UNDERSTANDING CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ACCULTURATIVE STRESS AND SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH INTERCULTURAL TRAINING

by

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Abstract

This executive summary provides an overview of a research study on the acculturative stress experienced by Chinese International Students (CISs). The study utilized a mixed-methods approach to analyze the factors contributing to acculturative stress among CISs and to identify potential solutions. The literature review identified personal, environmental, and behavioral factors as key contributors to acculturative stress among CISs, including academic stress, language barriers, perceived discrimination, and lack of social support. The quantitative and qualitative data collected from 44 CISs revealed that the participants experienced low social self-efficacy and high levels of acculturative and academic stress. The study's discussion includes a comparison of the findings with other studies and proposes a potential solution to address acculturative stress. Component three provides possible solutions based on the needs assessment, including facilitator notes and detailed teaching content, using the model of intercultural communicative competence by Byram (1997). The study acknowledges potential biases due to the researcher's cultural background and positionality. Understanding the factors that contribute to acculturative stress and providing appropriate support and resources can help CISs cope with the challenges of studying abroad.
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Component One Overview

Component one starts with the introduction of the problem of practice. The Chinese International Students’ (CISs) acculturative stress can lead to multiple issues in their lives and future. This literature review focused on analyzing their acculturative stress from three perspectives based on Triadic Reciprocal Determinism by Bandura (1997). For example, acculturative stress among the CISs is influenced by a combination of personal, environmental, and behavioral factors. Personal factors such as academic stress and language barriers significantly impact acculturative stress. Environmental factors such as perceived discrimination and a lack of social support also contribute to acculturative stress. Social support has been found to be a crucial coping mechanism for reducing stress and improving psychological well-being among international students. Behavioral factors, such as self-efficacy beliefs and help-seeking, also play a critical role in CISs’ experiences of acculturative stress. Social self-efficacy and English language proficiency influence acculturative stress, while low help-seeking intentions and behavior can exacerbate it. Cultural factors also influence help-seeking behavior, as Asian international students may have cultural values that discourage seeking counseling services. Students may also have lower help-seeking intentions than undergraduate and domestic students. Understanding the relationship between these factors is crucial for providing appropriate support and resources to help international students cope with acculturative stress.

Introduction to the Problem of Practice

As of 2020-2021, the entire U.S. post-secondary education industry was valued at $695 billion (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Approximately $38 billion of that figure comes from international students (Rovito et al., 2021). Many international students have the financial capability to fully cover the expensive out-of-state tuition fees, which makes them attractive
prospects from a financial standpoint (Bound et al., 2016). Students from China represent over a third of the total international student population studying in the United States. Their presence and contributions to the higher education system greatly impact the financial viability of educational institutions and, more significantly, their role in the U.S. economy is substantial.

In light of the financial benefits associated with enrolling international students, particularly those from China, a growing number of brokerage agencies have emerged in recent years, claiming to facilitate the placement of Chinese students in American institutions (Feng & Horta, 2021). The problem is that many of these agencies oversell their ability to secure acceptance to a U.S. university or do secure acceptance for students with limited English language proficiency or a lack of the skills necessary for academic study, which, as a result, gives way to a poor experience for the student (Bartlett & Fischer, 2011). The utilization of these brokerage firms often leads to students feeling like they are being exploited for financial gain. In addition to paying the high out-of-state tuition fees to a U.S. university, students are frequently required to pay exorbitant brokerage fees in order to secure admission. This leads to a perception that the educational institution views them not as individuals with unique backgrounds and experiences, but rather as a source of revenue to meet their financial targets.

Such a feeling of being “wholesaled” (Su & Harrison, 2016, p. 905) is a primary contributor to students’ acculturative stress. “Acculturative stress” refers to difficulties an individual experiences upon trying to live, work, and interact in a culture that is not one’s own. In other words, it is the strain that is associated with navigating away from one's culture of origin to another culture. Operating primarily from the framework of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), this dissertation examines the factors contributing to the acculturative stress of graduate-level Chinese international students (CISs) studying at a U.S. institution. By employing triadic
reciprocal determinism (TRD) as its conceptual framework, this chapter considers how personal, environmental, and behavioral factors work in conjunction with one another to impact CISs’ acculturative stress. Examining the problem of practice in such a way effectively sets the stage for the interventions and recommendations proposed in later chapters.

**Theoretical Perspective and Conceptual Framework**

The two theoretical frameworks used to investigate factors associated with CISs’ acculturative stress—social cognitive theory and triadic reciprocal determinism—are not discrete constructs. In fact, TRD may be considered a premise, or tenet, of SCT. Therefore, before examining how the external and internal factors of a student’s life triangulate, or work in tandem, to influence their acculturative stress, it is first necessary to review the basic assumptions asserted by SCT.

**Social Cognitive Theory**

Social cognitive theory (SCT) posits that individuals are proactively engaged in learning development and directing behaviors (Bandura, 1986). Put simply, learning is the result of the interplay that occurs between an individual and multiple contexts. SCT accounts for the influences of observational learning upon individual development, and moreover acknowledges self-evaluation and self-regulation as integral to the developmental process (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). In his framework of SCT, Bandura emphasized the importance of past experiences in their ability to affect an individual’s future outcomes. Past experiences, both successful and unsuccessful, impact one’s self-efficacy beliefs—that is, his or her “can do” feeling (Bandura, 1997; Luszczynska & Schwarzer, 2015, p. 128). Furthermore, research has shown time and again that higher self-efficacy beliefs produce better academic outcomes (Hwang et al., 2016; Komarraju & Nadler, 2013). SCT guides subsequent analyses of CISs' acculturative stress in the
Triadic Reciprocal Determinism

Triadic reciprocal determinism (TRD) is a central concept of social learning theory, explaining the relationships among the learner’s behavior, the learning environment, and his or her personal attributes and characteristics (Bandura, 1986). Behavioral factors include routine conditioning. Therefore, CISs who were raised in traditional Chinese culture, which discouraged help-seeking behavior and instead promoted self-reliance, may only engage in behaviors that are compatible with this mindset. Aspects of the individual’s environment that may affect the learning process include support from teachers, staff, or other resources within the school. In the example of CISs, educators trained in intercultural competency would be one such example. Finally, an example of how the learner’s personal traits can affect his or her learning environment is through personal traits or work ethic. A naturally shy student, for example, may be less inclined to seek help, even if she or she is struggling with acculturation. Alternatively, a student with limited English proficiency may be equally hesitant to pursue external help with regard to acculturation. Bandura intentionally depicted the relationship between these three elements as a triangle, as opposed to a linear progression to convey that no one element comes before or causes the next; quite the opposite, they are all equally important and mutually influence one another. Figure 1 depicts the variables associated with CISs ’acculturative stress from the perspective of TRD. In the diagram, the solid lines between each component of the triad represent empirically established relationships between variables.
TRD is a useful conceptual lens for examining the factors that influence CISs’ acculturative and academic stress as it does not focus on either behavior factors, personal factors, or environmental factors, but all of these factors concurrently. Doing this allows for a more comprehensive overview of the problems facing this specific population of international students. Phakiti et al. (2013) studied personal factors and their relationship to academic success among international students in Australia. Using a triangulated approach to learner development, the authors found that self-efficacy, social support, and English language proficiency are thoroughly intertwined. Along these same lines, Wang et al. (2018) looked at the interplay between CISs’ limited English proficiency (a personal factor) and their willingness to speak to and interact with Americans (a behavioral factor). Contrary to their fear that their accent would
make Americans biased against them, CISs discovered that Americans actually regarded a mild accent favorably. As Wang et al. (2018) study proves, when attempting to explicate the various factors affecting CISs’ acculturative and academic stress, it is best to do so by examining how multiple factors interact with one another simultaneously.

**Chinese International Students’ Acculturative Stress**

Acculturation is a complex process that can be challenging and stressful for individuals who are adapting to a new culture. Acculturative stress is a prevalent experience for international students as they transition from their home culture to the culture of the host country (Qi et al., 2018). Berry et al. (1987) define acculturative stress as “a reduction in mental, physical, and social health of individuals undergoing acculturation” (p. 213). Various scholars have illustrated how acculturative stress can negatively affect different domains of the individual's life, taking an emotional and mental toll. This stress can engender disruptive behaviors and lead to anxiety, depression, identity confusion, anger, substance abuse, and family conflict (Berry et al., 1987; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998). Furthermore, several studies have established a correlation between acculturative stress and higher levels of psychological stress, such as depressive symptoms, anxiety, and somatization, particularly for individuals of Hispanic/Latino and Asian descent (Rodriguez et al., 2000; Smart & Smart, 1995; Wong et al., 2017).

**Factors of Acculturative Stress**

Despite the negative associations identified between acculturative stress and mental health outcomes, some researchers argue that acculturative stress among Asian international students is negatively correlated to social support (Franco et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2004). Essentially, the greater social support the host institution provides, the less acculturative stress students are likely to incur. Along with social support, several studies have identified additional
factors that contribute to positive adjustment and reduced acculturative stress, including the geographic origin and English language proficiency (Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008). For example, Indian students demonstrated lower levels of acculturative stress than Chinese students when adjusting to living in the USA, presumably because they have greater familiarity with Western culture and society due to the widespread use of English in India (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). So, in this way, one can see how English language proficiency works to attenuate the effects of acculturative stress. Religion can also be added to the factors that lessen students’ acculturative stress. Both Gardner et al. (2014) and Hsien-Chuan Hsu et al. (2009) found that religion or spirituality might function as a coping strategy for international students in response to acculturation stress and other stress. However, as communist ideology still dominates all formal education in China, most Chinese students have little to no formal religious orientation or affiliation (Han et al., 2013). Therefore, CISs must identify and adopt other coping mechanisms for dealing with stress since religion is unlikely to serve as a protective factor.

**Personal Factors Related to Acculturative Stress**

As previously discussed, within the TRD framework, personal factors refer to aspects of the microcosm of the individual, including his or her beliefs, expectations, and personality traits. Academic stress can be thought of as a personal factor on the grounds that a student’s temperament (e.g., ability to withstand stress) and his or her expectations for graduate study in the U.S. color subsequent experiences of it. Therefore, in the context of my study, one of the vital personal factors affecting acculturative stress among CISs is academic stress, including language barriers, challenges brought on by living in a foreign environment, and differences in instructional methods and educational systems. According to TRD, those personal academic
challenges and stress play an important role in affecting students’ social behavior and the nature and likelihood of their interactions within their new living context.

**Academic Stress.** Academic stress is a combination of academic-related needs that exceed the adaptive resources available to an individual (Wilks, 2008). Barbayannis et al. (2022) define academic stress as mental distress concerning some anticipated frustration associated with academic failure, the anticipation of such failure, or even an awareness of the possibility of failure. International students who study abroad usually have a high GPA back in their home countries. Consequently, they may expect to achieve the same level of academic excellence in their host country. The resulting mismatched expectations and unexpected failure often lead to stress and depression for the international student (Russell et al., 2008).

