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I am in the Homeless Home or I Am Always on the Way Home: Formatting Identity and Transcultural Adaptation Through Ethnic and Host Communication

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Abstract: This study uses a phenomenological approach and 25 in-depth interviews to better understand ethnic and host communication by Chinese international students in U.S. higher education and the impact of such communication practices on their cultural identity transformation and transcultural adaptation. The research findings reveal that their ethnic communication reflects their dynamic negotiation of cultural identities and their efforts to integrate their original cultural background and their expectations of others to redefine their own cultural identities and communicative behaviors. It also highlights that Chinese students engage in ethnic communication not only for community building and cultural identity reinforcement but also assertively to express themselves and educate others.

Keywords: transcultural adaptation; ethnic communication; host communication; transcultural identity; international students

1 Introduction

Due to advanced transportation and technology as well as associated information flow and cultural exchanges, frequent mobility has become a common experience worldwide. As we demonstrate below, transnational migrants who experience different cultures along their journeys or acculturating paths tend to encounter conflicting positions or perspectives and feel homeless. In addition, increasing international contacts has brought many identity changes to itinerant individuals. Within the global trend of movements, Chinese people compose one of the major migratory groups. A report from the Migration Policy Institute noted that Chinese

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immigrants had grown more than six times since 1980 (Zong & Batalova, 2017). The Asian population in the United States experienced a 72 % growth between 2000 and 2015, outpacing all other racial groups, as reported by the Pew Research Center. As of 2015, 24 % of Asian Americans claimed Chinese origin (4.9 million), which is the largest Asian group in the United States.

For a significant portion of the transnational migrants, universities have been an initial destination upon arriving in the United States. In the realm of education, particularly in the context of educational exchanges between Asian countries such as China and the United States, both the import and export of valuable educational services and products have been steadily increasing over the years. For instance, data from Open Doors' annual Reports on International Education Exchange (2009; 2018) reveals a notable uptick in the number of Chinese students pursuing higher education at U.S. universities and colleges. This figure surged from 98,235 during the 2008/09 academic year to 363,341 by 2017/18, constituting 33.2 % of the total international student population in the United States. As of the 2021/22 academic year, there were 290,086 Chinese students enrolled in U.S. institutions, still representing a significant 30.6 % of the total international student population in the United States, according to Statista's 2023 data.

The contributions made by international students have received substantial recognition and profound appreciation. For example, the U.S. Institute of International Education (2023) highlighted their importance by stating, "International students remain a top priority for the U.S. higher education sector, contributing \$32 billion to the U.S. economy in 2022" (Baer & Martel, 2023, p. 8). A study has further revealed that the presence of international graduate students has a positive impact on U.S. innovation, leading to a 4.5 % increase in patent applications, a 6.8 % rise in university patent grants, and a 5.0 % uptick in non-university patent grants with a 10 % rise in the number of foreign graduate students (Chellaraj et al., 2008). Beyond their economic and innovative contributions, numerous scholars (Altbach, 1991; Lambert, 1993; Mak, 2008; Yang et al., 2006) have also underscored that international students enrich U.S. campuses with cultural diversity, providing domestic students with exposure to different cultures without the need to leave their home country.

The above-mentioned statistics and studies raise meaningful questions for studying international students, especially Chinese students' identity negotiations and formations. Although temporary sojourners and immigrants are both mentioned above, it has to be noted that the term sojourner better describes international students' identity as temporary migrants who voluntarily come to the United States for education (Knight, 2002; Yang, 2000). Also, international students have been identified as "non-immigrants" by the immigration policies in the United States. Therefore, this research adopts the term sojourner to describe Chinese international students in the United States. Sojourners might experience different

transcultural adaptations compared to permanent settlers regarding ties with their home culture and host culture. In the process, communicative activities within the host culture and their ethnic groups both affect their cultural adaptation and identity transformation. Host communication refers to sojourners' practices of communicating with others in the host society (Sheldon, 2010). Host communication provides opportunities for international students to develop social networks and receive social support from the host country (Xie & Chao, 2022). In contrast, ethnic communication refers to the communication behaviors and practices of interacting with people from the same ethnic group, which has been viewed as "the vehicle for the transmission and reinforcement of ethnic group identities" (Hecht & Ribeau, 1984, p. 136). Ethnic communication provides points of identification by revealing symbolic boundaries, reconnecting cultures to places, and fulfilling the longing for a past time and place. Such sojourning imaginations emphasize the shared identities of many itinerant subjects who are detached from their original culture and group belongings as an "imagined community" in terms of their shared culture, history, and geography.

Constructing sojourning identities has become more relevant when we consider both interpersonal communication and media communication. Scholars have identified that individuals' interpersonal communication with host members and ethnic members, as well as their use of both host and ethnic media, are all factors that influence their identity transformation when they enter and stay in a new and unfamiliar culture (Kim, 2001). Nevertheless, upon reviewing existing literature, it became evident that the majority of studies concerning international students tended to concentrate on their interactions with host community members and their engagement with the host culture. Less attention has been paid to the impact of ethnic communication on their transcultural adaptation and identity transformation. In this research, we adopted the concept of trans-culture to explore this specific group's cultural identity and adaptation. As Jiang et al. (2021) argued, the concept of "trans-culture" focuses on human interaction "with a special emphasis on co-existence and inter-dependence," while cross-culture focuses on comparative research (p. 1). With Chinese international students' sojourning experience, we believe the concept of "trans-culture" fits with the research context better. However, there is extensive literature on cross-cultural adaptation that we cannot ignore because of its extensive study on cultural differences and comparisons and its emphasis on communicative practices. Therefore, we will combine both perspectives.

