CULTURE, CONFUCIANISM, AND COMMUNICATION: HOW CULTURE AFFECTS INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS FROM CHINA AND TAIWAN WHO COME TO THE U.S. TO STUDY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

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When coming to the U.S. to study, international students encounter more than just a language barrier, they encounter and must learn to cope with cultural differences as well (Zhou, Frey, & Bang, 2011). This study examines how societal and educational cultural differences affect international students from China and Taiwan when they came to study education at a Midwestern university in the U.S. The main research question was how do societal and educational cultures affect the U.S. educational experiences of students from China and Taiwan? Data was collected by interviewing four research participants in three different formats: a questionnaire, an individual interview, and a group interview. The researcher also used a researcher journal and reflections of observations of the participants. The data showed that these students were very aware of how the culture from their home countries effected their interactions in the U.S. These cultural influences were Confucianism, face, humbleness, educational restrictions due to culture, and differences in educational values. Implications of this study show that culturally relevant pedagogy is important in the graduate classroom, or any classroom, and that international students need to be aware of what cultural differences they will encounter so they may better participate in their studies.
I dedicate this work to my family, friends, and my professors who have guided me and supported me throughout this process. Above all, this work goes to my participants in hopes that it helps them, and other international students like them, to be better understood in their graduate courses.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The average U.S. university application process requires international students to take an English standardized test, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language or TOEFL test (Educational Testing Service, 2013), intended to demonstrate their proficiency in English. However, these tests do not seem to be adequate indicators of how effectively international students participate and achieve in courses they take at U.S. universities that use a language different from their native tongue (Hill, Storch, & Lynch 1999; Light, Xu, & Mossop 1987; Patkowski, 1991). There are differences between both societal culture and educational culture in the U.S. and foreign countries (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995). Here, I define societal culture as the thoughts and views shared by a group of people that affect communications, interactions, how others are treated, and how one interacts with the world around them. Educational culture is the thoughts and views shared by a group of people that affect communications, interactions, how others are treated, and how one interacts with the world around them. These differences can affect how a student reacts to the new societal culture and the educational culture of the university classroom. Considering these differences, it is important for universities to consider societal and educational cultural differences when creating curriculum that attempts to fulfill the needs of all its students. These differences may be especially pronounced when students come to the U.S. to study culturally bound content such as U.S. education and its political, cultural, policy issues, and its connection to curriculum design and development.

My investment and starting point for this study was personal. I became friends with several international students from East Asia who were in the same curriculum and teaching program as me at the graduate college of education at Middle State University (MSU), a university in the Midwest. Although, I could communicate reasonably well with my international

1 This is a pseudonym for a Midwestern university where the international students and I studied.
peers, I often heard in conversation how difficult classes were for them to understand or how little confidence they had in their English ability, which made them reluctant to actively participate during class. I saw the toll it took on them to successfully get through just three classes when I could easily complete five classes in addition to my graduate assistantship work. I wanted to look at why, even with TEFOL test scores that are MSU admittance worthy, they still did not fully participate in class. I wondered if the differences in educational culture between the U.S. and East Asia also had something to do with lack of participation. In addition to my interest in how culture affected the educational experiences of my international peers, I plan on teaching English at the secondary level in South Korea and I wanted to know how I can make my Korean students’ transition into study abroad programs easier and help my students be more successful if they chose to study in an English-speaking western country and culture. Therefore, for this study, I wanted to explore the effects of societal and educational culture on international students and, particularly, international students from China and Taiwan.

**Research Questions**

For this study, I planned to find out how students from China and Taiwan learn and interact in the education classroom at MSU. The primary research question that guided this study was: How do societal and educational cultures affect the U.S. educational experiences of students from China and Taiwan? The sub-questions I hoped to answer as a part of this study were:

- What are the societal cultural differences in China, Taiwan, and the U.S.?
- What societal and educational cultural differences affect learning in China, Taiwan, and the U.S.?
• How do cultural differences affect communication in the U.S. university classroom setting?

Through the primary research question and sub-questions I hoped to gain insight in how students from China and Taiwan adjust their academic and cultural thinking and adapt to U.S. universities and the U.S. classroom in order to be successful learners, especially in graduate level studies.

