completing the homework. Because my reading speed is slow and there are too many

> assignments…and you need to understand those questions first – he posts many questions for you to answer. He also suggests a lot of videos and movies for you.

As a new student taking an online course her first semester, Qiao felt that there are too many new things to learn in the online course. She said with a sigh, "At the beginning, yeah, it is overwhelming. There is too much new information, and I am not familiar with the Internet, so it is difficult to sort them out."

Less direction from instructor. Another reason for the demanding experience of self management is due to less direction from the instructor in online classes. Students report that in their online courses, the teachers do not dominate the class like in face-to-face classes; they would rather stand aside to provide support, facilitate, and participate in the discussion like one of the class members. Gao said that her teacher tried to avoid to interacting with students individually, but let the classmates communicate with each other. She states:

> I think in any online course, the experienced instructor will try to avoid direct communication with individual students. Since you want to see student-student interaction, not everything relies on the teacher's direct communication. So I don't think I have one-to-one communication with her. She sometimes gives a follow-up posting to a student's post. I think that is the only individual contact between the students and teacher, in the online discussion.

Like Gao, Du tells the same story about communication with the instructor. He describes how he interacts with the teacher online:

> We have very few communications. Yes, the instructor does not communicate with students individually. He posts his discussion like one of the students. So

> each time, one or two students lead the discussion. The instructor gives his opinions and thoughts, too. The chance of communicating with the instructor is very little.

Regarding communication with the teacher, Yin had a different experience than Gao and Du. He emphasized less direction from the teacher in that there are fewer chances to talk with the teacher socially in the online course:

> I think I have less chance to meet the instructor. In the face-to-face class, you can walk with the teacher before or after the class and walk for a while with him. In the online course, there is a distance between you and the teacher. In a regular course, you can ask him immediately if you don't understand, and the teacher likes to explain it to you. You can also ask the teacher about his research and if you can participate in his project, etc. In the online course, there are few communications of this kind.

Similarly, Tong also reports that there is limited direction from the teacher during an online course. Email is the most common way to contact the teacher other than the online discussions. She states:

> Almost all of our communication with the instructor is via email. You write him an email if you have any question. He usually replies to you promptly once he receives it. Occasionally, the feedback is delayed because he went out of town. He will explain that later. All the methods the teacher left us for contact are email and telephone. But you can never find him via phone; you always end up recording a message.

In Kai's instructional technology course, he sometimes had the technical problem of not being able to get timely help from the teacher, so he had to ask a close friend to assist him. He explained the situation of not being able to solve the problem by himself:

> In this online course, we are required to design some web pages using Dreamweaver and upload them in a timely manner. You face some technical problems during the process that you can't solve problems by yourself. You can't upload them, for instance, so you can't complete your work. If nobody helps you – the teacher is not at your side – you cannot finish your assignments.

Qiao also reports her experience of having this type of anxious situation because of the distance with the teacher; it was not as convenient as in the face-to-face class to ask questions of her neighboring classmates. She said that in the online course, "Nobody sits around you; you can't find help from others. All the support you can rely on is merely a dictionary on your desk."

Loss of contextual information. The third reason leading to a demanding learning experience is the loss of contextual information. The online communication relies solely on texts or voices; the loss of context hinders communication and makes it difficult to carry out and easy to misunderstand. Zhou points out this problem vividly:

> In a face-to-face class, you can see others' expressions; you can always find some signs, you know. For instance, if you feel someone is sensitive to what you say, you can stop the topic then. But in online discussions, you can't see and you don't know how others feel, so it is easy to misunderstand. The other aspect is your language. Other students don't know you are an international student, or you are a newcomer. Who knows, Right? They can find that without trouble in the face-to-

> face class. The students online are just A, B, C, D; there is no physical concept….you have only a vague impression, you don't know whether the person is a male or female, old or young – all that information you can never know.

Similarly, Qiao also felt the loss of context made it more difficult to received timely feedback from the instructor. She says:

> In the face-to-face class, if you don't understand the instruction, the teacher can tell from your expression. For example, if I frown or shake my head, he knows my reaction immediately and then he may ask me, "do you have any question, Qiao?" or "do you have any other thoughts?" – this kind of immediate reactions. But in the online environment, no response does not mean you don't understand; he may think in this way, and thus you can't get timely feedback.

Qiao further reports that the chance for communicating about off-subject topics is less because of the loss of context in an online communication:

> In a classroom, you can also talk with other students on some off-subject topics, or chat about something interesting. I feel that this kind of communication helps to learn the subject, not just sitting there and facing a machine. I like this kind of classroom atmosphere. It's very human.

In Chen's experience, listening to the synchronous online teaching was not difficult, but asking questions was more problematic due to the lack of context clues:

> I think it is fine for listening to the course, but you have more problems than in a face-to-face class when asking questions and communicating. Since you can't see him or her, you are separated. He can't see your expression, either. You can't see

> his reaction to you. You may wonder if he understands your question, or if you are asking the right question, or how he responds to it, those kinds of things.

Yin reports another problem of online learning due to the loss of context in class communication. That is, he does not know how his learning compares to that of other students, which pushes him try hard to learn the required content:

> In this online course, I could learn the content through watching video, but I don't know about others' learning. Without direct communication, I don't know about my level among others in this class. In the face-to-face course, I can guess my level in the class. When people ask questions, I feel this question is a simple one, and I know I am OK. But it is hard to make such a kind of judgment in your online course, you then try to learn everything using your best efforts, trying to secure an A.

Like others, Gao also describes why she doesn't like the online chatting or posting for discussion due to the lack of communication context. She states:

> The thing I am not accustomed to, there is only yourself, sitting before the computer posting discussions in a Sunday evening. I don't like this. You like the way you accustomed to, seeing others' eyes and faces, talking about your opinions. But facing the screen…some people like online chatting, I have never chatted with others online. I only send some emails. So I am not accustomed to, and don't like this kind of interaction.

Lack of self-discipline or motivation. According to the participants, online learning requires a higher self-discipline or motivation compared to face-to-face courses. Chinese students feel the demands of self management because of their low self-

discipline ability or motivation. Making the decisions and supervising the process by themselves challenge their passive and accepting learning style. Gao reports how she was so unaccustomed to the online course that she even considered dropping it. She explains:

> Another aspect, I am not accustomed to this kind of course, very much not. I think maybe I am a person lacking self-discipline. I am required to log online and post messages in a timely manner. I didn't like it very much at the beginning of this course. I considered dropping out this course.

Tong also mentioned that online learning "calls for more self-discipline." She does not use her own example, but talks about others case in general: "Some people do not pay attention to the timeline and postpone the task with a later time. It may cut your scores." For Yin, even though he had a good management for his learning, he also felt that the online learning was easy to postpone:

> The arrangement I feel you need to have a schedule for yourself. Online learning is easy to postpone if you do not pay attention. You always have things to do, the videos are always there, the old ones are not deleted, and new ones are uploaded continuously. If you are not watchful, it is easy to develop a habit of postponing.

Similar to Yin, Zhou also describes how online learning relies on the student themselves, or in her words "on your own." She states:

> Since online courses depend on your self-consciousness, just as I said, on your own. If you do not follow the schedule, it is easy for you to slack off, to get off the track. An online course requires a high self discipline; that is, you need to manage yourself, since nobody tells you. You select the course by yourself, and you need to read and review by yourself.

Kai emphasized the self control as an important aspect of online learning: “Since it is very flexible, you must control your emotions and feelings and finish the preparations before the class.” He warned the other students, “If you miss the class or listen to the class inattentively, the teacher cannot know. But you may not learn some important content.”

The other face of lack self-discipline is low learning motivation. Because of the low motivation, Chinese students feel bored during their online learning, fall asleep or switch to other irrelevant work such as checking email. Two students reported that they fall asleep during their online class, which demonstrates lower learning motivation. Xin describes her experience:

> The online course is in the early morning, and you don’t need to go to a classroom. I just get up and listen to it, and then fall asleep after a while (laughs). Because you cannot see other people, the participation is not active. Sometimes you feel the class is boring… the teacher may find this issue, too. When nobody answers his question, he asks, “are you all sleeping?”

Xin also reports that she sometimes goes to surf other websites or check her email while participating in the synchronous online instruction. When she gets back to the class, the teacher has already finished the topic:

> Sometimes, the teacher talks about some irrelevant topics during the class, such as his kids or something; I do not want to listen then. You cannot leave if you sit in a classroom. But in the online course, I can surf on the Web or check email. When I come back to the course, he has already finished the topic.

Bin also reports falling asleep occasionally when watching course videos by himself. He believes that lack of interaction led to a low learning motivation for him:

> Yes, there are two sides. I sometimes fall asleep watching videos, but I never sleep in the classroom, since you have eye contact with the teacher and he may ask you to answer questions. However, when you watch videos, you do it all by yourselves. You tend to sleep after a while; this is not like in the classroom, where you have at least some kind of interaction.

Impact of technology, instruction and classmates

The fourth feature of Chinese students' online learning experience is that their learning is impacted by their accessibility and knowledge of technology as well as by their course instructor and instruction, and classmates.

Technology. Since course content is delivered and communication occurs through computers and the Internet, technology remains an indispensable factor of online teaching and learning. Based on the interviews from the participants, the limited access to the Internet, lack of experience with programs and tools, technical misuse, and constraints of functions, impact Chinese students' online learning experiences, in particular at the beginning stage of their online learning.

Zhou describes her experience of having constrains due to computer and Internet accessibility. At the time she was taking the course, she had no personal computer and no Internet connection at home, so she had to rely on the computer labs on campus to finish her online discussions and assignments. Zhou states:

> I was constricted compared to my classmates. I left school at about 8:00 pm every day, and I could not access the information after 8:00 pm. But many American

> classmates posted their discussions at night. They are all night owls, posting at 10:00 pm, 11:00 pm, even 1:00 to 2:00 am. These brought me a big challenge, since I could not access their discussion quickly, and put them together into a group presentation.

Besides the accessibility, she also mentioned her lack of experience of using computers and online tools: "Frankly, I did not use computer a lot in China. I don't know those things such as how to create a file; they all take me a lot of time." Similar to Zhou, Yin also emphasized the importance of technology, saying that a fast computer and an Internet connection is necessary for online learning:

> It is impossible if you don't have a good PC. Your equipment, the computer should not be too slow. The network needs to be at least 100k bps in speed so that what you see on the online video would not be discontinued. I think the network is important.

Qiao also mentioned that she had few experiences using computers and the Internet in China. When she started her online course here, she felt overwhelmed by so many programs, software, and databases. She had used a few computers and the Internet for learning purposes before, but she did not know how to check databases and hyperlinks. She was definitely in a disadvantaged place in using technology compared to her American classmates, who were all familiar with online learning. She heard that they have taken online courses in their undergraduate programs and had used computers a lot in their previous studies:

> I asked my classmates if they had taken this kind of course in their undergraduate studies, and they said yes. So they are accustomed to doing things online. You

> give them a link, and they know how to find the topic. Even changing to another department, or switching to a different school, they know how to use it…. I feel they don't have any problems, the only person who has problems is me.

Xin took a synchronous online course for the first time, and the problems posed by the technology caused it to be a terrible experience. She describes her situation like this:

> This was my first online course. I have not taken any similar course in China, and so I felt it was fresh and interesting. At the beginning, I didn't know how to enter, how to log on; I had difficulty in downloading files too. I tried to log on the computers in three different buildings on campus for my first class meeting….
>
> When I found the working computer to type on, the class had past its midpoint.

Because they lack experience using technology, Chinese students reported more misuses or mistakes in their online course. For example, Tong and Kai both told their stories of technical mistakes. Tong said that she once forgot to attach a file when she submitted her assignment, another time, she entered the wrong chat room. Kai also reported the mistake of attaching a file when submitting his assignment, and he knew it only when the teacher returned the assignment to the other classmates. Even though those mistakes were solved later with help from the teacher, they caused anxiety, worries, and other negative feelings when they happened.

The limited functions of current technologies also bring challenges to learning. For example, Kai felt that online communication could not duplicate the free discussions of face-to-face. Although the teacher can answer his questions through typing or voicing, some steps of manipulation and problem solving are hard to explain via word descriptions. Kai could not understand them preciously without seeing how they are

carried out by the instructor step by step. For Feng, the hardest thing in his linear algebra course was to type statistic formulas or equations when asking a question to his teacher. He states:

> At the beginning, I wanted to ask questions via email, but I couldn't….I had no way to do that. For instance, I had a question about one assignment, and I couldn't type it in, couldn't type the formula into the email. I tried it my first time, and then went to her office during the office hours all the other times. To ask a question online, I felt it was not convenient….you just can't do it online sometimes.

Feng wished that the development of technology would allow the online classrooms to simulate real classrooms in every aspect, with all the books, notes, and learning materials found online. Typing formulas would become easier, and then he would not need to go to the instructor's office. He stated, "Going to the teacher's office is the only choice of out of no choices."

Even though almost every Chinese student reported some technical problems, most problems happened in their beginning stage of the classes – that is, the first several times they attended their online courses. Qiao referred to this as "beginning stage bitterness." When they became familiar with the online template and tools, the challenges or difficulties posed by the technology tended to become less demanding.

Instructor and instruction. The instructor and his or her instructional style was another important issue students most frequently discussed as impacting their learning experiences. The instructor's experience, attitude, patience, participation, availability, and course design style all caused students to have different learning experiences. There were

stories about both good and bad learning experiences reported on how an instructor's attitude, style, and behavior can influence online learning.

Gao believed that both the instructional design and instructor's participation were important. She gave a comparative example of her two online courses. In one course, all of the assignments were required to be emailed to the professor, and students could not see each other's work. In another course, the instructor asked the students to upload their assignments online allowing students to critique each other's writing. As a result, she believed that "the instructional design directly impacts the students' performance." She also described that how the instructor gets involved in the course is another impacting factor:

> Another factor is the professor, or the participation of the professor. If the professor posts three to four discussions per week and gives feedback to some discussion, you may feel more encouraged to participate, right? So I think the instructor is a crucial factor. Whether or not the instructor has a sense of responsibility, whether or not he has a good sense of humor, will directly influence students' performance, including mine. For those who take the online course for the first time, they tend to use their professor's postings as a model to imitate, don't you think so? So instructor's participation is very important.