This study intends to enrich the limited existing literature on Chinese international students' sojourning identities and their host and ethnic communication.

The following sections will explain the cross-cultural adaptation theory and transcultural adaptation as the theoretical framework for this study. A review of past

literature regarding cultural adaptation, sojourning identity, and communicative practices will be provided. Through the examination of previous literature, a research question is proposed. In addition, there will be an overview of the research methods, including the phenomenological approach and research design. Finally, the research findings will be analyzed and discussed.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory

Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory (2001) focuses on the relationship between individuals and the environment and recognizes cross-cultural adaptation experiences as a dynamic process. The theory characterizes cross-cultural adaptation as the complete experience of individuals who, after moving to an unfamiliar sociocultural setting, endeavor to create and sustain a reasonably steady, mutual, and effective connection with that environment. The premise of the cross-cultural adaptation theory is that transnational migrants, no matter whether immigrants or sojourners, all experience a certain degree of cultural adaptation and identity transformation. Increased functional fitness, psychological health, and transcultural identity determine the degree of adaptation and cultural transformation. In addition, to explore how individuals undergo adaptive changes through host and ethnic communication, Kim (2001) proposed a structural model and a series of axioms and theories (p. 89). The structural model includes dimensions of individuals' predispositions and environmental factors. In this model, individuals' interactions with both host members and ethnic members (interpersonal communication), as well as their use of both host and ethnic media (mass communication), all directly influence the cross-cultural adaptation and identity transformation process.

Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory emphasizes the complex and dynamic process of cultural transformation of transnational migrants. Similarly to Kim's theory, Berry et al. (1987) focused on the cultural adaptation process and proposed that an individual's level of cultural adaptation is determined in part by two independent processes: the extent to which one preserves their native identity and the level of interaction with the host culture and micro-cultural groups. Berry (1997) stated that adaptation includes both strategies and outcomes. To be specific, Berry examined the transformation of cultural identity and suggested four outcomes: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization.

First, assimilation involves the effort to distance oneself from one's native culture and instead fully embrace the host culture and actively participate in the dominant society. The second outcome, integration, occurs when individuals strike a

harmonious balance between their affiliation with their native culture and their engagement with the host culture. In this scenario, individuals develop a bicultural orientation that effectively merges and harmonizes cultural elements from both groups while preserving their identity within each group (Neuliep, 2015). When individuals have limited interaction with the host culture while maintaining strong connections to and reaffirmation of their native culture, the resulting acculturation outcome is referred to as separation. In this context, those who are separated primarily interact with their own group and avoid forming close connections with members of the host culture. Lastly, marginalization pertains to communication behaviors in which individuals consciously choose not to identify with either their native or host cultures. According to Neuliep (2015), individuals experiencing marginalization may feel a sense of alienation from both cultures and often grapple with a feeling of abandonment.

2.2 Cultural Identity and Transculturality

The cross-cultural adaptation theories have been constructed on the premise that individuals can adopt various communication orientations and select certain types of communication practices. Both Berry and Kim's theories emphasize the development of transcultural identity by examining communication practices based on the degree of retaining their native cultural identities and the degree of interaction with the dominant and host cultures. As we have witnessed, frequent mobility has become a global phenomenon of identity construction; therefore, it should be explored within this context of change and transformation.

Notably, more and more scholars have adopted a transcultural perspective and approach to studying cultural adaptation, which acknowledges that cultural adaptation is not a simple process of adapting to a different culture (Schwanebeck & Smith, 2020). Also, scholars pointed out that the cross-cultural perspective always views one culture as the norm or dominant so people from other cultures are expected to adapt to this dominant culture (Li & Wekesa, 2022; Schwanebeck & Smith, 2020). Instead, transculturality emphasizes a transcultural space that allows individuals to examine various paths of communication between different cultures (Ritzer, 2020). Hall (1994) pointed out that diasporic and sojourning identities continuously produce and reproduce themselves along the journey of migrating while creating and recreating the never-ending desire to return to "lost origins." In contrast, Cuba and Hummon (1993) suggested that mobility extended home-enriched identity, and produced different patterns of home affiliations. The cultural transformation includes the development of a transcultural identity by integrating home and host cultures (Kim, 2005). Berry (1997) suggested that sojourners could grow and develop in both home and host cultures. The combined perspective fosters a more

comprehensive model that strengthens our understanding of international students' cultural identity construction and negotiation.

