Chinese International Students’ Dating and Marriage Issues

Huabing Liu

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS’ DATING AND MARRIAGE ISSUES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY

BY
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CHICAGO, IL

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For all Chinese international students in the United States.
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<td>Chinese International Student</td>
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<td>ICE</td>
<td>U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement</td>
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<td>IPA</td>
<td>Interpretive Phenomenological Approach</td>
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ABSTRACT

Chinese international students (CIS) have been the largest national population among international students in the United States. The study explored Chinese international students’ dating and marriage experience as well as their thoughts, feelings and values underlying their dating and marriage experience. This qualitative study employed interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) and recruited 12 Chinese international students for individual interviews. Three major themes were concluded with IPA data analysis: 1) attitudes towards sex and romantic relationships, 2) negative and positive influences, and 3) expectations and experience regarding dating and marriage. The study found that Chinese international students had unique experiences, values, thoughts, and feelings regarding marriage and dating issues. The study also had some highlights in findings, such as presentations of acculturation/westernization, unique interpretations of romantic relationship in Western cultures, special needs for romantic relationships in the United States, CISs’ subjective definitions of westernized romantic love, and CISs’ subjective “adjustment” goals. The findings of this study would be implicative for researchers, clinicians, and professionals in higher education to gain a better understanding of Chinese international students.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

International students are students from non-US countries who come to the United States with temporary visas to pursue a full course of academic study in US SEVP (Student and Exchange Visitor Program) -approved schools (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), 2017). International students consist of a large population in the United States. According to the data provided by ICE (2017), there were about 1.59 million active international students in the year of 2017 in the United States. The largest number of international students in the U.S. was from China. There were about 0.48 million international students from China, which was approximately 30% of general international students in the United States.

Chinese international students demonstrated excellent performances in academics in the U.S. and fulfilled the needs of the US job market (Shen & Herr, 2004). The data from ICE indicated that most international students pursued higher education (e.g., colleges and graduate schools) in the United States. Contrary to the situation that American STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) students cannot fulfill the needs of STEM jobs in the United States, almost half of Chinese international students studied STEM majors in the United States (ICE, 2017). In fact, international students earned over half of the doctoral degrees in STEM majors in the U.S., and China was the most common home country of these awardees (National Science Foundation (NSF), 2018). International students brought intellectual and cultural diversity to US campuses, provided a large amount of revenue for the US economy by tuition and living expenses, and alleviated the shortages in the U.S. job
markets. However, their needs and concerns were not thoroughly researched (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Considering the contributions of international students to the United States, more attention should be paid to this population. Understanding these international students’ needs and addressing their concerns would make the United States a more welcoming country, as well as make the academic process for this population smoother. Considering the cultural variances across international students from different countries, this study will focus on Chinese international students, the largest international student population from one nation, in the United States.

Chinese international students were shown to face difficulties with immigration, adaptations to host environments in language and communication, culture, academic study, and psychological adjustments (Li et al., 2017). Among these difficulties, adjustment was regarded as the most significant challenge for Chinese international students (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Researchers used “psychological distress” to measure levels of acculturative adjustment to the host environment (Wang et al., 2012; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). Wang et al. (2012) illustrated four groups of Chinese international students’ acculturative adjustment patterns: one group remained high levels of psychological stress, one group remained low levels of psychological stress (65% of the participants), one group had a sharp peak from the second semester to the third semester, and the other group felt relieved from the first semester to the second semester. Their findings illustrated that adjustment outcomes may depend on individual differences or other related factors. Predictors of adjustment included English Proficiency and length of stay in the U.S. (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Wei et al., 2007), attachment avoidance and social anxiety (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006), acculturation (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006), perfectionism (Wei et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2012), unconditional self-regard (Lin & Betz, 2009), self-esteem (Wang et al., 2012; Lin &
Betz, 2009), acculturative stress (Wei et al., 2007), coping strategies (Yan & Berliner, 2011), and mainstream and ethnic social connectedness (Du & Wei, 2015; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

Another serious challenge for Chinese international students may be their dating, marriage, and romantic issues. A study investigating international students’ utilization of counseling services found that concerns for relationships with romantic partners were in the top three "most worried" concerns for graduate students (30.6% extremely worried; 39.7% worried); and in the top four for undergraduate students (27.3% extremely worried; 44.4% worried) (Yi, Lin, Jenny, & Kishimoto, 2003). A study from another US university counseling center supported this finding. They found dissatisfaction or discomfort with dating and marriage were frequently presented concerns (10 times, 10 times, respectively) among 41 international students who sought counseling services at their university counseling center in one academic year (Nilsson, Berkel, Flores and Lucas, 2004). Another study which was conducted in Australia, a developed country which shares similar individualistic features with the U.S., found college students with Chinese backgrounds (including Chinese international students and Chinese Australians) were less likely to have a romantic relationship and more likely to be lonely, compared to their Anglo-Australian or Southern European-Australian peers (Moore & Leung, 2001). Overall, it was clear that dating and marriage issues were great concerns for international students, but there were very few studies addressing international students’ dating, marriage or romantic relationships. The only study which discussed the dating and marriage concerns of Chinese international students was Yan & Berliner’ study (2011), where they had a brief paragraph discussing Chinese international students’ concerns of dating and marriage. Their study summarized (2011) that dating and marriage issues were serious concerns for Chinese international students. Students were
concerned about the stability of the romantic relationships because of long-distance, uncertainty of future locations, long-term separation, and high academic orientation. They were also concerned about the limited number of potential candidates because many wanted to find a Chinese romantic partner. Furthermore, their lack of social involvement prevented them from finding potential candidates.

Overall, it is highly likely that Chinese international students’ concerns for marriage and dating issues affect their mental health. Unfortunately, from existing literature, it is hard to know how marriage and dating issues specifically influence Chinese international students’ adjustment and well-being. Thus, a thorough examination of Chinese international students’ dating and marriage issues and their influence on their cultural adjustment and well-being is warranted. This study aims to fill the research gap and help researchers and helping professionals have a better understanding of Chinese international students’ adjustment in relation to marriage and dating. Specifically, this qualitative study plans to explore 1) what Chinese international students experience, feel, and think about marriage and dating issues, 2) what factors impact their experiences, feelings and thoughts about marriage and dating issues and, 3) how their subjective experiences impact their adjustment and psychological well-being. Especially, this study plans to identify whether the population’s unique factors, such as their immigration status and culture, impact their subjective experiences of dating and marriage.

**Sojourning in the United States**

In the year of 2015, data from NSF indicated 75% of international students intended to stay in the US after graduation, around 15% of international students wanted to go back to their home countries, and 8% of international students wanted to go to another country. In 2019, 79% STEM doctoral international graduates continued to pursue their postdoc or
employment in the United States (NSF, 2020). Research found many Chinese international students had a difficult time determining the length they would stay in the United States after graduation. A qualitative study which interviewed 24 international students found that over half of the participants could not decide whether they would go back to their home country, stay in the United States, or head to another country (Shen & Herr, 2004). Their decisions were impacted by factors including location of a satisfying job, family expectations, marriage concerns, communication barriers, and restriction of foreign workers. Hazen and Alberts (2006) found that quite a few international students did not have an idea of when to return to their home country, when they were inquired at the beginning of their stay in the United States. Furthermore, many international students changed their minds during their stay in the United States. Moreover, it is possible that Chinese international students who wish to stay in the U.S. may not receive appropriate authorizations to stay. Data from NSF (2018) indicated that many Chinese international students intended to stay in the United States after finishing their studies, but not all of them could. Obtaining legal working authorization for foreigners was very hard, because of visa policies and the competitive US job market (NSF, 2018). Hence, for Chinese international students, there is excessive uncertainty about their future locations and careers.

The uncertainty about future plans may impact Chinese international students’ commitment to a romantic relationship. In traditional Chinese culture, seriousness and long-term commitment were taken into account before individuals begin dating, because a romantic relationship in traditional Chinese culture was often regarded as the step before marriage (Gao, 2001). Therefore, Chinese international students may not consider dating someone if they do not plan to marry them. Distance is another important factor in romantic relationships. College students in long-distance relationships experienced more symptoms of
depression, compared to those in geographically proximal relationships (Guldner, 1996). Therefore, Chinese international students might be reluctant to start a long-distance relationship (e.g., with a partner in China) or might have to break up with their long-distance romantic partners because of the distress from long-distance relationships. In sum, Chinese international students may find it hard and painful to start or maintain a romantic relationship with serious commitment, especially when they do not know when they may have to leave the U.S., or where they would live after graduation.

**Cultural Differences in Dating and Marriage Issues**

The differences in romantic beliefs and relational styles between Chinese traditional culture and American culture may contribute to Chinese international students’ romantic dating and marriage concerns in the United States (Gao, 2001; Moore & Leung, 2001). People from different cultures may have different expectations for dating rituals. For example, according to a study by Braboy Jackson, Kleiner, Geist, and Cebulko (2011), African Americans had different expectations for conventions of courtship from Caucasian Americans. In this study, researchers investigated the importance of sexual intimacy, gifting, and family meeting among African Americans and Caucasian Americans. They found both African Americans and Caucasian Americans regarded “attending social activities” as the most important ritual of their romantic relationships. However, for African Americans, meeting with family and gifting were more important, and sexual intimacy was less important, compared to Caucasian Americans. Research also found that foreign students may have never experienced the U.S. dating system before coming to the U.S. and might have difficulty in understanding a different dating system (Blood & Nicholson, 1962). Though Chinese international students’ expectations of dating and marriage have not yet been researched, they may also have different expectations from those of Americans. For example,
Chinese international students may have different expectations of the role of sex in romantic relationships from those of American students. People raised in Chinese culture were more likely to be conservative about sex and less likely to engage in sexual activities before marriage, compared to people who were raised in American culture (Moore & Leung, 2001).

In addition to different expectations, Chinese international students may have false beliefs related to sex in American dating culture. Sex is seen as taboo, and forbidden to be discussed in Confucianism, which is one of the most dominant and influential schools of ethical and moral ideology in Chinese culture (Gao et al., 2012). Research found that Confucianism currently still constrains Chinese people’s sex behaviors (Gao et al., 2012). Mass media might be a referral point for Chinese international students to learn about U.S. values in romantic relationships and their relation to sex. For example, frequency of sex may be seen much more in American mass media than in Chinese mass media. Heldman and Wade (2010) summarized sexual references were high in U.S. mass media. In contrast, sex was taboo among Chinese mass media (Zhang, Li, and Shah, 2007). Thus, Chinese international students may have the impression that people in American culture should have sex before committing to a romantic relationship. They are more likely to think that American people like to have sex when dating. However, this opinion may not be true. According to a study conducted twenty years ago, most U.S. adults objected to premarital sex (Petersen & Donnenwerth, 1997). Americans may have a more open attitude towards premarital sex in this decade, but personal values such as strong religious beliefs may prevent people from engaging in premarital sex (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). Therefore, their simplification of U.S. dating culture may lead to Chinese international students’ acculturative stress as to values in dating and marriage. For example, they may think they should acculturate to the U.S. mainstream culture and have sex during or before dating to act like
Americans, which is not consistent with their home cultures regarding dating and marriage, nor with the actual American values. These false beliefs may also perpetuate Chinese international students’ fears in finding a romantic partner in the United States. They might not be receptive to interracial dating because they may be scared that their values in dating and marriage would not be accepted by the partner. As a result, Chinese international students may prefer to find a romantic partner with Chinese backgrounds.

Additionally, Chinese international students may have different expectations of commitment in romantic relationships compared to American students. In an individualistic culture such as the U.S. culture, love and passion, instead of commitment, have been found to be the foundations of an American marriage (Gao, 2001). In collectivistic cultures such as traditional Chinese culture, as mentioned in the section “Sojourning in the United States”, commitment is the foundation of a romantic relationship (Gao, 2001). Therefore, Chinese international students may be confused about developing romantic relationships with people from U.S. culture. Furthermore, Chinese international students may have different needs in marriage and dating relationships, compared to students from other cultures. Moore’s study (2001) about young people in Australia from Chinese, Southern European and Anglo Australian backgrounds found that Chinese students needed greater geographic closeness in their dating and marriage relationships.

Chinese international students may need to understand and acculturate to U.S. culture. Evidence-based studies found that length of stay was predictive of Chinese international students’ acculturation to the culture of the host country (Zhang & Goodson, 2011; Lowinger, He, Lin, and Zhang, 2014; Wei et al., 2007; Lin & Betz, 2009). In other words, Chinese international students who stayed in the United States for a short time, might
have different expectations, or even have misunderstandings of American dating and marriage culture.

**Limited Social Involvement**

Coming to a new country usually means the international students in question may lose their physically close social supports and will need to build a new social network in the host country. Chinese international students were likely to have a big extended family in China and might find it hard to make friends and develop social supports in the United States (Zhang et al., 2011). Language difficulties, cultural aspects, personal characteristics, academic worries, and perceived discrimination were found as inhibitors of Chinese international students’ abilities to develop social connections with people from mainstream cultures (Hayes & Lin, 1994). In terms of social connections with people from Chinese cultures, Chinese international students usually built these connections through local ethnic groups such as Chinese Scholars and Students Association (CSSA) and online ethnic groups (Ye, 2006). The less time the new arrivals stayed in the United States, the more likely they perceived higher levels of support from online ethnic groups (Ye, 2006). This may indicate that time is also needed for Chinese international students to build their connections with people in the real world instead of online groups. Another study reported international students and their spouses experienced difficulty making stable friends, even with Chinese people in the United States, because they “come to and leave the country” quickly (Zhang et al, 2011). In sum, Chinese international students, especially those who have newly come to the United States, may lack both mainstream and ethnic social connections. The lack of social network may lead to social anxiety, acculturative stress, low self-esteem, and less number of candidates for their romantic relationships (Shaw & Gant, 2004; Lee & Robbins, 1998).
Cultural Expectations: Age, Gender and Family

People who are adherent to Chinese traditional culture usually have an expectation regarding the marriage age for women. In China, women who are not married by their late twenties are called “leftover” women (“ShengNv”; Fincher, 2016; Gaetano, 2014). “Leftover” women are often regarded as unattractive, unmarriageable, and problematic (Fincher, 2016; Gaetano, 2014). To avoid the pressure of being leftover, many women date men through matchmaking events and marry quickly before the age of 27 or 28. The pressure of not being left usually comes from family and culture (Fincher, 2016; Gaetano, 2014).

Chinese international female students may experience similar pressure from their parents, relatives, and friends in China or even from Chinese ethnic social networks in the United States. Considering the fact that a large number of Chinese international students completed their graduate studies in the United States (ICE, 2017), it is highly possible many Chinese international female students passed their late twenties as students in the United States. Those who are approaching or passed the marriage age may feel a lot of pressure to find a boyfriend or a husband before completing their studies in the United States. Furthermore, for those Chinese international students who do not have social networks in the US, they may regard the long-distance social support from family and relatives as important. As a result, they might experience anxiety about losing these connections if they do not meet their family’s expectations.

Chinese international male students may be less open to interracial dating than men from other cultural backgrounds. Uskul, Lalonde, and Cheng (2007) found that Chinese Canadian men were less willing to date outside of Chinese people, compared to European Canadian men. The more acculturated they were to Canadian mainstream culture, the more likely they were open to date European Canadian women. However, adherence to heritage
culture was not predictive of their openness to interracial dating. Besides restriction of candidates, Chinese international male students may have anxiety committing to a romantic relationship. Men are regarded as breadwinners in Chinese traditional culture (Zhang et al., 2011). As mentioned, many Chinese international students complete their graduate studies in the United States (ICE, 2017), and may want to build a family during this time. However, as students, they have limited income, and as a result might experience anxiety because they are unable to support their family financially.

**Summary**

Among the expanding population of international students coming to the United States, Chinese international students were the largest ethnic group. Their adjustment, acculturative stress, and the causes and consequences of acculturative stress were studied extensively. However, their experience of dating and marriage was barely researched. Very few studies addressed Chinese international students’ or immigrants’ concerns about dating and marriage. From Yan and Berliner’s study (2011), they briefly listed long-distance relationships, future relocation, focus on academics, long-time separation, and a limited number of candidates as Chinese international students’ concerns regarding dating and marriage. However, it is hard to know what exactly Chinese international students’ dating and marriage concerns are, and their impact on Chinese international students. It is also difficult to figure out whether dating and marriage have any positive or negative influences on psychological well-being. Though the impact of dating and marriage concerns on Chinese international students remains unknown, dating was found to be positively correlated with life satisfaction for college students (Coccia & Darling, 2016) and romantic relationships have been found to be negatively related to loneliness in college students in Australia (Moore, 2001). Considering the challenges Chinese international students experienced when
adjusting to life in the United States, dating and marriage relationships might worsen their adjustment difficulties or alleviate their negative feelings. Research found that social support was a significant factor in facilitating international students’ psychosocial adjustment to life in the United States (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). However, Chinese graduate students who came to the United States with their spouse or family were found to be less adjusted to U.S. culture than those who did not (Zhang, 2007). In this study, we will explore how dating and marriage issues impact Chinese international students’ well-being and adjustment.