Qiao argued that her negative learning experience was partially due to the young instructor who was a recent graduate PhD and had not taught any course previously. The professor, although he often told the students to come to ask him if they had any questions, never contacted Qiao, the only international student in his course, to see if she had any problems. If he had, it would have made a lot of difference to Qiao's learning.

Qiao states, “Every instructor should have this kind of cultural sensitivity. But in higher education, I have not felt it from either the young instructor’s or old instructor’s courses.”

Feng said that his instructor is a smart person who graduated from MIT, but that her thinking jumped very fast and she could cover half of a chapter during one class. Feng could not follow her instruction because of his limited English, so he took an online format of this course. He explained that the instructor was a major reason for his choice of the online course: “So if you ask me to choose, I would like to take the online course in both of the two situations: when the teacher has an accent, or when he doesn’t have a good logistics in thinking.”

Du did not feel satisfied with his online learning since the teacher “did not put much time into it” and “sometimes he did not come to his office for a week.” As a result, the students spent a lot of time discussing various topics but did not go along a structured theme. Contrary to Du, Xin felt that her instructor of the online course was very supportive:

> The instructor is important. Whether the teacher is patient or explains the points clearly, it is critical to your learning since you can’t see him or her in the online course. Our professor is a good instructor. He answers every one of your questions, and he treats international students well.

Xin told a story about how the instructor helped another Chinese student to keep up with the class. Tong reported that the instructor of her online course replied promptly to students’ questions, understood the technical problems, and gave her another chance to submit the assignment. Yin felt his instructor was a nice but busy person, and said the availability of the instructor sometimes caused problems:

> The instructor is nice. He has a good personality and is willing to help students… He is an American, male teacher. But his problem is that you need to follow his tight time schedule. You may need to negotiate several times to make an appointment with him. He always leaves for this reason or that reason, since he has many things on his schedule. He is willing to help. When you call him, he said "come to my office," but he may not be there when you stop by.

Classmates or peers. From the previous discussion on different learning communities and support, we can see that students tend to form different groups to support their online learning, either being assigned by the instructor or by joining together voluntarily. Learning with whom is a crucial aspect influencing students' online learning experience. In Gao's online course, her classmates were senior managers from community or technical colleges. Learning together with them, Gao felt that she had learned about another "landscape" of higher education, she explains:

> My classmates are relatively older. They are the high-ranking officers in technical colleges, like vice presidents. In talking about higher education, we used to focus on four-year colleges and universities. And then, those people come out from two-years colleges; all their discussion topics are new to me. During the discussion, they talked a lot about real examples in their work, all about community colleges. Many of the concepts they talked about are brand new to me.

Classmates not only impact the content and topic, but they also influence the way other learn online. Gao explained how her classmates' previous online learning experiences helped with their current learning:

> Another important factor is that many of my classmates know each other from before; they have built their own circle and they all have some online learning experience; thus they can push those first-time online learners in this course and bring along our learning. Actually, I feel that peer learning was critical.

Xin felt that her online courses were less demanding, since the instructor asked the students to work together as teams to complete their assignments. She also mentioned a competent classmate who gave her a lot of help. She said, "I think I may have met many difficulties if I had not taken this course together with him and had to learn it all by myself, since I do not have a statistics background. Thus, it would have been much harder to learn it by myself." Similar to Xin, Qiao found help with her technical problems from a friendly American classmate who happened to have an intern job with her. This classmate showed her how to use the template and tools and answered all of her technical questions. Chen had several other Chinese classmates to discuss assignments with for her online courses.

Zhou felt that she benefited from the class discussion and from reading others' posts. Since most students have real working experience, they bring their experience into the discussion. Zhou believed that she had learned to see different perspectives and to understand American culture:

> But other classmates have working experience, and they use what we learn in their work. Many of them did waiter or waitress jobs, and they may discuss the knowledge in these settings, talking about their guests, service tips, how to serve different customers, and so on. These discussions give you some different perspectives for understanding American culture. I feel it is enjoyable since you

learn many different perspectives. The biggest benefit I learned from this course is that I saw totally different ideas and thoughts, and you need to learn how to embrace them.

This section addressed the typical characteristics of Chinese students' online learning experiences. The first feature is that they feel more control over their learning in terms of time and location, pace of learning, course materials, and content. The second finding is they have built different learning communities and support to facilitate their online learning, in the forms of online community, offline community, and casual networks. The third characteristic is that they feel the demand to manage their online learning because of the workload, less direction from the teacher, loss of context, and lack of self discipline or motivation. The fourth feature is that their accessibility and knowledge of technology, their course instructor, and classmates all can lead to their different online learning experiences.

The Socio-cultural factors impacting their online learning

This section explores the major socio-cultural factors which impact Chinese students' online learning experiences. Based on the reports from the participants, there are three main socio-cultural factors including language, U.S. instructional style, and Chinese cultural values and school norms. The three factors are discussed in the following.

Language. Using English as a foreign language in their classes, Chinese students always confront the barriers, difficulties and challenges posed by language. In reporting their online learning experiences, Chinese students note language problems to be the most frequently mentioned topic. Almost every participant talked about their language

problems, such as not being able to understand the instruction, reading and writing slowly, high writing demand, and presentation anxiety. For Feng, the language obstacle was the direct reason for him taking an online class:

> I went to the face-to-face class the first two times. But as a Chinese student in his first semester, my English is too limited. I can't understand what the instructor said and I was often totally lost when I came back. The teacher is a very smart lady…and she said that I could try the online format.

Feng felt that that online model fit him very well since it helped alleviate his problem with language. Furthermore, if he missed something on the video, it was not a problem: "I can listen to it a second time if I did not get it."

Similar to Feng, Qiao reported that she could not keep up with her classmates during the chat room discussions because of language problems:

> The major problem of using the chat room is from language, that is, the language barrier. I feel there are some constraints and can't type as freely as my classmates can, since I need to think about how to express my thoughts with words, check the dictionary occasionally, and then submit. That is, it is influenced by the lack of proficiency in language. It is fine for the asynchronous discussion.

Zhou goes further to explain that the language barrier actually influences every aspect of Chinese students' learning behaviors:

> The disadvantages are language and culture…. your passive participation due to your language problem. If your language is mature and fluent, you have the guts to participate. I think in this way. It is due to your lack of proficiency in language. The language barrier impacts the speed, the speed of your reading, the speed of

> your thinking, and the speed of your writing. All of those together are influenced by your language problem.

She believed that her learning was impeded by her limited language skills: "Since your expression is constrained, you only ask your most important questions." Thus, Chinese students more often than not "get limited information from this course".

The challenges not only come from listening comprehension, but also from writing expression. Some participants reported problems with writing precisely and clearly during the online discussion. Gao, for example, reported that the loss of contextual information led to the pressure regarding writing:

> I think language is a factor. If you are in the classroom, others can know your expression through your behavior, eyes and body language; but in the online environment, they rely on the verbal language only, so it demands a lot of your writing skills. This may constrain my performance to some degree.

Yin shared the same experience and believed that online discussion "requires a lot from your written English. You need to express clearly your questions so that others can understand you." Yin thinks that it may be a challenge for some students to write in standard expressions.

Kai also talked about the language problems experienced by Chinese students; however, he believed that the pressure is not that demanding when all of the discussion occurs through typing. He explains:

> The disadvantageous aspect is this: You can image, whether an online course or face-to-face course, it is in English. The teacher and students use English to communicate. The language is a barrier to Chinese students. Since language is a

> part of culture, you have some barrier in your language, and you have a barrier to the cultural understanding. In the online course, since it should not demand high listening and speaking skills, you may feel the challenge from language is not very serious.

From his experience in the course about computer-based education, he thought that people can compensate for the disadvantage in language with other skills, such as technology skills. He said, "If you are good at technology, you can use the tutorial, graphic, and pictures to make up for your language disadvantages. So the advantages and disadvantages of language are mixed together in online learning."

Chen related an unpleasant experience when she once tried to communicate with the instructor through the microphone; the instructor was not able to understand her, which make her feel very frustrated. She felt that the biggest problem for Chinese students is language:

> I feel the biggest problem lies with the language. Since we have disadvantages in language, we need a certain amount of time if we want to speak a sentence. At least to me, this is true. I need to consider where to put the subject and the predicate, how to speak it in a right way.

Tong also felt that using English as a foreign language to chat online presents her with a disadvantageous situation. She said, "For instance, to react to a topic, you think about it, and think how to speak in English, considering the grammar, tone, and structure of the sentence… this may take some time. I think this is an issue. We write slower and can't write directly like others." She further reports that Chinese students have difficulty leading a discussion, so they often follow to others' topics:

> As a foreigner, it seems very difficult to lead a discussion; therefore, you follow others' topics and their flow of discussion, participate in it, you can hardly lead a topic. When they discuss a new topic and you feel you have something to say, you say it quickly. For some other topics on which you have nothing to say, you just stay there quietly. So it is just a kind of [passive] participation.

Xin did not agree that language makes all the difference. In his class about statistical software, she believed the language issue did not impact students' grades. She explained, "In language, you are no better than American students. You can not speak very concisely and easy to understand. You may need to write several sentences to express yourself, and it is not as good as others' expression. But it does not influence your scores, since the teacher only sees the outcome."

U.S. instructional style. Even though not every participant talked about this factor – specifically, familiarity with the teaching and learning styles in U.S. universities – we can see this factor has an important role in shaping Chinese students' online learning. Qiao's story is a good example of how the acquaintance factor influences the learning experience. Qiao took an online course in the first semester of her Master's program. She knew nothing about online learning before enrollment. Her experience of online learning turned out to be a terrible one, or as she called it, "just like a nightmare." She stated:

> When looking back, I feet I did not gain much from this course, but I had a deep impression about the online system. After all, it was not a pleasant experience. At that time, I hated this course, because I had no chance to talk with other students – I mean in face-to-face manner. I had no chance to communicate with the teacher. I didn't think I was taking a class, but just logging on to the Internet to watch

> others' discussion… I got a poor score in this online course, and feel, aahhh (sigh), just like a nightmare. Even today, I still feel nervous when I see that professor.

To explain why she had such a negative learning experience at that time, Qiao said that it was because she was so unfamiliar with the U.S. education system at that time: "In my first semester, I did not adapt to it well. That is, you need to adapt to the technical aspect, cultural differences, the instructional style; you need to adapt to everything. It was really a big challenge to me at that time, my first semester." After two years of study at her university and becoming acquainted to the instruction in the U.S., she felt much better and more confident in her learning. She said, "It would be very relaxed to me now, and therefore, I like to take online courses; since you don't need go to the school, you can stay at home and study the course in a cheerful and relaxed way." Qiao thought the unpleasant learning experience was partially due to her unfamiliarity with American culture and the instructional style. She felt she had adapted to it at the time of our interview, and she had changed into a different person: "Yes, I understand the American culture, language, and instruction. At that time, I was different from the way I am now. I think I would have an entirely different experience and feelings if I could take the course again." Qiao hopes there are more online courses offered for her to take in the near future, stating, "I feel like the online course is easy for me now."

Like Qiao, other participants' reflections also indicated the importance of familiarity with U.S. instruction. Zhou thought that taking a second online course would be different from taking the first one, since "The structure is very similar from course to course". Kai further explained that once you are familiar with the U.S. instructional style, taking online courses should be easier:

> As an international student, you come to the US to study. You must experience an adaptation process at the beginning stage. In one or two years, your adaptation ability improves. If there is a new course offered two years later and it's different from others, you need to familiarity yourself with it; then you feel the familiarity is not a big issue, since you have been in the U.S. for two years. You need only adapt to the course.

Bin did not have difficulties when he took his online course in his third semester. He argued that the reason lies in his acquaintance to the instructional style:

> There was not much challenge. I did not feel any challenge, since this was my third semester. It was not like the situation when you just came. If I had taken this course in my first semester, I might have met some big challenges. It gets better when you adapt to the instruction.

Like Bin, Xin did not feel any challenge when taking her online course: "When I took this course, I had lived in the U.S. for more than a year. Thus, I felt it was relatively easy to make." But Xin attributed the reason mainly to her improved language skills, and did not expect that language improvement was also related to the familiarity with the instructional system.

Chinese cultural values and school norms. Another crucial socio-cultural factor which impacts Chinese students' online learning experiences is the Chinese cultural values and school norms they acquired and brought to their present learning environment. Since these students all grew up in mainland China and studied in a Chinese school system until completing their undergraduate or graduate studies, Chinese values and school norms have been instilled in them, causing them to process different perspectives

and beliefs to teaching and learning. Participants in this study reported and reflected a lot of differences between their learning styles and their American classmates' styles. Specifically, the impact of Chinese values and school norms can be reflected from their following learning behaviors in an online environment: silence or passive learning, hardworking and diligent, formal or content-oriented discussion, deference to teacher, concern for others, and worry about losing face.

Silence/passive learning. Chinese students in U.S. classrooms are characterized with their silent and reticent way of learning: listening quietly, following passively, and seldom proposing questions or getting involved into discussions. This is true for both the face-to-face and online classes. Based on Xin's observation, Chinese students in her synchronous class "keep silence there all the time. No questions, no responses, they just stay there." One of her Chinese classmates asked questions through typing, but never verbally. Xin told a story about this Chinese classmate:

> I feel like American students are more active; they like to speak their questions. Chinese students like typing more. The student I just mentioned who is good at statistics, he is kind of… I don't know if he knew the content quite well or something. Each time after the teacher lectured, he always had some questions, but he never spoke out; he just typed his questions. So the teacher had to stop the instruction and check the student's message.

Xin believed that the reason why Chinese students do not like to talk in the class, is due to their different schooling experiences: "Because in China, where the teacher dominates the classroom, students seldom break in and ask questions. Like the instruction for undergraduates, there are many people sitting in a large room, it is impossible to ask and

answer questions like it is here." Du also suggested two reasons for Chinese students' silent learning. One reason was that "you are taking the class in a foreign language, [so] sometimes you do not understand the topics quite clearly; thus you don't feel confident to ask questions." The other reason was that "teachers in China present the whole class time, our students don't have time to ask questions, right? Once you propose your question, you will the hinder the progress of the class."