Taking a sociocultural perspective on identity, which focuses on the context of the communicative activity, Iddings et al. (2007) agreed that identities are not rigid or unchanging constructs; rather, they are flexible, evolving, loosely defined, and shaped through the activities in which individuals participate. In this present research, cultural identity emphasizes the shared knowledge and experiences, defined as "oneness" by Hall (1994), amongst an imagined cultural group with constant identity re-discovery and transformation. Shi (2005) conducted in-depth interviews with some Chinese diaspora subjects and found that diasporic lives are full of paradoxes. These diaspora participants not only constructed the myth of return when they encountered difficulties in identifying with traditional ways of life but also denied the changed lifestyle as "Westernization" and kept being aware of the line between "West" versus "East." According to Shi, individuals within the diaspora assess the authenticity of all cultural Chinese individuals on a spectrum, positioning those at the center as more authentic and those at the margins as less so. Simultaneously, their awareness grows regarding the collective identity of all cultural Chinese as a unified minority group within the hierarchical societal framework of the United States. This aligns with the observations made by Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, suggesting that as physical localities and geographic boundaries become increasingly blurred, the concepts of culturally and ethnically distinct places become more pronounced. Consequently, the notion of imagined communities gains prominence, wherein displaced individuals congregate around remembered or envisioned homelands, locales, or communities.

2.3 Sojourners' Communicative Practices and Transcultural Adaptation

Sojourners are people who choose to reside in a place and move to a different culture temporarily for professional or academic purposes, who might face challenges of cultural adaptation and identity confusion.

[Post online publication correction added 11 April 2025: the citation (Cheung & Wong, 2014) was removed.]

As sojourners, international students communicate with host members and their ethnic members simultaneously, which is a dynamic and ongoing process. Their migrating experiences tend to make their identity flow and negotiations more complicated.

For sojourners, ethnic communication provides an essential discursive space in various national and social contexts and operates in several ways (Sun, 2002). Advanced information and communication technology such as digital videos, satellite TVs, the Internet, and other electronic media has provided access to ethnic

media content and new virtual spaces and imagined communities globally. Placeless cultures and communications offer sojourners tools and frameworks for shaping their envisioned identities and communities (Shi, 2005).

However, Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory suggests that ethnic communication might soften the stress of host communication during the initial phase of cultural adaptation; but ethnic communication's adaptive role declines with time and then impedes host communication and cultural adaptation. It claims that ethnic communication might reinforce an individual's original cultural maintenance, limit host communication activities, and, therefore, impede cultural adaptation. To verify the theory, Kim and McKay-Semmler (2013) examined the relationship between host and ethnic interpersonal communication and found that host interpersonal communication, rather than ethnic interpersonal communication, was significantly correlated to individuals' functional and psychological well-being during the cultural adaptation process. In contrast, Lee's (2018) study on Korean immigrant community presented the opposite case of Kim and McKay-Semmler's (2013) research. This research found that ethnic communication did not necessarily limit host interpersonal communication and called for more studies to test Kim's theories on the negative relationship between ethnic and host interpersonal communication.

Also, alongside the flow of capital, and global, political, and cultural interpenetrations, the traffic of ethnic media and cultural products across national borders has increased in quantity and multi-directionally, forming a truly global media sphere. Kim (2001) suggested that ethnic media had supportive functions for sojourners by providing information and resources about the host environment, as well as emotional support. Shi (2005) proposed that ethnic media played a constitutive role for sojourners, which not only can re-connect their identity flows to lost origins but also satisfy their desire for memories and re-discoveries (Chen et al., 2018). For example, Lum (1996) implied that karaoke is a socializing tool for bringing people into public spaces and enhancing the formation of imagined communities and viewed karaoke audiences as active participants who indigenize mass-mediated texts into their daily interpretation of social meanings. Another study by Sinclair et al. (2000) investigated Chinese immigrants in Australia from Chinese mainland, Chinese Taiwan, Chinese Hong Kong, and the ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia. Through surveys and ethnographic interviews, this study revealed that ethnic media, particularly ethnic TV programs, have enhanced their "Chineseness" and created and recreated various forms of diasporic identification. However, Kim (2001) argued that this type of maintenance function hinders the development of proficiency in host communication and the establishment of meaningful participation in host communicative activities. This is because many individuals living abroad grapple with the challenge of reconciling their desire to preserve their ethnic identity with the necessity to adapt to the host society.

Overall, both the cross-cultural adaptation theory and the transcultural communication perspective provide valuable frameworks to understand the Chinese sojourners' experience of cultural adaptation and how their communication practices with host and home cultures influence their transcultural identities. However, very few studies have specifically focused on Chinese international students' ethnic communication culture and the connection between their ethnic communication and their cultural identities. As mentioned above, most of the existing literature has focused on their communication activities with host members, their cultural adjustment, emotional well-being, and the related educational outcome (Imamura & Zhang, 2014; Lértora & Sullivan, 2019; Ye, 2006). As Yan and Berliner (2011) argued, interactions within American culture influence the behavior and way of life of various ethnic groups and social classes, without altering their ethnic identity or ideological beliefs. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the interaction between host communication and ethnic communication practices of Chinese students in the United States. The researchers raised the inquiry question: How does host and ethnic communication influence the cultural adaptation and transcultural identity of Chinese international students in U.S. higher education?

3 Research Methods

3.1 Phenomenological Approach

A phenomenological method is characterized as a method that depicts the shared significance that individuals attribute to their firsthand encounters with a particular concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Husserl (2000) discusses that phenomenology describes the lived world and lived experiences of a phenomenon (cited by Sadala & Adorno, 2002). He views phenomenology as a science focused on describing the fundamental qualities and activities of consciousness (Sadala & Adorno, 2002). According to Creswell, phenomenological studies center around a specific phenomenon and delve into it by examining individual participants who have all encountered a similar experience. Essentially, a phenomenological approach provides a platform for research participants to articulate the intricacies, insights, and experiences they have undergone concerning a particular phenomenon. Researchers must remove their own biases to accurately capture and describe the participants' experiences, shedding light on the "what" or "how" of their encounter with the phenomenon. International students in the United States undergo diverse lived experiences, making it essential to consider how each traveling individual assigns meaning to their unique journey. The impact of host and ethnic communication on identity is one such experience that international students undergo differently, leading to various symbolic expressions.