Chapter one overviewed the potential impact of sojourning status, social network, disparities between dating and marriage in Chinese and American cultures (e.g., foundations of love, dating process, attitudes with sex), Chinese international students’ levels of acculturation to US mainstream culture and Chinese culture, family expectations, age, and gender on dating and marriage. However, there is still a lack of empirical findings to help us understand the roles of dating and marriage in Chinese international students’ lives. Hence, the research questions are: (a) what Chinese international students’ thoughts, feelings and experiences regarding dating and marriage are, (b) what factors impact their marriage and dating experiences, (c) how their experiences of dating and marriage impact their adjustment and psychological well-being, and (d) how culture plays a role in their subjective experiences with dating and marriage issues.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

The first part of Chapter Two will review what has been studied for Chinese international students (CISs) in the United States. Chinese students are not only transitioning to a different culture, but they are also transitioning to their adulthoods and adults' learning settings (Huang, 2012). As adults, it is daunting to wonder about romantic relationships and settling down issues in their lives. The second part of Chapter Two will compare the marriage and dating issues in China and the United States.

Studies about Chinese International Students
Psychological Well-being and Adjustment Experiences of CISs

Researchers have been curious about Chinese international students' psychological well-being and their general experiences of adjustment and challenges before and after they arrive in the United States.

Tang, Collier, and Witt (2018) interviewed CISs' studying motivations, expectations of life in the United States, and plans after graduation through focus groups, before CISs started their lives in the United States. Their findings suggested that CISs expected to experience the rigor of study in the United States because of language barriers, different class settings, and the high quality of U.S. academic education. They also expected to socialize with American people, but they prefer to get emotional and adjustment support from co-nationals. Many interviewees expected to return after graduation, and others expected to stay in the United States. Their plan after graduation was impacted mainly by their parents' expectations and their expectations for their life (e.g., settling down, getting married in their
home country). As introduced in Chapter One, Chinese international students (CISs) have been the largest national group of international students in the United States. Research about CISs has been diverse. These studies' most common themes are CISs' psychological well-being and adjustment experiences of CISs, factors related to difficulties, and coping mechanisms. Researchers took an eye on CISs' needs and helped them get related resources from universities, clinicians, and other professionals working in higher education and the community. In the first part of Chapter Two, I will present comprehensive studies about Chinese international students in the United States.

Chao, Hegarty, Angelidis, and Lu (2019) examined CISs' motivations for studying in the United States. They concluded that CISs came to the United States for study because they would like to gain a new perspective on their own country, and study in an educational system that they thought was better than the system in their own country. Furthermore, a lot of CISs left home and came to the U.S. by their own wishes, rather than their parents' expectations.

Regarding CISs' after-arrival adjustment, Yan and Berliner (2011) summarized Chinese international students' difficulties in the United States, based on their empirical studies and literature review. They indicated that CISs experienced academic concerns, socio-cultural concerns, and personal concerns. From Chinese students' eyes, academic success is the motivation for them to study abroad, the expectations of culture and family, the reasons for their parents to sacrifice financially, and the only way for them to get acceptance and financial security in the United States. Yan and Berliner further argued that academic pressure has been stressful for CISs because of the significant value of academic achievements and the difference between Chinese, language difficulty, and American education systems and disciplines. These three factors compose the adjustment pressures for
CISs. Besides, Chinese students meet with challenges in socio-cultural situations as they are from "a non-European, Third-World country, and Eastern country." Most of them feel confused about social rules in the U.S., feel disappointed about themselves, and feel incapable of making friends with Americans. In addition to academic and socio-cultural concerns, CISs do have concerns over themselves and their spouse/family because of visa issues, limited job opportunities, and immigration matters, and uncertain future. They are also concerned about romantic relationships because of the limited number of candidates, potential long-time separation, academic orientation, and few social interactions with local people.

Zhang (2016) voiced for Chinese doctoral students in a U.S. research university regarding their challenges and needs of support. Zhang conducted two focus group interviews with 10 Chinese doctoral students in 2011, asking about their academic, social, and cultural experiences. The study suggested that one of the difficulties for Chinese doctoral students was adjusting to U.S. higher education. As ESL (English as a second or foreign language) learners, Chinese doctoral students had problems actively participating or speaking in classroom discussions, which were highly emphasized in the U.S. class. As a result, they were treated "invisible" in classes by some American professors and students. Their findings suggested that Chinese doctoral students also experience difficulties with relationships.

Though the Internet and technologies have helped cover the gap of geological distance, Chinese doctoral students still feel "detached" after they came to the U.S. and physically left the relationships and people they had been close with for years. They also had difficulties formulating new friendships because of language, cultural differences, hard to participate as new to existing networks, and balance of schoolwork and social life. Those students also reported positive growth from their adjustment experiences in the United States. They
described that they were more attentive to cultural diversities, more tolerant of differences, and more responsible. Li et al. (2017) interviewed thirteen Chinese international students and summarized a similar conclusion regarding adjustment difficulties and challenges Chinese international students met. CISs reported facing difficulties with language, social interactions, learning, living and working in the United States, and feelings of loneliness and cultural stress to ask for help. Liu (2016) demonstrated that CISs who attended American higher education experienced difficulties in language competence, emotional issues, and American pedagogy.

Heng's study (2016) has similar findings of the challenges for CISs in the United States. Dr. Heng followed 18 Chinese undergraduates in the U.S. for more than one year to examine how their difficulties changed with social context over time. She found that CISs experience difficulties in relearning English language skills and communication style, especially writing and speaking. They also experienced challenges about changing their thinking patterns from "Eastern" to "Western" to hold more critical and divergent thinking patterns, which are more obvious CISs in social sciences, humanities, and language classes than math and science classes. Besides, they experienced difficulties in understanding unfamiliar and unclear classroom expectations, such as the open-ended teaching method and evaluation procedures. The new socio-cultural text also brought additional problems for CISs to get adjusted to their academic life in a new country. CISs felt that they lacked the "common sense" in class and social situations because they were not familiar with "the new socio-political-legal environment." This unfamiliarity could force them to spend extra time learning about the environment and pause them to engage in conversations with American classmates. According to the researcher, CISs had dramatically improved experiences with socio-cultural context over time. They had more understanding about American cultures from
people, media, books, extra-curricular activities, and help from people who explain the socio-cultural context to them, such as Asian Americans who "made a good cultural and communication bridge." Wang, Heppner, Wang, and Zhu (2015) also examined the CISs' adjustment over time. They identified the fluctuations of CISs' cultural competence over these three months. Their results suggested that CISs' cultural intelligence was improved through time. The connectedness with mainstream society, their anxiety levels, perceived language discrimination, and their coping through family support were significant predictors of their cultural intelligence change.

Liu and Vogel (2016) explored CISs' transitions to the United States regarding their pre-arrival preparation and after-arrival adjustment experiences. Their results indicated all of their CIS participants were facing difficulties. Their difficulties included adjusting to the U.S. classroom settings, lack of support from institutions for socialization and relationships, and high requirement for language and culture training before arrival.

Yao (2016) explored Chinese international undergraduates' expectations towards their relationships with their roommates in college or universities. The findings suggested that Chinese international undergraduates expected to have a roommate from the United States with whom they would speak English and learn cultural knowledge. They would also like to join in the social networks with their American peers, with or without their roommates' help. However, their expectations were not all fulfilled, which impacted their sense of belongingness when they studied in the United States. This conclusion could be interpreted as the willingness and expectation of CISs to get acculturated to the social networks in the United States. The failure of perfect acculturation may lead to negative affect. Yao (2018) then examined the first-year CISs' perceptions of their interpersonal relationships in college. These students experienced neo-racism and othering, which negatively impacted
their feelings of connection to other members in their collegiate community. Lértora and Sullivan (2019) explored CISs' experiences of transitioning from university to work. Their results suggested that CISs got stressed during the university-to-work transition because of extremely rigid requirements of visas, language and cultural barriers, and the lack of support in the United States. According to the study, CISs' perceptions of family support, parents' suggestions, social support from local friends and community, and their optimism under pressure took essential roles in their transition.

Despite the exploration of general challenges that CISs face during their adjustment, researchers also wondered about the impacting adjustment factors. The research suggested that CISs' psychological well-being was significantly impacted by acculturation to U.S. culture. Wang and Mallinckrodt's study (2006) gathered survey data from 104 CISs living in the United States. They found that those students' psychosocial adjustment was significantly predicted by acculturation to U.S. culture, attachment avoidance, and attachment anxiety. Furthermore, they found that attachment anxiety was negatively associated with those students' acculturation to U.S. culture.

Lian and Wallace (2020) explored CISs' correlated factors with mental health disorders. They concluded that these factors were (a) not having a stable partner, (b) perceiving more stress about the plan to go back to China after graduation, and (c) perceptions of lower levels of cultural humility of key personnel in the university or college. The findings suggested that CISs' stressors were related to their academics, finance, job/internship seeking, immigration status, social adjustment, discrimination, and life growth.

Lowinger, He, Lin, and Chang (2014) followed 264 CISs, and explored how academic self-efficacy, acculturation difficulties and language abilities impacted CISs' procrastination behavior. Their findings suggested gender differences. They found that
discrimination and homesickness were significantly correlated with academic procrastination for males. While, academic self-efficacy, English language ability and cultural shock and stress were significantly correlated for females.

Other than challenges in their lives, Chinese international students in the United States may also experience of the challenges from their universities and advisors. Su and Harrison's study (2016) collected qualitative data from 20 interviews with Chinese students who receive high education in six popular English-speaking study abroad countries (e.g., the U.S., the U.K., Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, and Singapore). Their study took the framework of academic capitalism and suggested that recruitment process and student development were neglected, and enrollment growth was prioritized by some higher education institutions. Thus, Chinese students may feel mismatched, or have an unsatisfied study abroad experience because of insufficient English skills. English writing, as an important aspect of academic learning, was a difficulty that CISs encountered. Despite the language barriers that CISs were having, they may also meet with misunderstandings in the communication with advisor because of cultural differences. Xu, Teng, and Cai (2020) explored CISs' experiences of supervisory feedback. They figured out that students' invisible feedback engagement was usually neglected by their writing advisors. Advisors may misunderstand CISs' mindful reflections as none or superficial engagement. During the process studying in the United States, CISs negotiated with multiple and perhaps conflicting cultural values from disciplinary norms and their inherited Chinese culture.

CISs could be very different from European American students regarding their worldviews and social interaction patterns. Yang, Harlow, Maddux, and Smaby (2006) assessed worldviews of CISs and European American students with the Scale to Assess Worldview (Ibrahim & Kahn, 1987). They suggested that the worldviews of these two
populations were quite different. CISs with significant cross-cultural experience were more future-orientated and believed more in nature control. In comparison, CISs with little cross-cultural experiences regarded human relationships as more individualistic than did European American students.

CIS's preexisted conditions might be essential predictive factors of their psychological adjustment in the United States. Qi, Wang, Pincus and Wu (2018) measured CISs' interpersonal problems before and during their studies in the United States. The results suggested that CISs' low agency and high general interpersonal distress before their study in the United States are significant predictors of high CISs' acculturative stress after one semester of study in the United States.

Heng (2021) gathered interview and journal data of 18 first-year and second-year undergraduate CIS to demonstrate how socio-cultural environments in China and United States impact CISs' social engagement in the United States. The results suggested that CISs were significantly impacted by the values they developed in China. They followed the cultural legacies, such as authority in hierarchy, community over individual, face, and homogeneity. They were also impacted by schooling experiences in China, such as exam orientation, teacher directedness, memorization of knowledge, and learning from practice. The societal demands of China including practical-orientation and economic development and organization also contribute to the development of their expectations. When CISs came to the United States, they had to change some of their preexisting values, work against their expectations and develop nuanced perspective of the new culture to get adjusted to the new environment.

Besides the difficulties which were demonstrated above, CISs may also experience the development of self-identity and self-maturation. Hsieh (2006) interviewed seven female
CISs and found that most of these participants had negotiated their self-identity with the constraints from American ideology of cultural homogeneity. Zhang's study (2016) indicated that participants experienced psychological maturation from their adjustment experiences.

In sum, according to above studies, CISs appeared to have strong motivations for studying in the United States for academic success, and experienced adjustment challenges in their academics, social relationships, and cultural differences. The factors impacting their adjustment were diverse, including environmental factors and personal factors. Environmental factors were visa requirements, different classroom settings, language and cultural differences, and perceived discrimination, etc. Personal factors were CISs' their preexisting values, attachment, worldviews, self-efficacy, etc.

**Interaction of Academic and Social Challenges**

CISs came to the United States for strong academic ambitions. However, they experienced a lot of difficulties in class, perhaps because of language barriers, and the different settings of class conversations in the United States. Yan and Berliner (2009) found out that academic stress is "extremely high" for most of the CISs that interviewed in the study because CISs language deficiencies, ineffective interactions with faculty members in the U.S., their ambitions of academic achievements and adjust to the US education environment. Heng (2018) compared the classroom settings between China and U.S. and argued the different expectations of students' participation and critical thinking could be barriers for CISs to engage and get academic success in class. CISs' silence in class could be understood as listening and reflection in China but may be understood as class disengagement in the United States, which may cause misunderstandings from their peers and professors, and then further cause the social difficulties after class.
The problem of class silence has received the greatest attention from researchers regarding CISs' academic stress and academic performance. Heidi and Chen (2015) ’s tried to enhance the understandings of CISs' academic performance by exploring reasons of Chinese international students' problems of class engagement perceived by higher education administrator. As they stated, the three major perceived problems were classroom silence, segregation, and instrumentalism. These problems have impacted professors' evaluations of CISs and the comfort level of the class towards their American peers. Heidi and Chen reviewed the class experiences of CISs had in China to explain that silence in class was actually perceived by CISs as a form of communication instead of a lack of engagement or preparation. They also emphasized the CISs needs to "stick together" so that they can have their cultural and ethnic values "rehearsed and expressed" in their trusted interpersonal networks. CISs' instrumentalism, as they explained, may come from CISs motivations/ambitions of studying abroad and cultural expectation of academic success.

Hsieh (2007) conducted a narrative study of a Chinese female international student who kept silent in her class in the United States. The researcher found that the participant kept silent because her American classmates' ideology of cultural homogeneity, which made her disempowered in her class. Furthermore, her consistent silence and the setting of American class made her internalize a deficient self-perception as a useless person in her group discussions and regarded this deficient identity as attributed by the American higher educational setting.

Zhang (2010) reviewed the literature and summarized that a lot of voices arguing that Chinese students' language barrier could be the reason of their silence in class. Zhang followed a group of Chinese international students for six months and re-interpreted the "portrait" of CIS in American class engagement. The results suggested that Chinese
international students kept improving their English proficiency, and their knowledge about cultures and academics. In Zhang's eyes, their choice not to verbally participate in class was not merely because of language proficiency, but also because of cultural adjustment. CIS were concerned about the appropriateness of their speech in class, like their American peers. CIS chose to be silent because they did not want to be regarded as the "cultural other" by their American professors and peers. Disempowering could be another reason of CISs' class silence.

Despite CISs' needs to express and hear their cultural and ethnic values within their trusted networks, another reason for CISs to "stick together" may be about their cultural values regarding interpersonal relationships and ethnic groups. Dos Santos's study (2019) compared CISs and American students' response to a scenario that their friend's performance failure. The results suggested that CISs were more likely to experience emotional discomfort when they had higher levels of collective face, if the friend was from the same ethnic group. The association between self-images and group-images was more obvious for CISs, compared to American students.

Despite CISs' personal reasons, their perceptions of American people's attitudes were impacting their willingness to interact in and after class. Valdez's qualitative study (2015) with fifteen Chinese international undergraduate students about their classroom experiences found that most of them felt that most American students and professors had negative perceptions about them. They gave some examples about the professors' "discrimination" behaviors (e.g., more likely to think Chinese students cheating) and Chinese students' difficulty participating in teamwork or discussions with American students. Chinese international students also felt excluded when their class professors required them to participate in activities which focused only on American cultures. Though CISs reported
negative experiences of their teamwork and discussion experience with American students, CISs were eager and felt positive to have peer collaboration with American students in class. This may indicate CISs' desire to study further and acculturate more.

Xue's study (2013) expressed similar voices of CISs regarding their desire to have more peer collaboration with their American peers in academic settings. The researcher interviewed fourteen Chinese international graduate students regarding their experiences with group work. Those students reported their attitudes as initial dislike to later acceptance. They also disclosed that group work has improved their language communicative competence. This result may indicate that group work with American peers may bring pressure to CISs at the beginning of their lives in the United States but may finally be beneficial for their adjustment.