To investigate the source of stress for international students studying in the U.S., Wan et al. (1992) conducted a Survey of Academic Experiences of International Students (SAEIS) among 689 graduate students. They examined students’ perceptions of stress in select academic situations, coping resources, role skills, social support, and cultural distance. Key findings showed that students pursuing more advanced degrees reported feeling less stressed academically than less advanced degrees (Wan et al., 1992). In other words, students who seek Ph.D. degrees reported fewer academic stressors than those who were seeking master or professional degrees. This finding holds important implications for the present study since it focuses on graduate international students, and it may be worth reflecting on whether their status as graduate students meaningfully influences students’ acculturative and academic stress. Another interesting finding from Wan et al.’s (1992) study was that international students, whose home country's educational system was more different in structure and content than that of the United States, perceived having more academic stress. This was especially true for Asian
international students, perhaps due to Asian cultures’ emphasis on instructional methods that are
towards standardized tests—an emphasis that does not exist to the same degree in the
U.S. But the differences between the Eastern and Western approaches in instruction and
educational content development do not stop there, as the next section demonstrates.

**Academic Challenges Due to Pedagogical Differences.** Academic challenges create
significant stress for college students, the effects of which can be compounded when one
considers how they interact with students’ social and other personal challenges (Hudd et al.,
2000). As alluded to above, international students face more academic challenges than their
domestic peers due to the differences in learning styles or teaching methodologies in their home
countries and the host countries (Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008; Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010;
Sanders & Lushington, 1999). Therefore, one leading cause of students' academic challenges is
often their unfamiliarity with the American educational system (Thomas & Althen, 1989). To
make matters worse, professors and other faculty members routinely misunderstand the
hardships of international students' adjustments, instead perceiving international students as not
taking ownership of their learning (Nilsson et al., 2008). Huang & Cowden (2009) and Chan
(1999) point out that Chinese students, in particular, tend to be passive learners who rarely ask
questions in class. Additionally, Chinese students’ reticence may be interpreted as their being
uncomfortable sharing their own thoughts and opinions in class. In a study of acculturative stress
among international music therapy students in the U.S., Kim (2011) found that Chinese students
viewed writing assignments to be the most difficult. Along these same lines, another survey
conducted in Australia investigated international students’ perceptions of various learning
environments. The results of the survey demonstrated that international students tend to show a
heavy reliance on books, did not often take responsibility for their own work, expressed
difficulties in applying critical thinking skills in writing, and failed to understand the concept of plagiarism (Robertson et al., 2000). So it appears that one discrepancy between Asian and American educational models that presents difficulties for Asian international students studying in the U.S. is when to credit others’ work and when to rely on their own voice.

Other “standard” American methods of evaluation, such as creative essays, term papers, frequent "pop" quizzes and tests, and active participation in class discussions also leave many CISs feeling highly unaccustomed to various components of the American educational system (Cadieux & Wehrly, 1986; Thomas & Althen, 1989). Despite all of these differences in the Eastern and Western educational systems, and the academic challenges that ensue from them, Zhao et al. (2005) found that international students are generally more engaged in educationally purposeful activities than their American counterparts are, especially in the first year of college. Examples of “educationally purposeful” activities include attending study groups and exam prep sessions, engaging in university-sponsored volunteer activities, and assuming leadership roles, such as those offered by teaching and research assistantships. In light of Zhao et al.’s (2005) conclusion that international students are more likely to engage in educationally purposeful activities of this sort, it follows that the CISs in the present study may be more likely to participate in intercultural competency training workshops, as these too would fall under the category of “educationally purposeful.”

**Language Barrier.** One well-studied stressor concerning acculturative stress is language barriers (Mori, 2000; Sandhu et al., 1994; Yeh et al., 2003). International students often struggle with academics as a result of language proficiency problems (Gebhard, 2012). What is more is that language barriers have direct and measurable negative implications for international students’ academic performance. Inadequate language skills often diminish students’ ability to
understand lectures, take notes, complete reading and writing tasks, orally express their opinions, and ask questions in classes (Cadieux & Wehrly, 1986). Language barriers also prevent international students from developing meaningful relationships with domestic students. Even if international student possesses the linguistic proficiency to pass the TOEFL exam, they may not feel comfortable doing so, as a result of their imperfect language skills (Ma & Cheng, 2015). This, of course, assumes that locals would be eager to communicate with CISs, as well. In addition to experiencing frustration and anger due to language and communication barriers, CISs may also feel isolated, in part to the frustrations felt by their peers, who may view them as lacking competency or qualifications for specific responsibilities due to their lack of English proficiency (Young et al., 2013). The problem is that there is no truly effective way to measure an international student’s English language proficiency. Standardized tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) primarily assess a student's academic English proficiency but do not accurately reflect their ability to use the language in real-life social contexts. It is important to note that some students who possess strong English language skills may perform poorly on these tests due to poor test-taking abilities, and similarly, students who perform well on these tests may not have strong English language skills in real-life situations.

Hence, it is crucial to exercise caution while evaluating a student's English language proficiency based solely on the results of such tests and to consider their ability to use English effectively in their daily surroundings. This aspect is of crucial importance and is at the heart of the discussion in the subsequent section.

**Environmental Factors Related to Acculturative Stress**

The stress associated with the process of acculturation can strongly contribute to somatic complaints, and other mental health issues as individuals experience a significant change in their
environments (Jung et al., 2007). For example, as a result of increased acculturative stress, students may be more prone to headaches, fatigue and lethargy, anxiety, depression, and an inability to concentrate (Kuriala, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2019). Environmental factors play no small part in contributing to the physical and mental expressions of acculturative stress. Two of the primary aspects of the CISs’ environment that have the potential to negatively affect their acculturative stress include perceived discrimination and a lack of social support.

**Perceived Discrimination.** Perceived discrimination is a judgment that an individual encounters due to their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group and is directly linked to the environment in which they live (Major et al., 2002). Research has shown that perceived discrimination is associated with psychological stress, which, in turn, is related to acculturative distress (Torres et al., 2012). For instance, Araujo (2009) found that more highly acculturated Dominican women reported higher levels of self-reported stress due to daily discrimination experiences. Similarly, Prelow et al. (2006) discovered that perceived racial discrimination was linked to lower perceptions of social support, more significant symptoms of depression, and lower levels of life satisfaction among African American college students. Moreover, Zhang and Jung (2016) found that Asian international students often face perceived discrimination and stereotyping from the majority group. In the context of culturally and linguistically diverse students perceived racial discrimination has been found to be positively correlated with PTSD, exceeding the influence of general stress (Bi et al., 2022).

**Racism.** Racism is associated with high levels of acculturative stress and exacerbates the negative effects of cultural stresses and adversities on mental health, leading to increased depression and greater psychological distress (Siddiqui, 2022). This connection between acculturative stress and racism highlights the importance of examining both the individual and
societal factors that contribute to mental health outcomes during the acculturation process. Racism can make the acculturation process even more challenging for individuals by further marginalizing and isolating them (Silva et al., 2017). Therefore, it is crucial to recognize and address the role that racism and discrimination play in the experiences of individuals adapting to a new culture and provide support for those experiencing acculturative stress (Bai, 2016).

The relationship between negative environmental experiences and perceived discrimination as contributors to acculturative stress can be moderated by acculturation attitudes and behaviors (Berry, 2006). Acculturation attitudes can be viewed as mediators/moderators between acculturation conditions and acculturation outcomes (Arends-Tóth et al., 2006). Measuring both acculturative attitudes and acculturative behaviors allows for a better understanding of both the short- and long-term outcomes of various personal, behavioral, and environmental factors on students' acculturative stress.

It is important to investigate perceived discrimination and its relationship with acculturative attitudes and behaviors, especially for Asians in the United States, who have experienced a long history of discrimination and persecution (Chen et al., 2020). Additionally, since the spread of COVID-19, there have been reports of increased racism and discrimination directed against individuals of Chinese origin or those assumed to be Chinese in the United States and beyond (Bieber, 2020). International students are one of the most vulnerable groups, which are often ignored by social work research on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Firang, 2020).

The Impact of COVID-19 on CISs' Acculturative Stress. Tense relations between the U.S. and China, brought on by the pandemic, have left international students feeling uneasy and unwelcome in the U.S. (Wang, 2020). As a result of the pandemic and the strained U.S.-Chinese
relations that followed, international students may have experienced uncertainty regarding their academic futures, producing a great deal of stress for them. Moreover, the lockdown implemented in response to the coronavirus pandemic brought a tremendous amount of stress to international students, especially those living thousands of miles away from their home countries (Misirlis et al., 2020; Ma & Miller, 2020). The U.S. government-enforced community lockdowns and mandated social distancing measures restricted their outlets for support and leisure, such as schools, malls, and non-essential businesses, which significantly impeded their ability to seek and receive social support, a known mitigating factor of acculturative stress (Choi, 1997; Fang et al., 2020).

**Social Support.** The process of being accepted into a group of peers offering social support is difficult for international students. Adapting to American customs and society, or campus life may conflict with aspects of international students' personal and cultural identities (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985). Research suggests, however, that international students’ acculturative stress and psychological well-being can be positively affected through social support (Katsiafas et al., 2013; Xu & Chi, 2013). In a study examining relationships between acculturative stress, social support, and career outcome expectations among international students in the U.S., Franco et al. (2019) defined social support as those experiences that assist individuals in utilizing and implementing coping strategies, such as sharing stressful experiences (emotional) and finding scholarships for study (instrumental). For these reasons, social support may be an essential coping mechanism for lowering stress (Lee et al., 2004; Yeh et al., 2006), especially among international students (Yeh & Inose, 2003). As it pertains to CISs specifically, the existing body of research demonstrates clear relationships between acculturative stress and decreased social support in the host country (Ho et al., 2016). But, acculturative stress and social
support should not be thought of exclusively in terms of a one-to-one correlation. Falavarjani et al. (2019) stated that social support might serve as an antecedent of lower stress levels or as a resource that helps reduce adverse outcomes, depending on the local conditions and the source of support. In this way, social support “set the stages” for healthy, stress-reducing behaviors. In a similar vein, O’Reilly et al. (2010) found that a high level of social support makes it easier for international students to make friends with people from the host country or countries other than their own. Support from others in the host country may provide career information, role modeling, and psychological health—function as a resource, as Falavarjiani et al. (2019) put it—all of which may contribute to more favorable outcome expectations (Schultheiss et al., 2001).

**Behavioral Factors Related to Acculturative Stress**

In addition to personal and environmental factors, behavioral factors, such as self-efficacy beliefs and help-seeking, likewise affect and are affected by CISs’ new environment and personal challenges in the TRD. As this section shows, students’ self-efficacy interacts with other elements of the TRD, such as personal factors like English language proficiency, so as to influence the likelihood that a student will engage with others in the educational setting (environmental factor).