Hence, a phenomenological approach proves most appropriate for comprehending how Chinese international students perceive, navigate, and construct their evolving self-conceptions through their encounters with ethnic communication, or in Creswell's words, their "reality" (2013, p. 78).

3.2 Sampling and Participants

This research adopted the method of non-probability sampling with a combination of criterion and convenience samples. The participants in this study were all students in the United States from different regions of China. The participants were chosen based on the convenience of availability. In addition, the participants must have been international students within the past two years or currently maintain status as international students in the United States to ensure relevant, timely experience. After getting approval from the Institutional Review Board of the leading researcher's institution, the researchers started recruiting participants through emails, phone calls, and social media. Since both researchers are from China, working in American universities, the participants were recruited through personal connections at the beginning and then snowball sampling. Informed consent was obtained before the interview and the research participants did not receive any compensation. After conducting 25 interviews based on the established criteria, the researchers found that the interviews had reached theoretical saturation. Participants in the study were also asked to include demographic information about their gender, age, education, years in the United States, and purpose for coming to the United States. Table 1 contains the participants' demographics.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected through in-depth interviews. These interviews were either conducted in person, one-on-one through online video calls, or via email, depending on geographical proximity and practicality. Each interview session spanned roughly 30–60 min, as participants shared their unique experiences, often requiring different amounts of time to elaborate. The interviews followed a semi-structured approach, with a set of ten open-ended questions serving as a guide. These questions were designed to explore areas that had emerged from the literature review, including ethnic communication, cultural identity formation, and transformation. Some examples of the interview questions were "How do you balance your communication with people in the host culture and your home culture?" "What are, if any, your home country media programs that you consume often and why?" "How does

Table 1: Interview participants demographics.

Code name	Gender	Age	Education	Years in the U.S.
Participant 1	Female	23	Master/Ph.D.	2
Participant 2	Female	23	Master/Ph.D.	3
Participant 3	Male	23	Bachelor	1
Participant 4	Female	25	Bachelor	5
Participant 5	Female	28	Master/Ph.D.	4
Participant 6	Female	23	Master/Ph.D.	2
Participant 7	Female	24	Master/Ph.D.	5
Participant 8	Female	24	Bachelor	1
Participant 9	Male	23	Master/Ph.D.	0.5
Participant 10	Female	24	Master/Ph.D.	2.5
Participant 11	Male	27	Master/Ph.D.	4.5
Participant 12	Male	33	Master/Ph.D.	7
Participant 13	Male	28	Master/Ph.D.	8
Participant 14	Female	33	Master/Ph.D.	7
Participant 15	Female	23	Master/Ph.D.	5
Participant 16	Female	24	Bachelor	3
Participant 17	Female	29	Bachelor	5.5
Participant 18	Male	26	Bachelor	4
Participant 19	Male	27	Bachelor	7
Participant 20	Female	26	Bachelor	1
Participant 21	Male	25	Bachelor	1
Participant 22	Male	26	Master/Ph.D.	3
Participant 23	Female	27	Master/Ph.D.	4
Participant 24	Female	29	Master/Ph.D.	4
Participant 25	Female	19	High School or below	1.5

communicating and sharing views about the ethnic media programs influence your identity?” Throughout the interviews, the researchers had the opportunity to pose probing inquiries whenever they believed participants could provide further details about their experiences or clarify the substance and significance of those experiences. The interviews were conducted in either English or Chinese according to the interviewees’ preferences. Overall, 14 interviews were conducted in English and 11 in Mandarin. Since both the researchers are fluent in both languages, we were able to translate the interview transcripts in Mandarin into English. During the interviews in English, the researchers used Mandarin several times to clarify and confirm some specific terms, which allowed the interviewees to express themselves more in-depth and provide rich and detailed narratives (Smith et al., 2008; Welch & Piekkari, 2006). All the translated interview transcripts were shared with the interviewees for member checking to ensure accuracy and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed and stored in Microsoft Word format, safeguarded on a secure USB drive. In an additional layer of confidentiality protection, all personal names in the original transcripts were substituted. These transcriptions were coded to identify pertinent text, recurrent concepts, thematic elements, and theoretical constructs.

3.4 Data Analysis

The process of data analysis commenced with the original textual content, aiming to compile a list of noteworthy statements—specifically, statements elucidating how individual international students perceived their experiences with ethnic communication. A thematic approach was adopted to analyze the transcripts. Both researchers independently immersed themselves in the participants' experiences by thoroughly reading and re-reading the transcripts multiple times. Following this, the researchers coded the data by identifying logical connections, contradictions, and statements of significant importance.