Lin and Betz (2009) found that CISs' social self-efficacy influence their social relationships and confidence in social settings. They conducted a quantitative study comparing Chinese students' social self-efficacy in social settings with native language speakers and with English speaking speakers. Their regression analyses results indicate that Chinese students had significantly higher social self-efficacy in the native language social setting. Chinese students' social self-efficacy in English setting was positively related to English proficiency, length of residence in the United States, and unconditional self-regard, and negatively related to acculturative stress. Lin and Betz's finding may illustrate where the stereotypes that American students hold for Chinese students regarding social interactions come from. Chinese international students are actually socially confident in social setting of their native language, but their low self-efficacy in English social setting may prevent them initiating interactions with American students. McCrohan and Nyland (2016) examined CISs' perceived experiences of discrimination. They explore CISs' experiences of their lives and academics in historically black colleges, which were trying to provide an equal learning
environment for minorities with their histories. Their results illustrated that those CISs were still discriminated based on their skin color, race, and nationality, which led to the gaps in academic expectations, and social unfairness of internship opportunities.

Their perceptions of Americans' negative attitudes were supported by evidence-based studies. According to the research, the stereotypes that American people have for CISs are oblivious/annoying, nice/friendly, smart/hardworking, bad at English/not assimilated and shy/not social (Ruble & Zhang, 2013). Though some of these stereotypes are positive or neutral, these could still be the reasons for Americans to accept CISs into their social groups. Zhu and Bresnahan (2018) examined American students' reactions to CISs' reticence in class. Their findings suggested that a number of American students held negative views of CISs' reticence as they were not willing to talk to American students, but only talk to their co-nationals. American students also blamed CISs' personalities and unfriendliness for their shyness and language barriers, which could be a result of stigmatization. Some American students were able to take the perspective of CISs as they don't know how to socialize in a new cultural environment, but they did not know how to get CISs involved more in this social context. In all, American students expected CISs to be assimilated to American culture, and to have no language and cultural barriers talking to them. American students' expectations for CISs could make CISs, who experience social difficulties, feel more unwelcomed and isolated in the United States.

Imamura and Zhang (2014) examined American host nationals' attitudes through CISs with experiential method. They assessed Americans students' affective attitudes, willingness to communicate, perceptions of social attractiveness and their communication anxiety by showing them four scenarios with integrated/assimilated/marginalized/separated Chinese international students. They found that American students perceived the assimilated and
integrated Chinese students more socially positive than marginalized and separated Chinese students, and they are more willing to communicate with the assimilated and integrated Chinese students. To note, in these scenarios, researchers used criteria of using English name or not, liking American/Chinese cultures or not, hanging out with American/Chinese friends or not, spending American/Chinese holidays or not, as definitions of acculturation types. These criteria may arouse participants' anxiety to communicate with people who may don't like them (e.g., for the CIS who don't like American culture nor hanging out with American friends).

From above studies, we can conclude that a number of American people may hold the stereotypes of CISs because of CISs' different language, culture, and social habits. Heng (2020) called on that American people should take alternative perspectives to view CISs, because CISs’ differences do not mean deficiencies. Heng's study (2017) emphasized CISs wishes for Americans to stop holding the stereotypes towards them and to provide more help for them to adjust to the new academic environment. They hoped their professors and host peers to recognize and be curious about their personal and cultural backgrounds, and to show care and initiative in approaching them. They also wanted the improved international services and academic support such as decoding implicit norms of the US academy.

Though research indicated that a lot of American people holding negative views towards CISs, some American people still try to socialize with CISs and help their adjustment. The following study investigated their experience about socializing and helping CISs. Sato, Burge-Hall, and Matsumoto (2020) interviewed seven American students who served as conversation partners of CISs during each fall semester, regarding their social interaction experiences with those CISs. The results suggested that these American students tried to receive feedback and recognize reciprocal benefits in their relationships. They also
provided the social norm information of the host country during the relationships as they wanted to help CISs to adjust to the host culture. These American students were also acknowledged the bias that those CISs perceived, as they might be viewed as "intellectually inferior" to American students because American students may not understand how hard to speak in a secondary language. To help CISs cope with this, these American students tried to develop trust relationships through identifying language barriers that CISs had and the weakness that American students about not learning a secondary language. As conversation partners of CISs, they were also taking roles of mentors for CISs to facilitate CISs' adjustment to American culture. While CISs had difficulties adjusting to the new culture, these conversation partners also encountered difficulties when developing relationships with CISs. Their difficulties included (a) a lack of strategies to enhancing intercultural communication, (b) a lack of ways to addressing concepts of sarcasm, (c) difficulty identifying mutual hobbies and interests, and (d) the needs of collaborating relationships in the field trips. Their experience may indicate that American people need guidance and cultural knowledge of socializing and helping CISs.

**Impacting Factors and Coping**

Researchers were interested in finding factors impacting CISs' adjustment, and developed copings for their adjustment difficulties. Dr. Meifen Wei and her team collected data from 189 CIS including students from Mainland China and Taiwan through their bilingual surveys (Wei et al., 2007). In their study, maladaptive perfectionism is defined as "discrepancy between expectations and performance" and measured by the Discrepancy subscale of the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R; Slaney et al., 2001). With hierarchical regression, they found that maladaptive perfectionism and acculturative stress had main effects on depression. They also found a three-way interaction, indicating that the interaction
of acculturative stress, maladaptive perfectionism, and length of time in the US had a significant effect on depression. Their conclusion was that the low maladaptive perfectionism could buffer the effect of acculturative stress on depression for CISs who have been in the U.S. for a longer period. This conclusion, as what they discussed in their study, may indicate that CISs have been suffering from acculturative stress in their early years in the U.S. no matter what their maladaptive perfectionism levels are. CISs with low maladaptive perfectionism may be able to adjust better to the new environment by setting up realistic goals, normalizing their acculturative stress, and thinking rationally about acculturative stress.

Dr. Wang and his team (2012) had similar findings by comparing CISs' acculturative adjustment patterns in their 3-semester longitudinal study. They found out that a better acculturative adjustment pattern was predicted by higher self-esteem, positive problem-solving appraisal, as well as lower maladaptive perfectionism. They also found that the social support and good coping (e.g., accepting, reframing and striving) in the first semester of acculturation is helpful for a better acculturation result.

Dr. Wei and her team continued to explore how forbearance coping may moderate the effect of acculturative stress on CIS's psychological distress. They collected surveys from 188 CISs and concluded that the more use of forbearance coping may be related to higher risks of psychological distress among CISs who experience higher acculturative stress and holding weaker identification with their heritage culture. In their study, forbearance coping is defined as the tendency to refrain from sharing their concerns with their family and friends because they don't want to burden them, which is consistent with the value of collectivistic cultures that others' needs are more important (Wei, Liao, Heppner, Chao & Ku., 2012).
Mainstream and ethnic social connectedness could be a protective factor of CISs' mental health. Sun, Hall, DeGarmo, Chain, and Fong (2020) gathered quantitative data from 210 in terms of their perceived racial and language discrimination, perceived social connectedness and their mental health outcomes. Their results indicated that perceived discrimination was predictive of negative mental health outcomes. The social connectedness with American students (host social connectedness) could buffer the association between discrimination and subsequent negative mental health symptoms, but the social connectedness with Chinese students (ethnic social connectedness) cannot buffer this association.

Based on the research findings from the static framework, Du and Wei's study further explored how mainstream and ethnic SC could be helpful to cope with acculturation and enculturation difficulties in a dynamic framework. Du and Wei (2015) conducted a 5-month long longitudinal study, collecting complete data from 213 CISs. They found that Mainstream SC (Time 2) mediated the associations between acculturation/enculturation (Time 1) and life satisfaction and positive affect (Time 2). Also, ethnic SC (Time 2) partially mediated the association between enculturation (Time 1) and negative affect (Time 2). Their findings may indicate that Mainstream SC may be helpful for CISs to be more positive, and Ethnic SC may protect CISs from feeling negative.

Tsai, Wang, and Wei's study (2017) supported the finding regarding mainstream society connection. They examined the relationships between social self-efficacy and loneliness of CISs. They collected three waves of data from 409 CISs across their pre-arrival to their second semester in the United States. Their findings suggested that CISs who had proportionally more American friends were more likely to have a higher level of social self-efficacy and better social adjustment to the United States.
Wei, Liang, Du, Botello and Li (2015) examined whether ethnic and mainstream social connectedness and self-esteem could buffer the associations between perceived language discrimination and its negative outcomes (e.g., anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress symptoms). Their findings suggested that mainstream social connectedness could significantly buffer the associations between perceived language discrimination and anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Ethnic social connectedness could buffer the association between perceived language discrimination and depression, but not anxiety and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Self-esteem could buffer the association of perceived language discrimination with anxiety and depression, but not with post-traumatic stress symptoms. This finding indicated that helping CISs develop their self-esteem and both ethnic and mainstream social connectedness could be protective for them when they encounter language discrimination.

Liao and Wei (2014) explored how academic stress, Asian value of family recognition through achievement (FRTA), contingency of self-worth on academic competence (CSW-AC) are associated with positive affect among CISs. In their study, FRTA is defined as adherence to the Asian cultural value of bringing honor to family through achieving academically and occupationally. CSW-AC is defined as to the extent they determine their self-worth through academic achievement. There are 370 CISs participating in their study. With hierarchical regression analysis, they found that CISs were likely to experience low positive affect when they have high academic stress, and CSW-AC amplified this negative correlation.

Liu and Wei (2020) found the coping effects of cognitive flexibility and realistic appreciation of CISs to cope with acculturation stress. As they explained, cognitive flexibility referred to an individual's ability to identify alternative reasons in situations, produce
solutions, and consider difficult situations as controllable. Relativistic appreciation was defined as an appreciation over both cultural differences and similarities among people, and the impact of them on an individual's self-understanding and personal growth. They collected quantitative data from 199 CISs suggesting that cognitive flexibility and relativistic appreciation could impact CISs' empathy with people from different racial and ethnic groups.

Tsai and Wei (2018) explored how to help CIS change their traumatic experience with racial discrimination. They wondered whether the coping strategy of internationalization, e.g., to attribute the responsibilities to themselves, or the coping strategy of resistance, e.g., to attribute the responsibilities to others, would be helpful for CISs to cope with trauma. They received data from 258 CISs through online surveying. Their findings suggested that female CISs were more likely to experience new possibilities if they prefer to use the coping strategy of internationalization to resistance. However, male CISs were more likely to experience new possibilities if they prefer to use the coping strategy of resistance to internationalization. The findings could be meaningful for clinicians and universities to understand the effective coping strategies for CISs.

Social support from home and host cultures are both protecting factors for CISs to manage their acculturative difficulties and psychological adjustment. Zhang and Goodson (2011) also found this similar phenomenon among CISs. They measured acculturation with bilinear acculturation models from Berry et al. (1987). They found the mediation effect of social connectedness with Americans between adherence to the host culture (acculturation dimension) and psychosocial adjustment, and the moderation effect of social connectedness with Americans between adherence to the home culture (acculturation dimension) and depression. They concluded that building social connection with host culture and local people could be a good coping for Chinese students' psychological adjustment in the United States.
Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser, and Kumar's consensual qualitative study (2014) found that CISs usually meet with language difficulties, academic difficulties due to different educational setting in China and the U.S., financial difficulties and feelings of disconnection. Their finding indicated that CISs are more likely to ask support from their family and friends in China, and fellow Chinese friends and peer in the United States when they meet difficulties regarding acculturation, study, or relationships.

Research indicated untraditional ways for Chinese international students to expand their social groups in the United States. Ye (2006) introduced that many online social groups and forums have been established among Chinese international students and immigrants in a local area, at a particular university or national wide. Examples include bbs.mit.edu, and http://www.huaren.us. These social online groups provide space for Chinese international students and immigrants to share their experiences, ask and answer questions, and develop a sense of community while they are studying and living in the U.S. Ye's study (2006) suggested Chinese students who received higher support from online social groups perceived less discrimination, hatred, negative feelings caused by change, and acculturative stress. The study also suggested the negative relationship between the satisfaction of interpersonal support network and perceived online information support. This finding may indicate that the search for help from online social groups might be the coping for the lack of interpersonal support group. Li and Chen's study (2014) about social networking site and social capital among CIS in the United States illustrated a picture of how CISs maintaining their existing interpersonal relationships and exploring new relationships. The study suggested that CIS use Chinese SNS (e.g., Renren, in 2014) to maintain their home country social capital, and use American SNS (e.g., Facebook, in 2014) for their host country social capital bridging.
Seeking professional counseling services could promote coping for CISs. Researchers examined CISs' attitudes and their help seeking experiences. Li, Marbley, Bradley, and Lan (2016) explored the roles that acculturation, ethnic identity, English proficiency in CISs' attitudes toward seeking professional counseling services with 109 CISs. Their results suggested that only ethnic identity was a significant factor impacting CISs' help seeking attitude. CISs with stronger ethnic identities were less likely to seek professional counseling services. Lian, Wallace, Fullilove's study (2020) gathered survey data from 222 CISs online regarding their attitudes towards help seeking. Their results suggested that CISs were more likely to seek help from an intimate partner, parents, and friends when they encountered mental health problems. They were more likely to seek help from professionals when they held a higher level of coping self-efficacy, a lower level of stigma, and received a higher level of social support.

CISs has unique needs for professional services. Li, Mitts, & Whiston (2021) examined CISs expectations about career counseling by qualitative study. The results suggested that CISs expects career counseling to provide outcome-driven activities, specific services, rapport with counselor, assessment, and culturally sensitive services. Liu, Wong, (2020) investigated East Asian International students' counseling experiences, including Chinese and Korean international students. Their findings indicated that Chinese international students reported unique needs of professional services. They did not only see counseling services as the services for their personal concerns (e.g., relationship, academic stress), but also a way to get connected with American culture. They perceived a lot of barriers (e.g., stigma, lack of knowledge of counseling.) before accessing to the counseling services and difficulties (e.g., language and cultural miscommunication, unrealistic expectation of counselors and counseling services) in the counseling services in the United States.
As suggested by research, music could be a good way for CISs to cope with their negative emotions and a good signal of CISs' adjustment levels. Jia and Koku's study (2020) indicated that CISs were more likely to listen to Chinese song to manage their negative mood. Yet, the higher levels of English songs listening were more likely associated with higher rates on cultural adaption and identity development.

Ma (2020) designed four activities to break down CISs' language barriers and support their social adjustment. These four activities provided structural guidance and active mobilization, involved shared intersubjectivity and contradictions, and offered support within CISs' zone of proximal development. With these activities, CISs reported to have more awareness of their English capabilities, engaged more in social interactions, and gained positive experiences in the engagement.

Xu, O'Brien, and Chen (2020) developed an ACT protocol in Chinese Mandarin for CISs in the United States. The protocol included two sessions, and was adapted by incorporating topics popular among CISs, and metaphors famous in Chinese culture. The results suggested that the protocol led to significant reductions in CISs' symptoms of depression, stress, and anxiety.

In summary, the factors impacting CISs’ acculturation and adjustment were maladaptive perfectionism (Wei, 2007), cultural coping (e.g., forbearance coping) (Wei, 2012), family recognition through achievement (FRTA), contingency of self-worth on academic competence (Wei, 2014), mainstream and ethnic social connectedness (Du & Wei, 2015), social support (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser, & Kumar, 2014), etc. The copings that researchers suggested for CISs were maintaining and expanding their social support, building mainstream society connection and maintaining ethnic society connection, taking self-care (e.g., music), seeking help from professional services, etc.
Limitations of Current Studies

There are some limitations of current studies. We usually view CISs as a homogeneous group, because their very different cultural and language backgrounds from American students. For example, in a lot of studies, researchers had combined groups of CISs who are from Mainland China and non-Mainland China (e.g., Taiwan, Hongkong, Macau). However, they may not be that homogenous as researchers assumed. Ihle, Sodowsky, Kwan's study in 1996 illustrated that those Chinese students from mainland China and Taiwan had significantly different worldviews. Zhou, Zhang, and Stodolska (2018) explored the role of leisure for CISs to cope with their acculturative stress. They examined the acculturative stressors during their pre-arrival and postarrival transition phase of 15 first-year Chinese international graduate students. Their results suggested that these participants experienced distinctive acculturative stressors, and leisure participation was effective for acculturative stress coping, but led to negative outcomes in some situations.

A lot of studies assumed CISs' high level of acculturation (e.g., talking in class like their American peers) as the goals of adjustment and solutions to adjustment difficulties. However, we are not able to know if this fits all CISs because CISs' subjective expectations for their adjustment are different. Lu et al. (2018) interviewed nine CISs regarding their perceived challenges and their perceptions of "successful adjustment." According to their findings, CISs recognized the positive and negative aspects of both countries. From those participants' eyes, the negative aspects of China were about social instability and inequality, while the positive aspects were the great economic and employment potential in China. In comparison, they viewed the relationships in the U.S. would be simple and independent, but they perceived discrimination from American people. Those participants also articulated the social difficulties developing "close and meaningful" relationships with American people.
They attributed the causes of this difficulty to the language barrier, a lack of cultural social knowledge and skills, and a lack of shared hobbies and topics. During their stay in the United States, they received both helpful and unhelpful support from their peers, and utilized various coping strategies, e.g., self-care, increased self-acceptance and optimism. Some of those participants defined "good adjustment" as completely fitting in the host environment and interacting with people from the United States. Others defined "good adjustment" as subjective satisfaction, e.g., building their own social groups that can meet their needs, and make them feel happy in their lives. This study indicated that CISs could have very different expectations of their "good adjustment" in the United States. Some of them prefer to maintain a low level of acculturation, and not to experience acculturative stress. Both of their expectations could impact their self-efficacy, self-satisfaction, and positive/negative effects.