**Social Self-efficacy.** Bandura’s SCT indicates that self-efficacy expectations, that is, beliefs concerning one’s competence in specific behavioral domains, influence his or her choices of, performance in, and persistence in areas of endeavor requiring or utilizing those behavioral competencies (Smith & Betz, 2000). Therefore, social self-efficacy is a key factor among countless other behavioral factors. Social self-efficacy, defined as a person's confidence in his or her ability to initiate and sustain social interactions (Sherer & Adams, 1983; Smith & Betz, 2000), is vital not only in its possible relationship to effective social behavior but also in its
connection to other factors of healthy mental functioning. Self-efficacy refers to students' expectations of their capacity to execute behaviors to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1986). The most influential factor in determining a change in behavior is one's self-efficacy expectations, as it determines whether a person will make the initial choice to engage in a specific behavior (Sherer et al., 1982). Self-efficacy affects their behavior in many ways: Students with high self-efficacy overcome anxiety and rise to difficulties in the learning process (Eginli, 2020; Endler et al., 2001; Yelgeç et al., 2020). Not surprisingly then, social self-efficacy is consistently related to higher levels of global self-esteem (Connolly, 1989; Hermann & Betz, 2004, 2006; Betz & Smith, 2002). Usually, learners with higher social self-efficacy also have more positive social, and interpersonal interactions (Chiu, 2014). Individuals with high social self-efficacy can trust their capabilities to initiate and develop interpersonal relationships, which are instrumental to creating a new support network abroad (Duck, 1990). In this way, high social self-efficacy can buffer against the loss of a social network caused by moving to the United States (Tsai et al., 2017). In addition, lower levels of social self-efficacy are related to higher levels of depression, which is itself related to the stress of acculturation (Hermann & Betz, 2004, 2006; Smith & Betz, 2002).

Ferrari and Parker (1992) reported a positive relationship between social self-efficacy and academic performance in first-year college students. Perceived social self-efficacy was also determined to be closely related to self-efficacy expectations with respect to a wide range of social behaviors (Smith & Betz, 2000). Additionally, in a study examining self-concealment behaviors and social self-efficacy skills as potential mediators between acculturative stress and depression among 320 African, Asian, and Latin American international students, Constantine et al. (2004) found a significant correlation between social self-efficacy and acculturative stress.
Given that self-efficacy exerts such an impact on international students’ acculturative stress, as the literature shows, it remains at the core of investigation in the current study, with it being examined alongside other factors affecting acculturative stress, such as English language proficiency.

**English Language Proficiency in Social Self-efficacy.** In the same study by Constantine et al. (2004), the authors also noted a close relationship between English language proficiency and social self-efficacy among international students. Similarly, in a study of 188 international graduate students studying at a large Midwestern university in the U.S., two researchers supported the conclusion that social self-efficacy was positively related to international students' English-language proficiency and the length of their residence in the U.S. (Lin & Betz, 2009). Therefore, the CISs in this study, who have been residing in the U.S. for two years or less, are likely to have limited English language proficiency. When considered alongside the fact that English language proficiency can be tied to self-efficacy, this finding becomes particularly significant to the study at hand, especially when one account for the relationship between self-efficacy and help-seeking behaviors.

**Low Help-Seeking Intentions and Behavior.** There is a close relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and help-seeking behavior (Kim & Omizo, 2010). Help-seeking can be measured in a variety of ways, but a primary means for assessing it is through attitudes (Cash et al., 1978) and intentions (Deane & Todd, 1996). Of these measures, the attitude-behavior literature, and specifically, the “theory of planned behavior” (Ajzen, 1991), suggest that help-seeking intentions may be more closely related to actual behavior than other constructs. Help-seeking intentions refer to the willingness of a person to receive professional psychological help to reduce psychological distress (Vogel et al., 2007) while help-seeking behavior represents the actual
behavior or experience of seeking professional psychological help (Cramer, 1999). Intention to seek help and actual help-seeking behavior is consistently correlated across people and settings, so intention to seek help is a key behavioral factor that can influence a person's decision to seek help or support (Nagai, 2015). Kim et al. (1993) reported that the correlation between intentions and behavior was generally higher than the correlation between attitudes and behavior. Therefore, help-seeking behavior represents a vital factor among other behavioral factors. As prior research has found that more significant psychological distress is closely associated with more acculturative stress (Thoman & Suris, 2004), methods for attenuating such stress, such as in the form of help-seeking behaviors, are of particular interest to the current study, and international students in general (Nguyen et al., 2019).

**Cultural Influences on Help-Seeking Behavior.** Even though Asian international students seem to experience greater difficulty adjusting to the U.S. than other international students, they are still less likely to seek out mental health services (Xiong & Yang, 2021). When a group of CISs was asked about their preference among four sources of mental health help—family, friends, church, and professionals—family was ranked as the most preferable source, followed by friends (Yan & Berliner, 2011). According to Chinese culture, disclosing mental health issues to others, to strangers, would bring shame and cause a "loss of face" for both the students and their families (Wei et al., 2007). Asian culture tends to perceive seeking counseling services negatively because of traditional Asian values, such as self-reliance and an uncompromising work ethic (Kim & Omizo, 2003; Lee et al., 2014; Liao et al., 2005; Young, 2017). Chinese culture discourages the expression of emotion or the discussion of personal/emotional issues that help-seeking for mental health problems often involves (Lian et al., 2020). As Parker et al. (2001) point out, in China, people commonly deny the presence of
mental disorders, as mental illness is interpreted as a weakness of one's character, one which stigmatizes the entire family. Seeking mental health services is thus viewed as admitting one's weakness, as a sign of failure, and as disclosing the family's shame to others—which is taboo in Chinese culture (Tseng & Hsu, 1970).

CISs Graduate Students with Possible Lower Help-Seeking Intentions. Several studies have suggested that both international students and graduate students possess fewer help-seeking intentions compared to domestic students and undergraduate students. Eisenberg and colleagues (2009) found that international students across 13 universities in the USA were unlikely to seek help for mental health-related issues when compared to domestic students. Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2019) also discovered that international students were more likely to overcome emotional difficulties alone or seek help on the internet than domestic students. A survey of CISs in Australia showed that 54% of the students reported high psychological distress, yet only 9% engaged with a mental health service for assistance (Lu et al., 2013). In addition to low help-seeking rates among domestic and international students, several studies have examined differences in help-seeking rates between the two student populations and found that international students demonstrate lower mental health service use compared to their domestic counterparts (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Nilsson et al., 2004).

In a recent study of 222 CISs, Lian and colleagues (2020) discovered that CISs at the graduate level adopted fewer general mental health help-seeking intentions than undergraduate students. However, this study included 80% graduate students and 20% undergraduate students, indicating a possible bias in the data, and perhaps a lack of generalizability to populations comprised of exclusively graduate students. In another study comparing mental health issues
among undergraduate and graduate students, Wyatt and Oswalt (2013) found that graduate students had experienced a higher level of stress and expressed a higher intention to seek mental health support. One possible explanation for this study's conclusion was that, compared with undergraduate students, graduate students tended to be more disassociated from family and friends, and had heavier academic workloads and potentially greater concerns about financial difficulties (Grady et al., 2013). Such disassociation from family and social networks might limit graduate students' sources of help, thus increasing the likelihood that they would not engage in help-seeking behavior and seek mental health services (Lian et al., 2020). Therefore, these studies’ findings support the assumption that CISs graduate students may have higher levels of stress than undergraduate and domestic students due to lower levels of help-seeking intentions.

Conclusion

The above literature review demonstrated that CISs are at greater risk for various problems associated with acculturative stress. Although international students enrich American institutions in many ways, many studies showed that they still face acculturation and self-efficacy challenges that affect their social well-being and academic success (Bulgan & Ciftci, 2017; Campbell, 2015; Sato & Hodge, 2015). Personality variables and life-changing events connect to psychological adaptation, whereas cultural knowledge, degree of contact, and intergroup attitudes connect with sociocultural adaptation (Ward, 1996). Based on SCT and TRD, the factors associated with social self-efficacy, social support, and academic stress could affect CISs' acculturative stress. The next chapter analyzes two main factors related to acculturative stress among CISs—self-efficacy and academic stress—to investigate how social self-efficacy and academic stress could affect their academic performance and social engagement in the process of acculturation.
Component Two Overview

Component two adopted an explanatory mixed-methods approach, collecting quantitative data through surveys from 44 Chinese international students (CISs) aged 21 to 40 and qualitative data through six one-on-one interviews. Prior to recruitment, the Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol, and participants received a letter of consent detailing the research objectives, the ability to withdraw at any time, no compensation, and privacy and anonymity protection. The data analysis process followed the analytical step method by Strauss and Corbin (1997) and Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis for qualitative data. Findings indicated that the CISs experienced low social self-efficacy and high levels of acculturative and academic stress. Qualitative findings included respondents' fear of socialization and difficulties with academic expressions, and financial worries. As an immigrant researcher with a Chinese cultural background, my positionality may have influenced the data collection process and analysis, and I have attempted to provide transparency on this potential bias. The study's discussion will compare the findings with other studies and introduce a potential solution to address the problem of acculturative stress.
Introduction of the Problem of Practice

U.S. universities are increasingly enrolling international students to multiple ends: economic growth, innovation in education, and cultural diversity on campuses (Ford & Cate, 2020). In fact, the number of international students studying in the United States has increased by over 83% in the past decade to exceed one million students in 2017 (IIE, 2017). Compared to other Asian countries, China is the leading source of U.S. international student enrollment, with 372,532 Chinese international students (CISs) enrolled in U.S. universities in 2019-2020, an increase of 1.1% compared to 2018–2019 (Institute of International Education, 2020). This means that, for the 2020 academic year, one in three international students (35%) enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions was from China.

Despite this substantial number of international students attending U.S. universities, university systems provide inadequate support to international students who experience challenges related to perceived discrimination, difficulty establishing friendships, and a lack of social support (Brunsting et al., 2018; Gareis, 2012; Glass & Westmont, 2014; Williams & Johnson, 2011). The transition to the U.S. education system and the American culture can present significant challenges for international students, resulting in increased acculturative stress that may have a detrimental impact on their mental health (Atri et al., 2007; Glass & Westmont, 2014). Acculturative stress is a process wherein the “stressors are identified as having their source in the process of acculturation; [with] a particular set of stress behaviors that occur during acculturation, such as lowered mental health status (especially confusion, anxiety, depression), feelings of marginality and alienation, heightened psychosomatic symptoms, and identity confusion” (Berry, 1995). Stress due to acculturation may be distinguished from academic stress, which, for the purposes of this study, refers to academic-related needs that
exceed the adaptive resources available to an individual (Wilks, 2008). Acculturative stress has been shown to exert a significant negative impact on international students’ mental health, with many reporting increased levels of psychological distress in the form of helplessness, social withdrawal, loneliness, homesickness, frustration, even hostility (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Sawir et al., 2008).