Once a comprehensive list of significant statements had been established, the researchers collaborated to categorize the relevant text into recurring ideas, subsequently merging these recurring ideas across multiple transcripts. This culminated in the creation of a master list of recurring ideas, which were then organized into cohesive categories. In the process of identifying themes and sub-themes, the researchers associated the codes with themes that either offered a textual depiction of “what” participants had experienced or presented a structural depiction of “how” participants had experienced it. The criteria employed for discerning these themes included their repetition, recurrence, and emphasis (Orbe & Groscurth, 2004).

To provide specific details, the interviews in this study yielded a total of 618 significant statements, which were further categorized into 82 recurring ideas. These recurring ideas were subsequently grouped into four overarching themes. The themes were comprehensively expounded upon, with participant quotations serving to illuminate their experiences and provide rich, detailed descriptions.

4 Findings

A thematic analysis of the data built upon 82 repeating ideas and concepts has developed four major themes: (1) communication with ethnic members; (2) ethnic media communication; (3) being westernized; (4) “an outsider within” the United States. Themes, as mentioned previously, are summaries accompanied by explanations of significant ideas (Rubin & Rubin, 2011), which will be addressed below.

Theme 1: Communication with Ethnic Members

For some of the participants, maintaining their connections with ethnic members such as families and friends is an essential part of their communicative activities. According to them, “values, views, beliefs, and some lifestyle are formed” (Participant 24). Also, “being understood by their own people” (Participant 21) and “being around with family members and friends” (Participant 22) are some of the factors that made them keep their culture. As Participant 6 stated,

I haven't changed any of my cultural practices. There are many Chinese restaurants here. I visited those places very often and I celebrate all the festivals along with my friends. I have a group of Chinese friends and they keep reminding me of our traditions.

The cross-cultural adaptation theory emphasizes that sojourners and immigrants navigate both home and host cultures through communicative practices. Ethnic communication is a product of co-cultural group members' “attempts to organization, communication, and facilitate their transition” into the host society (Viswanath & Arora, 2000, p. 40). Ethnic communication is used not only to strengthen the cultural tie with their home country but also to build communities and networks within their ethnic groups in the United States. Participant 19 noted,

I have some friends from Chinese mainland or Chinese Taiwan in the physical community but we also talk about things evolving around family here in America, jobs, and other things a lot. It doesn't need to be Chinese-related. (Participant 19)

When they were asked the question about community, identity, and common interest, most of the participants expressed that they would join their cultural groups and support minority groups. Participant 17 noted, “Yes I would support my cultural group to fight for a cause since it would help us to live a more comfortable life in an alien country.”

In their adaptation process, some of them tried to adjust their needs and expectations of themselves and others. Further, they adopted various orientations during their everyday interactions with others. Therefore, a strategy mentioned by the interviewees is to adopt different ways to deal with different situations. As Participant 2 mentioned, she tended to treat her friends and family from Chinese Taiwan in Taiwanese ways while treating the American side of the family in American ways, so that she “can make both sides happy with the way they are familiar with.”

In contrast, some of them believed that the interaction with their ethnic members might hinder their adaptation in the United States. For example, Participants 8 and 13 stated that they forced themselves to have more conversations with their American friends and limited their communication with Chinese students as much as possible. As Participant 13 said, “I tried to talk with my American friends and

classmates more and have more interactions with my professors. I always ask questions so that they don't think I am a quiet Chinese student."

During the cultural adaptation process, individuals always weigh their interaction outcomes consciously or unconsciously. They conduct interaction and communication based on their judgment regarding how their communication interactions influence their relationships with others. As previous studies have found, it might indicate "a high level of identification with the heritage culture," which can be related to their daily communication strategies (Cao et al., 2017).

Theme 2: Ethnic Media Communication

As sojourners, Chinese students in the United States are using various strategies to construct and maintain their identity as both an insider and outsiders. During the cultural adaptation process, ethnic media has played an important role in their cultural identity formation and transformation. For example, ethnic media are always tied to a particular ethnic group and in their native language. The participants feel easy and relaxed while watching, reading, or listening. Apart from entertainment, almost 80 % of them admitted that browsing their home news sites is a habitual practice in their daily lives because "watching some news from some sites, I think I feel closer to my home country and have more belongingness" (Participant 11), "it allows me to understand the macro situation and social status of my country" (Participant 12), and "it creates a point of connection to my native culture" (Participant 6).

Unlike living in some metropolitan Chinatowns and Chinese neighborhoods, most of the participants in the current study didn't have easy access to their home country's media programs. However, thanks to convenient access to the Internet, which has become the major source of ethnic and cultural content for most participants, ethnic media content and programs are available for sojourners no matter their location. Through sharing ethnic media content, the Chinese students facilitated communication among themselves. For example, Participant 16 said,

Because we can find more common topics and share the same opinions about something so that we can feel we are the same. The most important thing about cultural identity is that you can find out you are not alone, you belong to some groups, you can find somebody the same as you. So sharing the program gives us this opportunity.

Participant 15 stated, "Sharing views and ideas of those programs makes me feel connected with my home country and native culture. No one would be interested if I talked American shows with them."

For some of the students, their ethnic media communication remained the same even more. Participant 14 also noted,

When I was in China I never really watched the Spring Festive Gala on TV. But Since I came here I have watched it every year for seven years. When I watched the Chinese New Year program of CCTV, I almost cried because there were many programs about getting together with families. When I talked with my father who is in China, he said he also cried when he watched the program. I think through this program, we find strong connections with each other.