**Dating and Marriage Issues in China**

**Dating and Marriage Values in Traditional Chinese Culture**

Dating and marriage values have changed dramatically from ancient time to the current decade, with the impact of social values and policies. The following paragraphs would illustrate what dating and marriage values were in Chinese culture.

Higgins, Zheng, Liu, and Sun (2002) reviewed the changes of marriage values in traditional Chinese culture. From the Spring and Autumn (770-476 BC) periods and Warring States (475-221 BC), Confucian philosophy, which was admired mostly, suppressed the passionate love, and viewed marriage as a family business which should be arranged by the parents to meet with the social expectations of filial piety and social hierarchy. The Neo-Confucians, developed from the Song Dynasty (960 – 1276 AD), suppressed love and sex more strictly. Only sexual activities (e.g., kiss, sexual intercourse) within legally married couples for the purpose of having generations were culturally approved. Even till Qing
Dynasty (1644 – 1910 AD), the cultural values of the suppression of love and pre-marital sexuality still continued. The society in Qing Dynasty still held a very strict attitude towards people’s marriage and dating behaviors. During the Second World War, the western values of romantic love were firstly introduced to China. As the founding of the People’s republic of China, the Chinese government outlawed arranged marriages and ruled that choosing romantic partners with free wills would be the only legal form of marriage. However, pre-marital sex was still forbidden.

In summary, love and sex were suppressed in Chinese culture for several thousand years. The conservative social values of love and sex decided the forms and obligations of dating and marriage in traditional Chinese society. Most marriages before the second World War were arranged by parents, instead of results of dating activities. Further, sex related activities never allowed before marriage. The traditional values of marriage and dating still impacted the values in the recent decade.

Marriage and Dating Values in Contemporary Chinese Culture

Higgins, Zheng, Liu, and Sun (2002) also continued to review the marriage and dating values in the recent century. With the Open-Door policy in 1978, social norms and romantic love values have changed significantly. As China opens her door to the Western world and cultures, more and more western romantic love values entered China through cultural influences, such as music, movies and literature. Also, the changes of economic structures, the emerging nuclear family instead of extended family, and the urbanization of China contributed to Chines people’s values for marriage and romantic love, as well as pre-marital sexual behaviors. They argued that urban Chinese young people started to develop a new liberal attitude towards sex, and all expected themselves to marry for love by their own choices. They cited a paragraph from the “Time” magazine in 1988 by Burton, “millions of
Chinese people newly exposed to Western ideas, have fallen prey to notions of romantic love and sexual fulfillment…Chinese people…have been in the dark a long time…Suddenly, when the windows are opened, they feel dizzy.” This paragraph could be a general description of how overwhelmed young Chinese people feel about western values of sex at that time. Thus, more and more Chinese people were getting familiar with westernized values for romantic love and sex. These authors also reviewed the divorce rate in recent forty years and observed that there were significant increases throughout the years. They argued that this may indicate the recent changes of Chinese people’s attitudes towards love and marriage. In modern China, marriage is still a very important event for most Chinese people and their family. The nature of collectivistic society makes Chinese people rely heavily on interpersonal relationships. Chinese people valued their romantic love, but also valued their obligations to others. Other than that, marriage is also a signal of the mid adulthood. Chinese people are expected to get married and start their careers (cheng jia li ye) by a certain age. If they cannot marry by a proper age, they may get stigmatized by the society, and their parents may get anxious and concerned.

Xu, Li and Yu (2015) reviewed the impact of the Chinese government policies over Chinese people’s marriages from the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 to the current decade. In 1950, the Chinese government ruled out arranged marriages, and legalized free-choice marriages. That law explicitly stated that wives’ rights are equal to their husbands. In late 1970, the Chinese government encouraged Chinese people to marriage and give birth late. In the years from 1949 to 1977, marriages were very common, and divorce, and premarital cohabitation were rare. With the economic reformation started from 1978, China was more open to other cultures. Chinese family became more modern with the increase of individualistic attitudes and values. With policies over urbanization and birth
control, the status of Chinese family became very unique, not merely with the development of modernization of China. Their research findings suggested that the pre-marital cohabitation became more common, and intergenerational co-residence became less common in China nowadays. They concluded that Chinese family experienced substantial changes over recent years, but some old practices still continued and even became more traditional (e.g., gender roles in family).

From above, we were able to view an overall picture from a macro perspective of marriage and dating issues in modern Chinese culture and how they were impacted by policies, social norms, economics, and the western cultures.

**Chinese College Students’ Attitudes Towards Marriage and Dating**

As the emerging generation of Chinese society, college students’ attitudes usually predict the mainstream attitudes of the Chinese society in a few years later. Certainly, researchers were interested in their attitudes towards dating and marriage.

Blair and Madigan (2018) measured Chinese students’ attitudes towards marriage. Their finding suggested those Chinese students, who were at the average age of 21~22 years, reported weak attitudes to get married. Among students who reported the desire to marry, female Chinese students preferred to marry at the age of 26.6, and male Chinese students preferred to marry at the age of 27.9. They also noted that significantly more male students than female students reported the preference to marry at the age of 31 or above. Most of those students reported willingness to have two children right after they get married, which may indicate the impact of Chinese traditional values in their attitudes towards marriage. Interestingly, female Chinese students who have better academic performance considered their academic and occupational goals as more important than their marriage, but females who have better educated parents would like to marry earlier. The researchers argued that this
may indicate that daughters and their parents may think that educational attainment could be beneficial for the daughters’ occupational future, but detrimental to their marital and fertility aspirations. However, males whose parents were better educated showed patience of the timing to marry and believed that there would be a larger pool of potential candidates if they could get successful in their career. This comparison of high-educated females’ and males’ attitudes towards the timing of marriage may indicate cultural expectations for two genders. In other words, well-educated Chinese females may meet with higher pressure from family, culture and peers for marriage and careers, compared to well-educated Chinese males.

Blair and Madigan (2016) explored Chinese college students’ attitudes and expectations for dating at a public university in Shanghai, one of the most developed cities in China. They compared the views of romantic relationships between collective and individualistic cultures: obligations to the greater society and family are more important in China (collective culture), while romantic love is considered as the priority in individualistic cultures. They wondered if there are any changes of the young college students’ attitudes towards romantic relationships in China, as the generation had more exposure than the previous generation to individualism and western culture. With examination of those Chinese students’ attitudes and expectations, they suggested that Chinese young cohorts had more open attitudes towards dating, but their values were still impacted by traditional Chinese cultures and the parental expectations. As examples, about two seconds of those young adults expressed the desire to date more often. Only about one fifth of respondents agreed to have kiss or sex on their first date. Female and male Chinese young adults indicated different preferences for mate selections. Female Chinese students put men’s pragmatic qualities (e.g., well-educated, wealthy, successful, ambitions) as their priorities for mate selection, and male Chinese students’ put women’s appearance qualities (e.g., sexy, neat, attractive, well dressed)
as the priorities. Furthermore, male Chinese students have more conservative attitudes towards gender and gender roles in their future family, which aligned well with the patriarchal nature of Chinese culture. Regarding the needs of dating, Chinese students experienced peer pressure, and they showed low levels of willingness to date with people outside their social groups (e.g., religion, race/ethnicity, nationality).

Though studies indicated that most Chinese college students were not open to sex without intentions of marriage, there were still a lot of Chinese people looking for dating and hook up. Some social media or dating apps have been popular in China because of their nature of sex (Liu, 2016). Wong and Solis (2018) investigated the use of mobile dating applications in China and explored Chinese people’s motivations and hesitations to meet with strangers. Their findings suggested that the reason of the people who used the mobile dating applications in China met with strangers offline was for date and casual sex. In comparison, the reason that they chose not to meet with strangers offline was because of their fear to expose themselves to friends, colleagues, and the community.

In sum, the young generation of Chinese people appeared to have more open attitudes towards dating and marriage, compared to their previous generations, though their values were still influenced by traditional Chinese culture and their parents. They were more likely to accept pre-marital sex in dating, but only the dating for the purposes of marriage. Furthermore, the interaction of gender, social class, and education level impacted their dating and marriage values and decisions.

**Comparison of Dating and Marriage in Chinese and Western Cultures**

Chia, Chong, Cheng, Castellow, Moore and Hayes (1986) compared Chinese and American college students’ attitudes toward marriage roles in 1962 and 1984. They observed the changes of marriage roles views over time. In both countries, the students held a more

Higgins, Zheng, Liu, and Sun (2002) compared college students’ attitudes towards marriage and sexual behaviors in China and the United Kingdom. Their findings suggested that Chinese people were more likely to associate love and sex with morality and less open to sexual freedom. For example, they disagreed more about pre-marital sex without intended marriage spouse, cared more about their partner’s previous sex experience, and disagreed more with masturbation. The students in the UK and China shared some similarities in their love values. There was a gender gap in both China and Great Britain. Women, in both countries, were more likely to follow the “male-superior norm” in mate selection. The male respondents emphasized women’s appearance more, and the female respondents emphasized more the resources that the men can provide. Chinese people had more consensus about the gender roles of women and men, compared to people in the UK. They concluded that the cultural differences between the Chinese and British students’ attitudes towards marriage and sexual behaviors might be fewer with the Westernization of China.

Tang and Zuo (2013) compared the attitudes of dating between Chinese college students and American college students. Their findings suggested different dating behaviors and expectations between Chinese and American students. In comparison, the Chinese students expected to start dating at a later age (at the age of 18 years old), with less sex intercourse involved. American students started dating younger (at their age of 14.68 years old) and were more likely to have sex in their dating. In their findings, only 20% of Chinese respondents had sex, but 55% of American respondents had sex. Tang and Zuo used the dating theory of McCabe to explain these differences. They argued that dating was a
reflection of teenager maturation and the dating values were affected by social influences. They stated that dating is popular among teenagers in American culture, while dating at teenager ages was traditionally perceived as “premature love” and deviant from their parents and teachers in Chinese culture.

Madigan and Blair (2021) gave us a more comprehensive comparison between Chinese and American college students’ attitudes towards dating and sex. First, they found that American college students had more liberal attitudes towards dating, compared to their Chinese peers. Their finding of Chinese and American students’ age to start dating was similar to Tang and Zuo (2013) finding: Chinese college students started dating two and a half years later (17.3) than American college students (14.8). Also, American students had more intensive romantic relationships (e.g., dating more times, with more people, with a longer period) than Chinese students. Moreover, American college students were more open to date with people who are different from their backgrounds (e.g., SES). Second, they argued that social pressure and culture influenced those students’ attitudes towards dating. Compared to American students, Chinese students felt more pressure from their parents and friends to date and were more likely to pursue dating and having a romantic relationship. They also wanted more social approval about their romantic partner. Third, Chinese students appeared to be more conservative than American students towards sex. They would like to have more dates before sex. For most Chinese students, dating is a serious process leading to marriage, instead of a casual process only for fun. To note, Madigan and Blair thought that the entrance examination to colleges was an extremely stressful exam that Chinese students had to experience after their 12th grade, which caused their late to consider romantic relationship. However, the researchers also sensed a slight decrease of the age to start dating of Chinese
students. They argued that this slight change may indicate the slow but significant changes of Chinese college students’ openness to dating.

Madigan (2021) compared Chinese and American college students’ attitudes towards marriage. The finding suggested that Chinese and American college students had significant differences of their attitudes. For example, the Chinese students preferred to marry and have children a year later in age, compared to their American peers. The Chinese students also preferred to have fewer children in the future. The American students reported to be more willing to support gender equality in marriage, compared to their Chinese peers. The American and Chinese students shared similarity. Both of them agreed that couples would cohabit after getting married.

Marriage in China is usually not a binding with two individuals but could be the binding of the two individuals’ family. Xie and Dzindolet (1999) compared college students in China and the United States about their views towards marriage. Their findings suggested that more American students than Chinese students disagreed that parents should intervene any matters in their marriages. For example, American college students would still marry the person who their parents did not like or did not agree. However, Chinese college students would not marry the person who their parents did not like or marry the person who their parents like.

With such above comparisons, the differences about dating and marriage values between Chinese culture and Western cultures became clear. Chinese college students still had comparatively conservative attitudes towards marriage and dating than American and UK college students. They were different about their openness to sex in dating, age to start dating and have a marriage, expectations for marriage and having kids, gender values in marriage, and the degree to relate their romantic relationship to the social connections.
Marriage and Dating of Chinese International Students and Asian Americans

Yan (2017) interviewed nineteen Chinese international students regarding their stress in the United States. Her findings suggested that most of her interviewees reported their anxiety and frustration about the limited number of candidates that they can consider in the United States. Both of male and female students had a strong preference to find a romantic partner within their cultural/ethnic group. Female students complained about Chinese male students’ non-involvement in social connections, indicating they would expect men to take initiatives. Chinese female students were also anxious about their age, because “age is really a problem in the marriage market.” Chinese male students expressed their frustration about not being able to find a “pretty, submissive and caring” Chinese “dream girl,” in the United States, because most of the female Chinese students they met in the United States were academically orientated and “too manly.” Besides, long distance made their existed relationship fragile. Some of her interviewees shared their stories of falling apart, and their pain of compromising for their future and long-distance relationships.

Yan’s findings may illustrate the influence of the Chinese cultural expectations of dating and marriage in a harsh cultural adjustment and academic-heavily process, for Chinese international students. The research about Chinese international students’ marriage and dating issues or romantic relationships was very limited. As so, I also took a look at the research about Asian immigrants’ dating and marriage issues in North America. The studies about Asian American’s dating and marriage were mostly about their attitudes of interracial dating and perceived impact of their parents.

Mok (1999) examined Asian Americans’ attitudes towards dating and marriage. The findings indicated that most Asian women preferred to date men within their ethnic group. The factor of acculturation, instead of ethnic identity, was the predictor of Asian Americans’
openness to date White Americans. Interestingly, parental influenced was found to have no significant impact on Asian American women’s attitudes towards interracial dating.

Uskul, Lalonde and Cheng (2007) examined Chinese Canadians’ and European Canadians’ attitudes towards interracial dating. Their findings suggested that the identity of Canadian was decisive of Chinese Canadians’ openness to racial dating. Chinese Canadians reported more understanding about their parents if their parents required them to marry a Chinese, compared to European Canadians. This may indicate the family impact on Chinese Canadians’ mate selection. Compared to European Canadian males and Chinese Canadian females, Chinese Canadian males indicated less favorable attitudes and less openness to interracial dating.

Chinese international students were a unique population studying sojourningly in the United States, but mostly raised up under the Chinese culture. With adjustment to the new environment, they acculturated to American culture but also held some level of enculturation. Asian immigrants’ experiences may not perfectly fit Chinese international students’ experiences, because of different enculturation and acculturation level. However, the experiences of Asian immigrants regarding dating and marriage, a population who also had mixed levels of acculturation and enculturation, could give us some sense of how Chinese international students may experience about dating and marriage in the United States.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Research Design

Qualitative Design

A qualitative methodology was utilized to answer the research questions about Chinese international students’ experiences and values of marriage and dating. Reasons to use a qualitative methodology instead of a quantitative methodology included: 1) qualitative methodology could provide rich information about complicated phenomena; 2) qualitative methodology could illuminate participants’ unique experiences and interpretations; 3) qualitative methodology would allow initial exploration to develop hypotheses or theories when there is a lack of understanding about the phenomena; 4) qualitative methodology could give voices to people whose voices and views are rarely heard (Sofaer, 1999; Maxwell, 2008). As mentioned in the Introduction, dating and marriage issues of Chinese international students were scantily studied. Chinese international students’ voices over their marriage and dating issues were rarely heard. A qualitative methodology would allow us to have an initial but in-depth exploration of Chinese international students’ dating and marriage experiences. Furthermore, rather than merely understanding the phenomenon at a surface level, a qualitative methodology would illustrate how their environments and social support impact CISs views and experiences regarding romantic relationships and psychological well-being. The qualitative results could stimulate more quantitative research design and be implicative for other researchers and practitioners.
Interpretative Phenomenological Approach

This study employed interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA). IPA was firstly suggested by psychologist Jonathan Smith in 1996. IPA developed from descriptive phenomenological approach (DPA), but different from DPA. IPA has three essential theoretical bases: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Similar to DPA, IPA concerns lived experience and encourages the phenomenon to speak for itself (phenomenology). However, despite pure descriptions from participants, IPA emphasizes the meaning and interpretation of experience to people from researchers’ perspectives (hermeneutics). Moreover, IPA focused on the specific experience of people instead of general life (idiography). In all, IPA researchers intend to summarize the patterns through a small sample of cases as well as remain the individual details.