Bin believes the influence of the Chinese instructional model attributes to Chinese students' silent learning behaviors:

> That is, you have received the education in China for many years, so you are accustomed to the instructional model. You have not often had a lot of interaction with the instructor, which leads you to not get involved in the class here in the United States. I think this is an influential factor, more or less, impacting your learning. It is a tendency that Chinese students don't get involved in the class discussion here. This is related to the instructional model in China.

Similarly, Qiao describes her participation in the class passively: "I would not answer the question actively if the teacher does not call my name. I would not raise my hand and answer the questions." She further describes the Chinese students' passive learning behaviors in U.S. classes:

> Chinese students are passive, accustomed to being changed by the environment, and would rather not change their environment. So they are very inactive at the beginning, passively accepting the instruction. They appreciate it if others offer help, but never think to go out to seek help by themselves or being somewhat active. Like my professor suggested to me, "Qiao, you should be aggressive.

> Don't be so polite." I understand that he meant "polite" as a positive word. If he used a negative word, he may say, "Don't be too timid."

Feng had the same feeling described by Qiao. That is, asking a question in the class could lead to shame. Even having studied in the U.S. for three years, he said he still would not like to ask question in the class: "In the class, some students ask stupid questions, which wastes my time. Sometimes, I ask stupid questions, too. So I don't like to ask questions in the class."

Chen finds that Chinese students are not good at communication with others and said that the passive learning habit is the key: "Chinese students are not willing to speak in the class. They listen to the teacher and leave with the assignments after class. They are not good at communicate with others… this is our habit of taking class for a long time, we don't want to be interrupted on the class." Chen further states for the business school students, the communication ability is actually more important than the technical and academic skills.

Hardworking and diligent. Chinese students are among the most diligent students. Even when disadvantaged by language, culture and social background, they work hard to excel. They attend their classes, work hard on course assignments and projects, take exams very seriously, and read all of the required materials. Xin finds that Chinese students participate in every class meeting and rarely skip class: "The Chinese students I know participate in almost every class." She explains the reason for this:

> You can consider it as a factor that Chinese students face greater living pressure, since you live in a different country and try to do your best on everything. They may be worried that others talk about them "This student does not work hard," or

> something like that. I feel that most Chinese students have this kind of pressure; they are trying to do their best. Maybe I cannot write better than American students, but I can come to the class each time.

Qiao also attributed her hard work to the Chinese cultural influence when she described how she read the course materials attentively each time:

> A good influence from Chinese culture is that I read the course readings carefully. Each time before the class starts, my classmates ask each other, "Hi, have you read all the readings?" I tell them I have read all of them. They said, "oh, you read it all!" Many American classmates said they just read some pages. In the class, the teacher asks some questions based on the readings. Since I read them through, I know how to answer the questions.

Similarly, based on his experience in some group projects, Yin believed that Asian students usually work harder and take projects more seriously than do their American classmates. He said that "Asian students can not do better than American students on expressing thoughts and ideas….but Asian students are very diligent; they complete every assignment and project attentively." Kai told me a story about a two hour exam. He and another international student were the last two people to complete the exam, while some American classmates submitted within a half hour. The result was that those American students did not get a better score than Kai. He analyzed the phenomenon: "I feel I work very carefully on the exam and other assignments, and I take them seriously. My American classmates may not care much about them."

When talking about the influence from Chinese culture, Chen believed that Chinese culture emphasizes to hard work, so Chinese students all work diligently; they

are especially better in math, science and technology subjects than the students from other countries. She explains this: "I feel this is what our culture emphasizes, taking the bitterness of hard work from an early age, learning math and science well." Zhou agrees that Chinese students are all diligent students who "cross the board." She finds that Chinese students have a different attitude toward learning tasks than do American classmates: "They did the quiz one to two times and were satisfied with a 90 point score; but our Chinese students did it until getting a perfect score." Thus, she believed that Chinese students take homework more seriously than do American students. Zhou also talked about how Chinese students pursue high achievement and regulate themselves according to a higher standard:

> Asian students, or Chinese students, try to be the best…. I don't know if you agree with me or not, and I discuss this with many others. When we say, "I did badly on this course," it means we got a B. If an American student says he did badly, it means he got an F, he fails the course. So we have different standards.

Formal or content-oriented. Another feature of Chinese students' learning behaviors is that their discussions are very formal or content-oriented. Gao believes this is influenced by Chinese culture:

> I think the culture may influence your participation in the class. Asian students are not very expressive by nature. At the beginning, my posts were very formal and very content-oriented. If everyone talks just like me, this class would be very tedious. Don't you think so? So I think culture affects me in some sense.

Zhou shared the same experience through a comparison with her American classmates. She thinks it is impolite to write informally:

> I spend much more time on writing than do American students. I didn't anticipate that their online discussion was so informal; there were typing errors, slang, etc. They did not write as formally as we did, sentence by sentence. You called me Ms Zhou when you wrote emails to me, but nobody has called me Ms Zhou for a hundred years. (laughs) They did not use a title, just started talking with "yeah, you are right," then blah blah. Very informal, no attention to capitalization, and then…. But I think this is not my standard. I feel this is not respectful to others. I will write in a more formal manner.

Qiao reported that she tried to consider spelling and grammars, and avoid any typing errors during the online discussion, since she worried about others may laugh at her writing errors in English:

> Later I found many classmates have typing errors; they just pay attention to expressing their thoughts. They don't care about typing and spelling. But I feel they might say, "Your English is so poor, how can you come to study in the U.S.?" I have this kind of concern. So I tried to make sure my spelling is correct and my grammar is correct. Actually, when thinking back, I think I was funny at that time.

Feng told a pleasant story about his teacher dressing up as a rabbit for class on Halloween. He felt that it was very interesting and surprising when he saw it on the course video: "I remember she dressed up as a rabbit on Halloween. She dressed like that for the whole class. I watched it on the course video. On different holidays, she dressed in different costumes for class… it was very interesting when she came out." Feng was very

surprised, since this kind of thing can never happen in a classroom in China, where being formal and content-oriented is the school norm.

Deference to teacher. The role of a teacher in China is as an authority, a class leader, and a knowledge resource. Chinese students are accustomed to following the teacher's instruction and deferring to his or her decisions. Even though the teacher-student relationship is quite different in the U.S. instructional system, participants reported that they defer to their teacher more than their American classmates do. When talking about students' different reactions to the syllabus, Du explained, "American students may be better; they will talk to the instructor: "I can't do this," "I can't do that." But Chinese students are accustomed to following teachers' choices. They will do it even though it is very difficult or they do not like it. Zhou also found that her discussion can hardly disagree from the teacher's topic: "You answer the teacher's questions, and you will not think outside of his topic; you can hardly think of challenging your teacher, but my American classmates can." She did not feel satisfied with her online learning; one reason is that she received few directions from the teacher in this course. She explains her feeling:

> Yes, I spent more time in the online course, yet I did not feel satisfied with my learning experience, since I don't know if I have learned them right. I often have questions. Because I was accustomed to listening to the teacher who tells me what is important, and now you don't know what is important and what is not. You just learn by yourself following the framework of the syllabus….this may be influenced from our culture, since Chinese culture respects the teacher as the authority, with what the teacher says being correct. And now the teacher does not

> tell you any more but lets you make it by yourself…In a word, the online course is on your own. (Laughs)

Like Zhou, Feng said that he often walked to the teacher's office when he had questions, but did not like to discuss the questions with other students. He stated:

> In our major, I will go directly to the teacher if I don't understand, since what you get from the teacher, 99% of it is correct. If I discuss with my classmates, he may give me a wrong answer. I am one of the best students in this class according to exam scores. I feel more comfortable consulting the teacher than other classmates. I don't know if other students think in the same way or not.

Qiao told her experience about different classroom norms, and felt very surprised about the rule that students eat during the class. Her experience as a student and a teacher in China caused her to believe that this was a disrespectful to the teacher:

> In a class titled Women Administrators, the teacher tells us that each student group should bring some food and share with others when discussing our syllabus. I can't believe what I am hearing – unbelievable! – Since there is "No food no drink" written on the door of the classroom and I think it is not appropriate to eat food. It is disrespectful to the teacher! When I was a teacher in China, I did not want my students eating food in the class.

Concern for others. Having grown up in a collectivistic society, Chinese students often put group interests as their first priority and are concerned about whether their behaviors impede others in the group. They try to follow the routine or the majority of others and not go to extremes to take a risk. They hesitate to ask questions in their classes, since this may delay the teacher's instruction and waste other students' time. Feng

explained why he felt uncomfortable asking questions in class: “I am not that kind of student who shoots his questions immediately to the teacher if he doesn’t understand. Since I think I don’t understand the question, maybe the majority of my classmates know it; so if I break in with my question, it takes time for the teacher to solve my personal problem. I will then feel uncomfortable.” Like Feng, Du was also concerned about if his question taking up others’ time, and he preferred to ask questions after the class rather than during the class:

> We had this kind of discussion in China, too. The question you asked is your own question, which may be a simple one. The teacher repeats the same content again to you, so you waste the time of other students who already know, right? I feel uncomfortable with this on my conscience. It is not appropriate to take up others’ time. I can ask my classmates right after the class or ask the teacher via email later. This may be a better way, right? At least I have this kind of thought at the beginning.

Qiao provided a further analysis of the cultural impact to their classroom disengagement, with concern for others being one of the reasons. She explained:

> Some professors think that students from other countries don’t like to speak in the class; sometimes this is not true, but because of the different cultural backgrounds. Your cultural norms tell you not to speak out in the class unless the teacher calls your name. This kind of cultural influence shows strongly in students from Korea and China. If the teacher does not call on you to answer, and you raise your hand vigorously, others will think you are showing off. The Chinese emphasize following the golden rule of being in the middle and avoid going to extremes.

Qiao believed that this is due to the cultural differences between collectivism and individualism. The rooted idea of concern for others impacted her learning most when she first came to the U.S. She described it this way:

> Chinese people have a strong sense of saving face. They are concerned with others' impressions. Americans are individualistic; they do what they want and don't care how others see them. The Chinese are opposite, collectivistic, concerned about how others think of them and how they influence others. So this rooted idea impacted me when I first came to study in the U.S., which gave me a deep impression.

Zhou also talked about the different cultural values between individualism and collectivism, and further told an example of how they influence her attitude to a group project differently from her American classmates:

> We are concerned about the others or the whole group, and we avoid being too special. They don't care about that. This is the difference between individualism and collectivism; they focus on personal achievement. Like me, when I post my discussion for the project, I try to finish it early, since I think others need our discussions to put together a PowerPoint. I try my best to give my reflection as early as possible. They say 4:30 pm as the deadline, so I make sure to submit it before 4:30 pm, while other (American) students may provide excuses.

Worry about losing face. The other side of being concerned about others is that Chinese students care how others see them or their behaviors. Expecting to be accepted or respected by others, they want to save face in front of a group, and worry about losing face, which refers to a feeling of being shamed. Gao said that when she did not drop out

of her first online course, the main concern was to save face, since she did not want the instructor, who is also her advisor, to feel disappointed in her. She struggled to make it to save face. Du felt hesitate to ask questions in class, since he worried about being laughed by other classmates if his question was too simple or inappropriate:

> The second reason is, anyways, English is not your native language. You may not understand completely about the course, even if your English is good, right? The question you asked, maybe the instructor had covered in the course. Then other classmates may feel you are stupid or laugh at you; you don't feel good for it.

When discussing online with other students, Zhou always wrote her opinion in Microsoft Word first to check the spelling, then copied and pasted the message to the discussion board. She would not type it directly since she worried that others couldn't understand her and would laugh at her if there were a mistake in her writing. She said she have this kind of pressure during the online discussion.

Qiao mentioned the topic of saving or losing face quite frequently during the interview. She felt that the group online discussion lacked a private room for small talk or seeking help secretly. She worried that others would laugh at her if she raised a childish question:

> The whole class is discussing an important question on the subject. For example, they are discussing if hazing is appropriate. When everyone else is focusing on the question, if I suddenly ask, "What is hazing," others may think I am stupid. Under this circumstance, I wouldn't…. This is not like in the face-to-face meeting, Since when others are talking, I can ask the student sitting beside me, "what is hazing?" and he will tell me directly. Then I can understand it and continue to

> participate to the discussion. But in the online discussion, everyone see your message immediately, so you feel you have no privacy…Once you post your question, everyone will see it – this guy with such a net name asking what hazing is, they then will know this person is me. I feel like, I lose my face.

Here, hazing refers to an old college practice of students playing tricks on new students as part of the ceremony of admission to a club or fraternity. It is a typical student activity in universities in the West. Since Qiao majored in higher education, she was supposed to know about many college student organizations and activities. Qiao further reflected that it is a widely existing phenomenon for Chinese students to be anxious about losing face in the classes. She experienced this kind of feeling from both her students in China and herself as an international student in the U.S.:

> This is related to our culture. Influenced by the culture, you are not willing to ask questions, and feel losing face for raising your question. I feel it happens when I teach in China. I know some of my students do not understand or have questions, but they never ask you. I ask them, "do you understand the content?" They said they understand. They would rather ask other classmates after the class, but not ask the instructor in the class. I don't know if this is a Chinese cultural thing or idea. I do the same thing as a student. I know my students had this kind of problem when I was a teacher, and wondered why they did not ask me. When I become a student in the U.S., I found out that I was the same. I don't want to ask questions in class. I think this is related to our culture.

From the above discussion, it can be seen that Chinese cultural values and early schooling experiences impact online learning for Chinese students in the U.S. universities.

The influence can be considered as a reflection from their typical behaviors, such as silence or passive learning, being hardworking, having concern for others, being formal or content-oriented, deferring to teacher, and worrying about losing face. These behaviors or features make them have a different learning experience from their American classmates, in either negative or positive ways.

This section explored the factors that impact Chinese students' online learning. Three socio-cultural factors were discussed, along with the supporting data. The socio-cultural factors consist of language, U.S. instruction, and Chinese values and school norms. Chinese students online learning behaviors, such as silent or passive learning, studying diligently, formal or content-oriented discussion, deference to teacher, concern for others, and worry about losing face, reflect the influence of traditional Chinese cultural values.

Negotiation of cultural values and learning styles

Taking online courses in U.S. universities, Chinese graduate students become aware of and frequently reflect on the different teaching-learning styles between the U.S. and China. They also learn new strategies for adapting to the new model of online learning, such as participating in mutual communication, engaging in informal and collaborative learning, and learning to be self-managed. The reflection on the educational systems' differences and practices of new learning skills are the two major themes in their negotiation of Chinese cultural values and learning styles in their online learning in U.S. universities. I will report the data related to the two major themes in the following session.