As for English-language media consumption, these Chinese students have encountered cultural and linguistic barriers that prevent them from fully understanding the program content. This encourages them to enjoy their ethnic media programs: “I watch some TV drama programs and movies on my computer and most of these are in Chinese because they are easier for me to understand and I can relate them to my background or way of life more” (Participant 23). For the sojourning subjects, watching, reading, or listening to their home country programs creates a feeling of connection with their family, friends, and country – the feeling that is necessary elements required to attain resolution in their tumultuous and constantly shifting experiences (Shi, 2005, p. 65).

Theme 3: Being Westernized

Although most of them acknowledge the influence of Chinese culture on them, they are navigating the “pros and cons” (Participant 5) of both American and Chinese cultures and trying to internalize “the nice part of American culture” into their own practice (Participant 1). As Participant 1 noted:

I really like the way that Americans value written evidence so I always keep a written record for almost everything. I like the concept that Americans save up and take care of their own retirements so that they don’t need to pass on this responsibility to their children (So certainly, I will treat my own offspring the American way).

Because of the environmental change, the research participants were forced to change their habits or lifestyles to adjust to the new environment, complete their academic work, and navigate their social and living spaces. When initially discussing cultural practices, the most common responses among most of the participants declared that their lifestyle and eating habits had changed.

The participants believed that the sojourning experiences have impacted their daily lives, their sense of group belongingness, their interaction with the dominant group members, and their sensitivity and independence. They acknowledged the expectation from the host culture for them to learn and adopt the behaviors and rules of the U.S. social and educational system. For example, Participant 1 expressed how she had been open-minded to learning American practices. She noted,

I have learned all the professional and ethical practices in the American way. I have also learned that greetings, small talk, keeping a safe personal boundary, not soliciting to know other’s privacy, and always stepping out of my own comfort zone help me fit in socially more easily.

Also, Participant 12 noted, “I think I became very sensitive to my privacy. I used to answer questions from any of my family members. Now sometimes I will reject telling them something that I consider private.” For Participant 17, speech freedom should be a civil right. She said, “I learned to express myself more. In China, we value listening more than speaking. In the United States, if I don’t speak out my voice, no one cares about me and I would be perceived as having no value to a team or a conversation.” So, most of the itinerant subjects practiced “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” and tried to learn American values, culture, and ethics. Yet, they revealed controversial accounts about being “Westernized.” Participant 6 expressed the debates she had because of different opinions on political and cultural topics. She noted,

People will have a debate with me on certain things I share, either political, cultural, or new studies. I love those debates because I can see different views. I am Chinese and that identity will define me and will never lose. But I try not to present it to people too much because that way you won’t be able to be integrated into the Western culture.

According to Heath (2004), Westernization is a process of Western value adoption and behavior change that is influenced by cultural contact with and emulation of the West. Several participants have admitted to becoming Westernized. Participant 4 clearly explained the appeal to Western culture:

The final aspect to consider is consumerism. In Western cultures, especially the United States, there is a tendency to buy things when you actually don’t really need them (e.g., food and clothes).

The research participants of this study have demonstrated their various ways to integrate into the American culture as well as to maintain connections with their home culture. As a result, they are consistently navigating the balance between preserving their native cultural identity and avoiding the perception of being too distinct from American society.

Theme 4: “An Outsider within” the United States

Nevertheless, some of the international students interviewed in this study responded to the question of Westernization in confusion: “I am not sure. I prefer to call it [Westernization] to become mature cause there is something you rather keep it to yourself than to share with others” (Participant 15). Participant 24 also made amendments to the definition of being Westernized; “For internally, I am not because of my religion. Our lifestyle might be Westernized. That might be because the world is westernized. Western holidays such as Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and Valentine’s Day are very popular in China.” After all, although their accounts reveal their mix-up and confusion in cultural identification, one thing is clear they have

tried to blend in with the U.S. society, yet, they tend to feel that they are just outsiders due to the apparent cultural differences between the United States and China. The “outsider within” position of Chinese international students reflected the awareness of their social standing in the host culture.

Some of them expressed their pessimistic views about being blended into U.S. society. Participant 6 said that “it is hard to fit in as a foreigner, especially when you don’t know what others are talking about. You have to constantly ask questions, and it is not fun asking many questions. In your native language, you can reply with some jokes, but here you are just confused.” Participant 8 also noted, “I have met many American classmates and classmates from a lot of different countries. But I don’t think they are my friends because when the classes are over, we will not contact each other anymore.” Several participants expressed the challenges for them to be integrated:

No. I’m being more open and respectful to the Western culture. My attitude to people and things may be changed a little after I came here but I still think it’s hard for me or a foreigner to really get into this country or this culture. I’m still an outsider and there seems like a door in front of me which I couldn’t open although I tried. (Participant 11)

I was educated from childhood on how important to ‘fit in its society’ and ‘blend in with its community.’ However, it’s impossible to blend in with the community in the U.S. since there are so many different ethnic groups and cultures. After a while, I stopped trying to be like others and just being myself. (Participant 5)

For Participant 2, the challenge was from her “Chinese mind:”

My Chinese mind sometimes makes me think too complicated even though it’s a very simple case. So far I think I got a lot improved in this but my first mind is always very “goal-oriented” and cares too much about how people think about me, which is not necessary actually.