IPA is one of the most recently developed qualitative approaches, compared to other qualitative theories as it was initially suggested in 1996 (Smith et al., 2009). Though it is new, but it is a good fit for this study. Using interpretive phenomenological approach is helpful to understand participants’ lived experience about marriage and dating from the perspectives of their unique social and cultural values without distortion or prosecution (Alase, 2017). As reviewed in Chapters One and Two, Chinese international students’ experiences about dating and marriage can be unique. Their feelings and values are greatly influenced by their subjective perceptions of the world. Additionally, Chinese international students experience acculturation in the United States (Li, Heath, Jackson, Allen, and Fischer, 2017), meaning their behaviors and values may be partially Americanized. Therefore, their cultural values may be presented differently from Chinese people who have always lived in China and Americans who have always lived in the United States. From the perspective of interpretative phenomenological approach, humans have freedom with their choices, but their choices and
subjective experiences in life are influenced by social, cultural, and political contexts (Lopez & Willis, 2004). As an approach rooted in psychology, IPA allows researchers to interpret participants’ experiences through empathy and shared world experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Though researchers can never share the others’ experiences in their entirety, they can understand participants better through the bonding relationships that IPA encourages researchers to develop with their participants (Alase, 2017). Another advantage of IPA is that IPA aims to making sense from both convergent and divergent experiences to understand the “lived experiences” at a deep level (Smith et al., 2009), which fits this study’s goal of summarizing diverse experiences of Chinese international students and exploring deep mechanisms of the observed phenomenon. Compared to other qualitative theories, for example grounded theory, IPA does not pursue the commonness of targeted research issues, theory testing or generalization of the theory (Oktay, 2012), but seeks to describe the entire phenomenon and explore the deep and comparatively universal patterns based on diverse issues of the phenomenon. Therefore, IPA is an ideal qualitative approach for this study.

**Individual Interview**

Among research utilizing IPA, individual interview is the most common and effective method of data collection (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Considering that romantic experience could be sensitive for Chinese international students, individual interviews could be ideal for gaining their authentic experience.

When designing the questions for the semistructured interview, we followed IPA suggested procedures (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). IPA emphasizes particular lived experience and encouraged broad and open questions. The interview would intend to explore detailed participants’ lived experience from their perspective. Therefore, the questions were designed to encourage participants to speak out their experience with marriage and dating
issues by descriptive questions. In the interview design, several potential prompts and follow-ups were set up to help participants talk if they find some questions are too broad or too general. The interview questions were firstly developed by the dissertation author and then discussed and revised based on the feedback by several faculty and doctoral students in counseling psychology for clarity of meaning. Please see Appendix A for the list of interview questions.

**Participants**

In this study, a Chinese international student is defined as a student who was born and raised in mainland China and currently studies in the United States with an F1 visa. Considering that dating and marriage issues of LGBT Chinese international students could be significantly different from those of heterosexual students, only self-identified heterosexual Chinese international students were included in this study. This decision aligned with IPA's suggestions that the IPA research should be focused on a specific population instead of a broad population (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). As a result, the inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) participant was born and raised in mainland China and self-identifies as a Chinese international student; (2) participant is currently enrolled in an on-campus academic program in a U.S. university; (3) participant self-identified as heterosexual; (4) participant is fluent in Mandarin Chinese.

The study was approved by the author’s university Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects (Project #2873). All participants were recruited from online social groups and forums. The author sent out the recruitment flier to some Chinese international students’ online groups (e.g., WeChat groups) via snowballing and posted it in some forums which Chinese international student participated in frequently (e.g., 1point3acre.com). Twenty people responded to the recruitment flyer. Interested participants firstly completed a brief
questionnaire (e.g., name, gender, email address, academic program, and sexual orientation) to determine their eligibility. Eight people were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria (e.g., some just graduated). Then, the author contacted them via email or WeChat to schedule a time for the individual interview. Each participant was rewarded a $20 Amazon gift card as a token of appreciation for their participation. Due to the policy of social distance during the pandemic, interviews were conducted online, through WeChat or Zoom video conferences. The researcher stopped data collection after recruiting twelve participants for this study because the number of twelve has been a good number for an IPA study (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Another reason to stop after recruiting twelve participants was because these twelve participants could be good representations of the population of Chinese international students regarding their age, gender, length of their stay in the United States, and romantic relationship status. Table 1 demonstrated the participants’ demographic information. These participants were diverse about their demographic background and romantic relationship experiences (for more details, please read Table 1). Their ages ranged from 19 years old to 32 years old, and their average age is 26.75 years old. Eight female participants and four male participants were interviewed. Two of them were undergraduate students, three of them were completing their master’s degrees, and the other seven interviewees were working on their doctoral degrees. Among those doctoral students, participants #1 and #7 were in their last semester of the doctoral study and had secured job positions in the United States. Among those master’s students, participant #10 was completing her second master’s degree in the United States because she was not able to find a job with her previous master’s degree. Also, participant #2 was completing her second master’s degree because she was not fortunate enough to an H1B visa by her first master’s
degree and needed a second degree to gain another opportunity for H1B visa lottery. She already had some experience working in the United States.

Regarding relationship status, four of the twelve participants (participant #4, #6, #1, and #12) established a romantic relationship before they came to the United States. Two of them (participants #4 and #11) had already married their partners upon the interview. One participant (participant #6) broke up with his romantic partner a couple of weeks ago because of their long-distance difficulty. Another interviewee (participant #12) was having a long-distance romantic relationship with her boyfriend residing in China. Participant #3 never had a romantic relationship but was eager to have one. The other seven interviewees either had experienced romantic relationships or were in a romantic relationship at the time of interview.

Table 1. Table of Participants’ Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years/Study</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Length in the U.S. (Years)</th>
<th>Relationship Status (Duration)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5/Doctoral</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Single (2y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2/Master's</td>
<td>Data Science</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Single (1y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3/Undergrad</td>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Single (20y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5/Doctoral</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Married (2y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4/Doctoral</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Single (6m)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2/Doctoral</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Single (2m)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6/Doctoral</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Cohabiting (1y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1/Doctoral</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Married (3y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2/Undergrad</td>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cohabiting (6m)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1/Master's</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cohabiting (1y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2/Master's</td>
<td>Informatics</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Married (1m)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2/Doctoral</td>
<td>Food Science</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Long-distance Dating (4y)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Procedures

Before participating in the study, each participant reviewed and signed an informed consent form approved by the author’s university Institutional Review Board for Human
Subjects (Project #2873). Participants were informed they could terminate participating in the study at any time if they experienced any emotional or physical discomfort.

To encourage participants to express their honest views, the researcher established rapport with the interviewee and created a non-judgmental environment. In addition to introducing confidentiality, the researcher let participants know that there would be no right or wrong answers and that every voice would be essential and valued. Using primary language in the interview is helpful for participants to describe their experience and reflect on their values. Because the primary language of participants and the researcher was Mandarin Chinese, they had the interview in Mandarin Chinese. The researcher was 30 years old, cisgender female, self-identified heterosexual, married Chinese international doctoral candidate in counseling psychology and had advanced clinical skills in interviewing. During interviews, the researcher encouraged participants to describe their experience about dating and marriage issues generally. If participants wanted a direction to start talking or an interesting topic was addressed, the researcher asked appropriate follow-up questions to facilitate the interview. An interview lasted for about one hour to two hours.

To decrease subjective bias caused by the researcher, she reflected on her bias after each individual interview, as suggested by Giorgi & Giorgi (2003). Interviews were audio recorded. The audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher. All transcripts and audio recordings were encrypted and kept in an encrypted flash drive.

Data Analysis

The researcher followed the data analysis process suggested by Smith and Shinebourne (2012). There are three stages of IPA data analysis: 1) reviewing all transcripts and, 2) coding emerging themes, and 3) labeling clusters of themes. In the first stage, the researcher read all transcripts many times to get immersed with data. While reading, the
researcher made notes about her observations and reflections. Those notes were emphasized on content, language use, context, interpretations, dynamics, and emotional reactions. In the second stage, the researcher transformed the initial notes to emerging themes. The goal at this stage was to use a more abstract phrase to reflect the psychological conceptualization of those notes. In the final stage, the researcher grouped similar emerging themes together and labeled clusters with major themes. The best IPA results should include both divergent and convergent themes (Smith, 2011). In other words, the best IPA results should grasp the commons among the data but also present diverse phenomenon. Therefore, in the results section, the researcher presented general themes that summarized patterns across these participants and their individual differences.

Furthermore, the researcher was conscious that interview and data analysis inevitably included the researcher’s subjective bias. For example, the researcher expected to hear how those international students managed their acculturative stress (e.g., different dating rituals in the United States) regarding their dating and marriage issues because she had read many research papers discussing about acculturative stress of CISs. However, she realized her assumptions might cause bias in data collection, analysis, and interpretations, especially when many participants denied pressure to be acculturated. She also realized that her status as a married Chinese international female student, who experienced severe acculturative stress, may have made her be more attentive to interviewees’ experiences that she resonated more. To manage bias in data collection, analysis and interpretation, the researcher designed general questions in semi-structured interview to encourage the participants to have free discussion about their experiences regarding dating and marriage. The researcher also constantly reflected on her subjective bias during data collection, analysis and interpretation. For example, the researcher read all transcripts repeatedly on different days, trying to minimize
any bias in interpreting the data and catch every critical information from the data. The researcher also realized that there might be other bias in the study but cannot be managed, so she noted them in the dissertation writing. For example, the researcher described the administrative bias in the limitation section. Additionally, sensitivity and transparency are two crucial criteria to evaluate the quality of an IPA study (Smith et al., 2009). A good IPA study should be sensitive to the data, which means each argument should be supported by interview data. As a result, the researcher cited participants’ verbatim extracts with each theme and argument in the results section. The verbatim extracts were translated to English from Chinese by the researcher. Second, transparency of a good IPA study should be addressed by presenting what was done in data analysis. For this reason, the researcher explained the coding process in this dissertation paper through describing the process in results section and listing emerging themes and their corresponding major themes in tables, as what Smith and Shinebourne suggested in their paper (2012).
CHAPTER FOUR
RESULTS

Current data illustrated a diverse picture of Chinese international students’ dating and marriage issues. Three major themes were used to label the clusters of many emerging subthemes from the analysis of participants’ interviews. Verbatim extracts were presented with themes to support the coding of those themes (Smith, 2011). However, simply describing these themes might not enough to reflect the clustering and conceptualizing process in data analysis, because the dating and marriage story of Chinese international students includes many complexities. Bruce (2007) suggested that diagrams of data analysis process could be helpful to clarify the complicated data analysis interaction process. Therefore, the researcher drew figures to reflect the relationships among those themes so that readers can visualize these themes and understand the coding process more clearly. Figures 1, 2, and 3 were shown at the end of respective themes. In these figures, ovals mean major themes and rectangles mean subthemes. Arrows indicated the clustering process of themes and subthemes. For example, in figure 1, “first time of sex…”, “multiple sex relationships…”, “hook up…”, “talk sex publicly” was clustered by a higher level of theme “understanding about American culture…,” because participants developed their understanding about American culture from these four perceptions. Then, the arrow from their understanding about American culture to CISs’ attitudes towards dating and marriage reflected that their understanding was a component of their attitudes. Additionally, the researcher also listed subthemes and themes in the tables as advised by Smith and Shinebourne to illustrate data transparently (2012). Because one important goal of IPA is to
summarize divergent and convergent themes, the researcher calculated the number of the participants who mentioned such themes in their interviews to show more details of the “lived experience” to readers.

**Theme 1: Attitudes towards Sex and Romantic Relationships**

Chinese international students appeared to have variant attitudes towards sex and romantic relationships. Some participants appeared to be comparatively conservative about dating and marriage. For example, they would like only to date and have sex with someone they were certain to marry in the future. In contrast, some participants were more open to dating without purposes of marriage and sought hooking up. It was hard to tell what caused such individual differences for CISs sharing similar cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, their attitudes and changes in the United States may have reflected the cultural influence that impacted their attitudes and values.

When asking about their attitudes toward sex and romantic relationships, all of them reported openness to pre-marital sex. However, among those participants, some participants prohibited pre-marital sex when they were in China (participant #1, #8, #9). During their stay in the United States, four participants reported that they changed their attitudes towards pre-marital sex to some extent. Participant #9 was a representative of those participants. She described the significant change in her attitudes toward sex:

> When I was in high school (in China), I felt disgusted about pre-marital sex behaviors. I never expected myself to have pre-marital sexual behaviors. My values (regarding pre-marital sex) changed after I came to the United States. I now live together with my boyfriend. I had no idea what caused this change…My friend who studied in the United States also experienced a similar change. With more reflection on her personal experience, participant #9 summarized potential factors leading to her change:

> I learned from a (Chinese) blogger who also lived in the United States. She stated that the girls’ first time was not to give but to gain. Having sex doesn’t mean you would be dirty. I was really shocked. I realized that having pre-marital sex was not a significant issue…My class about gender discussed pre-marital sex behaviors. The
discussion made me realize that emphasizing too much on the girls’ first time was an act of objectifying women…I was shocked when I knew Americans usually had their first sex at 15~16 years old in high school. I saw those data from some surveys on social media…This makes me feel okay to discuss sex with my friends in the United States.

From the descriptions of participant #9, she experienced a significant change regarding attitudes towards pre-marital sex after she learned some different viewpoints of pre-marital sexual behaviors from her friends and co-nationals in the United States and surveys investigating her American peers’ sex behaviors. From the class discussion and social communications with her friends, she realized that sex could be openly discussed in American culture. Therefore, she was able to consciously face the meaning of sex and produced significant insights, which were previously ignored when she studied in China before college.

Not surprisingly, all participants argued that American people were open to sex. Some of them learned from surveys like participant #9, and others learned from T.V. shows and their observations from peers in the United States. Instead of merely focusing on pre-marital sex, CISs also mentioned exclusive commitment and responsibility as their specific understandings of the differences between Chinese and American romantic relationships cultures. All participants used “chaos” (乱) to describe Americans’ sex relationships. From their perspective, most young Chinese were open to pre-marital sex though it was rarely publicly discussed in China. However, American people were more likely to have multiple romantic relationships with commitments. CISs viewed the exclusive commitment to one romantic relationship (e.g., not to hook up, not to date multiple people simultaneously, and not to have too many romantic relationships in a lifetime) as a more critical component of the definitions of romantic relationships in Chinese culture. For example, participants #4 and #8 described their understanding of sex in American culture:

Participant #3 and #8 explained why they thought American people had “chaotic”
American people are very open to sex. I remembered watching a T.V. show about the Kardashians family. They started to have sex when they were only 14 years old!... Also, I heard that one of my dormmates, who is an American, had sex with her boyfriend in the restroom at our level...I was shocked at the beginning, but now I am used to it because it is none of my business. I am already above 14 years old. But I now think it is normal to see pre-marital sex, but I don’t know if I want to have it. (Participant #3)

I can accept pre-marital sex, but I don’t want to act on it because I have no motivations to do so. (The first time) is an important capital for me. I would like to have this with my committed (romantic) partner...But I think I am open because I enjoy multiple romantic relationships. My parents were concerned about my capriciousness [花心] with romantic relationships. I never told my friends in China about this. Coming to the United States, I became more open to discuss (about my experience and values) with my friends, because I witnessed a lot of examples, such as open relationships in the United States. I am glad to find that I am actually less open than American people. (Participant #8)

Participant #10 mentioned the T.V. show Friends enlightening her understanding of American sex culture:

Because of American culture, I think sex is not a big issue...In many American T.V. shows, people were very relaxed when discussing sex...for example, I remembered someone in Friends stated that people could sleep with their friends. I also have such friends (in the U.S.). They just need to solve physiological needs.

Like participant #3, participant #1 and #2 expressed similar attitudes towards pre-marital sex. They accepted pre-marital sex as common in their culture, but they were ambivalent about acting on pre-marital sex. Interestingly, participant #5 stated his values of romantic relationships remained the same in the United States because he did not think there were significant differences between American and Chinese culture regarding sex and romantic relationships:

I feel young people from Chinese culture are not that different from their American peers (regarding their attitudes towards pre-marital sex). I feel pretty relaxed about dating and marriage, so I did not overthink this issue...I think that sex could happen to Americans at all stages of their dating process. I guess, I don’t know.
Unlike participant #5, participant #1 was clearly aware of the differences between Chinese and American values about sex, but she chose not to change:

I know my peers around me became more open to sex. I also understand that sex is very common among Americans. But I don’t want to follow them. I am Chinese. I won’t have pre-marital sex.

Participants #4 and #11 reported similar attitudes and reasons. Statements from participants #4, #5, and #11 may indicate the impact of their strong identity with Chinese culture on their values towards sex and romantic relationships.

In the above, CISs’ unique understanding of cultural differences regarding sex and romantic relationships was summarized. Meanwhile, the researcher found out that some of them changed their attitudes because of cultural adjustment, but some chose to preserve their original values. Surprisingly, a large group of participants (participant #1, #2, #4, #7, #8, #10) identified the significant cultural impact that did not change their values but helped them identify and positively strengthen their values. They disclosed reasons: they feel less judgmental and more controlled of their romantic and dating values and choices because of the freedom inherited from the American culture. For example, participant #10 identified herself as more open compared to her Chinese peers. She was afraid to tell other people about her romantic values in China because some of her dating values and behaviors were not culturally admired in China. However, she became more comfortable speaking about her values towards romantic relationships and more confident to date more people after observing the openness of the romantic relationship in American culture.