Acknowledging and reflecting on different teaching-learning styles

Even though they are not asked as an interview question, Chinese students always compare and contrast the two different educational systems and relate their current learning experience in the U.S. with their prior learning in China. Acknowledging and reflecting on the differences can be seen as a preliminary step of cultural negotiation. The acknowledgement and critical reflection on the difference is important, since from there they open their minds to another cultural perspective, find the limits of their inherited values and ideologies in education, and think about the teaching and learning phenomenon in an alternative way. Their reflections usually center on topics such as instructional styles, class participation, teacher-student relationship, and arrangement of assignments and exams.

Instructional styles. Participants reflect that Chinese educational styles are characterized by instilling instruction, teacher domination, few student choices, little participation, and a rigid and serious classroom atmosphere; The U.S. educational style, on the other hand, emphasizes students' discussion and interaction, and the atmosphere is relaxed. When talking about her posts reflecting a single and narrow perspective and how she "can hardly think out of the box," Zhou believes her prior education in China accounts for it. She stated:

> Our education is mainly instilling instruction and we have grown up in such a circumstance. Passing through the education system from primary and secondary school to enter into a major in a college, there were few elective courses offered, and students have few opportunities to select what their want to learn. For the newly enrolled student, what courses he is going to take has been determined by school and you just follow the route. How can you select this course or that course

> or drop it if you don't like it, as you can in the U.S.? This education system constrains our thinking and interactive ability to a great extent.

Zhou further told about taking some humanity courses such as art appreciation and music appreciation, "those courses were never available to us non-art-major students in China," since she believed these courses can benefit her major study of business management and enrich her life as well. Like Zhou, Bin also suggested that his past educational experience in China had led to his passive involvement to class interaction in China, "since you are accustomed to that instructional style," where there is little teacher-student interaction. "I don't remember having any good class discussion," he said. In the U.S., there is a lot of communication with the teacher and other classmates. He further described the different classroom atmospheres:

> In the classroom you find the atmosphere is more relaxed than that in China. You feel it is very free of stress in regular classes; online courses are even more casual. Taking a class in China, you can not imagine eating food in the class or standing up to go to the bathroom without asking permission. These kinds of things are highly prohibited in a domestic class. In your mind, it is just not appropriate to do those. When you study in the U.S. and all those things happen, you find that is nothing to them, the student stands up and leaves, and the teacher is not impacted and continues his instruction.

Qiao was also surprised by the different classroom manners between U.S. and China. She found it unbelievable that students eat in class, saying that "this is disrespect to the teacher." She cannot understand that when the teacher asks a question, the students just

shout out the answers without raising their hands. Qiao feels it is chaotic and out of order in the classroom.

Du reflected on how his learning habits developed from teacher dominated instruction, "since in a domestic class, the teacher presents lectures most of the time, and we students don't have time to ask questions. You may impede the progress of the class if you raise questions." When coming to study in the U.S. and the teacher gave sufficient time for class discussion, he felt that he could not become accustomed to this instructional style.

Class participation. Different instructional styles lead to different class participation models. Participants in this study reflected that American students are more active and involved into the class activities, while Chinese students are more passive and reticent, waiting for the teacher to call their names to speak. Based on Xin's observation about her synchronous online course, American students are "very active" and they will "hold on and break in with their questions." Most of the emoticon users are American students. On the contrary, while Chinese students "are quiet" and "keep silent" to the teacher's questions, some like to "type messages" to get involved, but most of them "just lurk there, no question and no response." Chen shared a similar impression, describing how American students are different than Chinese students regarding class interaction:

> They [American students] like to ask questions or break in with their inquiries. That is, they will ask if they don't understand. When the teacher ask, "do you have any question?" they will say, "yes" and raise their questions immediately. When the teacher asks, "who can answer this question?" they react quickly. They

> will do that. Chinese students speak out only when the teacher calls their names and they can't shy away. Actually, I think most of them know the answer.

Du remarked that American students are more involved into the class than Chinese students and that they feel very relaxed raising questions. He said, "They raise simple questions or difficult ones; they feel free to ask. You can see from their expression and the way the question, they feel very natural." Chinese students are "relatively serious" when asking questions in class. The question they ask reflect "what they really want to dig into." Regarding online discussion, Kai described his American classmates as "very relaxed" and their discussion as very informal: "They often use some interjections, like 'Oh, Yeah, Haha.' They use symbol icons occasionally." Qiao's descriptions more vividly reflect Chinese students' participation model, "I wait for the teacher to call on me in class, I will not voluntarily answer the question if not called on and I will not stand up to answer the question." She explained in a Chinese perspective, the student would be seen as showing off if he or she was too active in class.

Teacher-student relationship. Participants reflected on the teacher-student relationship as being relatively equal and collegial in the U.S., with teacher and students respecting each other, and the role of teacher being to facilitate learning. While this relationship is rather hierarchical in a Chinese school context, the teacher has a higher social status than the students. Bin described the position of a professor in China as being high as a mountain that can not be climbed:

> The teacher-student relationship…. in China you feel the professor is like a mountain and you can't climb and surpass it. The young teacher may be a little bit better. But here in the U.S., the teachers are very amiable and close to you, which

> makes you feel comfortable. This kind of feeling reflects apparently on American students. When you call the professor's name, some may call him Dr. XXX and some just call their first names directly. You can never call the professor by his first name in China.

Echoing Bin's descriptions, Yin told how he never feels uneasy stopping by his professor's office when he has a question in the U.S.: "I make a call once I find their office phone number and go to their office if they are there. I did not feel this is impolite for the American professors. They are very open-minded." Yin further explained even though some professors are academicians, they like to talk to students if their students asked them.

In Gao's first online course, the instructor, who is also her advisor, asked her to get involved in the design of the class, which reflects a collegial relationship between the students and teacher: "Before the class started, the professor asked me to help make the syllabus, even though I have never taken an online course. She is serious and careful, and wanted another perspective from the students. So some instructional activities were developed by us together." Gao felt pleasant with this role, and she always provided students' opinions to the professor.

Tong noted that the course learning in the U.S. mainly relies on students themselves; the role of the teacher is to facilitate students' learning. The teacher seldom dominates or lectures for a whole class, as the teachers do in China. Students read the learning materials according to the syllabus and communicate their understanding in the class. She said, "Here in the U.S., you rely on yourself. It is actually based on your self-discipline…the only help from the teacher is his or her facilitation. You may be relaxed if

you do it all by yourself." Du said that in his online course, there were not any teacher presentations or lectures, the teacher "participates in the online discussion just like all other students," and that is the major means of communication between teacher and students.

Assignments and exams. Another difference between the two educational styles is the arrangement of assignments and exams. Courses in the U.S. have more assignments and projects at ordinary times, and final exams take only a small percent of the total score; In the Chinese system, teachers use only final exams to check students' learning outcomes, and there is little homework or assignments during the courses. Tong compared the learning evaluation in the two educational systems and found this to be most significant difference:

> The U.S. courses emphasize learning at the ordinary times. It tells clearly what percent each assignment is, what percent for class participation, and what percent for papers. The final exam is worth only a few percent. But for the courses in China, there are no ordinary assignments, just a final exam. You can cheat or whatever and pass it without a problem. For the courses in the U.S., you cannot pass it if you don't work hard all during the class. I think this is a significant difference between the two educational systems.

Tong further remarked that she thinks the U.S. arrangement of assignments and exams pushes students to work diligently throughout the course and is a "more scientific" method, while the Chinese way encourages students to recite and cram for the exams and does not stimulate deep learning. Like Tong, Bin was surprised when he found there are

endless assignments and tests for his courses in the U.S. while the exams in China are relatively easy to pass. He explained:

> I don't know if you have this kind of feeling or not; I didn't know there were so many tests in U.S. schools. I used to think there are a lot of exams in China, and I did not anticipate there being more course tests here. Like this semester, if you take four courses, you find you spend the rest of the class time taking tests after the midterm…. The whole process is just like this; you then feel it is relatively easy in a Chinese class. There is only a midterm exam and a final exam.

Bin said that he didn't remember having ever done any course assignments in his undergraduate study in China. Feng agreed with Bin that there are many course assignments in their courses in the U.S. He thought the domestic instruction paid more attention to final exams, while U.S. courses split the burden into regular assignments. He commented, "Yes, there are many course assignments ordinarily. The Chinese educational style is different from the U.S. education. We did little homework and felt very relaxed at that time. The domestic way pays more attention to the final exams. But here in the U.S., it splits off [into ordinary assignments]."

Acknowledging and reflecting on the different teaching-learning styles between the U.S. and China, Chinese students become aware that the educational approach they are accustomed to may have cultural limitations and is incongruent with the their present learning in U.S. universities, for both online learning and regular face-to-face learning. To better adapt to online courses in the U.S., they need to learn some new strategies to achieve more successful learning outcomes.

Learning and practicing new strategies

Learning and practicing new strategies, particularly the strategies that may conflict with their traditional cultural values and learning styles, is another step or stage of cultural negotiation for Chinese students studying in the U.S. In this stage, they broaden their cultural perspectives, and gain new knowledge and skills, and practice them in their new learning environment. Based on the reports from the participants in this study, Chinese students have learned three major strategies from and for online learning: participating in mutual communication, engaging in informal and collaborative learning, and learning to be self-managed. Those strategies are rarely practiced and never valued in a Chinese class context even though they seem quite natural and common for American students. I discuss these strategies in the following sections.

Participate in mutual communication. Traditionally, Chinese education does not appreciate communication, particularly mutual communication in the classroom. The single direction of communication – from the teacher to the students – dominates the classroom. Chinese students are accustomed to being silent and passively learning. Taking the online courses in the U.S., both the online discussion and group projects require that they participate in mutual communication. They have learned to appreciate the importance of communication and get involved in the multiple interactions. Participants reported that they try to ask questions in the class, join the online discussions, visit the teacher's office for help, and even negotiate learning tasks with their teacher.

Yin explained that communication is very important in his field of industrial engineering, contrary to many people's beliefs. Chinese graduates, even though they are good at theories and work assiduously, Yin believed that their communication skills prevent them from getting higher promotions. He stated:

> Because I had worked several years in the U.S., I can see how it is different. In the U.S., an industry or business does not need all of their employees to be top professionals. For a business, the first consideration is to survive, which requires you to express your work and report your working outcomes. So it is crucial to be in contact with other people and to communicate with others. Chinese graduates or those who freshly enter into U.S. business, they usually bury their head and work diligently, but their hard work does not get an equivalent reward. They work much harder than their U.S. colleagues, but they do not get a promotion, right? This is related to your language, your expression, and your communication skills.

Similarly, Chen realized that communication is an important part of class learning. She tried to push herself to ask questions in her online class and to take part in the communication:

> Many Chinese students choose online courses because they do not require physical presence and are relatively free, and there is not much pressure compared to face-to-face learning. But I have come to realize that this is not a correct viewpoint. We should ask when we have questions and speak out when needed. Anyway, nobody can see your face. Let it be awkward if it's so. Anyway, I plan to… sometimes I try to ask some questions in the class, but I can't make myself explicitly. I should at least ask some simple questions.

Chen further stated that the online courses on statistics are not difficult for Chinese students. The challenge is "if you are willing to voice yourself out" and "practice your communication skills."

In Gao's first online course, the students and teacher built up a good online community that facilitated various kinds of discussion. Gao believed the interactions among the students are more important. The experienced teachers try to avoid one-to-one communication with the students, but let students support each other. While Gao received a lot of help from her classmates online, she also liked to visit the teacher to ask questions outside of the class. Zhou often visited the teacher's office, too, since she was a full-time student and studied on campus most of the time. She said that she wanted to make sure that she is "on the right track". As for communication with other students, Zhou told of how she "fights" with the students who have prejudices against international students. It is worth mentioning that she is the only person who shared the negative experience of online discussion:

> Since your culture is different from their culture, you have a different perspective on some topics. Some classmates are mean; they said you don't know or you are an international student… and so, I was angry at that time. Yes, we are online, discussing with each other. Then I fight with them and I am not afraid of that. I said, "yeah, that's true, I am an international student, I am a Chinese, but blah blah..." In their concepts, China is still in a dark age when women bound their feet.

Even though argument is not a good way to communicate, it can not always be avoided in an online environment, when people can not see each other, and misunderstandings easily happen. Zhou's example demonstrates how she has actively participated in the online communication and has fought for her own cultural perspective, unlike other Chinese students, who lurk and remain marginalized in class communication. Du goes even further than this. He shared a story of how he successfully negotiated a task with his

instructor in a later class, which could never happen in a Chinese class context. Du explained,

> It did not happen in this online course, but in a later face-to-face course. In the qualitative course, the teacher asked us to cite the content of a book on interviewing. I told her I didn't want to cite this book, since it doesn't make much sense for me after reading it, and that I want to cite other book. She said that was fine, that I could cite others.

We can see that Chinese students participate in multiple communications with their teacher and classmates in their online learning. They begin to understand the importance of mutual interactions for both course studies and their future career. They try to voice themselves out on various occasions.

Engage in informal and collaborative learning. Online learning calls for free and informal communication and collaborative learning among the students. Having grown up in a rigid and sacred classroom environment, Chinese students tend to be very cautious when giving their opinions and sharing feelings in an instructional setting. Collaborative learning is not encouraged. Some participants in this study reported that they have learned to engage in informal discussion and collaboration with other classmates. Du described how he learned to be casual and relaxed in the online discussion:

> I contact the co-teaching student, since I had no idea about this kind of discussion, how to do it, what content is appropriate, the degree to which is should be discussed, or what the teacher's expectation is. He said it doesn't matter, you can post whatever you want to say, any thoughts or ideas. You just tell your opinions on the topic. You can also state what you don't know and let others discuss it. Just

> like that, take it easy. You can post any of your ideas; try to make it professional a little bit.