**Rationale for Study**

Of the international students who come to the U.S. to study, 2% of these students come to study in colleges or schools of education (Institute of International Education, 2012). Although this number is small compared to enrollments in areas such as science and business, this number has been growing annually (Institute of International Education, 2012). Therefore, it is important for universities to consider how these students will learn and interact in their education courses. Those who teach educational courses and have international students in their classroom will be able to create better classrooms and curricula using insights from this study. Additionally, this study may provide key cross cultural and educational insights for international students who are considering studying education in a culture different from their own. While there are possibilities for general insights into cross cultural considerations for international students, this study specifically focuses on international students from China and Taiwan and considers the societal culture and educational culture of these countries.

**China and Taiwan vs. East Asia**

Current research tends to consider East Asia as a singular culture due to the massive influence of Confucianism and collectivism on East Asian countries (Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 1996). I would like the reader to understand that throughout this paper, I am only discussing results and research as they apply
to international students from China and Taiwan, but, I also utilize research that generally compares Eastern culture to Western Culture. Although Chinese and Taiwanese cultures differ, both are still closely linked together, as their histories, cultures, and educational systems are related (Chou & Ho, 2007). Throughout this paper, research references to East Asia and eastern culture are references to China/Taiwan. Similarly, western culture is a reference to the U.S. By keeping these cultural differences in mind, my research is able to delve deeper into a singular group and better understand how that groups societal and cultural differences effect international students from that group especially when they study in the U.S.

**Summary of Chapters**

I set out to examine how Chinese and Taiwanese international students learn and interact in the education classroom at MSU. My close relationships with four students from China and Taiwan piqued my interest in conducting this study and added my personal involvement. My interest in the study also came from my own personal goal of teaching abroad in Korea. The primary research question that guided this study was: How do societal and educational cultures affect the U.S. educational experiences of students from China and Taiwan? The sub questions ask what are the societal cultural differences in China, Taiwan, and the U.S., what societal and educational cultural differences affect learning in China, Taiwan, and the U.S., and how do cultural differences affect communication in the U.S. university classroom setting? This study is important because the effects of societal and educational culture on international students, and in this study, those students from China and Taiwan, can affect how these students learn and interact in the graduate classroom. The more those who work with these students know about the effects, the better suited they can be to educate international students from China and Taiwan.
In Chapter Two, a review of literature considers: the different aspects of culture that help define culture, Confucianism’s influence on culture and education as it relates to China and Taiwan, the educational histories of China, Taiwan, and the U.S., educational norms in China and Taiwan at the secondary and post-secondary levels, and how these norms at the secondary level differ. Specifically, the literature review aimed to explore how societal culture and educational culture influences student interaction and adjustment. Chapter Three outlined the methods and procedures used to answer my research question. This research was based on a qualitative study with a critical phenomenological approach to data analysis. Data was collected using a researcher journal and three interviews with four participants: three from China and one from Taiwan. The data was analyzed using an adapted spiral data analysis and then recorded in textual format in Chapter Four. Chapter Four is the compilation of my data according to the reoccurring themes and coding found in my data. My participants showed a cultural awareness of how culture affects their thoughts, actions, and interactions inside the classroom and these cultural effects are difficult to change or avoid. Chapter Five offers a summary of the study along with conclusions, implications, and limitations.

Definition of Terms

1. Societal Culture – the thoughts and views shared by a group of people that affects communications, interactions, how others are treated, and how one interacts with the world around them.

2. Educational Culture – the thoughts and views shared by a group of people about how members of the culture should be educated and what is valued in that education.

3. Power Distance - is the idea that a society accepts that power is distributed unequally in organizations and institutions. For example, in cultures with a small power-distance,
superiors consider those below them to be people that are just like them, whereas in cultures with a large power distance, superiors see those below them as a different kind of people (Hofstede, 1980).

4. Uncertainty Avoidance- the point to which a society feels threatened by and tries to avoid ambiguous situations. That is, societies with a small uncertainty avoidance have a larger acceptance of dissent, while societies with a strong uncertainty avoidance seek a consensus (Hofstede, 1980).