My experiences of romantic relationships are complicated. My value (about romantic relationships) was very different from my friends in China. I usually hide my values when I was in China. When staying in the United States, I identified more about my own values… Coming to the United States, I realized that most Americans are more open than me (to sex). They even have open relationships! I also see American culture has more openness to diversity and tolerance of difference, such as LGBT+ groups. This gives me more freedom to identify my own values. (Participant #10)
With the empowerment of values freedom, comparatively conservative participants also became more assertive about their attitudes towards romantic relationships:

I was concerned when I was in China because my peers were more open to sex than me. I was afraid if I was weird...However, I have seen so many odd persons in the United States. America is very tolerable of those people. I know American culture is open to sex, but I just want to be myself. No one would comment on me. (Participant #7)

I came to the United States in my sophomore year. I have made a lot of decisions in my life on my own. This experience facilitated my independence from the family and others’ evaluations. I am more confident about my own values. I noticed significant differences between American culture and Chinese culture. Seeing how wild American people are living, I feel okay about my different lifestyles. I accept how American people live, but I don’t want to live like them. (Participant #2)

The above verbatim quotes indicated that psychological maturation might have facilitated this process. In sum, during CISs adjustment to American culture, some of them changed their values as results of acculturation. Others remained or insisted more on their original values though they acknowledged the differences between their values and American people’s values. It might be because they developed a cultural identity through their experience of psychological maturation and the non-judgmental environments of this hosting culture. This theme demonstrated an overall picture of CISs’ attitudes and values towards sex and romantic relationships. From this theme, we got to know CISs’ experience and values regarding romantic relationships. In particular, the roles of American and Chinese cultures in CISs’ attitudes and values regarding sex and romantic relationships were illustrated.
Table 2. Prevalence of Subthemes in Major Theme 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Participant#</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percentage%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes more open.</td>
<td>3, 6, 9, 12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes remained.</td>
<td>1, 4, 5, 11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think Chinese people’s values are similar.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledging differences but no desire to change.</td>
<td>1, 4, 11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes strengthened.</td>
<td>1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding that American are more open and “chaotic” about sex and romantic relationships.</td>
<td>all</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First sex age.</td>
<td>2, 3, 8, 9, 10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-committed sex intercourse.</td>
<td>2, 3, 9, 12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open relationships.</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk sex publicly.</td>
<td>all</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Relationships of Subthemes in Theme 1
Theme 2: Positive and Negative Influences

Romantic relationships were necessary for our participants. All of them were eager for or had experienced romantic relationships in their life. Their experience or eagerness with romantic relationships brought them both negative and positive influences in their lives. Negative consequences were led by their difficulty finding a romantic partner, long-distance relationships, and their struggles and distress due to conflicts of their values and their international student status.

First, they reported having many barriers to find a romantic partner in the United States. These participants concluded to meet difficulties such as limited networks, limited candidates, limited time, and preference for co-nationals. Most participants stated that they came to the United States because they would like to study in an American university, which would provide them a more promising career future, a broader horizon, and more possibilities in their future career plan. However, their focus on academic study and future careers suppressed our interviewees’ pursuit of romantic relationships and family life. Participant #1, #2, #3, and #5 described heavy coursework in American universities and limited candidates that could prevent CISs from finding an ideal romantic partner and pursuing romantic relationships. Participant #3, who is a junior undergraduate student studying at a Midwestern University, stated that she would like to find a dating partner. But she cannot find an appropriate one because she had no time outside her study to find candidates and hang out with them.

Academic stress is enormous as a student studying in an American university. I have a lot of assignments to do every day. Every assignment will be counted for the overall GPA, so I can’t spare anytime to socialize.

Moreover, limited social networks in the United States was also a barrier for CISs to find a romantic partner. For this reason, participants #1, #2, #7 tried to expand their social networks and find dating candidates through American dating apps (e.g., Coffee Meats Bagel,
Tinder) and Chinese American dating apps (e.g., She Says). Dating apps allowed them to communicate with people who were not within their social networks. Interestingly, participant #7 also viewed dating apps as an essential way to get to know new people and cultures in the United States.

I like dating different people through tinder because I am curious about people in the United States. I want to hang out with them and get to know their backgrounds and stories… they don’t know me so that they won’t judge me. I have no other ways to understand American culture deeply, and I feel dating is a good way for American people to communicate with me.

Their preferences for co-nationals may be another barrier for our interviewees to find a romantic partner. Almost all of our interviewees reported preferences for co-nationals as their romantic partners. To note, most of our female interviewees were open to date non-Chinese, though they finally decided to limit to co-nationals. Some of them (participant#1, #2, #8, #9, #10) dated non-Chinese in the United States but experienced cultural barriers of communication and empathy.

I dreamed of dating an American guy and having a biracial baby before coming to the United States. But it is not easy for me to communicate with them. I dated an American guy, who is my classmate. He invited me to hang out. It was hard for us to find a topic interesting to both of us…Moreover, we cannot get each other’s points. I felt bored and worried when dating him. I realized that I prefer to date a Chinese international student. We have similar experience and feel close when talking about our experience in the United States. (Participant #9)

I am open to date Americans. But it is hard for us to find common topics. I won’t take the initiative to date an American. But I can try to hang out with them if they take the initiative and would like to learn Chinese culture for me. (Participant #2)

In contrast, most of our male interviewees were not open to date non-Chinese.

I don’t like American girls. We are so different. There is no possibility for us to be together. (Participant #7)

Furthermore, most interviewees preferred Chinese international students other than Chinese who had no overseas studying experience. Participant #6 explained his viewpoint.
I would prefer to marry a Chinese girl who is studying or studied in the United States. The experience as an international student in the United States is unique. I would hope that my wife can understand my experience. Also, studying in the United States means that she is open to new things and can come out of her comfort zone. From my values, I hope to marry a girl whose family and personal background could be equal to mine (men dang hu dui). For me, a girl who studied in the United States would be more likely to match my family and personal backgrounds.

For those participants who luckily found a romantic partner, long-distance relationships caused significant stress and negative affect.

I have not met my boyfriend and family for more than a year. It is hard to communicate with my boyfriend. We both have work during the daytime, so we can only video chat at the weekend. It is great to talk to him about my life. Otherwise, I may be depressed because of loneliness. (Participant #12)

To avoid distress from long-distance relationships and keep connection with their romantic partners, these participants made compromises and sacrifices, which brought/will bring them positive influences.

I worked in Hongkong when my boyfriend studied in the United States. To stay with him, I decided to come to the United States to study further. I only applied to his university and the universities around that location. Luckily, I was admitted to his university, and therefore we can stay together. (Participant #11)

I am thinking about going back to China or move to another country, maybe Singapore, after graduation. My boyfriend cannot find an excellent job in the United States because of his visa, but he may find a good job in Singapore. I know it will be easier for me to find a job in the United States… But I can stay with my boyfriend if I leave the United States. (Participant #12)

Despite difficulty finding a romantic partner and long-distance relationships, the struggles and distress coming from their student status, CISs’ cultural values and gender and age pressure contributed significantly to the negative influences. For more examples and details about the subtheme struggles and distress, please read the descriptions in Theme 3. These struggles and distress did cause not only significant negative influences but also impacted CISs’ expectations and experience regarding dating and marriage.
In sum, the general barriers as Chinese international students, such as limited social networks and cultural differences, were significant factors causing difficulties and tension among CISs’ romantic relationships. However, CISs also experienced positive influences connecting to their romantic relationships. Indeed, positive experience with romantic relationships made those CISs better cope with adjustment pressure, especially loneliness and helplessness. As CISs in the United States, they experienced significant adjustment pressure, such as different settings of academic environments and unfamiliar living environments. In particular, coming to the United States was usually their first time being independent. Let’s hear how participants #3 and #4 described their experience and motivations for having a romantic partner.

I am fortunate to have my girlfriend support me to go through a tough time in the United States. I feel lonely staying in this country. Studying in the United States is quite challenging… Talking to my girlfriend is helpful for me to feel supported and be more motivated in this environment. (Participant #4)

I am sometimes jealous of my classmates who have a boyfriend here. I feel lonely in this country. Furthermore, I sometimes feel helpless. I don’t have a car, so I have to take uber to grocery stores. But, for my classmates, they can rely on their boyfriends to get goods from grocery stores…They can ask their boyfriends for help when they need it…I hope to have a boyfriend to help me. (Participant #3)

From above, we could see that Chinese CISs may have unique interpretations and needs of romantic relationships. They viewed romantic partners not only as someone to love but also someone to rely on and gain support from, both emotionally and physically.

CISs' specialized needs for romantic relationships may explain why Chinese international students’ couples seemed to have more stable relationships than student couples in China. They experienced adjustment pressure, supported each other, and overcame difficulties together in the United States. CISs usually have limited networks in the United States. Therefore, romantic partners may choose to trust and rely only on each other in this
new environment and pressured adjustment process. Participant #11 explained her experience and thoughts.

I think my relationship with my boyfriend is different than my peers in China. They date people who they like, or they believe ideal for marriage. My boyfriend and I experienced a lot together. Our experience has made us more cohesive. We don’t feel that different about marriage because we have already lived together for a long time, like we have married a long time. (Participant #11)

Several participants mentioned observing cohabitating popular among Chinese international students (Participant #3, #4, #8, #11). They noticed many Chinese international dating couples cohabited together after they committed to their dating relationship. Most CISs do not have family members or relatives in the United States. They usually lease their housings near campus. It is natural for them to choose someone they would like to spend time with to rent a place together. Also, they can save money for living expenses if they share a room. Participant #9 disclosed her decisions about cohabitating with her boyfriend, who she dated for five months.

It is so natural for us to move together. I did not think too much about this decision... We would like to see each other every day. If we stay in different housings, it would be difficult for us to meet because we are so busy with our academic work. Also, it will be great to have a roommate who I like...My parents know that I am dating him, but they don’t know that I live with him. I don’t dare to tell my parents. (Participant #9).

The disclosure from participant #12 may also indicate some issues around her and her parents’ values about sexual behavior. Away from parents seemed to help our participants feel less stressed about parenting or traditional Chinese values. In the subtheme Struggles and Distress (in Theme 3), we discussed age and gender pressure were vital stressors. Physically away from parents enabled these participants more comfortable about their own decisions and more relieved of cultural stress regarding dating and marriage.

My mother and relatives urged me to marry, but I am not prepared. I am comfortable with my current life. I don’t know what to say to my mom, which becomes one of our communication problems. I am glad I am now away from them, so I don’t need to confront them every day. (Participant #7).
The above verbatim extracts showed some CISs’ positive feelings about getting away physically from their family and cultural stress. Staying in the United States helps them ignore the cultural pressure regarding dating and marriage from familiar social networks and traditional Chinese culture.

Table 3. Prevalence of Subthemes in Theme 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percentage%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Struggles (see Theme 3).</td>
<td>all</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cope with adjustment pressure.</td>
<td>1,2,3,4,7,8,9,10,11,12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs for romantic relationships.</td>
<td>3,8,9,11,12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty finding a romantic partner.</td>
<td>all</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference for co-nationals; limited candidates.</td>
<td>all</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited Time.</td>
<td>3,8,9,12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long distance relationships difficulties.</td>
<td>2,4,6,11,12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual support in the relationship.</td>
<td>3,4,6,7,8,9,11,12,13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIS couples are more cohesive and resilient.</td>
<td>4,8,9,11,12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabitating</td>
<td>3,4,8,9,11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physically away from family pressure and parents.</td>
<td>1,2,5,7,8,9,10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long distance relationships compromise.</td>
<td>4,11,12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme 3: Expectations and Experience Regarding Dating and Marriage

Generally, these participants demonstrated different expectations and experience regarding their dating and marriage. Some participants were married, but others were single (please see Table 1 Demographic Information for more examples). Some participants expected to marry after completing academic studies, while others married during the academic study. However, they appeared to have similar motivations, interpretations, and struggles underlying their decisions and thoughts of dating and marriage issues. Their shared opinions and values may indicate their unique bi-cultural values regarding dating and marriage issues.

Figure 3 was composed of three groups of subthemes: international student status, Chinese cultural values, and struggles and distress. These three subthemes impacted each other and comprehensively composed the major theme of expectation and experience regarding dating and marriage.
Regarding the subtheme of Chinese cultural values, the researcher named several significant Chinese cultural values emerging from interviews. The Chinese cultural values included but were not limited to Cheng Jia Li Ye, Meng Dang Hu Dui, Jie Hun Sheng Zi, parental reliance, and family bonding. We used a couple of Chinese terms here because these terms are particular and vital in Chinese culture. Cheng Jia Li Ye means that marry and start career literally. In Chinese culture, Chinese people are usually expected to get married after being stabilized with their careers by a certain age. Usually, Chinese females were expected to marry by the age of 26 or 27, and men were about the age of 30. Jie Hun Sheng Zi represented Chinese expectations of having children right after marriage. Meng Dang Hu Dui reflected Chinese people's expectations to marry a partner with similar individual and family backgrounds. In addition to Cheng Jia Li Ye, Meng Dang Hu Dui, and Jie Hun Sheng Zi, CISs participants appeared to rely much on their parents regarding marriage decisions, such as romantic partner and marriage age. They also viewed getting married as not only bonding with two individuals but bonding between two families.

In sum, marrying after having a stable career and income (Cheng Jia Li Ye), having children soon after getting married (Jie Hun Sheng Zi), marry by a certain age, and parental satisfaction (Men Dang Hu Dui) played interactive roles in our interviewees’ dating and marriage issues. Those Chinese cultural values, along with their student status, worked together to cause Chinese international students’ stress about dating and marriage. For example, many of our participants looked forward to getting married after graduation, though they perceived pressure to match their peers. Therefore, their anxiety about finding a romantic partner might be conflicting with their academic ambition in the United States. More specifically, because of the student status and Chinese cultural values, they felt that they could not get married in their twenties or thirties, like their non-student peers. Even those who had already found a romantic partner may have experienced emotional frustration
and distress because they could not have a financially stable life. Many participants viewed a financially stable life as a prerequisite of marriage because they believed they would have babies right after getting married. Not surprisingly, the conflict of those Chinese cultural values and their student status could cause significant negative affect and lower their self-efficacy.

Participants #4, #7, and #8 disclosed that their expectations for Cheng Jia Li Ye and pressure to be financially stable in the United States.

I won’t have sex with my girlfriend if I cannot take the responsibility for her future. I would only have sex with her after I feel I will be capable of giving her a financially stable and emotionally happy life. (Participant #4)

My mother persuaded me to marry my partner. I felt it was not a good timing because both of us have not graduated and started working. I still had concerns about financial status at that time because we did not earn a lot. (Participant #8)

I could not marry as a student. Though Ph.D. students have stipends, that money cannot allow us to have a quality life. I expected to have a respected and quality family life. After finding a job, I feel less anxious to make a promise to my girlfriend. (Participant #7)

To note, financial responsibility appeared to be more evident with the male participants. In comparison, age pressure performed to be more obvious for our female interviewees. Almost every female participant mentioned the pressure to marry by a certain age. They were anxious about studying as an “old” lady in the United States. Being away from China and their previous social networks were helpful for them to experience less anxiety in their daily life. However, when they communicate with their parents, family relatives, and Chinese friends, this anxiety became too significant to neglect. The age pressure was not merely from them or their family but also very valid in the Chinese mating market. In other words, even if CISs changed their values in terms of marriage age in the United States, they would still meet with difficulties finding a romantic partner in China. Some of their parents also acknowledged it and even advised them to find a Chinese
international student as their partner before they came back to China because mating market in the U.S. was more tolerable of age. This expectation could increase those students’ pressure to find a romantic partner when they focused heavily on their academics. Participant #1 described her anxiety.

I am concerned about finding a boyfriend. You know my age...I am about to graduate. Lots of my friends are married, but I am still single. I went to several friends’ parties but still could not find a suitable candidate…This made me so upset.

Parental involvement appeared to be inevitable and nonnegligible in CISs’ marriage and dating issues. Many of our participants emphasized their parents’ preferences for their romantic partners’ cultural and familial backgrounds. Participant #5 prefer to date co-nationals because he perceived his parents’ expectations:

I won’t date an American girl because my parents do not want me to marry a foreigner…It will be hard for them to communicate with a foreigner. (Participant #5)

Furthermore, they also looked at their parents’ judgments about their marriage age and their partners’ family backgrounds to decide whether and when to get married. Their willingness to incorporate their parents’ suggestions makes sense through the Chinese cultural values of filial piety and their student status. With Chinese cultural values of filial piety, they would like to consider their parents’ suggestions for this significant life decision. As students, they are not ready to live up by themselves. They still need financial support from their parents. In our sample, the relationship with parents-in-law in China was also crucial for the participants’ marriage life in the United States. To keep filial piety with them and to receive verbal approval and financial support from both sides of parents were significant in some of our participants’ lives. Participants #6 and #8 described how their parents influenced their marriage decisions.