Furthermore, only a few participants felt their culture was adequately portrayed and/or represented by the U.S. *media*. Most of them commented on the U.S. *media*’s failure to provide them with an objective or balanced view of their home cultures. Two participants even provide vivid examples for critique:

When I first came to U.S., the residence assistant on duty even asked me if we had washers and dryers in China. I was surprised that she had no idea what China looks like now. She was picturing China like 30 years ago.

Most Americans I met have a stereotypical impression of China. For example, I saw someone commenting on a photo of different flavors of chicken feet on Facebook: “I was never impressed that in the country with such amount of population almost everything may be served at the dinner. But the variety of chicken feet and their wrapping colors sound like they’ve gone too far. Don’t try this sort of thing sober, Nicole, alcohol may not change the taste of food but at least it will somehow influence antibacterial safety.” My understanding of the comment is that the

person thinks poverty brought China a variety of food. I guess he has learned about the poor and hungry China from the media. (Participant 14)

Participants 5 and 14's rebuttal toward the misconception of Chinese people's eating habits and simplification of Chinese cultural practices reflects the alarmingly incorrect stereotype of Chinese people and their culture. A country's food-eating practices are complex and multifaceted. For example, news coverage reported that the vast majority of Chinese people do not eat dog meat (Qi, 2020). Some scholars also confirmed the above-mentioned critique. From a transcultural perspective, the media portrayal reflects the power relations between the dominant group and the sojourners (Orbe & Roberts, 2012). As sojourners in the host society, Chinese students attempted to create a transcultural space that allowed them to present their own cultures. Ethnic communication by Chinese students reveals their communication tactics within a dominant cultural system.

Chinese students in the United States are still in the process of exploring and learning how to navigate and interact with both the Chinese and American cultures, and to build their bicultural self-identities. Their adaptation experiences and processes provide empirical evidence and demonstrate a life of paradoxes to test the cross-cultural adaptation theory.

Many Chinese students were, to some extent, familiar with American values and customs through varying levels of media exposure. In the realm of education, they must adapt to the social and academic regulations and conventions. Nevertheless, they continue to be recognized as one of the quietest, most invisible, underserved groups on the American campus due to their status as cultural outsiders (Mori, 2000). As Espin (2006) proposed, migrants often construct both a public and a private identity. Their public identity and actions are shaped by the norms of the host society and the prevailing culture, while their private selves enable them to maintain their customs and behaviors from their home country, affording them a sense of autonomy.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined Chinese students' ethnic communication in the United States and their cultural adaptation experiences. Based on the categorization and analysis of their narratives, the research results highlight some important factors about how their ethnic communication practices influence their cultural identity and their cultural adaptation process. In the following section, the research question, "how does ethnic communication influence the cultural identity of Chinese international students in U.S. higher education?" was addressed in light of the findings and the literature review.

5.1 Communication Orientations and Strategies during Cultural Adaptation

One of the premises of cross-cultural theory is that people always navigate between the host and home cultures and adopt various communication strategies. Existing literature found that ethnic communication reinforces sojourners' home cultures and is negatively related to the cultural adaptation process (Hwang & He, 1999). However, their ethnic communication tends to be more home culture-oriented rather than equally balanced between home and host cultures. As Nesdale and Mak (2003) stated, the increased cultural distance might even strengthen their native cultural identity as a response to the complexities of the new and changing environment. Compared to other types of immigrants or sojourners, international students always have clearer career and academic goals (Trice, 2004). To achieve these goals, they have to adopt common strategies to develop relationships with American peers, professors, and communities. Also, the connection with members from the same culture of origin helps them to maintain their national identity, receive social support, and identify other individuals who have similar experiences within the dominant society. They engage in ethnic communication to maintain their Chinese cultural identity and connections with their home country, it is hard to say whether it positively or negatively influences their cultural adaptation process.

The research findings have found that ethnic communication plays an important role in creating community and kinship among Chinese students in the United States. It has to be noted that, from the psychological adaptation perspective, ethnic communication provides them with imagined connections and establishes an imagined community within a specific situational context. As Georgiou (2013) stated, the accessibility and utilization patterns of both traditional and modern media unveil power dynamics associated with the regulation of technologies, information, and cultural values. Through sharing and exchange of cultural meaning and symbols, they can develop a sense of belonging as well as social and mental support beyond the boundaries of place and space. Ethnic communication is a tool for them to exchange, interact, and engage in their cultural identities and reimagine cultural influences and memories through spaces and practices.

Scholars suggested that ethnic activities are relational strategies for people to deal with problems. According to Georgiou (2013), the use of ethnic media is interpersonal exchanges within sojourners' daily lives. Ethnic communication is a type of strategy to balance multiple cultural identities and influences as they actively communicate within and among various groups and educate others. It facilitates more frequent and closer connections with Chinese international students' home countries. Also, the behavior of sharing ethnic media content is an

effective way to express communication and to resist the dominant system that contains mis-portrayal and stereotypes. The research participants criticized the mis-portrayal of China by Western media, which impacted their willingness to use Western media. As Suler (2002) stated, the selection of media can deeply intertwine with the level of identity amalgamation or disconnection and with how much a person portrays either their genuine or fabricated self. The use of ethnic media reflects the power relationship between sojourners and host members. The media choice reflects users' identification and management of their cultural identity, which is a multi-dimensional and fluid process that cannot be oversimplified as positive or negative.