5. Masculinity- where the dominant values in a society are “masculine.” Hofstede (1980) defines masculine as assertive, desire for money and power, and not caring about others. Masculine societies value rigid gender roles live to work, and machismo. A society with low masculinity, or a feminine society, values working in order to live, independence, and androgyny.

6. Individualism – a loose social network where people are supposed to take care of themselves and those closest to them only. Individualism values autonomy, variety, initiative, and identity based on the individual (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980).

7. Collectivism- a tight social framework of in-groups and out-groups; where in-group members (relatives, organizations, peers) look after and are loyal to one another. Collectivism places emphasis on order, duty, security, and membership to a group where identity comes from the social system that holds a “we” consciousness (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980).

8. Holism – where a group of people have a shared identity, this identity is determined, “dialectically between the forces to be conjoined with and disjoined from the
environment” (Kim, Lim, Dindia, & Burrell, 2010, p. 548). People view themselves as part of a whole.

9. Cram Schools – “Examination oriented private institutions which focus on drills and practices” (Chou & Ho, 2007, p. 368). These schools are attended after the regular school day is over and are common in East Asian countries, such as China and Taiwan.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For this study I planned to find out how students from China and Taiwan learn and interact in classes about education at MSU. The primary research question that guided this study was how do societal and educational cultures affect the U.S. educational experiences of students from China and Taiwan? The sub questions ask what are the societal cultural differences in China, Taiwan, and the U.S., what societal and educational cultural differences affect learning in China, Taiwan, and the U.S., and how do cultural differences affect communication in U.S. university classroom setting? The literature review for this study focuses on the culture of China and Taiwan, the educational culture of students from China and Taiwan, the differences from their home educational cultures and the U.S. educational culture, and the effect of culture on learning. Since culture is what affects an educational system, a definition of culture should be established before the culture and educational systems of China and Taiwan are explored. This definition is developed by identifying aspects of culture as identified by previous research in the field.

Aspects of Culture

**Reviewing conceptualizations/definitions of culture.** Hofstede (1980) studied 40 different countries and found that culture could be compartmentalized into four different areas: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, collectivism-individualism, and masculinity. A culture’s stance on each of these areas affects how the culture interacts and communicates with others and their surroundings. Power distance is high in collectivistic cultures such as Chinese and Taiwanese cultures, which place importance on power relationships and interactions within those relationships. Whereas, in individualistic societies such as in the U.S., there is less power-distance and communication often happens on the same level across the society. (Gudykunst &
Matsumoto, 1996; Hall, 1967; Hofstede, 1980). Uncertainty avoidance is whether or not a
culture avoids situations they are not sure of. This occurs more predominantly in eastern cultures
when a stranger is often avoided and treated as unapproachable, whereas in western culture,
strangers are treated as an approachable person (Hofstede, 1980).

Collectivism-individualism is a common theme in research in culture and
communication, as it has been used for years by researchers, especially Hofstede (1980), and is a
pointed cultural difference between the East and West. Collectivistic cultures focus on the in-
group, which consists of those a member of a collectivistic society works with on some level. For
example, those who are automatically part of the in-group are classmates, co-workers, and
family, whereas out-group members are those not part of one of those groups (Ting-Toomey &
Chung, 1996). The needs of the in-group are put before the needs of the individual person. In
contrast, individualistic cultures place focus on the person as an individual first and that
individual, once their needs are met, then works to help the community in general (Gudykunst &
Matsumoto, 1996).

However, we should not focus solely on collectivism-individualism because there are
deeper differences that occur in culture and differences that are not necessarily related to a
simple division between collective or individual thinking. Kim, Lim, Dindia, and Burrell (2010)
found that with Korean people and people from the U.S., bigger differences existed in holism
views, not in collectivism and individualism. Holism creates a shared identity where people see
themselves as various parts of the whole, interacting on every level of the whole (Kim et al.,
2010). Other studies that show that all cultures have aspects of individualism and collectivism,
some just have larger individualistic tendencies, while some have larger collectivistic tendencies.
(Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996; Hall, 1976; Kim et al., 2010). Therefore, culture and communication are affected on many levels and with different interactions.