When my girlfriend’s parents had a conversation with my parents about our marriage, I noticed that my mother chuckled lightly. She felt it was too early for me to get married. My family (parents and me) are not ready to have a newborn in the family. No one can take care of the baby. Also, my girlfriend was not willing to
come to the United States. How can I marry a person who is not going to stay with me? I hope she can come to the United States because this means she is also willing to expand her horizon, like me. (Participant #6)

I did not expect to marry that early. I actually would like to date more people. But my mother liked him. She urged me to marry him…Thinking about my age (26 years old), I thought it was a good timing to get married. His parents’ financial conditions were similar to my parents’. I could not find a reason not to marry him at that point. (Participant #8)

From participant #6 and #8’s disclosure, we can see that they were strongly influenced by Jie Hun Sheng Zi, Cheng Jia Li Ye, Meng Dang Hu Dui, and family bonding those Chinese cultural values. Participant #6 was prohibited from marrying by those values and his parents’ suggestions, while participant #8 was encouraged by those cultural values to marry even she was not personally prepared. Indeed, parents’ financial support impacted CISs’ decisions of romantic issues.

I agree to marry because our parents promised to help us… They wanted us to marry. His parents bought a house and two cars for us. They promised to help if we have a baby. So, I felt okay to marry. (Participant #8)

In sum, these Chinese values regarding marriage age and preconditions, mate selection, parental involvement, and individual maturation have hugely impacted our CISs participants. Some of these participants lowered the impact of those values on them by communicating with American values and physically getting away from Chinese values. Examples are as follows.

I was shocked by the dating culture in the United States. I heard a lot of (romantic relationship) drama from American T.V. shows and social media. I was overwhelmed. This impacted my values a lot. (Participant #9)

I am about thirty years old this year. If I am in China, there must be a lot of people urging me to marry. But here, I feel I can still wait even I am 35 years old. I am not that anxious here…I have seen a lot of single women here. (Participant #2)

I was hesitant to start a doctoral program because I will be about 30 years old when I finish the doctoral program. I heard a lot in China that women should have babies before 30 years old because of childbearing concerns. After I came to the United States, I saw many women still single even after 35 years old. I also saw a lot of
Chinese women have their first baby after 35 years old. I feel less anxious about having a baby after 30 years old. (Participant #12)

In contrast, some participants increased their coherence to these Chinese cultural values by getting psychologically closer to their parents. These participants valued their parents’ suggestions more because they cherished their parents' love behind those suggestions, and they emphasized their parents’ distress because of their left. Participant #8 reflected on her reasons for incorporating her mother’s advice for mate selection and marriage.

I won’t listen to my mom if I am still in China. I came to the United States because I would like to escape from my mother’s control. She wants to control my life. Now my wish of escaping from her control has been partially satisfied. However, I feel my mother is miserable. She misses me so much…If it is not something I feel very uncomfortable with, I usually say yes to her.

Also, they valued their parents’ suggestions more because they trusted their parents’ experiences of marriage and love and their filial piety with the parents.

My parents set a good role model for me. I would like to have their kind of marriage. They take care of each other and raise me together. I would like to be equally involved in child-rearing with my wife in the future…They told me not to be anxious about getting married. They suggested me getting married after I graduate and know where I will settle down for a career. (Participant #6)

All in all, Chinese cultural values shaped CISs' values regarding dating and marriage. Their experience with American culture and their relationship with their parents influenced the importance of Chinese cultural values in their values and experience about dating and marriage issues. Despite Chinese cultural values, their status as international students also greatly influenced their values and experience about dating and marriage.

As international students, the participants were ambitious about their academics and career, which motivated them to overcome adjustment difficulties in the United States. However, this academic ambition conflicted with the Chinese cultural value about marrying by a certain age. CISs were still learning and did not start their careers. With ambitious
academic goals, they usually finished academic study at a comparatively late age. Therefore, they perceived tremendous pressure from Chinese traditional culture regarding dating and marriage. Participant #9 described her strong academic motivations and her struggles regarding romantic relationships.

I am planning to marry after I get my doctoral degree. My parents expected me to study in the United States. They told me that they had prepared enough money for my future doctoral study. I hope to marry and have children after completing academic study in the United States…I am still a sophomore. I don’t know what to promise my boyfriend. (Participant #9)

This status of students also added to financial pressure, which conflicted with Chinese cultural expectations of having a family after having a stable career.

I feel rushed to graduate. I want to give my girlfriend a good life with stable financial status. (Participant #6)

I am not prepared for marriage because I am still a student. I don’t know how to guarantee me and my wife’s life. I don’t know what to promise to her and her parents. I am glad that I am going to graduate soon but now feel anxious to find a highly paid job. (Participant #4)

Overall, the conflict between CISs’ cultural expectations and their international student status led to struggles and stress in their life studying in the United States. These three issues came together to form and cause their expectations and experience regarding dating and marriage in this important and unique period of their life.
Table 4. Prevalence of Subthemes in Theme 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percentage%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International Student Status</td>
<td>all</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial instability</td>
<td>1,4,5,6,7,8,11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic and career ambition</td>
<td>all</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future uncertainty</td>
<td>1,2,4,5,6,11,12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggles and Distress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age pressure</td>
<td>1,2,8,12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>5,6,7,8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Cultural Values</td>
<td>all</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheng Jia Li Ye</td>
<td>all</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jie Hun Sheng Zi</td>
<td>4,5,6,7,8,9,11,12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Bonding</td>
<td>4,6,8,11,12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men Dang Hu Dui</td>
<td>4,5,6,8,9,11,12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease: American culture influence</td>
<td>1,2,3,9,10,12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease: Physically away from family and Chinese culture</td>
<td>1,2,3,5,7,9,10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase: Psychologically closer to parents</td>
<td>4,5,6,8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3. Relationships of Subthemes in Theme 3
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

Three major themes and clusters of subthemes were extracted. They answered the following research questions: 1) what CISs’ dating and marriage issues were; 2) what factors impacted CISs’ feelings, thoughts and experience of dating and marriage; 3) how CISs’ dating and marriage issues impacted their subjective well-being and 4) how culture plays a role as to CISs’ dating and marriage issues. The majority of our study’s results were supported by previous literature about Chinese college students in China or Chinese international students in North America (including U.S. and Canada). For example, most of our participants self-reported being open to pre-marital sex before and after they came to the United States. This finding aligned well with studies investigating college students in China (e.g., Blair & Madigan, 2016, 2018; Madigan & Blair, 2021; Tang & Zuo, 2013). Also, this study indicated the importance of parental opinions in CISs’ dating and marriage decisions, which was supported by the studies about parental influences over on Chinese people’s dating and marriage decisions (Xie & Dzindolet, 1999; Uskul et al., 2007; Blair & Madigan, 2016). Furthermore, the current participants appeared to be ambitious about their academics and career, in consistence with previous findings (e.g., Tang, Collier, and Witt, 2018; Chao, Hegarty, Angelidis, and Lu, 2019) regarding CISs' motivations to study overseas. Regarding the impact of romantic relationships on their subjective well-being, the participants reported more positive than negative influences. With the company of their romantic partners, the participants experienced less loneliness and increased support and motivation, which aligned with Wallace et al. (2020)’s finding that not having a stable partner led to mental health
problems among international students. The findings on the difficulties in finding romantic partners (e.g., limited candidates, academic focus) and expectations of dating and marriage (e.g., preference for co-nationals) also aligned with Zhang’s study (2016).

Despite the aforementioned support for previous findings, this study also had some new findings, adding new information to the literature. These new findings may indicate cultural uniqueness of CISs population. For example, Blair and Madigan (2016) suggested that Chinese college students became more open towards dating, but their dating and marriage values were still impacted by their parental expectations and traditional Chinese cultures. This study suggested that international student status was an additional important factor that interacted with cultural values and family expectations and strongly impacted CISs’ attitudes towards dating and marriage.

**Gender Differences**

Gender differences were significant in the results of this study. When inquiring preference for dating candidates, more female participants than male participants reported openness to date non-Chinese. This finding was similar to previous finding that Asian women were more likely to date Whites than their Asian men peers (Mok, 1999). According to Mok, Asian men may be less likely to date Whites than their Asian women peers because they need to take more initiatives in dating invitation, but they may either be discouraged from their parents of dating or feel that they are not as attractive as their Asian women peers towards Whites. Male CISs may have low self-efficacy about inviting White girls for dating. In contrast, female CISs may only need to respond to dating invitations so it would be easier for female CISs to date non-Chinese. This may also be related to CISs’ mate selection criteria. Higgins, Zheng, Liu, and Sun (2002) found that female Chinese students emphasized resources (e.g., financial capability) in their mate selection, while male Chinese students emphasized their female partners’ appearance. Yan (2017) had a similar conclusion that male
CISs preferred to find a conational who would be good-looking, caring and submissive, while female CISs were more attracted to males with good grades or careers. The participants of this study also mentioned similar mate selection criteria in their interviews. Male CISs might experience cultural or language barriers which could make them feel vulnerable and even submissive when dating non-Chinese. Moreover, some participants of this study indicated their expectations of receiving financial support from parents on both sides, which motivated them to choose a co-national who shared similar cultural values regarding parental support. Their specific needs for financial support and shared cultural values within family aligned with this study’s conclusion that CISs had special needs regarding marriage and dating because of their status as international students and unique cultural values.

Interestingly, our study found that female participants had been more open to interracial dating even before they came to the United States. Their openness to interracial dating actually decreased after coming to the United States and/or having dating experience with non-Chinese in the United States. Because the transition pattern of female CISs regarding their openness to interracial dating seemed to be similar to the change that other CISs experienced in their social interpersonal relationships, this transition pattern might be explained as the response to acculturative stress and racial/cultural discrimination. Yao (2016; 2018) found that CISs had strong desires to make friends with American people before they arrived in China but had negative experience connecting with American students because of perceptions of neo-racism and otherings. Connecting with co-nationals enabled CISs to have their cultural values preserved and expressed within trusted social networks, which could help them cope with acculturative stress and better adjust to their academic life in the United States (Yan & Berliner, 2009; Heidi & Chen, 2015; Heng, 2018). Additionally, the change of female CISs’ attitudes towards intercultural dating might also indicate female CISs’ growth in ethnic identity and cultural confidence: they would not change their cultural
values for their dating candidates but would prefer to commit to someone who shared same cultural values. Female participants’ insistence on their cultural values and rejection of being permissive to males might indicate their identity of independence. This finding might explain why male CISs regarded female CISs as “manly” and “independent” in the United States (Yan, 2016).

Other than gender differences in mate selection, male and female CISs reported pressures about marriage and dating from different sources. Generally, both female and male participants experienced pressure compromised of Chinese cultural values (e.g., parental suggestions, marriage by a certain age, acculturation) and their international student status (e.g., financial instability, focus on academics). Indeed, female than male CISs appeared to be more anxious when they talked about dating and marriage in the interviews. In comparison, male CISs looked more patient and calmer about finding dating candidates although they seemed to be more anxious about making money as preconditions to committing to their romantic partners. Their different attitudes towards dating and marriage might be explained by different cultural expectations for women and men. Women were expected to marry by their late twenties, otherwise they would be regarded as “leftover” women in China. “Leftover” women in China were usually regarded as unattractive, problematic, and unmarriageable (Fincher, 2016; Gaetano, 2014). Their pressure was somewhat relieved by the physical distance from their family and Chinese culture as well as tolerance toward an appropriate age range for marriage in the U.S. culture. Nevertheless, female participants still expected to marry not “too late” so that they could have a baby when they were not “too old.” Moreover, the age pressure could lead to tension in CISs family relationships and other interpersonal relationships in China, which might impact participants’ decisions on where to stay after graduation. Male CISs were not expected to marry at early ages but experienced pressure to financially take care of their families once they get married (Zheng et al., 2011).
Additionally, the participants reported temporary relief from such pressure because they observed many exceptions in the United States. This change, what they called as “expansion of horizon,” could be understood as positive consequences of acculturation to the U.S. culture.

Participants’ individual differences may also come from their age differences. Young participants seemed to have more openness and fantasies when talking about their romantic love and interracial dating (e.g., imagining interracial dating before coming to the United States, hoping to rely on the romantic partner). In contrast, participants in or beyond their late twenties were more likely to talk about their pressure and anxiety from age, career, and financial responsibility. From the perspective of life span, people in early twenties are more likely to have unstable relationships and work and hold many possibilities in their life (Arnett, Žukauskiene, and Sugimura, 2014). This might explain why the young and inexperienced participants were curious about and held dreams of romantic relationships. To note, participants who came to the United States for their undergraduate study were more likely to gain more openness towards pre-marital sexual activities. Their eagerness for understanding this world and acceptance of possibilities may support their changes towards American values of pre-marital sexual activities. In their late twenties or early thirties, CISs might want to pursue more stable life because of their developmental needs (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). They would consider romantic relationships commitment, career paths and family responsibilities. Therefore, anxiety about marriage age, starting a career, and financial responsibilities became frequent themes for comparatively older participants in this study.

**Subjective Understanding of American Cultures and Westernization**

Another important series of findings in this study was about CISs’ subjective understanding of American culture, cultural westernization, and their presentations. Attitudes towards sex had been used widely by researchers as an important criterion to quantitatively
measure Chinese students’ cultural openness and westernization widely (e.g., Blair & Madigan, 2016; Madigan & Blair, 2021). However, our study suggested that CISs’ subjective definitions of cultural westernization should differentiate from researchers’ expectations over cultural westernization. Our interview results suggested that our participants had different attitudes towards sex with committed romantic partners with marriage purposes and without marriage purposes, but most of them believed that pre-marital sex were common in the young generation of Chinese people. Indeed, most participants opposed sex with instable romantic partners (e.g., hook up) or with dating candidates without marriage purposes. More importantly, they identified “chaos” (乱) (e.g., dating multiple people, having sex with many people, and having sex without intentions of marriage) as a more noticeable pattern among U.S. culture through their U.S. peers, social media and T.V. shows. This finding resonated with Higgins, Zheng, Liu, and Sun (2002)’s conclusions that Chinese college students were more likely to connect love and sex with morality and then disagree with sex freedom. Therefore, instead of merely measuring Chinese students’ openness to pre-marital sex, their attitudes towards “chaotic” romantic life might be a more robust indicator of the westernization of their romantic values. However, their subjective understandings of American romantic culture might not be completely accurate, because, for example, personal values such as strong religious beliefs may prevent American people from engaging in premarital sex (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). CISs might pay more attention to the differences than similarities between American and Chinese cultures when they came to the U.S. to help themselves get to know and acculturate to American culture. Moreover, due to limited social networks, they might have to rely more on media and social media, instead of communicating with American people, to understand the diverse American culture completely and accurately. CISs’ inaccurate subjective understanding towards American culture of romantic love and sexual activities could cause barriers to their adjustment.
Furthermore, this study indicated that some participants may have presented cultural westernization or acculturation in other ways, which might be contradicted with some previous studies. Rather than becoming more open to sex, many participants reported being less shamed and more assertive about their original conservative values regarding dating and marriage. This result was opposite to other studies regarding westernization of college students in China that Chinese students became more open to sex as the reflection of their cultural westernization (e.g., Blair & Madigan, 2016; Madigan & Blair, 2021). However, looking at the reasons of this phenomenon, this result still showed some level of acculturation of CISs in the United States. CISs perceived the spirit of freedom within the context of U.S. culture, which empowered those young Chinese international students to be more confident about their distinctive romantic values and decisions. As a result, they insisted more on the direction (conservative versus open) of their values in terms of dating and marriage. When they were in China, they wondered if they should change their values like their peers. However, with the nutrition from the U.S. culture with free will, they gained more power to be themselves rather than being pressured to be similar to their Chinese peers or American peers (please see Theme 1 for more examples). Those CISs’ values might have transformed from collectivistic to individualistic cultural oriented. This result indicated that the transformation of cultural values could be reflected in different representations: change towards U.S. cultural values regarding dating and marriage versus being more assertive with the influence of individualistic cultures. As a matter of factor, these two representations may lead to varying results of quantitative measures. For example, in the study of Higgins, Zheng, Liu, and Sun (2002), they conceptualized the Chinese college students’ westernization levels by measuring their levels of openness towards sex. This conceptualization might be biased because a college student with a low level of openness could also be significantly influenced by western culture. After all, this new insight about CISs acculturation/westernization
presentations would expand researchers’ understanding of CISs’ adjustment process and contribute to a better understanding of the CISs population.