Gao thought that she was too cautious at the beginning of the online course: "Your discussions are not necessary right," but could "sparkle others' discussion." It is good to give others a chance to critique your thoughts. Gao further explained how she learned how to communicate effectively, and particularly, to make her posts solid and interesting:

> It is important to communicate effectively with others. Since in the online environment, people have different opinions, how to express them is crucial, since you don't want someone be annoyed because of your wording. So I am cautious with my posts. On the other side, you don't want to be too boring; you want to make others feel you have a sense of humor. This is a challenge for my communication skills. You want your posts to be interesting so you can attract others to read them. Since you know there are a lot of posts in the online forum, one person post one, ten will post ten. You post your opinions there not just to complete the tasks, but also to expect resonance from others. So the communication is very important.

Gao told how she learned from her classmates to write quality posts in the online discussion forum:

> I came to pay attention to this issue later, since you feel boring when you read the posts only talking about the topics. We have a classmate whose name is Alexander. His posts are very enjoyable to read. They are solid in content and humorous in expression. When you see it's good, you want to imitate it.

When Chinese students learn to participate in the online discussion, they also learn how to collaborate with others. Gao believes that collaborative learning is not encouraged in Chinese schools and that students are used to studying by themselves:

> Collaborative learning seems to me to be uncommon in Chinese education, at least not encouraged when I was in school. Instead of working as a team, the students were told to complete their assignments independently. So I've been used to studying on my own instead of sharing my thoughts with the rest of the class.

However, through learning collaboratively with other students in the online courses, Gao learned how to work with and share her learning with others:

> After taking these online courses, I came to understand the importance of collaborative learning. I majored in education and read many books in this area; I know collaborative learning is more effective. But personally, due to my characteristics or my experiences, I like to do things by myself. So I am used to being an independent learner. After taking the online courses, I became willing to communicate with others on the progress of my dissertation research or something like that. I became more appreciating of collaborative learning. This is my biggest gain from the online courses.

Similar to Gao, Zhou found it enjoyable to read other posts and to know many different perspectives. She worked hard on her group project and tried to finish her own part before the deadline so that her classmates could put them into the project in a timely manner. Xin also shared her experiences with many collaborative projects – how they divide the labor, who is responsible for which part, and they meet occasionally to discuss

the progress. The collaboration with others makes Xin feel that online learning is “less demanding” and more enjoyable.

Learn to be self-managed. Online learning provides students with a larger space to control or manage their learning. It also requires students to be responsible for their own learning. In this study, participants have learned different self-management strategies for their online learning, such as making their own learning schedule, taking advantage of various resources, and finishing assignments in advance.

To manage her workload of online discussion, Gao learned to “spend half an hour to check the posts” daily, rather than checking five or six times every day, which takes a lot of time. Similarly, in his online video course, Yin made himself a schedule for this course; he “watched one session every Wednesday and Friday” in the library, and he saved all the learning materials and assignments to one folder on his laptop.

Taking the online course, Chen considered how to “take advantage of the materials efficiently” and she believed that everyone can find a learning method suitable for himself or herself. Her method is to “listen to the course through first, then do homework, and go back to check video or notes if I don’t understand anything.” She tries to take advantage of class video and notes, and finishes the assignments quickly.

Feng has developed a learning method for his online course. He told how he tried to keep the class schedule by watching the video at the time the instructor taught the course. He would catch up if he missed the class for some reasons. He usually watched the video three times: going over it briefly the first time, checking the textbook and watching it again by focusing on the difficult topics, and then watching the video through the night before exams.

Du divided his learning into two sessions – reading posts and posting his discussion. He usually downloaded the learning materials to his laptop first, and then read the PowerPoint file and recommended articles: "I read only the Powerpoints if I have no time." After reading the posts, he replied to those to which he had something to say. He "waited to see others' reactions" to the posts that did not make sense to him. His principle was to "post more on the interesting topics and less on the nonsense ones."

Tong's learning method was to finish the learning and the assignments in advance rather than waiting until right before the deadline. She described how she may complete studying several chapters at once, save the assignments, and submit them at the due date. In this way, she was able to manage her time for other coursework or her family duties.

This section has addressed how Chinese students negotiate cultural values and learning styles in the online learning environment. Two major themes characterize their cultural negotiation process: reflecting on the differences between the U.S. and Chinese educational systems and learning new strategies for their online learning. Being aware of the differences facilitated their ability to stand outside of their own culture and think from another cultural perspective on the best ways of teaching and learning. The new strategies they have gained and practiced in their online learning environment include participating in mutual communication, engaging in informal and collaborative learning, and self-managing their skills or approaches to learning. These strategies or skills, which seem common to American students, conflict somewhat with Chinese students' traditional cultural values and learning styles.

Summary of Findings

This chapter began with an overview of the research participants, their educational backgrounds in China, majors of study in the U.S., and the online courses they have taken. The chapter then reported findings according to each of the three research questions. To the first question of how Chinese students experience online learning in U.S. universities, Four major themes characterized their learning experiences. First, they felt more or greater control in terms of schedule and location, learning pace, course materials, and depth of learning. Second, they experienced different forms of learning communities and support. Third, they felt high demands on their online learning due to workload, less teacher direction, loss of context, and lack of motivation or self discipline. Four, the issues of technology, instructor and instruction, and classmates all influence their online learning experience.

The second question focused on the socio-cultural factors that impact Chinese students' online learning. The three socio-cultural factors included language, U.S. instructional style, Chinese cultural values and school norms influence Chinese students' online learning experiences. In particular, these factors caused them to have different learning experiences than those of their American classmates. The impact of the cultural values and school norms are reflected in their learning behaviors, such as silent or passive learning, working hard, being formal or content-oriented, deferring to the teacher, having concern for others, and worrying about losing face.

The third research question dealt with how Chinese students negotiated cultural values and learning styles in their online classes. Two major phases of their cultural negotiation consisted of reflecting on the different teaching-learning styles between the

U.S. and China, and gaining knowledge of new strategies for their online learning. Through reflection, participants became aware of the differences between the two educational systems, such as instructional styles, class participation, teacher-student relationship, and arrangement of assignments and exams. In order to cope with their online learning, Chinese students have learned and practiced the new strategies, such as participation in mutual communication, engaging in informal and collaborative learning, and learning self-managing skills or approaches for their online courses.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of cultural values in shaping Chinese students' online learning experiences in American public universities. Three research questions guided this study. First, how do Chinese graduate students experience online learning in U.S. public universities? Second, what are the socio-cultural factors that impact Chinese students' online learning? Finally, how do Chinese students negotiate cultural values and learning styles in their online learning? A qualitative methodology was employed for the research design, and in-depth interviews were chosen for data collection. A total of eleven Chinese graduate students from six public universities in the Southeastern United States were interviewed in this study.

The sample was chosen purposefully in order to locate information-rich participants and to create maximum variation based on age, gender, major, and education backgrounds. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants at times and locations convenient for them, each lasting from one-and-a-half to two hours. All the interviews were recorded with a digital recorder and later transcribed for further analysis. Follow-up interviews and email contacts elicited additional information and clarification.

The results of this study revealed the characteristics of Chinese students' online learning experiences, the role of Chinese cultural values in shaping Chinese students' online learning experiences, and the process of cultural negotiation and construction in their online learning. In this chapter, three conclusions are generated and discussed, based on the findings from this study and the relevant literature. The implications of this study

for practitioners of adult and distance education are addressed, along with suggestions for future research.

Conclusions and Discussion

Three conclusions can be drawn from the findings of this study. The first conclusion is that while Chinese students share experiences common to all online learners, they also experience some features of online learning in unique ways. The second conclusion is that Chinese cultural values shape their online learning experiences. Last, taking online courses in U.S. universities is a process of cultural negotiation and construction for Chinese students.

Conclusion one: While Chinese students share experiences common to all online learners, they also experience some features of online learning in unique ways.

Certain features of online learning are experienced by almost all online learners. These generally reflect the different characteristics of this learning approach compared to traditional face-to-face instruction. I call them the common features. The unique learning experience can be found within Chinese students group or other Asian students from similar cultural backgrounds. Unique features are a function of Chinese students' personal background or an interaction between Chinese students and online learning. I call them unique features for Chinese students. The *common features* of the online learning experience include flexibility of schedule and location, student control over the learning pace and materials, deep learning, various forms of learning communities and support, demanding workload management, loss of context, lack of motivation or self discipline and impact of technology, instruction and classmates. The *unique features* of online learning for Chinese students include less demand on listening comprehension and

oral presentation skills and more time to prepare discussion and reflections, but less direction from the teacher, language barriers, unfamiliarity with U.S. instructional style, and impact of Chinese cultural values and school norms. Based on the findings from this study and relevant literature, a summary of the common features and unique features is listed below in Table 6.

Table 6. The Common Features and Unique Features of Online Learning for Chinese students

Common features	Unique features
• Convenient schedule and location • Control of learning pace and materials • Deep learning • Various learning communities and support • Demanding workload management • Loss of context for information • Lack of self-discipline and motivation • Impact of technology, instruction and classmates	• Less demand on listening and speaking skills • More time to prepare and think • Less direction from the teacher • Barriers in using English as a second language • Unfamiliarity with U.S. instructional style • Impact of Chinese cultural values and school norms

All participants in this study discussed some features common to all online learners and some features unique to Chinese students during their interviews, although not every Chinese student experienced every feature, and each participant experienced these features to a variety of degree. For example, Gao, who took three asynchronous online courses, tells that she enjoyed the flexible learning schedule, studying online at home, and having time to think more about the topics; she built up close and intimate online learning communities with her classmates which further supported her online

learning. However, she felt that workload management was a big problem for her since the posts in the discussion board were updated constantly. Besides those common features of online learning, Gao also experienced some of those features unique to Chinese students. For instance, the asynchronous discussion allowed her to have sufficient time to think about the topic and prepare her discussion, which Gao deemed important for her as an Chinese student. Gao's Chinese cultural values and school norms impact her online learning, as she is very cautious to express her opinions, discusses coursework in a formal manner, and wants to save face by not dropping the course. Thus, Gao's learning experience is a combination of both the common features and some unique features of online learning. This is also true for Feng, who took an online course which mainly used pre-recorded video for instruction. Among the common features, Feng liked the flexible time and location of online learning, and the ability to stop and repeat the video at any time. Like Gao, he was able to build an offline community with several international students and they often discussed their assignments and prepared for exams together. Even with this community, however, he felt as lonely in his studying as "a solider fighting against an army." Among to the features unique to Chinese students, the online course solved Feng's problem with language – he couldn't follow the regular class because of his lack of English proficiency in his first semester. Impacted by Chinese values, he relied on the teacher rather than fellow students, stating that he didn't like to raise questions in the class since they might be "stupid" and "waste other students' time." Similar examples can be found from the other participants.

These findings on the common features of online learning are supported by many studies in the literature on the advantages and weaknesses of this learning approach

(Petrides, 2002; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2006; Thiele, 2003; Yang & Cornelious, 2004). In their book *Teaching and Learning at a Distance*, Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek(2006) summarize a list of advantages and limitations of online learning. The advantages include availability of course materials, flexibility, convenience, self-paced learning, and accommodation of different learning styles. Limitations include technology problems, requesting that students take responsibility, delayed feedback, and so on. Yang and Cornelious (2004) investigated students' perception to online learning though a qualitative interview method, and they found that students' positive experiences included flexibility, cost-effectiveness, electronic research availability, ease of connection to the Internet, and well-designed class interfaces. The students' negative experiences were caused by delayed feedback from instructors, unavailable technical support from instructors, lack of self-regulation and self-motivation, a sense of isolation, monotonous instructional methods, and poorly-designed course content. Petrides (2002) and Thiele (2003) found that students tend to think or delve deeper into the subject area when responding in writing. The findings in my study fell in line with the results from those studies on the general features of online learning.

Studies of Chinese students' online learning experiences in Western university settings tend to reveal their negative experiences and disadvantaged situations. The language barrier and disengagement from class communication are the two obvious issues (Edwards, 2002; Jun & Park, 2003; Shih & Cifuentes; 2003; Tu, 2001). Based on their observations of the six Asian students' participation in class discussion on an online discussion board, Jun and Park found that Asian students initiated very few discussions compared to their American counterparts, and that most of their posts are replies to

others', using sympathetic language such as "yes, I agree" or "I think so." Similarly, Edward observed an online discussion in a postgraduate course among international students in which the Chinese students from Singapore exhibited a lack of responses, only some of them replying with short messages. Some studies (Shih & Cifuentes, 2003; Tu, 2001) also found that Chinese students from Taiwan disliked conversing in a public online space because they were concerned with losing face before their instructor and classmates.

The findings from this qualitative research coincide with some conclusions of the previous studies, such as the pervasiveness of language problems, and disengagement from class communication. The language barrier is discussed by almost every participant and seems to be the most apparent issue. Some participants, like Feng, Tong, and Lu, report a serious problem in language; while others, like Kai and Bin, who majored English in their undergraduate study in China, think the language barrier impacted their learning to a lesser extent. This is understandable, since in using English as a second language in their classes, Chinese students are always constrained by their vocabulary, communication ability, understanding of the language, as well as the cultural meanings behind the language. Zhou even expressed the belief that the language problem accounts for every disadvantage of Chinese students' online learning. She said, "If your English is proficient and mature, you have nothing to worry about." Nevertheless, although this study reveals the struggle with language experienced by Chinese students, it also indicates that the pressure from language decreased for Chinese students in an online course, since the communications are based on reading and writing when using the discussion board, with no listening and speaking skills involved. Even for the

synchronous online course, students can choose typing to participate if they don't like to speak in class.

Regarding lack of participation in class communication, most studies (Edwards, 2002; Jun & Park, 2003; Tu, 2001) related it to the cultural difference. This study found three unique features that may contribute to the phenomenon: different cultural values and school norms, unfamiliarity with the U.S. instructional style, and language barriers. Chinese cultural values and school norms constrain Chinese students from being as active in class as American students. Their past schooling experiences tell them that behaviors such as questioning teachers and other students in public, discussing personal things or irrelevant topics, and talking too much, are not appropriate. Besides, language barriers and lack of familiarity with U.S. instructional style further prevent them from expressing themselves.

A recent qualitative study by Thompson and Ku (2005) on Chinese students' experiences and attitudes toward online learning provides a more complete picture of this topic. The researchers found that Chinese students have a mixed attitude toward online learning. They like the easy resource sharing, easy record keeping, and convenience of the discussion board most, while in the large amount of English writing required, insufficient and deferred feedback, and lack of cultural exchange were their major concerns. All of these positive and negative features can be found in the present study. The features they like in online learning fall into my category of common features. The easy resource sharing and record keeping correspond to student control of the learning materials, and the convenience of the discussion board is part of the flexibility of time

and location. The negative aspects are related to the two factors discussed above: language barriers and cultural difference.