CISs, in particular, appear to experience greater difficulty adjusting to a new cultural context than international students from Western countries (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). The disproportionate degree of acculturative stress experienced by CISs may be attributed to the fact that the differences in the educational systems and social norms between China and the United States are much more pronounced (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). In light of this, operating from a theoretical framework of social self-efficacy, this study examined the potential proximal factors associated with acculturative stress among CISs at a large private university in Maryland.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of the needs assessment was to understand how CISs experience acculturative stress and explore the relationship between social self-efficacy and acculturative stress. To facilitate the study, the researcher selected a mixed-methods methodology consisting of quantitative and qualitative data.

**Theoretical Framework**

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory and notion of triadic reciprocal determinism (TRD) offer a useful framework for conceiving of acculturative stress as a product of social interaction. Within these frameworks, Bandura presents a comprehensive theory of human motivation and action from a social-cognitive perspective. Social cognitive theory addresses the prominent roles of cognitive, vicarious, self-regulatory, and self-reflective processes in
psychosocial functioning by emphasizing reciprocal causation through the interplay of cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1986). Through Bobo doll experiments with 72 young children ages three to six, Bandura demonstrated that both desirable and undesirable behaviors could be learned by observing others’ actions and then subsequently modeling those actions (P Hollis, 2019). From SCT, the concept of Triadic Reciprocal Determinism (TRD) grew; one key concept around which TRD revolves is that the extent to which people believe in their own effectiveness, or their perceived self-efficacy, can indicate their motivation to tackle the current problems (Bandura, 1977), which lays the foundation in this study for understanding the possible inner motivations that hinder CISs’ acculturation process as observed in previous literature. Acculturation is a collective yet individualized process for each CIS, resulting from the interactive influences of personal, environmental, and behavioral factors in the overseas learning and living environment and resulting in the CIS reacting positively, defensively or passively to a given situation. For instance, a CIS’s limited English language proficiency, as related to his or her perceived self-efficacy, may cause the student to refuse to communicate with neighbors and classmates of the host culture, or to seek academic help from his or her American professor. A different student may perceive the limited language proficiency as the motivator for him or her to interact more with English speakers to better acculturate himself or herself to the local culture. However, for that student he or she may be thwarted in the acculturation process by perceived discrimination throughout his or her conversations with neighbors. These hypotheses justify the rationale that TRD, highlighting that each person is influenced by personal, environmental, and behavioral factors to different extents, provides the framework for tackling CISs’ acculturative stress in this study. This study used elements of SCT and TRD to inquire
about the academic and acculturative stress experienced by CISs, as well as the social support (or lack thereof) available to them.

**Research Design and Objectives**

In the section that follows, the study setting, participant demographic information, and instrumentation measures are outlined to contextualize the research findings. Three research questions anchor this study. They are:

1. What is the relationship between social self-efficacy and acculturative stress among CISs?
2. How do CISs experience academic stress—as both separate from and related to acculturative stress?
3. How do CISs experience acculturative stress in the U.S.?

**Study Setting**

The study was set at a private university in a large city in the northeastern U.S., hereafter referred to simply as “the University.” The university offers both undergraduate and graduate degree programs, with an average tuition cost of approximately $50,000 a year. The university’s student population of more than 20,000 is predominantly White (over 50%), with roughly 15% identifying as Asian. With a reputation for being highly selective, the university’s acceptance rate hovers just above 10%.

**Participants**

The study’s participants were from an international students program. This 12-month program aims to prepare international educators to be leaders in schools, organizations, and other dynamic and fast-paced learning environments worldwide. The coursework featured in the program attends to both core and focus areas in the field of education. The program includes
eight areas of study such as Global Leadership, Explorations in Neuroeducation, and Introduction to Global Education, Entrepreneurship in Education, etc. The entire population of students in this program is from Asia, and 97% are CISs. Students who graduate from the program obtain a Master of Science in education. Most of the students go back to their home countries following their studies, while a small group of the students stay and work in the U.S. This study involved the participation of 44 students, comprising 39 female and five male students in the quantitative study. In addition, six students, including two males and four females, participated in the qualitative interviews.

**Instrumentation**

This section outlines the instrumentation used to ascertain students’ levels of acculturative stress, as well as any potential associated factors, such as their perceived self-efficacy and academic stress. To pursue these lines of inquiry, a three-part web-based survey was utilized. Questions in the first part of the survey were derived from the Inventory of College Challenges for Ethnic Minority Students (ICCEMS), which originally contained 50 questionnaires, while this study adopted eight items; the second part from the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS) which originally contained 36 items, this study adopted eight items; and the third part from the Scale of Perceived Social Self-Efficacy (PSSE) which originally had 25 items while nine questions were chosen for this study. Responses to survey items were recorded utilizing Qualtrics.

**Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS).** The ASSIS (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994) was modified for its use in the present study. The original version of ASSIS consists of 36 items, to be rated on 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 3 = unsure, 5 = strongly agree), which assesses cultural adjustment problems. The ASSIS is furthermore
comprised of seven subscales, including *Perceived Discrimination* (8 items; e.g., “Others are biased toward me.”), *Homesickness* (4 items; e.g., “I miss the people and country of my origin.”), *Perceived hate/rejection* (5 items; e.g., “Others do not appreciate my cultural values.”), *Fear* (4 items; e.g., “I feel that my status in this society is low due to my cultural background”), *Stress due to change/Culture shock* (3 items; e.g., “I feel uncomfortable adjusting to new cultural values.”), *Guilt* (2 items; e.g., “I feel guilty that I am living a different lifestyle here.”), and *nonspecific concerns* (10 items; e.g., “I worry about my future for not being able to decide whether to stay here or to go back”). The scale provides a sum score for analysis, accounting for 70.6% of the total explained variance in Sandhu and Asrabadi’s (1994) survey research. ASSIS internal consistency scores range from .87 to .95 for the total items measured by Cronbach’s alpha (Poyrazli et al., 2006; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Sandhu and Asrabadi (1998) reported a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.94 and a Guttman split-half reliability of 0.96 for all 36 items of the scale. Construct validity was supported by a positive association with depression among international students (Constantine et al., 2004). Rather than implement all 36 items, however, the survey for this study included the most relevant items given the research objectives, and thus featured eight questions associated with fear, perceived discrimination, homesickness, stress due to change/culture shock, and other nonspecific concerns. A Cronbach’s Alpha test was used to determine the reliability of the quantitative portion of the chosen survey questions. The reliability across all quantitative survey items was high ($a = 0.85$). Furthermore, there was no missing data on the quantitative survey items.

**Inventory of College Challenges for Ethnic Minority Students (ICCEMS).** While the ASSSIS assessed acculturative stress, the ICCEMS was introduced to measure academic stress (Ying et al., 2004). The ICCEMS incorporates a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (a little) to 4
(all the time). As pointed out earlier, the number of test items, item inter-relatedness, and dimensionality affect the value of alpha. There are different reports about the acceptable values of alpha, ranging from 0.70 to 0.95 (Tavakol and Dennick, 2011). The three item Academic Demands sub-scale measures distress due to academic challenges. The two-item Difficulty with Academic Expression subscale, on the other hand, assesses the current level of stress associated with difficulties in expressing oneself in academic settings. In the current study, the coefficient alphas for academic demands and difficulty with academic expression were .70 and .73, respectively. The validity of the overall ICCEMS was supported by a positive association with depression and a negative association with GPA among Chinese American students (Ying et al., 2004). The scale originally aimed to understand 13 factors such as pressure to use substances, social isolation, counseling needs, etc. The present study used eight items, which were related directly to academic life, such as, pressure to get good grades, class discussion, and academic demands. The scale provides a sum score for total academic stress, with higher scores indicating greater academic stress. The total scale reliability for modified academic stress in this study was \( (a = 0.87) \).

**The Perceived Social Self-efficacy (PSSE) Scale.** The final scale administered in the present study was the PSSE, which measures an individual's confidence in his or her ability to initiate and sustain social interactions (Sherer & Adams, 1983; Smith & Betz, 2000). Smith and Betz’s (2000) PSSE scale includes 25 items with five-point Likert-type response options ranging from one to five, in which one means "no confidence" and five means "complete confidence." The scale items measure an individual’s level of confidence in a variety of social situations, including their performance in public situations, in groups and parties, and while receiving and giving help. The researchers reported Cronbach's alpha value to be 0.95. Total scores range from
25 to 125, with individuals with higher scores demonstrating higher levels of social self-efficacy beliefs. This study implemented a modified version that focused on nine items that were mainly associated with shyness, social anxiety, and global self-esteem (Smith & Betz, 2000). The internal consistency based on Cronbach's alpha value is \( \alpha = 0.90 \), which shows a high internal consistency of the data value.

The importance of the PSSE lies not only in the relationship it may illustrate between confidence and effective social behavior, but with its ability to demonstrate how these constructs interact with both academic and acculturative stress (Constantine et al., 2004). For instance, a student who reports lower perceived self-efficacy in academic contexts may be expected to report higher degrees of academic and acculturative stress (Nilsson, 2007).

Table 1 below illustrates the various scales and the constructs they are designed to investigate.

**Table 1**

*Chinese students’ acculturative stress*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Operational Definition</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Citation(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>A person's confidence in his or her ability to initiate and sustain social interactions</td>
<td>Perceived Social Self-Efficacy questionnaires</td>
<td>Sherer &amp; Adams, (1983); Smith &amp; Betz, (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(PSSE)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acculturative Stress</td>
<td>A reduction in mental, physical, and social health of individuals undergoing acculturation.</td>
<td>The Acculturative Stress Scale for</td>
<td>Berry et al (1987); Sandhu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Academic Stress

Mental distress concerning some anticipated frustration associated with academic failure, the anticipation of such failure, or even an awareness of the possibility of failure.

Inventory of College Challenges for Ethnic Minority Students (ICCEMS) Ying et al., (2004).