Lastly, this study found out that not all CISs aimed to fully acculturated to the United States, which could be implicative for studies concerning CISs’ acculturation and adjustment. Most previous studies regarded fitting into the host environment as an ultimate goal in Chinese international students’ lives and explored acculturative stress caused by this overwhelming goal (e.g., Wei et al., 2007; Qi et al., 2018). However, some of our participants decided not to be acculturated as they were comfortable with their Chinese cultural identity. This finding resonated with a previous study exploring CISs’ definitions of “good adjustment” (Lu et al., 2018). In their conclusion, some CISs defined “good adjustment” as completely fitting into the environment, while other CISs chose to seek subjective satisfaction. Most of the participants in our study seemed fit more the latter. In that study, the authors suggested that CISs who sought subjective satisfaction might exhibit a low level of acculturation and experience little acculturative stress. Our participants resonated with that finding. They seemed to be more conservative regarding marriage and dating values compared to American students. Still, they felt good about their differences and denied the stress to fit into the American values. It is currently hard to explain what caused CISs to have different goals of their stay in the United States because very few evidence-based studies explored this topic. It might be because some CISs were not determined to stay their entire life in the United States or proud of Chinese cultures, which could make them unmotivated to acculturate to the U.S. culture. Alternatively, the stress and barriers that CISs experienced during adjustment process might compel them to neglect and deny their acculturation goals, as responses to stress. This would be a great research direction for researchers to explore in the future. The result indicated that our researchers should listen more to CISs’ subjective
voices of their life in the United States and consider more about CISs’ subjective adjustment
goals instead of assuming adjustment and acculturation as their only aims.

**Implications**

In recent decades, Chinese students had been growing as the largest national group among international students in the United States. Researchers and clinical practitioners noticed their difficulties and tried to help them through research and clinical practice. With tremendous efforts, they had already done sound research work with Chinese international students (e.g., Xu et al., 2020). However, dating and marriage issues among CISs were scantily researched. As the first study deeply investigating CISs’ experience regarding dating and marriage and exploring underlying factors of their experience, this study would be implicative for researchers, psychological clinicians, and professionals in higher education.

For researchers, this study would be a solid base for future research as this is the first study deeply explored CISs’ dating and marriage issues. For example, this study identified CISs’ different definitions and presentations of westernization or acculturation of cultural values, unique interpretations and understandings about U.S. romantic relationships, and their subjective “adjustment” goals. These three highlighted findings could guide researchers to look at cultural presentations more from CISs’ inner perspectives instead of from outsides’ perspective. Hence, researchers could conduct more studies to help CISs further voice their needs about dating and marriage or other aspects and solve their specific problems from CISs’ subjective perspectives. Regarding measuring CISs’ acculturation levels, researchers could do more qualitative and quantitative studies to know what caused CISs’ different presentations of cultural westernization. Additionally, researchers could also expand such research method to other ethnic minority populations to explore their similarities and differences with Americans and CISs in the United States.
For psychotherapists, this study would contribute to help them understand more about CISs’ mental health. International students’ romantic relationships were concerning because romantic relationships were the top three presenting concerns for international students who utilized university counseling services (Nilsson, Berkel, Flores, and Lucas, 2004). However, clinicians could only find meager information in existing literature regarding CISs and other international students’ dating and marriage issues. They might have had trouble understanding why CISs develop such values and make such decisions about dating and marriage. People who did not thoroughly know about Chinese culture could be overwhelmed about the Chinese and American cultural values embedded with CISs’ dating and marriage issues. For example, this study illustrated the special meaning of romantic love for CISs in the United States. From their perspectives, romantic relationships were not only a spiritual connection with someone they like but also a strong social support for them to overcome adjustment difficulties and pursue their academic degree in an unfamiliar country. From this conclusion, psychotherapists and higher education professionals might be able to understand more about why CISs dating couples usually lived together and set themselves as emergency contact for each other.

Furthermore, this research could help student affairs personnel and offices in higher education design programs and policies for CISs as well as international students from other countries. It is because CISs appeared to have inaccurate or incomplete understanding about American cultures regarding dating and marriage, which could cause adjustment difficulties and mental health distress. Creating programs or policies which benefits international students’ communication in relation to American culture can be helpful for these international students to have a better understanding of American culture. For example, international student offices can set up programs or events to invite people from different cultural backgrounds in the university to discuss specifically about their cultural values of romantic
love and pre-marital sexual activities. This will facilitate communication of romantic love, perhaps a sensitive topic in some cultures, among different cultures. Alternatively, to include education about various cultural understandings of romantic love and premarital sex in international students’ orientation or to assign American buddies to international students to help them get familiar with American culture can be helpful. After all, to enhance social support and their knowledge of romantic relationships in American culture will be beneficial for CISs’ well-beings and adjustment in the United States.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

There are several limitations of this study. First, though the sample size was enough for an IPA study to explore in-depth data of CISs’ marriage and dating issues, it was not big enough to reflect all CISs’ marriage and dating issues. Chinese international students are so diverse and considerable. It would make more sense if future studies could involve more CISs or focus on a different specific group of CISs. This study initially intended to include all Chinese international students because every CIS’s voice would be essential, but it only included CISs who self-identified cisgender and heterosexual oriented for the reason of research design. From the literature review and pilot interviews with CISs from the LGBTQ+ community, the researcher realized that the uniqueness of LGBTQ+ Chinese international students should not be messed up with non-LGBTQ+ CISs. Additionally, interpretative phenomenological approach required the study to have a clear focus on a specific group. IPA encouraged researchers to recruit not too diverse participants so that the convergent pattern of the data would be more cohesive (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Therefore, the researcher finally decided to focus on cisgender and heterosexual CISs only in this study. However, the voices of LGBTQ+ CISs should be explored in the future. The researcher would like to expand future studies to LGBTQ+ CISs’ marriage and dating issues. Furthermore, the researcher would also like to do quantitative studies about CISs’ dating and marriage issues.
so that more CISs could be involved. For instance, understanding the impact of dating and marriage on CISs’ subjective well-being could be a good research direction of quantitative research.

The second limitation of this study might be the bias in interview administration. The researcher was 30 years old, cisgender female, self-identified heterosexual, married Chinese international doctoral candidate in counseling psychology. During coding analysis, the researcher realized that male students seemed to be less reflective of the differences in attitudes towards pre-marital sex between Chinese and American cultures than female students. They seemed to be unclear when verbalizing their values of sex. Also, male students discussed less about their experiences and attitudes towards pre-marital sex in the interviews, compared to female participants. Instead, most male participants emphasized more on commitment and responsibility of marriage. Though this might be a reflection of their focus on family responsibility, the researcher still wondered whether this was because male students were shy to discuss their attitudes towards sex with a young female. This aligned with Chinese people’s forbidden of sex in Chinese culture but might prevent researcher to understand their sex values clearly. In future studies, the interviewers’ genders should be carefully considered. Also, anonymous surveys and questionnaires could be considered for researchers to get more direct answers regarding sensitive topics. Also, this could be a way to measure CISs’ openness to sex culture. For example, avoidance and shyness of talking about sex topics with same-gender or different-gender interviewers may indicate their openness to sex culture.

The third limitation of this study was about the explanations of such above phenomena. This study was able to explore deeply with CISs about their dating and marriage issues and shed light on meaning and interesting phenomena. However, those phenomena were hard to be strongly supported by current data and literature because they were scanty
found or researched in existing research. For instance, it is difficult to figure out what causes CISs’ different goals of “adjustment” in the United States (refer to the last paragraph of discussion section). Are their definitions of adjustment goals related to their personalities, their experience, or their values? More studies should be done to fully understand the population of Chinese international students.

**Conclusion**

In sum, this study is the first study to explore Chinese international students’ marriage and dating issues in-depth. The study illustrated a colorful picture of their dating and marriage issues and answered the four research questions from an interpretative phenomenological perspective. As an effort to catch up convergence and divergence of our participants, this study finally summarized three major themes to describe Chinese international students’ stories about dating and marriage: 1) attitudes towards sex and romantic relationships, 2) negative and positive influences, and 3) expectations and experience regarding dating and marriage. Along with these three major themes, to guarantee the transparency of the study, sub-themes coming up from data analysis were listed in the tables. These themes could be overwhelming at the first glance because we try to present the overall and in-depth results of our rich data. To make the presentation more organized, three figures were created to explain the process of coding from subthemes and major themes. Those themes were grouped together to described and interpret the phenomena of Chinese international students’ dating and marriage issues as well as the values and cultural impact reflected in their subjective experience.

Chinese international students met with tremendous difficulties in their study and life in the United States. Remarkably, they felt lonely in this new country. They wanted to know new people, understand this country but also pursued what they are supposed to pursue at this age: love and intimacy. They were excited and hopeful but also overwhelmed. In many
situations, they were not able to consciously reflect on their expectation of dating and marriage issues because they had to focus heavily on their academic study. Additionally, it was not easy for them to convey their concerns to their parents because their parents, who may have never come to the United States, could not provide appropriate help. From CISs’ cultural values of filial piety, they would not like to make their parents concerned. As so, romantic relationships became considerable support for them during the tough time in a host country. Talking with their romantic partners to gain emotional support and perhaps physical help in the reality enabled those Chinese international students to survive and keep motivated for their American dreams in the United States. Many Chinese international student couples experienced bitterness and sweetness together, which glued those couples firmly. Yet, values from Chinese and American cultures and their international student status made them wonder about what to do regarding dating and marriage issues in this mercurial period. Some of them changed their values as they were immersed in the U.S. culture. In contrast, others became more adherent to Chinese culture because of their national and ethnic identity and their sense of freedom from American culture. This study presented stories of Chinese international students’ marriage and dating issues in the United States, with their hope, growth, struggles, happiness, and distress. More importantly, this study also brought delightful insights about the cultural adjustment of Chinese international students.
APPENDIX A: APPROVED SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW OUTLINE
Semi-Structured Interview Outline

1. What are your experiences of dating and/or marriage as a Chinese international student?

聊聊你的恋爱和婚姻

2. How do you feel about issues related to dating and marriage as a Chinese international student?

作为中国留学生，你的恋爱和婚姻有没有遇到什么困难或者积极之处？你觉得有什么影响因素？你是怎么做的/解决的？

3. What factors do you think impact your dating and marriage experiences?

你认为什么因素影响了你的婚恋经历？

4. How do your experiences/thoughts/feelings related to dating and/or marriage impact your well-being in life?

Potential follow-up Q: How do you cope with the negative impact of dating and/or marriage related concerns on your well-being?

你的恋爱和/或婚姻经历/想法/感受如何影响你的生活和心理健康？
可能的追问：你是怎么克服负面影响的？

5. How do you think culture impact your experiences related to marriage and/or dating?

你认为中国和美国文化如何影响你对恋爱和婚姻的处理方式/想法？

6. What’s your observations about marriage, dating, and/or family related issues around the community of Chinese international students?

你对中国留学生的恋爱与婚姻有没有什么观察或者感受？

7. Are there any other topics that you feel important to talk about in relation to dating and/or
marriage as a Chinese international student?

有关于中国留学生其他重要的事情你想要提及的吗？
APPENDIX B: APPROVED CONSENT FORMS
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH: FOR PARTICIPANT

Project Title: Chinese International Students’ Marriage and Dating Issues
Investigators: Huabing Liu and Dr. Eunju Yoon

You are being asked to participate in a study being conducted by Huabing Liu and her advisor Dr. Eunju Yoon in the Counseling Psychology Program at Loyola University of Chicago. You are being asked to participate in this study because we are interested in your experiences as a Chinese international student. For the purpose of this study, the selection criteria are (1) participant was born and raised in China and self-identifies as a Chinese international student; (2) participant is currently enrolled in an on-campus academic program in a U.S. American university; (3) participant self-identifies as heterosexual because of research restrictions; (4) participant is fluent in Mandarin Chinese. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to participate in the study.

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences of Chinese international students regarding their dating and marriage issues. This research may provide a better understanding of Chinese international students in two cultural contexts.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in a two-hour face-to-face group interview (or two-hour face-to-face or Zoom individual interview) regarding your experiences about dating and marriage issues as a Chinese international student studying in the United States. The interviewer will ask open-ended questions, providing you with the opportunity to tell your story and describe your thoughts and experiences. The interview will be audiotaped and transcribed for the purpose of analysis and report.

Risks/Benefits:
- There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life.
- Some of the questions asked may present very personal issues around individual experiences and relationships. You are not required to share any information that you are not comfortable reporting. There will be no penalty should you decide to withdraw at any time. If you are experiencing feelings of discomfort, you may speak with the interviewer who is a clinically trained counselor.
- There are no direct benefits to you from participation, but the results of this study will be used to gain a better understanding of Chinese international students’ lives in the United States. This research may eventually provide insight into counseling practice and research with this population.
Compensation: As a token of our appreciation, we will give a $20 Amazon gift card at the completion of the interview.

Confidentiality:  
We will not be asking your name on the demographic form and the interviewer will not state your name throughout the course of the interview. Your name or identifying information will be removed from the transcription or report. If we obtain any information about illegal status of immigration (e.g., undocumented), we will remove this information from the transcription or report as well.  
Only the listed researchers and a professional transcriber will have access to the audio files. The audio files will be destroyed 6 months after the completion of transcription. The consent form with your signature will be kept separate from the demographic form and audio file.

Voluntary Participation:  
Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you initially decide to participate, you may stop the interview at any time, withdraw from the study, and decline to answer any questions without penalty. Your decision to participate or not will have no effect on the current relationship with the interviewer.

Contact and Questions:  
If you have questions about this research study, please contact Huabing Liu at hliu5@luc.edu.  
If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Loyola’s Office of Research Services at 773.508.2689.

Statement of Consent:  
Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

_________________________________________________________  ______________________________
Participant’s (Your) Signature  Date

_________________________________________________________  ______________________________
Researcher’s Signature  Date
APPENDIX C: APPROVED RECRUITMENT FLYER
Earn $20 for Participating in a Study

*Are you a Chinese international student studying in the United States?*

*Would you like to share your thoughts and experiences about dating and marriage issues?*

If you answered yes, you may be eligible to receive $20 for your participation.

**Details:**

* I am a doctoral student in the Counseling Psychology Program of Loyola University Chicago. I am doing my dissertation study, advised by Dr. Yoon, about Chinese international students dating and marriage issues.

* We hope to interview Chinese international students who are currently studying in the United States, in order to gain a fuller understanding of the unique and individual experiences that these individuals face with regard to romantic relationships and cultural experiences.

* You can choose to participate in a **two-hour group interview** (face-to-face) or a **two-hour individual interview** (face-to-face or through Zoom) in Mandarin Chinese.

* The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. No identifying information of the interviewee will be included in the audio recording or report. The interview will take place in a mutually agreed upon public setting (e.g., public library, Loyola University Chicago).

* At the completion of interview, a **$20 Amazon gift card** will be given to express our appreciation of participation.

* If you are interested in this study, please email Huabing Liu at hliu5@luc.edu. We will follow you up with next steps. If you have any questions or concerns before making a decision on study participation, please let us know.
APPENDIX D: APPROVED RECRUITMENT SCRIPT
Recruitment Script

I am a doctoral student in the Counseling Psychology Program of Loyola University Chicago. I am doing my dissertation study, advised by Dr. Yoon, about **Chinese international students dating and marriage issues**. We hope to interview Chinese international students who are currently studying in the United States, in order to gain a fuller understanding of the unique and individual experiences that these individuals face with regard to romantic relationships and cultural experiences. Unlike formal interviews, this is an opportunity for the interviewee to share their story and describe their experiences of living within two differing cultural contexts. We would like to conduct a **two-hour group interview (face-to-face) or a two-hour individual interview (face-to-face or through Zoom/Skype) in Mandarin Chinese**. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. No identifying information of the interviewees will be included in the report. The interviews will take place in a mutually agreed upon public setting (e.g., public library, Loyola University Chicago). At the completion of interviews, a $20 amazon gift card will be given to express our appreciation of participation. If you are aware of any individuals who meet the criteria for participation, would you please distribute the recruitment flyer to the individuals?

The interested individual should email **Huabing Liu at hliu5@luc.edu**. We will follow him/her up with next steps including the procedure for parent’s approval and participation. In case the interested individual and/or his/her parent would like to review the interview questions before making a decision on study participation, please let us know.

The participation would be greatly appreciated.
APPENDIX E: APPROVED DEMOGRAPHIC FORM
Demographic Form

1. Age 年龄 _______ 2. Grade Level 年级 _______

2. Academic Program (e.g., Master in Psychology) 学业项目及类型（如心理学硕士项目）

3. Gender 性别 _______

4. Sexual Orientation 性向 _______

5. Length of time in the current relationship 这段关系持续多久了？

6. Your living location and your romantic partner’s living location (if applicable) 您和您
伴侣（若有）的生活地点

7. Your Preferred Email Address or Phone Number

__________________________________________

__________________________________________
REFERENCE LIST


VITA

Dr. Liu was born and raised in Shanghai, China. Before attending Loyola University Chicago, she attended Fudan University, where she earned a Bachelor of Science in Psychology in 2013. She then attended Indiana University Bloomington, where she received a master’s degree of Education in Counseling and Counselor Education in 2016.

Dr. Liu was working on her APA-accredited pre-doctoral internship in the Center of Counseling and Psychological Services at University of Massachusetts Amherst when completing her dissertation. After graduation, she will move back to her hometown Shanghai, China and continue her passion with counseling psychology as a faculty in Shanghai Jiaotong University.