Compared to the relevant literature, my research provides a comprehensive description and summarization of the Chinese students' online learning experience. The features of online learning experience might also be applicable for international students from other East Asian countries or similar cultural backgrounds. Learning in a foreign country and working with an unfamiliar learning model, they are definitely disadvantaged with regard to their American classmates. However, they also share many common experiences with their American counterparts when learning in the new instructional model. And it seems these common learning experiences have greater weight than the features unique to Chinese students. Previous studies of Chinese online learners seem to pay little attention to the common features, focusing instead on the unique aspects, and tending therefore to overemphasize the disadvantages of online learning for Chinese students. In my study, most participants did not report being marginalized in their online courses. Even though they were disadvantaged compared to their American classmates, they tried to engage in various activities in their online courses. Furthermore, some participants, like Gao, Qu, Yin, and Zhou, have developed good connections with their classmates and enjoy their online discussions.

Another contribution of this study is that it discloses the existence of various learning communities and support that help to compensate for the demanding features of online learning. The presence or absence of learning communities and support indicate how well students interact with each other in the online courses and build up bonds and relationships as a group. The importance of building and sustaining learning communities

and support for students engaged in online learning has been recognized by many scholars (e.g. Hiltz, 1998; Lally & Barrett, 1999; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Russell, 1999; Russell & Ginsburg, 1999). Palloff and Pratt even assert that "the learning community is the vehicle through which learning occurs online. Members depend on each other to achieve learning outcomes for the courses online….Without the support and participation of a learning community, there is no online course" (p. 29). However, the online community does not establish itself automatically when the class starts; rather, it requires well-designed class activities, instructor involvement, and the engagement of all students. In particular, the instructors should provide more opportunities for socio-emotional discourse and networking among the online learners (Lally & Barrett, 1999). In this study, we found only a few instructors who were aware of the importance of online learning community development and designed strategies to facilitate it. For example, Gao's instructors insisted that all students participate in the online discussions, and encouraged students to read and critique each other's assignments; Tong reported that her instructor made their first class meeting face-to-face, so that students could get to know each other and initiate learning relationships. However, most of my participants' instructors did not intentionally seek to build an online community or facilitate social communication among students. In these cases, the students are forced to develop their own communities themselves, and two kinds of support thus emerge: off line community and casual network. As Orey, Koenecke and Crozier (2003) found, if a learning community has not developed online, the students tend to receive help from family members, colleagues, or friends and build a supporting community offline. For a better learning effect and students' satisfaction with online learning, instructors should facilitate the development

of an online learning community and encourage various social interactions among students.

The demanding features of online learning reflect how students who are accustomed to teacher-led face-to-face instruction confront the new model of student-centered online instruction, in which the teacher's role is transformed from a classroom leader or organizer into a learning facilitator or supporter. Some scholars (Cashion & Palmieri, 2002; Kearsley, 2002; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2006; Thiele, 2003) suggest that successful online learning requires students to be self-directed, self-motivated and self-disciplined. The workload management, loss of context, lack of direction from the teacher, and necessity of greater self-discipline all call for the students to take more responsibility for their learning, which challenges the face-to-face class model and learning habits to which they are accustomed. While Kearsley suggests online learning may not be appropriate for everyone, in particular the students who lack self-discipline, other researchers have proposed suggestions that may help students to develop the responsibility (Macfarlane & Smaldino, 1997) and self-regulation skills required for online learning (Cho, 2004; McMahon & Oliver, 2001).

Conclusion two: Chinese students' online learning experiences are shaped by Chinese cultural values.

The second conclusion to be drawn from this study is that Chinese students' online learning experience is shaped by ingrained Chinese cultural values, such as collectivism, hierarchical relationships, conservatism, keeping harmony, and face saving. Together with other socio-cultural factors such as language barrier and unfamiliarity with U.S. instructional style, traditional Chinese cultural values shape Chinese students' online

learning behaviors and experience in a significant way. Different from other factors whose influence can be sensed easily and reported clearly, the cultural impact seems intangible but omnipresent, and can only be detected by the sensitive participants through the typical attitudes, behaviors and learning experience. In this study, six aspects of Chinese students' online learning behaviors are summarized to demonstrate the impact of traditional cultural values, which include silent or passive learning, deference to the teacher, concern for others' interests, formality or content-oriented discussion, diligence, and worrying about losing face.

These typical online learning behaviors reported by the Chinese students are generally congruent with the descriptions of Chinese cultural values from the literature (Chinese cultural connections, 1987; Chen, 1989; Fan, 2000; Lee, 1997, Yau, 1994; Yick & Gupta, 2002), specifically collectivism, conformism, hierarchical relationships, conservatism, harmony seeking, face saving, and valuing learning and education. These values are intertwined with each other, together shaping Chinese students' attitudes, beliefs, perspectives, and preferences, and further impacting their online learning behavior and learning experiences. It is likely that these rooted cultural values penetrate every aspect of people's social lives as well as the school norms. Growing up with those school norms and in a Chinese society, students were inculcated in appropriate and inappropriate behavior, and performed certain types of reinforced learning behaviors in school settings. Although it is practically impossible to identify a specific cultural value with a type of behavior, certain learning behaviors can be traced to traditional Chinese cultural values, as can be seen in Table 7.

Table 7. The Correspondence of Learning Behaviors and Chinese Cultural Values

Typical Learning behaviors	Chinese Cultural Values
Passive learning	Collectivism and conformism
Deference to teacher	Hierarchical relationships
Formality or content oriented discussion	Conservatism
Concern for others	Harmony seeking and collectivism
Worry about losing face	Face-saving
Diligence	Valuing effort and hard work

Passive learning is major characteristic of Chinese students' learning styles, as observed by many researchers (Liu, 2001; Watkins & Biggs, 1999, 2001). In this study, this feature was discussed by several participants. Xin stated that Chinese online learners have "no questions, no responses, they just stay there." Du doesn't like to ask questions, since he was never granted so much time and opportunity for discussion during his schooling in China, and he worried that his questions might hinder the progress of the class as well. Bin also attributed his non-involvement in the class to the Chinese classroom experience of little interaction. Qiao described herself as a passive learner: "I would not answer question if the teacher did not point my name." Based on the participants' experience, we can correlate passive learning behavior with the Chinese values of conformism and collectivism. Conformism emphasizes obedience to the rules or authority and adherence to routines and social norms (Yao, 1994). Collectivism places the welfare of the group as the highest priority and values self-restricted behaviors (Hofstede, 1991). In classroom settings, Chinese students tend to passively accept the teacher's instruction, and politely and attentively follow instructions. They rarely interrupt the teachers and other students by raising their individual questions.

Deference to teacher is a very important feature in the Chinese classroom, which reflects the Chinese cultural value of respecting authority and the hierarchical

relationship (Schwartz, 1994; Yao, 1994) between the teacher and students. Students usually accept their teacher's instruction unconditionally and see the teacher as the authority (Watkins &Biggs, 1999). In this study several students made similar claims about Chinese cultural values: Du stated that Chinese students couldn't say no to their teachers; Zhou did not feel satisfied with her online course due to the absence of a teacher; Feng pointed that "99% of the teacher's instruction is correct," while students may give a wrong answer; Bin described the teacher in China as an unsurpassable mountain; Qiao's first reaction to the students eating and drinking in the class was, "This is disrespectful to the teacher!" Their attitudes and behaviors demonstrate a distinct tendency toward hierarchical relationship and respecting authority.

Formal or content-oriented communication can be related to the conservatism in Chinese cultural values, which emphasize the status quo and propriety, and avoid actions that may disturb others (Schwartz, 1994). The stern and restrictive atmosphere in domestic classrooms requires students to discipline their behavior to keep order in the class. In this study, Gao, Zhou, Qiao, and others all reported that they wrote their discussions in a very formal style and checked for spelling and grammar errors frequently before posting, and Feng had a big surprise when his teacher appeared in the class wearing a rabbit costume. They complained about the casual and informal quality of their American classmates' online posts.

Concern for others was demonstrated by Zhou's always submitting her part of group work as early as possible, and Feng's and Du's hesitation to raise questions in the class in order not to waste other students' time; this concern reflects the Chinese values of collectivism and keeping harmony (Lee, 1997; Yao, 1994). As collectivists, they see

themselves as members of a group, and feel obligated to maintain the well-being of that group (Hofstede, 1991; Yick & Gupta, 2002). In keeping harmony with others, they consider how their behavior may affect others, and they would do their best to act according to the interests of the group. This is why Zhou felt she had to finish her part of the group work before the due dates, and felt "disappointed" when her classmates failed to meet those deadlines.

For Chinese students, losing face before their classmates can produce a strong sense of shame for their fault or mistakes. They try to keep a good image or maintain their reputation before others, or to "save face" in front of them. Tu (2001) identified face-saving as one of the most notable Chinese traditions, and one that has a forceful impact on Chinese students' interaction with others. In the present study, Gao did not drop her online course since she did not want to disappoint her advisor; she stayed in the course in order to save face. Du worried about raising foolish or inappropriate questions before other students and wanted to avoid being embarrassed. Zhou double-checked the spelling of her posts because she didn't want her classmates to learn of her weakness in English. Qiao expected a private channel for asking questions during the public online discussions, since she didn't want all the classmates to discover her lack of background knowledge in her major – specifically, Qiao recounted how she didn't even know "what is hazing," a very basic concept in her major area.

As to diligence, it is related to the Chinese cultural value which emphasizes effort and hard work rather than inherent talent or personal ability. In Chinese culture, achievement through hard work is more highly valued than achievement through high ability, and attempting tasks beyond one's ability is considered a virtue (Yang, 1986).

Participants in this study reported that Chinese students attended every class meeting (even optional ones), read course materials and completed assignments attentively, took their exams extremely seriously, and pursued a high standard for their class performance. These learning behaviors reflect Chinese culture's valuing of effort and hard work, and achieving an excellent outcome through diligent study.

Analyzing those Chinese cultural values and school norms further, we can see that they coincide with the characteristics of the Chinese school system, namely a large class size of 40 to 50 students sitting compactly and taking notes quietly, the teacher presenting instructional content during class hours, and students then completing their assignments or reviewing their notes after class. This is a typical teacher-centered instructional model. The norms – such as not raising questions, believing the teacher's instruction, and being formal and disciplined – mainly serve the purpose of regulating students and maintaining classroom order. These rooted cultural values and school norms sharply contrast with the western cultural values which espouse the student-centered online learning model (Robinson, 1999; Biggs, 1999). Even though the Chinese educational system has undergone a dramatic transformation caused by rapid economic development and social restructuring, the student-centered educational model and related theory and ideology has yet to be developed in the Chinese school system. Wen and Clement (2003) found that Chinese students are not accustomed to the student-centered class, and insisted on more lectures from their teacher.

In the context of teaching and learning in American universities, and in online courses specifically, Chinese cultural values and school norms seem to exhibit a negative influence on Chinese students' learning behavior and experience. Excessively deferring

to and relying on the teacher, not wanting to express themselves, worrying about losing face, and so on, all prevent them from enjoying the instruction and interacting with their teachers and classmates in an online academic environment. The self-directedness and self-motivated nature of online education presented more difficult challenges for the Chinese students than for their American counterparts. Chinese students are generally "other-ruled" learners (Peters, 1998) or "student-as-a-tape-recorder" (Watkins & Biggs, 1999). The negative influence from traditional culture results in a negative learning experience in their online courses, although they can achieve good outcomes through hard work. In this study, Gao felt she lacked discipline when learning online, Qiao described her online course as a nightmare, Xin and Bin reported that they fell asleep during the class or when watching video by themselves, Zhou felt she put more time into her online course but gained less, and so on. Even though these behaviors did not necessarily lead to a worse learning outcome, they made Chinese students feel less satisfied and more frustrated in their online learning.

The conclusion from this study coincides with previous studies of how traditional cultural values shape people's learning behavior in various contexts (Alfred, 2003; Hvitfeldt, 1986; Merriam & Muhammad, 2000; Pratt, 1990, 1992). For instance, Merriam and Muhammad found that older Malaysian adults' learning behaviors were significantly shaped by their Eastern cultural values such as collectivism, hierarchy, relationship orientation, and valuing face and religion. The study of Caribbean immigrant women's learning experience by Alfred revealed that their indigenous culture and early schooling socialization in their origin country have influenced their learning experience in the U.S.

Like these studies, my research confirms the critical role of cultural values in shaping people's learning behaviors and experience in a non-traditional learning context.

This research also resonates with the research on Chinese cultural values and their significant impact on people's behavior (Lee, 1997; Won & Lai, 2000; Xu; 2004b; Yau, 1994). Lee, for example, found that traditional cultural values such as respecting authority, maintaining harmony, valuing education, putting men above women, acknowledging fate, etc., shape how Taiwanese Chinese interpret their significant life experiences. Yau studied how Chinese cultural values impact their shopping behavior and summarized several key values, including harmony (with nature and people), abasement, respect for authority, group-orientation, valuing face, past-time orientation, and the doctrine of the mean. In this study, the prevailing Chinese values include collectivism, hierarchical relationships, harmony-seeking, conformism and conservatism, face-saving, and admiration of effort and diligence.

However, although my study confirmed previous studies of some common cultural values such as respecting authority, maintaining harmony, collectivism (group orientation), and valuing face, it did not exhibit the importance of some other values found by previous studies, such acknowledging fate, family orientation, putting men above women, past-time orientation, doctrine of the mean, etc. I argue that Chinese cultural system comprises of a number of key values, and these values demonstrate different roles in a different context. What this study revealed is the operating cultural values in the context of teaching and learning in U.S. universities. They may not be the same as those in other distinct contexts, such as the workplace, job interviews, or sharing life stories.

The unique contribution of this study is that it not only confirms previous studies of the role of cultural values in shaping people's learning behaviors and experience, but also reveals some prevailing cultural values in the specific context of online learning, and demonstrates how these values relate to Chinese students' learning behaviors. This study further indicates that traditional Chinese cultural values conflict with the student-centered online learning model, and thus may adversely influence students' online learning experiences in U.S. universities.