Quantitative measures such as the surveys and scales described above are not without drawbacks, however. One such drawback is social desirability bias, wherein participants agree with a statement to avoid seeming disagreeable (Schutt, 2015). The participants in this study may be even more susceptible to social desirability bias since they were students in a program where the researcher serves as faculty, further explanation will be stated in the section of limitation in Component Three. Recognizing the potential bias inherent to quantitative measures—and its ability to preclude a more comprehensive understanding of academic stress and social self-efficacy as means for identifying students' acculturative stress—qualitative measures were used in conjunction with quantitative ones. Specifically, in-depth interviews using open-ended questions were employed to elucidate CISs’ experiences. By utilizing both quantitative and qualitative measures in tandem with one another, this study adopts an explanatory sequential mixed method to explore the needs of CIS, and test the tentative hypothesis that acculturative stress is influenced by social self-efficacy and academic stress among CISs.
Data Collection

This study adopted a mixed method of sequential research design, the qualitative data collection process follows the quantitative one in order to be able to further explain the novel results obtained through analysis of the quantitative data or vice versa (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017). Survey responses from 44 students aged 21 to 40 comprise the data for quantitative analysis and six interviews for qualitative analysis. There were six male students and 44 female students who participated in the survey, and four female interviewees and two male interviewees. Participants were recruited for participation in the study via a strategically placed informative flier in one of the hallways of the school. As previously discussed, I anticipated the potential complication to students’ free and voluntary participation in this study due to my position as an adjunct faculty member within the program. To prevent students from feeling socially obligated to participate in this study, I left my work email to contact if interested, rather than approaching students directly to enlist their involvement.

Prior to recruiting the participants, this study’s protocol, including all recruiting materials, was approved by the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). To further minimize the risk that the students might have felt undue pressure to participate in the study, participant rights and confidentiality were addressed through a rigorous onboarding process. Upon contacting me, the participants received a letter of consent. I explained the letter to them, detailing the research objectives and design, the fact that they could withdraw at any time, there would be no compensation provided, and that their privacy and anonymity would be protected. Once participants agreed to participate, the survey through Qualtrics was sent via email before the individual interviews happened three weeks later. All identifying names and characteristics
would be changed, and the survey data would be stored on a password-protected personal computer.

Data Analysis

I analyzed data from both the survey and the qualitative interview responses. For the quantitative data, SPSS was used to obtain descriptive and inferential statistics. For the qualitative data, an inductive coding procedure was performed according to the seven-step analytic method for developing codes and themes established by Strauss and Corbin (1997). The analytical process sought to adhere to the principles set forth by Charmaz’s (2006) notion of grounded theory, which rejects developing *a priori* analytical categories before commencing data analysis and instead recommends letting the data itself dictate the codes used. In this study, codes were determined from the language used by CISs in describing their experiences, what is commonly referred to as *in vivo* coding. By using the participants’ actual words from the interviews as codes, this research study rejects a top-down approach to research and rather seeks to adopt a collaborative spirit, one which solicits participants’ input and active participation in the research process. This method of coding is ideal for studies examining a specific culture or micro-culture, as it “offers a sense of nuanced meaning that other forms of coding might not allow” (Manning, 2017, p. 2). Because this study aims to examine the experiences of a particular group of Asian (Chinese) graduate-level students studying in the U.S., this methodology seemed fitting.

Descriptive categories were identified as soon as data collection had begun, through generating and comparing codes applicable to each category (Glaser, 1965). Once the codes had been assigned to the data, these codes were grouped and categorized to construct broader analytical themes (see Appendix A). I analyzed qualitative and quantitative data for each
participant separately to assess the same concepts, and then merged the findings. An explanatory sequential mixed method design was used to merge the data (Ivankova et al., 2006). According to this approach, quantitative findings are introduced first, followed by qualitative observations. The qualitative data are meant to further explain (hence the name of the methodology) or interpret initial quantitative results. The advantage that this research design offers is that later qualitative measures (here, interviews) can be adapted or modified according to the findings presented in the quantitative dataset. Additional data in the form of field notes and self-reflective notes/memos served to contextualize participant responses and conceptually extend analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Those field notes memos to survey questions were analyzed to provide insights into participants’ content knowledge of intercultural competency and understanding of their acculturative stress.

44 pieces of survey were completed in February of 2022. Six one-on-one interviews were conducted in March of 2022 on zoom with six participants who are from the program. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six steps for conducting thematic analysis were used. I read and re-read the transcripts from the interview and apply codes to data segments. Based on constructs of interest and other common statements, I developed a coding list available in Appendix A. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), audit trials are one of the main techniques for establishing the ‘confirmability’ of qualitative findings. These codes were then collapsed into themes, as indicated in Table 2 below.

**Interview Method**

Thematic analysis was used to understand the data collected during the interview (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The 30-minute interviews took place on zoom and were recorded. I, as the interviewer, also took notes during the interview. The notes taken focused on the responses that
each participant provided. I tallied each time a participant mentioned any content related to the following: social self-efficacy, acculturative and academic stress, communication issues, and concerns about living in the U.S. These categories were developed based on the findings from the survey and the current literature.

**Table 2**

*Chinese international students' acculturative stress*

<table>
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<td>Inventory of College Challenges for Ethnic Minority Students (ICCEMS)</td>
<td>Ying et al., (2004).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Positionality Statement

Providing transparency in research methodology and results allows readers to assess the validity of the findings and reduces the potential for researcher bias (Unluer, 2012). I wrote the statement in an effort to present my reflections on possible bias during the completion of this research project. Throughout this research on understanding the CISs acculturative stress, from designing the three research questions to recruiting participants for the qualitative interview, my positionality remained as an immigrant researcher with a Chinese cultural background. Prior to and during the study, I have been working and studying at this private university for years. My professional experience studying and working with Chinese international students stimulated my intellectual interest and impelled me to conduct quantitative and qualitative studies to learn more about their acculturation process here in the United States and, more importantly, the motivations behind it. I expect the voices of the CISs to be heard and reflected. Therefore, I analyzed the data from the qualitative interview using the seven-step analytical method by Strauss and Corbin (1997). As a professor and doctoral student at this university, it is crucial for me to document my reactions to prevent potential bias and facilitate proper data analysis (Krieger, 1985). The participants’ voices not only appeared in the analysis but were also used as codes in data collection. Nevertheless, I perceive my positionality as intertwining with the decoding process. To some degree, the participants might feel comfortable sharing their acculturative and academic stress with me, as we share certain levels of commonality regarding cultural backgrounds. But the challenge remained as my positionality might lead them to think that I could not fully emphasize with them as a researcher and a professor, especially for those with limited English language proficiency in this English-speaking interview. Meanwhile, some of the participants asked me questions during the interview about how I dealt with acculturative stress as a former
international student. They also constantly yet unconsciously sought my agreement while expressing their unwillingness to go to a party or to ask for clarification in class. In this case, the participants’ awareness of my positionality made the analytical method no longer the only factor that influenced the data collection process.

Furthermore, for the quantitative survey measuring acculturative stress, social self-efficacy and academic stress, it occurred to me that several students chose to skip answering certain questions, as they might assume I already knew their answers to these questions (Unluer, 2012). However, this made their survey results incomplete and invalid for use. My positionality, in this case, might have made them take for granted that I could, or could not, comprehend their concerns. It might also send an implicit message that they didn’t have to take the survey too seriously. From their perspective, the possibility that I can empathize with their inner struggle does not necessarily lead to people of the host culture understanding and supporting them.

Reflecting on my positionality, especially my race, and culture, I am mindful that research results and their interpretations are influenced by the narratives of both the participants and the researchers (Milner, 2007). As both an insider and an outsider when conducting research on people of the native culture, I should pay attention to “internal variations”, such as gender, education, class, and duration of contact with participants, that can lead to positionality shifts (Merriam et al., 2001). However, it does not always serve as an impediment. As long as the researcher makes efforts to clarify his/her positionality to himself/herself and also the participants, positionality can become an asset indeed.

**Findings and Discussion**

In order to examine the relationship between CISs’ social self-efficacy and their acculturative stress, their academic stress, as well as how they experience acculturative stress,
both quantitative data from the survey and qualitative data from the interviews are synthesized below. required a thorough synthesis and analysis. The findings indicated that 100% of the participants in this graduate program tended to have low levels of social self-efficacy while experiencing high levels of acculturative stress. Social self-efficacy was defined as related to “an individual’s self-belief about their skills in interpersonal interaction situations” (Bandura, 1997). Statistically significant data indicated that social self-efficacy was negatively correlated with acculturative stress among the participants ($r=-.341^*$$). The respondents expressed feeling intimidated about participating in local social activities and thus were unwilling to volunteer at local events. Their low social self-efficacy, or belief in their ability to socialize in local activities, was in accordance with their higher acculturative stress, which was manifested in their fear of socialization within the local community. Furthermore, The respondents demonstrated huge amounts of academic stress in terms of difficulties with academic expressions and financial worry regarding tuition. Having thus delineated the “problem” of acculturative stress via the quantitative and qualitative findings presented in this chapter, the discussion sets will compare these findings with the findings of other studies, and introduce a potential solution to be detailed in Component Threeout to explore a potential solution.

Findings for Research Question 1

Research question 1 (RQ 1) was, “What is the relationship between social self-efficacy and acculturative stress among the CISs?” To answer this question, Table 2 indicated the Pearson’s $r$ correlation was performed to examine the relationship between social self-efficacy and acculturative stress. The result indicated a relatively strong negative correlation between social self-efficacy and acculturative stress ($r=-.341^*$$). This correlation meant the lower social self-efficacy that a student had, the higher levels of acculturative stress this student experienced in
this program. Correspondingly, qualitative data, collected through the six interviews and analyzed thematically, revealed that low levels of social self-efficacy brought communication and accountability challenges for the CISs in this program.

Table 3

*Correlation between acculturative stress*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Acculturative Stress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pearson Correlation Coefficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>-0.341</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

*Mean, standard deviation, and frequencies of social self-efficacy survey questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1*</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help to make someone you’ve recently met feel comfortable with your group of friends.</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>1.004</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer to help organize an event locally.</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>1.225</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask a group of local people who are planning to engage in a social activity (e.g., to go to a movie) if you can join them.</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>1.289</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Get invited to a local party that is being given by a prominent or popular individual.

Volunteer to help lead a group or organization in the U.S.

Go to a party or social function locally where you probably won’t know anyone.

Ask someone out after she or he was busy the first time you asked.

Call someone you’ve met locally and would like to know better.

Ask a potential friend out for coffee.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1*</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I fear for my personal safety because of my different cultural background.</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>1.220</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10.9%) (10.9%) (23.9%) (37.0%) (17.4%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel intimidated to participate in local social activities.</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>1.343</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(19.6%) (10.9%) (19.6%) (37.0%) (13.0%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others are biased toward me.</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>1.112</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(13.3%) (22.2%) (31.1%) (28.9%) (4.4%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I miss the people and country of my origin.</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.011</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.2%) (8.7%) (10.9%) (43.5%) (34.8%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel uncomfortable to adjust to new cultural values.</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>0.856</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(28.3%) (47.8%) (17.4%) (6.5%) (0.00%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *The number is corresponded to five degrees in a Likert-Scale ranging from disagree to agree.

Table 5

Mean, standard deviation, and frequencies of acculturative stress survey questions
I feel that my status in this society is low due to my cultural background.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I feel some people don't associate with me because of my ethnicity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I worry about my future for not being able to decide whether to stay here or to go back.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *The number corresponds to five degrees in a Likert-Scale ranging from disagree to agree.