5.2 Multi-Layered Cultural Identity

Although the present study's participants all have the necessary competence, such as language competence and the ability to adjust to the educational expectations, to study in the United States, most of them spend time with their Chinese peers and maintain close connections with their families and friends in China. Therefore, they maintain Chinese cultures, traditions, and behaviors and attempt to understand American culture and society simultaneously.

Consistent with previous studies (Cao et al., 2017; Yu & Wang, 2011; Zheng & Berry, 1991), this research also finds that integration is the most adopted strategy among Chinese students for cultural adaptation, followed by separation. This can be explained from different perspectives. As Cao et al. (2017) stated, integration and separation are both characterized by the strong influence of the heritage culture. Although the present study's participants all have the necessary competence to study in the United States, most of them spend time with their Chinese peers and maintain close connections with their families and friends in China. Therefore, they maintain Chinese cultures, traditions, and behaviors and attempt to understand American culture and society simultaneously.

According to Berry et al. (1987), cultural adaptation strategies vary based on the social standing of the sojourners with the people and society of the host culture. Previous studies found that people are more likely to be integrated into a multi-cultural society such as the United States, Canada, and Australia (Berry et al., 1987). The United States, Canada, and Australia are all countries with very diverse cultures and multiple cultural and ethnic groups. In contrast, Kim (2001) proposed that ethnic proximity is one factor that impacts cultural transformation and suggested that ethnic proximity and cultural similarity are positively related to cultural adaptation. These two perspectives might better explain the integration and

separation of Chinese international students in the United States. According to Yu and Wang (2011), integration and separation were both the dominant strategies used by Chinese students in Germany due to the nation's ethnocentrism and strict policies toward immigration. With the increasingly complicated immigration policies and political conflict between the United States and China, we can expect to see more sojourners return to their ethnic roots.

The research results elucidated how Chinese students simultaneously and continuously seek and negotiate both their outsider and insider identities through communicative practices. Hall (2006) has outlined three directions of migrants' cultural identity development: (1) "to contest the settled contours of national identity and to expose its closures to the pressures of difference, 'otherness' and cultural diversity;" (2) "a strengthening of local identities;" and (3) "the production of new identities" (p. 264). Generally, Chinese international students are undergoing both psychological and sociocultural changes and experiencing challenges such as the language barrier, homesickness, mental health issues, and cultural misunderstanding, especially between different cultural and value systems. Chinese students' cultural identity is reinvented based on the interrelationships of positioning, cultures, and values, which are inseparable from a continuous balancing and negotiating process. On the one hand, they maintained and shared their Chinese cultural identity through their interaction and communication with people from their home country consciously or unconsciously. It is difficult to detach themselves fully from their upbringing in a prominent collectivist culture. Although the present study's participants all have the necessary competence to study in the United States, most of them spend time with their Chinese peers and maintain close connections with their families and friends in China. Therefore, they maintain Chinese cultures, traditions, and behaviors and attempt to understand American culture and society simultaneously. On the other hand, they experienced (dis)connections among their cultural identities and acknowledged the importance of establishing new social connections with people from the host culture. Therefore, these international students have multiple even competing identities depending on the situation (Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014).

6 Implications and Future Research

This research expands and enriches our understanding of ethnic communication as a communication strategy based on the cross-cultural adaptation theory. It demonstrates that cultural adaptation and cultural identity construction is a multi-dimensional and multi-layered process based on individuals' preferred outcomes as

well as the needs and expectations of self and others. This research integrates the role of ethnic media as a new dimension of mediated communication into the cross-cultural adaptation process. The inquiry into sojourning communication space will be essential to understanding how ethnic communication can be used to make cultural connections, transform cultural identities, and challenge traditional perceptions of community.

In addition, this research highlights the role that ethnic communication can play in the cultural adaptation process for international students. The widespread adoption of information technology and social media has provided convenient channels and possibilities for international students to sustain their connections and access social support from their native culture. Researchers have deliberated on the significant role of communication in bolstering social support, consequently fostering better acculturation and cross-cultural adaptation (Du & Wei, 2015; Lee & Ciftci, 2014). Their cultural adaptation process is closely related to their mental well-being and academic performance. While the 25 participants cannot represent the whole population of Chinese students in the United States, they do illustrate their effort to interact with the American culture while maintaining their Chinese cultural identity.

It has to be noted that this research examines international students from Chinese mainland, Chinese Hong Kong, and Chinese Taiwan as a group under the umbrella of Chinese cultural identity. However, due to the political and social differences among these regions, people's cultural identities cannot be the same. Further research is needed to identify and compare the nuanced differences in their ethnic communication, imagined community, and cultural identities. In addition, further research should be expanded and include more diverse participants to reveal their cross-cultural adaptation processes.

Ethical approval: The research related to human use has complied with all the relevant national regulations, institutional policies, and in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration, and has been approved by the author's Institutional Review Board (University of Nebraska Medical Center, 0694-18-EX).

Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individuals included in this study.

Author contributions: Both the authors made substantial contributions to the research and are accountable for all aspects of the research regarding accuracy and integrity. Dr. Chao designed the study and collected the data. Dr. Xie was mainly responsible in data analysis and interpretation. Both the authors drafted and revised the paper for intellectual content.

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