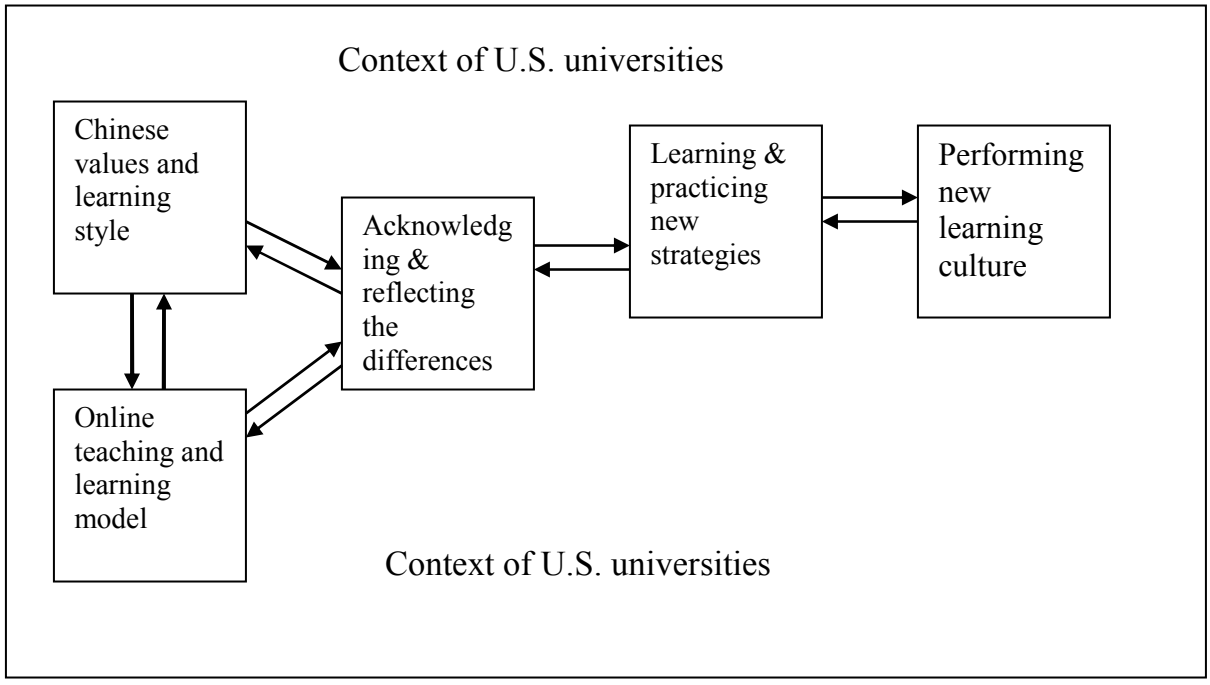
Conclusion three: Chinese students' online learning in the U.S. universities is a process of cultural negotiation and construction.

The third conclusion of this study is that Chinese students' experience in online courses in U.S. universities is a process of cultural negotiation and construction. The conflict between U.S. and Chinese cultures is experienced and identified by Chinese students, and is best solved through a cultural negotiation process. Negotiation here refers to the interaction between two cultural systems in order to reach a compromise and balance. Construction means the establishment of a new learning culture which embraces the different cultural perspectives, knowledge and practices. Two major phrases or stages emerge during this process: acknowledging and reflecting differences, and learning and practicing new strategies. The outcome of this cultural negotiation process is a transformed perspective on teaching and learning, or a new and comprehensive learning culture for Chinese students. This cultural negotiation process is illustrated in Figure 1.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the interaction between ingrained Chinese cultural values and U.S. culture incorporated with the online learning model leads to the two major steps of cultural negotiation. Chinese students first become aware of and reflect on

the differences between the two educational systems, and then they gain new strategies and skills allowing them to better adapt to the new learning model. The result of this cultural negotiation is that Chinese students gain a broader perspective on learning with relevant knowledge and skills. Although the process of cultural negotiation in Figure 1 is presented as a linear framework, participants did not necessarily follow a step-by-step process. In fact, reflecting on the differences and learning new strategies could be parallel, as they could happen simultaneously. Furthermore, the stages interact with each other, making the cultural negotiation a quite fluid, back-and-forth process. Finally, it is important to mention that this whole process occurred within the context of U.S. university settings. This context also affects every step of the negotiation process.

Figure 1. The Process of Cultural Negotiation and Construction



In the first stage of cultural negotiation, Chinese students acknowledge and reflect the teaching and learning differences between China and the U.S. Based both on their learning experiences themselves and on their critical reflections, they identified various

differences, including instructional style, class participation, teacher-student relationships, and arrangement of assignments and exams. The participants in this study reported that teachers in China usually dominate the class, while student contributions to class discussion are more valued in the U.S. While quietly listening to lecture is the norm in the Chinese context, American students vigorously engage in class communication. The teacher is seen as an authority figure in China, and students typically accept their teacher's instruction unconditionally, while in the U.S. the teacher-students relationship is relatively equal and collegial. In China teachers use the final exam as the major means of evaluating students' learning, while ordinary assignments and projects are used more heavily in U.S. classes. For Chinese students in particular, acknowledging and reflecting on the different educational styles is an indispensable component of their cultural negotiation, since it stimulates them to open their mind to other perspectives, think alternatively, and identify the limits of the educational style that has been ingrained in them since childhood. For instance, Zhou believes her narrow perspectives and inability to "think out of the box" are due to the strict Chinese education system; Gao realizes "it's not necessary to make sure you speak everything right" in the online course and that casual communication can inspire a "sparkle of thoughts." Tong thinks that the arrangement of exams and assignments in the U.S. is "more scientific" and works to motivate students to learn.

Reflection is critical at this stage. Boyd and Fales (1983) defined reflection as "the process of creating and clarifying the meaning of experience (present or past) in terms of self" (p.101). After reviewing many theories of experiential learning, they claim that reflection is central to experiential learning. Reflection is essential in stimulating the

individual to learn from experience such that they change cognitively or affectively. Mezirow (1985) argued that critical reflection is central to growth and transformation. He posits that reflection is one of the critical steps in transformative learning. In the present study, students came to acknowledge the many differences between the two educational systems, the limitations of their ingrained cultural values and learning styles, and the difference of U.S. teaching styles via critical reflection. Critical reflection is crucial to initiating and completing the negotiation process.

The second stage of cultural negotiation occurred when Chinese students learned to practice new strategies for their online learning. According to Marsick and Watkins (2003), "Learning takes place when disjunctures, discrepancies, surprises, or challenges act as triggers that stimulate a response" (p. 134). As Chinese students began to recognize that due to the differences between the two educational models and their cultivated values and learning styles, they couldn't adapt themselves well to the new learning environment; rather, they began to learn some new strategies and practice them in their online learning. "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." This adage tells of people discarding their rooted beliefs or traditions and trying new things in a local way, which vividly describes the situation of the Chinese students at this stage. Based on the data from this study, three strategies center their new learning: participating in mutual communication, engaging in informal and collaborative learning, and learning to be self-managed. In this study, Gao began to learn how to make her posts solid and interesting, Du negotiated learning tasks with his instructor, Zhou and Xin found the collaborative projects became more interesting and less demanding, and Feng and Tong all developed their own strategies for managing their online learning tasks. We can see that Chinese students have learned

some new strategies and adapted themselves to online learning, which also indicates that they have come up with an new learning culture that integrates the different sets of cultural values and learning styles and makes meaning of the online learning model from a more critical and comprehensive perspective.

Cultural negotiation as an element of Chinese students' online learning in U.S. universities resonates with the other studies with regard to the relationship between culture and learning (Lee, 1997; Pincas, 2001; Yeh, Ma, Madan-Bahel, & Hunter, 2005). Pincas(2001) noted that in most cases where students are working in a international context, they need to find a balance between adapting to different social and cultural interactions in English, while also maintaining a secure sense of self as a member of their national culture. Learning is a crucial part of the process of developing a "professional" self and now has to occur in a very new environment – one which does not reflect the local cultural in a familiar way. Lee concluded in her empirical study that the whole process of Chinese Taiwanese interpretation of significant life events is culturally constructed, and the negotiation is the center of the process. She defined negotiation as the "essential phase of meaning-making during which all concerned are involved in the discussion, reflection, negotiation, and construction of meaning."(p. 118) In this study, we found that negotiation occurred between their own cultural values and the host cultural system, between their accustomed learning styles and the learning styles required for online courses. All Chinese students, their class teachers, American classmates, Chinese fellows and related others became involved with the negotiation process though discussion, group work, observing each other's work, and trying new ways of learning. Practicing the new learned strategies did not mean simply imitating or copying their

American classmates' behavior. Rather, it meant that Chinese students behaved according to a broader perspective and a new learning culture, which incorporated the meanings from two cultural systems.

The special context of the studied phenomenon is the U.S. universities, which wholly impact the cultural negotiation and construction process. On the one hand, the online courses being offered are in accordance with the cultural and academic traditions of the local university. On the other hand, Chinese students living, studying and working in the university community develop perceptions about U.S. culture through context: namely through their interactions with other students inside and outside the classroom. The role of context in learning has been discussed by many researchers (Vygotsky, 1978, 1999; Clark, 1991; Clark & Wilson, 1991; Caffarella & Merriam, 2000). Russian pioneer psychologist Vygotsky proposed the concept that all human activities occur in a cultural context with many levels of interactions, shared beliefs, values, knowledge, skills, structured relationships, and symbol systems. These interactions and activities are mediated through the uses of technical or psychological tools provided by the culture. Wilson (1993) argues:

> Learning is an everyday event that is social in nature because it occurs with other people; it is 'tool dependent' because the setting provides mechanisms (computers, maps, measuring cups) that aid, and more important, structure the cognitive process; and finally, it is the interaction with the setting itself in relation to its social and tool dependent nature that determines the learning (p. 73).

So in taking online courses, Chinese students negotiate the cultural difference and build new meanings for their learning experience within the context of U.S. universities.

Should the context be changed to university settings in China or anywhere else, the research would yield different findings and conclusions.

The process of Chinese students adapting to online courses in U.S. universities is parallel and somewhat similar to Mezirow's transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978, 1991). According to Mezirow (1990), "Learning may be defined as the process of making a new and revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action" (p. 1). Mezirow assumes that most of our meaning perspectives are acquired unconsciously through cultural assimilation since childhood. It is only when these meaning perspectives are challenged that people start to think about their underlying assumptions. In this study, Chinese students confront a new model (online courses) which challenges their previous learning styles developed in a face-to-face classroom. This causes them to revise their interpretations of past educational experiences and make a new meaning of their online learning. Mezirow (1997) states that adults can achieve significant transformative learning through three stages: "critical reflection on one's assumptions, discourse to validate the critical reflective insight, and action" (p. 60). This study uncovered a similar process, in which students achieved self-improvement through learning new knowledge, practiced critical reflection and developed new skills, and gained a broader perspective on learning as the outcome. However, most participants in this study did not report a "disorienting dilemma" or other likely affective reactions, nor did they report an identifiable dramatic personal and spiritual change as the outcome of online learning.

This study expands the horizons of adult education theory by investigating the cultural and contextual issues in adult learning. In analyzing Chinese cultural values and

Chinese online learners, this study found that their ingrained cultural values significantly impact Chinese students' learning experiences and behavior in a non-traditional learning environment. The unique context of online teaching and learning and the U.S. university settings also contributed to their online learning experiences. Recalling the arguments of previous researchers (Amstutz, 1999; Caffarella & Merriam, 2000; Lee, 2003; Pratt, 1991), this study further challenge the dominant psychological and cognitive preconceptions entrenched in adult learning theories, by stressing the role of cultural values in shaping Chinese international students' learning experiences and behaviors. This study demonstrates that Chinese students' online learning in U.S. universities is actually a cultural negotiation and construction process in which they negotiate their Chinese cultural values with the U.S. culture espoused in online education, and achieving a compromise or balance. Thus, in researching adult learning and development and constructing new theories in adult education, the role and influences of cultural values must be seriously taken into account.

In the same way, the theories of distance education have been developed on the framework of Western cultural values and philosophy (Robinson, 1999) – either via Wedemeyer(1981) and Moore's (1994) independence and autonomy theory, Peter's (1993) theory of industrialization of teaching, or Holmberg's (1986) theory of interaction and communications. For Chinese students or students from other Asian counties, who grew up in a collectivist and hierarchical society where the technology cannot yet widely support online learning, these theories have cultural limitations and might not be directly relevant.

This study also helps to advance our understanding of Chinese cultural values and their interrelation with learning behaviors. Most cross-cultural studies treat a national culture as one whole variable and compare people's behaviors in specific situations or learning behaviors. This study, in contrast, analyzes several Chinese values related to learning behaviors, and through doing so indicates that the cultural system is constructed by various values and it expresses and operates different facets in different situations. Future studies of Chinese cultural values and Chinese students need to specify the content and construct of the cultural values system in the investigated context. It might also be pointed out that certain Chinese values such as concerning others, maintaining harmony and being diligent can be suggestive and valuable to the online teaching and learning practice in the U.S. universities. Online education in the West emphasize very much on independence and self-directedness of individual learners, while it tend to neglect stating students' responsibilities to the group.

In summary, three conclusions are drawn in this study and discussed respectively. First, the online learning experience of Chinese students is characterized by some commonly shared features as well as unique features. Second, their online learning experiences are shaped by Chinese cultural values. Finally, their online learning is a process of cultural negotiation and construction. This study contributes to the literature in several aspects. It confirms some previous studies on Chinese online learning experience, identifying cultural values as an important factor impacting people's learning, and highlighting the socially and culturally constructed nature of learning. It also supplements the literature with the discovery that Chinese students share many common experiences of online learning with their American counterparts, and that Chinese cultural values they

brought into the new learning environment may negatively impact their online learning in the U.S. university settings. Lastly, this study further explores the roles of specific Chinese values such as collectivism, hierarchical relationships, conformism, conservatism, face-saving, and valuing effort and diligence, in shaping learning experience, as well as how they are related to Chinese students' online learning behaviors. Moreover, this study demonstrates that Chinese online learning in the U.S. universities is a process of cultural negotiation and construction.

Implications for Practice

In that it explores the impact of cultural values on Chinese students' online learning experiences, this study has significant implications for the practice of instructors, researchers, course developers, and policy-makers in the fields of adult and distance education. It also provides suggestions for Chinese international students who plan to take online courses in the future.