Table 4 indicated mean responses to survey questions focused on social self-efficacy. Respondents scored question #4 the lowest, with a mean score of 2.41. In terms of social self-efficacy, for example, the mean score (M=2.48 in response to the question about ) associated with survey question #2 measuring respondents’ willingness to volunteer to help organize a local event has shown that the participants tended to have low levels of social self-efficacy. More specifically, merely 18% of the respondents showed a willingness to volunteer to help organize an event locally, while the majority of the respondents (over 82%) demonstrated different degrees of hesitancy in offering help, which further implied their low social self-efficacy.

Moreover, in response to survey question #2, “I feel intimidated to participate in local social activities” measuring students’ acculturative stress, more than half of the respondents (52.27%) showed various levels of agreement. At this point, a relationship between these two quantitative findings emerged: the CISs were fearful of taking part in local socialization and that they were unwilling to volunteer in local activities. The former result indicated their low social self-efficacy, while the latter one revealed higher levels of acculturative stress. The negative association between social self-efficacy and acculturative stress can also be observed in
responses from the qualitative interviews. For example, interviewees demonstrated low levels of social self-efficacy with high levels of acculturative stress in general. One interviewee explained why she did not want to talk to her professor in class by saying, “it is so difficult and stressful to speak English the entire day” and also expressed concerns about studying in the U.S. by not understanding the local culture and the language (Interviewee 3, March 10, 2022).

**Low Social Self-Efficacy Includes Communication and Accountability Challenges**

Interestingly, the relatively high mean score (M=3.64) associated with survey question #9 revealed that respondents expressed a positive attitude towards the hope of making friends. This finding correlated with what was found in the qualitative interview. For example, multiple participants expressed their hope to make friends with local people and speak more “authentic” English during the qualitative interview. Interviewee #5 (Interviewee 5, March 2, 2022) stated, “Having more friends could definitely help me to feel less lonely and stressed at school. It is just hard to make new local friends because of my poor communication skills.” Those findings suggested that the students were eager to establish new friendships but were thwarted by a lack of motivation and communication skills.

Moreover, four participants complained of “being tired of speaking English the entire day.” For instance, in response to the question, “What help do you need to be academically successful and accountable,” Interviewee #4 said, “Be brave to ask for clarification and be active in communication, which is a lot of work.” (Interviewee 4, March 12, 2022) Another student portrayed the connection between low social self-efficacy and accountability challenges more explicitly, saying, “I couldn't get up for events in the mornings.” (Interviewee 1, March 4, 2022) In conclusion, they knew what the right thing to do, such as getting up early when they should,
and asking for clarification while being active in communication, but the lack of social self-efficacy acted as a mediator leading to a higher level of acculturative stress, such as loneliness.

**Findings for Research Question 2**

Research question 2 was, “How do CISs experience academic stress—as both separate from and related to acculturative stress?” Table 5 indicated mean responses to survey questions concerning academic stress. In general, data (M=2.81) showed that the participants in this survey tended to have a moderate level of academic stress. However, the students experienced a comparatively high level of difficulties with academic expression, as the mean score (M=3.01) associated with survey questions #4 and #5 corresponded with the “Neither Agree nor Disagree” category on the Likert scale. Out of 44 respondents to the survey, more than one-third of the students (38.64%) disclosed concerns about not being able to fully express their ideas in class discussions. Therefore, not being able to communicate smoothly exacerbated their academic stress.

**Table 6**

*Mean, standard deviation, and frequencies of academic stress survey questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1*</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Felt pressure to get good grades.</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>1.304</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(11.1%)</td>
<td>(15.6%)</td>
<td>(17.8%)</td>
<td>(33.3%)</td>
<td>(22.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt financial pressures regarding how to pay for tuition, books, etc.</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>1.411</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(19.6%)</td>
<td>(19.6%)</td>
<td>(8.7%)</td>
<td>(37.0%)</td>
<td>(15.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt conflict between time to study and time to make international</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>1.286</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>friends and party.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(22.2%)</td>
<td>(31.1%)</td>
<td>(22.2%)</td>
<td>(13.3%)</td>
<td>(11.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt you could not express yourself adequately in class discussions.</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>1.307</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(20.0%)</td>
<td>(26.7%)</td>
<td>(15.6%)</td>
<td>(28.9%)</td>
<td>(8.9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Felt you could not express yourself adequately in writing papers. 3.22 1.397 7 10 4 16 9 (15.2%) (21.7%) (8.7%) (34.8%) (19.6%)
Felt you could not keep up with the academic demands. 2.04 1.095 20 9 13 3 1 (43.5%) (19.6%) (28.3%) (6.5%) (2.2%)
Felt you had trouble communicating with a student of another cultural background. 2.80 1.307 10 10 7 15 3 (22.2%) (22.2%) (15.6%) (33.3%) (6.7%)
Felt you had trouble communicating with a staff person of another cultural background. 2.50 1.278 12 15 6 10 3 (26.1%) (32.6%) (13.0%) (21.7%) (6.5%)

*Note:* *The number is corresponded to five degrees in a Likert-Scale ranging from disagree to agree.*

Interestingly, when being asked about their communication with the American staff, the respondents exhibited a different attitude compared to questions #4 and #5, which showed their concerns about communication during class time. Only 3 out of 44 respondents (6.81%) agreed that they encountered communication difficulties with a staff person of another cultural background. The reason could be that this program only had international students. The American instructors were used to the cultural differences, which, to some degree, compensated for the communication misunderstandings caused by the language and cultural barrier.

Another finding was that “high expectations on academic achievements” also perceived greater amounts of academic stress, with the highest mean score (M=3.40) associated with survey question #1. In this study, 79% of the respondents agreed on various levels of feeling pressure to get good grades. One interviewee admitted: “To get an A, I have to listen to the professor very carefully to make sure I don’t miss a word. This is so tiring, and sometimes I don’t want to get up for classes thinking about another long English-speaking day.”(Interviewee 5, March 2, 2022)
The second highest mean score (M=3.09) indicated that “financial worry” strongly contributed to their academic stress. For instance, only 19% of the participants showed that they were not worried about financial pressure. A similar financial concern was shared by interviewees in the qualitative study. One interviewee mentioned: “I felt extremely guilty when I didn’t get an A for an assignment, since my parents had invested so much in me.” (Interviewee 1, March 4 2022). Generally, the result showed that they suffered from concerns as to whether they did well enough to deserve the tuition their parents had spent on supporting their study abroad.

**English Language Proficiency Level Leads to High Academic Stress**

During the interview, the majority of the participants mentioned that challenges impacted their acculturative stress and academic stress. The most common challenge mentioned in six interviews, for example, was a perceived lack of English language proficiency that directly caused academic stress. The students interviewed consistently linked what they believed to be underdeveloped English skills to both a fear of communicating with authority and an inability to convey their needs or express themselves in class. For example, “I am so nervous when the professors called me because I am not sure if I understand their English” (Interviewee 3, March 10 2022) or “I am often confused and anxious with the homework instruction, so many unknown words” (Interviewee 2, March 7 2022). Participants made further connections between limited English language proficiency and their inability to integrate socially, commenting, for example, that they rarely interacted with Americans in social settings and even went so far as to claim to feel “ignored” by the professors in class as a result of their linguistic differences.

**Findings for Research Question 3**

Research question 3 was, “How do CISs experience acculturative stress in the U.S.?” The quantitative findings, as shown in Table 5 above, revealed an overall trend of high
acculturative stress among the participants. In the first round of interviews, when the students had just arrived in the United States, acculturative stress was mainly related to difficulties in communication and concerns about safety.

Concerns for Discrimination and Safety

The mean score associated with survey questions #1 #2 #4 and #8 was M=3.475. Similar to other recent research learning about international students’ fears of living in the U.S. (Ma & Miller, 2021; Shi, 2021), fear of personal safety has shown to be a strong acculturative stressor. For example, survey question #1 “I fear for my personal safety because of my different cultural background,” manifested the second-highest mean score (M=3.39; Mo=4). Out of 44 participants, 25 of them expressed fear of personal safety to different extents, constituting a striking proportion of 56.81%. This was also confirmed in the qualitative interview. One student mentioned, “I know we look and talk differently in every way, we are all always worried we will be robbed on the way to school.” (Interviewee 6, March 8 2022). This information conveyed a message that participants felt a mistrust of the host culture out of unfamiliarity and reported lacking a sense of safety. These concerns for discrimination and safety could aggravate their marginalized situation and further impede their effective acculturation into the host culture.

Meanwhile, when asked about willingness to take part in local social activities in question #2, the mean score (M=3.13) and mode (Mo=4) revealed that the students held a similar attitude which was the feeling of fear and intimidation. More than half of the respondents (52.27%) reported a feeling of intimidation in participating in social activities, which was reiterated during the qualitative interview among multiple interviewees expressing the “fear” of speaking English to the local people. Their fearful and intimidated feelings of the new environment denoted their incompetent intercultural communication skills, resulting from
perceived limited English language proficiency, which eventually led to higher levels of acculturative stress.

**Concerns for the Unknown Future**

Furthermore, concerns for the future remained a powerful indicator of those CISs’ acculturative stress (M=3.38; Mo=4). One-third of the respondents (34.09%) agreed to some extent that they were unable to make the decision of staying in the States or coming back to their home country after graduation. 22.73% of the students admitted it as a significant concern. Participants in qualitative interviews shared the same negative feeling. One student said: “I am scared of thinking about what I am going to do after graduation.” (Interviewee 6, March 8 2022) Another participant complained: “It is so difficult for the international students to find a job here, I feel like being mistreated and dumped after graduation.” (Interviewee 5, March 2 2022) There was also one student who mentioned that he received pressure from his parents to find a job, “My mom and dad talk about my job in every video call with me, which is annoying.” (Interviewee 1, March 4 2022) Moreover, this graduate program lasted less than a year, so the students must start planning for their future at the same time when they were still adapting to a new life in a foreign country, which added to their acculturation challenges.

**Homesickness**

Homesickness served as another strong acculturative stressor. Participant responses to a survey question that aimed to reveal participants’ degree of homesickness, “I miss the people and the country of my origin,” suggested that the majority of the participants (74.3%) experienced acculturative stress. The total sample mean score (M = 3.92) and mode (Mo = 4) revealed that, at the time of the survey, most participants were undergoing a period of acculturative stress primarily derived from their homesickness, which might ultimately engender many other
negative emotions, such as loneliness, depression, and anxiety (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). This homesickness was considered to be the most significant and prevalent unmixed indicator (singling out Miscellaneous), compared to other factors. The standard deviation score for homesickness ($SD = 1.061$), showed that reports on homesickness varied less than other items, and moreover indicated that homesickness was a common issue among the students.