For adult and distance learning educators and researchers, this study reveals the characteristics of Chinese students' online learning and how their perceived cultural values interact with the new learning model. From this study, instructors and researchers can better understand Chinese students' learning behaviors, feelings, and experience, as well as their cultural values and socio-cultural background. They will thus be able to direct their students in a more efficient and effective manner. Instructors teaching in a multi-cultural class must be very sensitive to the needs of their students and keep an open mind about cultural differences (Wang, 2005). Simply treating all students equally is far from enough; it is critically necessary to know a student's cultural background and learning style. Ziegahn (2001) suggests that adult educators can "become more sensitive

to cultural difference in the classroom by first examining the cultural values that underlie their preferred methods of teaching" (p. 4). Palloff and Pratt (1999) recommend building a learning community to include learners from different social, cultural, and knowledge backgrounds. Researchers (Conceicao, 2002; Joo, 1999; McLoughlin & Oliver, 1999; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Wang, 2005) have suggested several strategies for building a culturally-sensitive learning environment which can accommodate students from multicultural backgrounds. These include making the teacher more accessible and available to students via various technologies, assigning students from different backgrounds in a small group or one-to-one pair, facilitating various social interactions among students, encouraging international students sharing their cultural knowledge or stories, being sensitive to student privacy, and so on. All these strategies can be applied to the teaching and learning practice with Chinese international students.

Online course designers and developers in particular need to take into consideration cultural influences when designing and developing a course, selecting the technologies, and organizing the class activities. Every technology has its advantages and disadvantages. For example, discussion boards provide students with asynchronous and continuing communication, and Chinese students find it less stressful, as it allows them more time to prepare. Its shortcomings are its slow pace and the fact that students can't get timely answers to urgent questions. Online chat room is a fast and efficient tool for class communication, but it may marginalize student who are non-native English users, and those who are not good typists. The best strategy is to employ various technology and tools, so that students can choose their favorite ways for attending (McLoughlin & Oliver, 1999). It is also highly recommended to assist first-time online learners in getting

acquainted with the course courseware and communication tools, to help them understand the requirements and regulations, and to facilitate them developing their own learning strategies for online courses.

For educators and policy-makers in distance education in China, this empirical study provides some insights into the nature of the online education model and Chinese students' online learning styles. Online courses can be designed in various ways, from a loosely structured course for students' self-directed learning to the strictly teacher-controlled mode, but it serves best as a student-centered model which gives more flexibility as well as responsibility to the students. Keeping in mind the Chinese students' learning style and its incongruence with the online learning model, the instructors need to provide a more structured and specific guide to the online learners, and make various learning support available and accessible. Care should be taken to adopt or copy the online programs or online courses from Western universities and use them directly with Chinese students in the Chinese educational context.

This study also reveals some limits of Chinese school norms and instructional styles through the comparison with the U.S. educational system. School leaders and policy makers in China need to consider how to transform the traditional instructional model into a more student-centered one, which will result in a new learning culture in a long run. Strategies could be taken such as changing the teacher's role from lecture presenter to learning facilitator, providing more opportunities for class communication, strengthening the students' independent learning ability, using multiple means for student evaluation and motivation, and so on.

For Chinese students who plan to take online courses in U.S. universities, this study offers some suggestions for their better adaptation to this new learning model. First, they should take time to become familiar with the online teaching model before the course starts. It is important for them to know the courseware and tools, the way instruction is organized, the instructor's style, and the requirements of the courses before they start their online learning. Second, they should understand the importance of their engagement in class communication, be prepared to adjust their passive and reticent learning approach, and try to get involved in various courses activities actively. Third they should develop a learning plan for their online course, and try to make it explicit and practical. Finding a classmate as a learning partner would be a good technique to enhance self-discipline and cultivate a learning community. Fourth, in order to insure a better learning outcome, Chinese students should try to delay taking online courses until they become familiar with the U.S. educational style and feel comfortable with their English language ability. Fifth, an asynchronous mode of online courses using online videos or discussion board as the major courseware would be better for international students whose language is a big problem since they can repeat watching or reading. The synchronous mode of online courses using chat room, Central, Horizon Live would be more appropriate for those English fluent students, because they can get immediate responses and interaction.

Suggestions for Future Research

Even though increasing attention is paid to the cultural issues in adult and distance education, empirical study of the impact of cultural values on students' online

learning experiences has been very limited. This qualitative study projects several areas for further research.

With regard to the research topic, this study focuses on the impact of traditional cultural values on Chinese students' online learning, and yields some findings on the characteristics of their online learning experience, the influencing factors, and the nature of their online learning. In doing so, however, it actually uncovers more questions than it can answer. We have seen that there are many factors influencing Chinese students' online learning, including technology, instructor, peer group, language, the U.S. instructional style, and Chinese cultural values as well as others not yet known. But there is not enough space in this study to fully explore the relationships between these factors. How do cultural factors interact with the other factors in shaping Chinese students' learning experience and performance? What is the relationship between cultural values and language? How can we build a learning community and support for Chinese students? In the context of U.S. public universities, I delineate a cultural negotiation process that includes acknowledging and reflecting differences and learning and practicing new strategies. Is there any other negotiating practice involved in this process? All these interesting questions call for further study to give us a better understanding of the complicated relationship between culture and learning.

As to the research method, this qualitative study depends on memories of participants about their online learning experiences and on their interpretations of and reflections on those memories. Throughout the interview process, it became clear that some participants could produce very logical and plausible explanations of and deeper reflections on their experiences, while others were satisfied to share relatively superficial

experiences. The internal influence of cultural values on students' learning, more often than not, is very subtle, intangible yet ubiquitous, which makes it difficult for participants to specify and articulate their impact. It is equally difficult for the researcher to delineate a clear picture of the phenomenon based on one single research method. Thus, other research methods such as observation, quantitative methods, and other qualitative approaches are necessary for further research on this topic. For example, observation of the online discussions between Chinese students and their American classmates may produce important data about the class dynamic and interaction among students. A large scale survey study of Chinese international students' perceptions about their online courses can help us to better understand their attitudes, readiness, difficulties, and problems in their online learning.

As to the research sample, the participants selected for this study were all graduate students who are studying at major U.S. research universities. They are highly educated and have grown up in non-rural middle- or upper-class families in China. The results of this study may reflect the unique concerns, interests, and perspectives of this particular group, rather than the "typical" Chinese students or students from other backgrounds. To verify how the findings from this study apply to the situations of other student populations, a larger and more diverse sample is needed. For instance, Chinese undergraduate students or those from non-research universities can be studied in following studies. For Chinese students from outside mainland China, like those from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, or overseas – especially those coming from relatively western and modern societies – they may have values different from those described here, and experience online learning differently from the mainland Chinese. To introduce the

findings of this study into the instructional practices of mainland China, a sample of college students from Chinese universities would need to be investigated to see how they perceive online learning differently. It would also be interesting to conduct a study comparing the online learning experiences of Chinese students studying in the U.S. with those of students in China.

Technology is an important element of online education. I summarized five modes of online courses in this study. The different modes have different ways of presenting content, organizing communication, and providing support, and thus influence students' learning experiences differently. From this study, we can see the asynchronous discussion board-based course facilitated more class communication, and that this helped online learning community become established. In contrast, there were few student-student communications in the synchronous online teaching mode, and therefore students tended to find their support off-line or outside of class. Further studies can compare and contrast students' learning experiences in different modes of online course, to see how technology impacts their learning experiences differently.

With this study serving as a foundation for future research investigating the phenomenon of online learning from the perspective of Chinese international students or other Asian groups, it is important for researchers to continue to expand on the findings and conclusions presented here, and further examine the cultural issues in adult and online education. These studies will not only benefit those who teach and learn in an online environment, but also facilitate those various educational practices on a face-to-face basis.

Chapter Summary

Based on the data from interviews with eleven Chinese graduate students from six public universities in the Southeastern U.S., this study generated three conclusions on the cultural impact of Chinese students' online learning experience. Firstly, Chinese graduate students share some experiences common to all online learners, as well as some unique features; secondly, their online learning experiences are shaped by the Chinese cultural values of collectivism, hierarchical relationships, conservatism, conformism, valuing face, and emphasizing effort and diligence in study. Thirdly, their online learning in U.S. universities is a process of cultural negotiation and cultural construction, in which they reflect on different educational styles and gain new strategies to adapt to their online learning. This chapter also addressed the implication of this study for instructors, researchers, program developers, and policy-makers in adult and distance education as well as for Chinese online learners. The limitations of this study and recommendations for future research have been discussed as the closure of this chapter.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A:

Interview Consent Form

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study titled "How Cultural Values Shape Chinese Students' Online Learning Experience in American Universities" conducted by Haidong Wang from the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration and Policy at the University of Georgia under the direction of Dr. Sharan Merriam, Program of Adult Education, University of Georgia (542-4018). I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can stop taking part without giving any reason and without penalty. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

I understand the purpose of this study is to explore or understand how social and cultural factors shape Chinese graduate students' online learning in the U.S. public university. If I volunteer to take part in this study, I understand that:

- I will participate in an interview lasting about one and a half hour;
- The researcher will ask me questions about my experience in taking online courses in the U.S.
- All my responses will be audio-taped. The interview data will be kept safely by the researcher and all of my personal information will be replaced by pseudonym or by using anonymous.
- I may be asked to participate in a short follow-up interview or a focus group discussion.
- I will be asked to provide some online discussion documents if available.

I will receive a small gift of appreciation for participation at the end of the study. No risk is expected during the research. No information about the participants, or provided by me during the research, will be shared with others without my written permission. The audiotape will be kept in a safe place where only the researcher can access it and it will be erased when the research is finished.

The investigator, Haidong Wang, will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the research. The researcher can be reached by phone (389-6136) or via email (wanghd@uga.edu).

I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my records.

__Haidong Wang_____ _____ _____

Name of Researcher Signature Date

Telephone: _706-369-6136__ Email: Wanghd@uga.edu___

_____ _____ _____

Name of Participant Signature Date

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to Chris A. Joseph, Ph.D. Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia, 606A Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu

Appendix B:

Interview Guide

1. Can you tell me something about yourself: who you are, what you study and your education experience in China?
2. Tell me about the online course(s) you have taken at UGA.
3. Tell me about a time when had a good experiences in this course. Can you give me an example?
4. Tell me about a time when you had a bad experience in this course. Can you give me an example?
4. Tell me how you have changed in you learning approach.
5. Based on your observations, how do you learn differently than your American classmates?
6. Tell me the challenges you met in your online learning course. Can you give me an example?
7. Tell me something you really liked in your online course. Can you give me an example?
8. Can you tell me what factors (technology, language, learning style, culture, or else) impacted your online learning?
9. How did you communicate with the instructor in the online course?
10. How did you communicate with your classmates in the online course?
11. How did you manage your study for this online course?
12. As a Chinese student, how did your cultural background impact your online learning?
13. If possible, how could the online course be improved in favor of your learning style?
14. What else would you like to add before we end this interview?

Appendix C:

诚征研究参与者

本人为 UGA 成人教育系 3 年级博士生，研究兴趣是成人的网上学习活动。我的论文研究主要关注的是文化价值观是如何影响中国学生的网上学习经验的（How Cultural Values Shape Chinese Students' Online Learning Experience），目的是为中国学生今后如何能更好地适应国内外日趋普及的网上学习方式，做一些积极有益的探索。按计划我将在今年 8-10 月收集数据，需要找 12 名左右在美学习的中国学生来参加我的研究。具体情况和要求如下：

条件要求：

1、来自中国大陆，目前在 UGA 或邻近高校就读的研究生，性别和年龄不限;
2、近 2 年内曾经参加过或正在参加网上课程，即 75%的授课内容通过网络进行的课程；
3、来美学习时间不超过 3 年。

参与活动：

1、一个半小时关于自己网上学习经验的当面访谈；可能参加一个小时左右的随后访谈或小组访谈；提供一些反映课上交流的文件复本。
2、所有面谈都将用中文进行，选定双方都合适的时间和地点。
3、研究中，所有关于您的个人信息，按安全保密原则都将被隐去或替换掉.

参与的益处：

1、使您有机会了解本项研究的各方面信息，分享文献资料；
2、使你能亲身体会参与质的研究数据收集方法，愿意解答你的有关问题；
3、您将得到一份个人访谈的文字纪录；
4、作为感谢您的时间和参与，研究结束后您将得到 25 美元的现金或等值的购物卡。

如果您本人对我的研究感兴趣，或者知道您的朋友同学参加过网上课程，请和我联系。

联系人：王海东
电话：706-389-6136
电子邮件：wanghd@uga.edu

Recruiting research participants

I am a third-year doctoral student in Adult Education at the University of Georgia (UGA), and my research interests focus on adult students' online learning activities. The topic of my dissertation concerns how cultural values shape Chinese students' online learning experiences. The purpose of this study is to explore ways to enable Chinese students to better adapt to online courses in American universities, which are becoming increasingly popular. I plan to collect my data in this summer from August to October, and I need to recruit about 12 Chinese students who study in the U.S. to participate to my study. The requirements for qualification, activities, and benefits are as follows:

Requirements for qualification：

1、Chinese graduate student studying at UGA, coming from mainland China, no limitations to gender and age;
2、You have taken online course(s) during the past two years, which means 75% of the instruction hours of the course were delivered through the Internet;
3、You have lived in the U.S. for no more than three years.

Activities：

1. One-and-a-half hour face-to-face interview about your online learning experience; some may be asked to attend a follow up interview or a one hour group discussion; provide several course-related documents which reflect your active online communication with others.
2. All interviews are conducted in Chinese, at a time and place convenient for you.
3. All your personal information or identity as well as others' will be replaced with pseudonyms and fictitious information during the data collection.

Benefits：

1. You will have a chance to learn about this study and gain access to the literature and materials；
2. You will have a chance to participate in qualitative research and know the research methods in detail. I will be glad to answer any related questions；
3. You will get a hard copy of your interview transcript;
4. As compensation for your valuable time and participation, you will be given a a $25 Wal-Mart gift card or cash.

Please contact me if you are interested in my study or have friends who have taken an online course. I appreciate all your help.

Contact：Haidong Wang
Phone：706-389-6136
Email address: wanghd@uga.edu