**Cultural Identity Confusion**

Students in this study tended to feel overwhelmed by cultural adjustment issues. During the interview, some participants expressed feeling trapped in a dilemma between maintaining their ethnic identity and reconstructing their identity in the host culture. One student expressed her unutterable embarrassment caused by her family’s taken-for-granted perception of her as an overseas student. She complained: “My families in China think I am so American now, they asked me to translate everything, but my English is not that perfect.” (Interviewee 2, March 7, 2022) Others worry about being unable to discern the true feelings of members from the host culture due to cross-cultural differences. One participant expressed his concerns during the interview “I cannot tell if my American neighbors are being sarcastic or mad.” (Interviewee 6, March 8, 2022)

**Emergent Findings**

Some other findings emerged through both quantitative and qualitative studies. For example, the majority of students expressed stress due to a low level of intercultural communication skills. Respondents shared a common concern about expressing their ideas appropriately either in class or in writing an academic paper in the survey, while they frequently talked about being lonely as not understanding the culture and the language. Their self-perceived inadequate English proficiency obviously thwarted their social interaction with members of the
host culture. For example, one interviewee held a passive attitude on social events with the
native speakers and put, “Well, I do not feel comfortable in social events because I didn’t know
how to express myself in English.” (Interviewee 5, March 2, 2022) Meanwhile, inadequate
knowledge of the host culture contributed to more intercultural misunderstandings during social
interactions with native speakers. One participant recalled his unpleasant experience
communicating with a native professor: “My American friend told me I was rude to the professor
the other day because I didn’t even look at him, but I thought I should not look at him in his eyes
in my culture, no wonder he does not like me.” (Interviewee 6, March 8, 2022)

There was strong evidence showing a need for additional intercultural communication
learning support. Based on the quantitative study, question #6 showed that most of the students
(65.91%) were able to meet the academic demand. Similarly, in the qualitative interviews,
students discussed feeling a sense of high academic efficacy – they were able to complete
assignments on time and did not feel that the academic load was too high. One female student
stressed: “We have no more than two classes a day. I am a graduate student now, and I am
expecting more classes and assignments, wish I could learn more.” (Interviewee 4, March 12,
2022) Another interviewee showed confidence in submitting assignments on time. She said:
“Although sometimes I feel confused with my homework instructions, I am able to finish and
submit it ahead of the deadline, it is much less challenging than I thought.” (Interviewee 2,
March 7, 2022) However, students also expressed having a difficult time understanding faculty
and communicating with faculty in class. This result was also shown in the quantitative analysis
in question #8. Merely 12 out of 44 respondents, which constituted a percentage of 27.27%,
claimed that they had no trouble communicating with faculty of different cultural backgrounds.
One participant mentioned: “I have to double-check with more than one of my classmates in case
I misunderstand my professor’s instructions.” (Interviewee 4, March 12, 2022) Another student referred to his experience in class: “The professor made a joke in a class by referring to a famous quote in an American movie. I didn’t laugh, since I did not even realize it was a joke, it was awkward and stressful” (Interviewee 1, March 4, 2022).

**Discussion**

The sections below discussed the relationship between low social self-efficacy, acculturative stress, and intercultural communication challenges among Chinese international students (CISs). Findings reveal that low social self-efficacy is negatively related to acculturative stress, and this relationship is mainly mediated through intercultural communication. Furthermore, academic stress and cultural identity confusion as two other challenges that CISs commonly encounter while adapting to a new culture. This discussion adds to the existing literature by highlighting the complex interplay between these factors and their impact on the acculturation process of CISs.

**Low Social Self-Efficacy Leads to Communication Challenges**

This study found a negative relationship between social self-efficacy and acculturative stress, mainly mediated through intercultural communication. This negative relationship was also proven by Lin and Betz (2009) in their study of 203 Chinese and Taiwanese international students at a large mid-western university in the U.S.

Meanwhile, the challenges of communicating in English plagued the interviewees with low social self-efficacy. Firstly, the participants perceived their social efficacy in the English setting as similarly low as their contemporaries in Lin and Betz’s (2009) study. Secondly, it was worthy of note that the finding of the connection between low social self-efficacy and communication challenges was similar to the literature. As also pointed out by Lin & Betz
social self-efficacy and perceived English fluency were found to be “positively associated” with each other. In another study, social self-efficacy was also found to be “positively related to cognitive, affective, and behavioral communication skills” (Gist et al., 2006). Consistent with their findings, Raskauskas and colleagues (2015) reported a positive interrelationship between social self-efficacy and academic performance, highlighting the feasibility of interventions that scaffolded social self-efficacy.

However, there remained several findings in the current literature that were not addressed in this study. For example, Lin and Betz (2009) also discovered that participants’ social self-efficacy increased when communicating with others in their native languages. Though no significant differences between social self-efficacy and the change of language settings were addressed in this study, it echoed one of our major findings that low social self-efficacy leads to communication challenges for CISs. Furthermore, social self-efficacy was found to play a mediating role between attachment anxiety and loneliness, or even depression in a longitudinal study of 308 freshmen at a midwestern university (Wei et al., 2005). Similarly, Tsai and colleagues (2017) have found that higher social self-efficacy was predictive of a lower level of loneliness for CISs, independent of their perceived English proficiency. Although the relationship between social self-efficacy and depression was not specifically addressed in this study, depression, and loneliness are major elements in studying acculturative stress which is the target of this study.

Academic Stress Relates to the Literature

This study reported a moderate level of academic stress among CISs. The result was slightly different from previous findings (Yan, 2017; Liao & Wei, 2014; Smith & Khawaja,
2011). As discussed in the previous sections, possible explanations could be that the faculty are getting more accustomed to the different cultures between American and Chinese.

To be more specific, this study found a cause-and-effect relationship between English language proficiency and academic stress, which was different from the current literature. Within the limited literature concerning academic stress among international students, on one hand, some of the previous findings identified English language proficiency and academic stress as two separate acculturative stressors, without exploring the relationship between them (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Low levels of English proficiency were found as a characteristic of international students who had low academic achievements (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006). On the other, some studies only mentioned the role of language barriers as an intensifier of academic stress (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Nilsson, 2007). What’s more, in a study of CISs studying in the Washington, D. C. area, English language was identified as the barrier to academic achievements by CISs themselves (Kao, 1987). In this case, this study took a step further to postulate and prove, via qualitative interviews, that English language proficiency and academic stress were directly correlated among the CISs.

Furthermore, this study found that high expectations on academic achievement could add to the burden of academic stress among the students. This finding aligned with those of previous research. Anxiety and feelings of uncertainty about academic performance reflected the “education shock” that CISs were struggling with (Donovan, 1981), which might result from different standards and requirements between the Chinese and American educational institutions and further resulted in CISs encountering “inadequacy of educational preparation” and suffering from huge academic stress (Geng et al., 2005). It showed a clear picture that the academic stress grew out of high expectations led CISs to encounter challenges in their acculturation process and
to choose an “avoidance-oriented coping strategy” to deal with the acculturative stress (Endler & Parker, 1990). In the study of semi-structured interviews of CISs in a Southwestern public university, participants reported high academic expectations, which were rooted in their traditional values, led to a higher level of academic stress (Yan, 2017).

**Cultural Identity Confusion Between Chinese and American Cultures**

Lastly, this study found that the participants were struggling with their cultural identity between Chinese and American cultures, which was similar to some of the current literature, which focused on the identity confusion or struggles that international students experienced in the host country. The six international students interviewed in one qualitative study all demonstrated “a strong emotional response to threats to collective identity,” regardless of their different coping strategies (Brown & Brown, 2013). The researcher further suggested multicultural training on the side of university counseling staff to help them tackle the specific needs of international students on campus. Similarly, graduate participants in Bond’s (2019) study felt a huge gap between “their own and others’ conceptions around their nationality” in the host culture.

Interestingly, there remained some articles that discussed the confusion of cultural identities, while pointing out different motivations behind them. For example, Lee and Rice (2007) commented that international students felt the “rejection” of their cultural identities and “alienations” from the host culture by Americans as the latter showed indifference to understanding their cultures. Ng et al. (2018) emphasized that international students encountered difficulties in maintaining their social identity due to their identity within the international student community, which prompted them to “bridge across old and new cultural identities.” Accordingly, several scholars suggested developing a bicultural identity to lower acculturative
stress (Fuller & Coll, 2010; Tadmor et al., 2009), based on which Peng and Patterson (2022) further discovered a positive relationship between cultural identity and English language proficiency, mediated by the motivation of language learning, for international students in the U.S.

In this study, the participants expressed their cultural identity confusion similar to that of the international students at a Southwest research university interviewed by Lee and Rice (2007). However, our study showed different intentions behind cultural identity confusion. The participants experienced a feeling of alienation from the host residents resulting from perceived difficulties in managing the potential differences between the host culture and their native culture. The identity confusion, according to our interviewees, was also a result of the conflict between their own and their family members’ perceptions of their English language proficiency, for example, echoing the findings in the study by Peng and Patterson (2022). Meanwhile, interviewees in this study emphasized their cultural adaption to the local culture, not mentioning specifically their identity within the international community as Ng and colleagues (2018) studied.

**Conclusion**

Similar to this study, the students’ acculturative stress negatively correlated with social self-efficacy, with communication issues bridging the two elements. Although student sojourners were required to pass certain language proficiency examinations in order to study in an American university, their English language proficiency was still far from sufficient to assist them in smoothly participating in daily communications with people of the host culture (Hwang & Ting, 2008). Acculturative stress was representative of an individual’s mental health in front of his or her cultural transmission process, in which his or her capacity to communicate in the local
language played an essential role (Berry et al., 1987). Stepping onto the soil of the United States, CISs might quickly experience the contradictions between reality and the past expectations of their lives abroad. For example, Chinese culture tended to value interpersonal connections (Bian, 2019), and CISs were used to a collective style of living such as dormitory life. However, their low social self-efficacy, which was reflected in their perceived limited English language proficiency, might lead them to encounter difficulties in reconstructing the collective style of living in the host culture that they were used to by either getting in contact with neighbors or making friends with residents from the local culture. These difficulties were reflected in the qualitative study that the interviewees worried about failing to figure out the local confusing culture that led them to loneliness and higher stress. Their low social self-efficacy and further perceived limited English language proficiency, made them “foresee” the impossibilities of making people from the host culture fully understand their inner struggles as sojourners via English. Without appropriate interventions, these collective mental health difficulties during the cultural transition turned into overwhelming distress, which was, in another sense, acculturative stress (Berry et al., 1987).

In conclusion, interventions in intercultural training, including intercultural communication, cultural adjustment, attitude, knowledge, and English language proficiency training, could be effective in reducing acculturative stress and fostering a bicultural identity among Chinese international students. Additionally, social support in career guidance may also be beneficial for the students in this program to adapt to the host culture. These findings suggest the importance of targeted interventions and support systems in promoting successful acculturation among international students.
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### Appendix A

**Qualitative Codes and their Corresponding Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refuse to communicate</td>
<td>&quot;It is tiring to talk English the entire day&quot;</td>
<td>Low social self-efficacy includes communication and accountability challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting up late</td>
<td>&quot;I couldn't get up for events in the mornings&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not asking for clarifications</td>
<td>&quot;Confusion happens all the time in class, but it is a lot of work to ask for clarifications&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refuse to self-advocate</td>
<td>&quot;I didn’t want to be the center of the attention, so I don’t want to advocate for myself, even if I know I am right&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety in class</td>
<td>&quot;I am so nervous when the professors called me, because I am not sure if I understand their English&quot;</td>
<td>English language proficiency level leads to high academic stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confusion in directions in class</td>
<td>&quot;I am often confused and anxious with the homework instruction, so many unknown words”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity confusion</td>
<td>&quot;My families in China think I am so American now, they asked me to translate</td>
<td>Students express cultural identity confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misunderstanding of local culture</td>
<td>&quot;I cannot tell if my American neighbors are being sarcastic or really mad&quot;</td>
<td>between Chinese and American cultures.</td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English level impedes communication</td>
<td>&quot;Well, I do not feel comfortable in social event because I didn’t know how to express myself in English&quot;</td>
<td>Students express having low levels of intercultural communication skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural understanding impedes connections</td>
<td>&quot;My American friend told me I was rude to the professor the other day because I didn’t even look at him, but I thought I should not look at him in his eyes in my culture, no wonder he does not like me&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern for safety</td>
<td>&quot;I am afraid of living in the city due to safety concerns&quot;</td>
<td>Concerns for discrimination and safety lead to acculturative stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern for discrimination</td>
<td>&quot;I have seen that dirty look they gave me&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Component 3: Chinese International Students Intercultural Training

By Fangfang Clara Ma
Program Outline

1. CISs Acculturative Stress
2. Findings from Needs Assessment
3. Learning Theories
4. Proposed Solution
Existing literature’s understanding of CISs acculturative stress

1. The process of acculturation for Chinese International Students (CISs) when they move to the United States involves experiencing acculturative stress, a typical phenomenon.

2. CISs often face significant academic stress due to their lack of familiarity with the distinct pedagogical approaches utilized in the two countries.

3. CISs experience frustration, anger and other psychological stress due to language and communication barriers.

4. CISs experiencing acculturative stress or even social isolations by having limited social support access, they typically rely on family and friends for support.

(Qi et al., 2018; Wan et al., 1992; Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008; Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Lin & Yi, 1997; Ho et al., 2017; Yan & Berliner, 2011)
Behavioral factor:
- social self-efficacy
- English language proficiency
- low help-seeking intention

Environmental factor:
- social experience
- social support
- perceived discrimination
- Racism: Covid-19

Personal factor:
- academic stress
- academic challenge
- language barrier

Triadic reciprocal determinism (TRD) by Bandura (1986)
Component One

Acculturative Stress

Behavioral factors
- Social self-efficacy
- Cultural difference
- English Language Proficiency
- Social pressure
- Low Help-Seeking Intentions and Behavior
- Cultural Influences on Help-seeking Behavior
- CLSs Graduate Students with Possible Lower Help-seeking Intentions

Personal factors
- Academic Stress
- Historical/social experiences of Asian people in the U.S.
- Academic Challenges Due to Pedagogical Differences
- Covid-19
- Language Barrier

Environmental factors
- Perceived Discrimination
- Social Support
- Racism
Research Questions

What is the relationship between social self-efficacy and acculturative stress among CISs?

How do CISs experience academic stress—as both separate from and related to acculturative stress?

How do CISs experience acculturative stress in the U.S.?
**FINDINGS**

"I feel intimidated to participate in local social activities"  
"it is so difficult and stressful to speak English the entire day"

- **Willing to help**: 18%  
  - **Negative Correlations**: $r = -0.341^*$
- **Eager to make friends**: 66.7%
- **Moderate Academic Stress**: $M = 2.81$
- **Fear**: $M = 3.47$

"Having more friends could definitely help me to feel less lonely and stressed at school. It is just hard to make new local friends because of my poor communication skills."
1. A robust inverse relationship between high levels of acculturative stress and low levels of social self-efficacy among the participants.

2. A moderate level of academic stress, characterized by a comparatively elevated degree of difficulties with expressing themselves academically in English.

3. Difficulties in cultural adjustment, fears of discrimination, and homesickness.

4. Political tensions caused fear of the environment and their future

A sense of not belonging and fearful due to Covid-19; see themselves as cash cows; worrisome of the future

Exacerbated acculturative stress due to limited cultural misunderstanding and missing home

The students reported encountering difficulties in communicating effectively with their professors, despite their perception that they were capable of fulfilling academic demands with ease.

“The professor made a joke in class full of Chinese students, she mentioned a story in an American movie. Nobody laughed except herself, since we did not even realize it was a joke, it was awkward for everyone.” (Interviewee 5, March 4 2022)
1. Acculturative stress and social self-efficacy
2. Moderate academic stress with high English difficulties
3. Cultural adjustment, fears of discrimination, and homesickness.
4. Fear of surroundings and the future
The importance of the orientation and support programs for CISs.

Intercultural training teaches how to cope with challenges and stress of being abroad.

Less social support and higher acculturative stress relate to lower career outcome expectations.

Drawing upon Byram’s (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

- Savoir: knowledge of self and other; of interaction; individual and societal.
- Savoir être: attitudes; relativizing self, valuing other.
- Savoir comprendre: skills of interpreting and relating
- Savoir apprendre/faire: skills of discovering and/or interacting.
- Savoir s’engager: political education, critical cultural awareness (adapted from Byram, 1997)
- Social Support: career guidance (Franco et al., 2019)

(Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2008); (Stephenson, 2002); (Cohen, Paige, Shively, Emert, & Hoff, 2005); (Franco et al., 2019)
Improve perception of cultural similarities and differences (Sellami, 2000)

Reduce biases and prejudice about western cultures (Barrett, 2013)

Mediate anxiety and the feelings of uncertainty (Presbitaro and Attar, 2018)

Enhance social connectedness (Hendrickson et al., 2011)

Boost confidence with future (Liu, 2014)

Higher Self-Efficacy (Datu & Yuen, 2020)

Lower Levels of Acculturative Stress (Yeh & Inose, 2003)

Lower Levels of Academic Stress (Jeong, 2016)

Theory of Change

Module 1: Critical cultural awareness
- Intercultural citizenship and civic education

Module 2: Attitude
- Accountability, curiosity, and openness training

Module 3: Knowledge
- English language proficiency training

Module 4: Skills of interpreting and relating
- Cultural adjustment training

Module 5: Skills of discovery and interaction
- Intercultural communication training

Module 6: Social support
- Career guidance
Learning is based on the interplay between evolutionary, biological, and neurological systems.

Learning is inherently linked to other developmental processes and must consider the holistic development of the child, including their emotional, identity, and cognitive growth.

Learning is influenced by the culturally ingrained practices and experiences.

Learning is a holistic and social experience, embodied through interaction.

Provide teachers with a practical teaching model based on cognitive science.

Strong emotions in learning can significantly affect learners’ ability to remember information, concentrate, and engage in complex thinking.

Create a fair and inclusive environment, address biases, teach with cultural sensitivity, and create engaging lessons.

Enhance learning by promoting connections and collaboration through peer tutoring and group work.
Üzüm and Yazan (2020) found significant success in an intercultural training experiment with six modules for six weeks when students meet twice a week. Tran and Duong (2018) also found the importance of the length of time in the training.
Module 1: Critical Cultural Awareness

(intercultural citizenship; civic education)

- Promote cultural sensitivity: Emphasize the importance of being culturally sensitive and avoiding stereotypes and generalizations about different cultures.
- Explain cultural misunderstandings and bias from the perspectives of politics
- Share cultural values, beliefs, and assumptions
- Provide opportunities for cross-cultural interaction: Provide opportunities for participants to interact with individuals from different cultures to promote mutual understanding and respect despite the different political view.
Explain the concept of accountability and social self-efficacy and how it relates to the cultural context of the students.

Encourage students to engage in discussions and activities that promote self-reflection and a positive attitude.

Highlight the role that cultural differences play in accountability and how curiosity can help students understand and respect different norms and expectations.

Encourage students to ask questions, share thoughts and experiences.
Practice English in real-life scenarios to help them gain confidence and improve their language skills.

Utilize multimedia resources such as videos, audio recordings, and interactive activities to help students improve their comprehension and pronunciation skills.

Daily news discussions

Module 3: Knowledge (English language proficiency training)

(English language proficiency training)
Module 4: Skills of interpreting and relating

(cultural adjustment training)

- Understand the western cultural values, beliefs, and norms that influenced its creation.
- Analyze the local event, and discuss its purpose, audience, and key themes.
- Identify the cultural differences, such as in language, symbols, or cultural norms.
- Seek clarification from people who are familiar with the culture or from resources such as books, articles, or online resources.
Module 5: Skills of discovery and interaction
(intercultural communication training)

- Provide information about different cultural norms, values, and communication styles to help students understand and respect cultural differences.
- Discuss the importance of actively listening to others and asking questions to clarify their understanding of the other person's perspective.
- Discuss the importance of nonverbal communication and how it can be interpreted differently across cultures.
- Encourage Cross-Cultural Interactions: Create role-playing exercises for students to interact with people from different cultures to help them build intercultural communication skills.
Module 6: Social Support
(career guidance)

- Career service support: Connect students with alumni and professionals in their field of interest, who can provide guidance and support.
- Weekly support groups and meetings between students and career counselors both overseas and in China to provide guidance and support on career-related issues.
- Offer resources for mental health support, such as counseling services and peer-support groups.
- Foster a supportive community by encouraging students to connect with each other and with staff who can provide support and resources.
- Provide regular updates and information on job market trends, industry changes, and relevant topics to help students stay informed and make informed decisions about their future.
A crucial aspect of each module's conclusion is a 30-minute reflective session. It is vital for universities to establish spaces for reflection and collaboration, as advocated by Marcelo García (2009), that facilitate interdisciplinary academic participation and promote the exchange of experiences, leading to a reconstitution of knowledge and practices related to the cultivation of intercultural competence (IC) among higher education students. A self-reflection process is crucial in helping students release mental health stress (McConnell et al., 2019).

Reflection, via journaling, blogging and reflection papers, is essential in developing and collecting data on learners' intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006).
Conclusion

Although there is no definitive definition of success in intercultural training and social support groups, creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment is of utmost importance. By fostering an atmosphere where students feel comfortable asking questions, sharing their perspectives, and participating in open intercultural discussions, we can help reduce their acculturative stress. This type of environment empowers students to build meaningful connections and relationships, and encourages them to embrace new cultural experiences with confidence.
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