Hall (1967), one of the leading researchers on culture, writes about the effect of the “hidden culture” (p. 37) on our day-to-day interactions. Hall (1967) defines hidden culture as that which affects us no matter the different experiences we have had, what we have learned, or how malleable our views about the world have become. He also cautions us about lumping cultures together and suggests that we must look at both the culture and the individual to ascertain the background the person is coming from. An individual has hidden culture affecting them, but can also react differently to situations than someone from the same culture. When considering cultural differences and effect, it is important to look at how different areas and experiences shape people, as well as their cultural backgrounds (Hall, 1976).

**Working definition of culture for this research.** Considering the above examinations of culture, I loosely define culture as a meaning system shared by the majority of people who live or interact in a certain space that helps dictate how people work with one another, how they communicate, how they govern themselves, how they interact with the land, and how they educate. Culture can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including communication systems, collectivism-individualism, hidden culture, and how one identifies one’s self, all of which are pertinent to interactions and education (Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996; Hall, 1967; Hofstede, 1980; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 1996). Since I have defined culture as being pertinent to interactions and education, it is important to look at the culture of China and Taiwan as it affects the educational system of these two countries. The above research has already identified China and Taiwan as an eastern, collectivistic culture with influences from Confucianism. In China and Taiwan, Confucianism has the largest affect on culture and education.
Chinese Cultural Context: Confucianism

Chinese and Taiwanese cultural history can be traced back to ancient China and the major cultural and philosophical thought of Confucianism. Confucianism is not a religion but a philosophy created by Confucius (551-479 BCE), and then taken over by his followers and interpreters years later. Confucianism is a philosophy process focused on morality, and specifically, the morality of personal interactions (Hwang, 1999; Hwang, 2001). These interactions focused on holistic ideas of people and their interactions on all different levels (Hwang, 1999). Confucius thought that people should act morally towards each other, and there should be levels of respect. These levels were husband/wife, father/son, older/younger brother, friend/friend, and leader/subordinate where the dominant party (husband, father, older, friend, leader) takes care of and leads the other party (wife, son, younger, friend, subordinate). In return, the other party listens to and respects the dominant part (Gao, 1996). “A Chinese person’s identity is therefore connected closely with the social role he or she plays,” (Gao, 1996, p. 89) and a person’s social role should be acted on morally using the proper relationships.

Additionally, the leaders of a community were supposed to be those who were the most educated, and those with the most education where also to be the most respected. These two ideas are what shaped Confucianism’s influence on education in China and Taiwan.

Since education was seen as a qualification for leadership, education was also the only form of social upward mobility in ancient China. This idea is what established the civil servants examination. This examination was a comprehensive exam to prove that one was educated enough to become a leader in the community (Zhao, 2007). The ancient examination and its great importance in establishing leadership is largely the reason why testing is so heavily emphasized in East Asian societies where Confucianism has great influence. Because of this,
many Chinese people cling to the idea that a good education means you can advance, despite your background (Postiglione & Tan, 2007). Confucius believed that all students could learn through hard work and dedication, which has further contributed to the emphasis on testing in Chinese education (Cheng & Wong, 1996). With Confucius’ deep roots and influence on education, it is no surprise that many of these practices and interactions are still in use today.

Much of the aspects of education in China and Taiwan are still linked to Confucius since his teachings were the primary mode of education up until 1840 and the civil servants exam was used until 1905. Confucius’ influence can even be found in school attendance where instances of low attendance in schools in China are from those minorities who were not influenced by Confucius (Cheng & Wong 1996). The two main aspects of Confucianism that are still in effect today are moral education and education as a way to advance yourself in society. Moral education is a large part of Chinese and Taiwanese education (Cheng, 1998; Cheng & Wong 1996). This morality has much to do with the cultural idea of self as a holistic being and a being that is able to interact well with others in the society. Moral education is also connected with discipline, as schools have heads of discipline that are called moral leaders (Cheng, 1998; Cheng & Wong 1996). Just like during Confucius’ time, education is still viewed as the sole means of building a future and advancing yourself in society (Cheng, 1998; Cheng & Wong, 1996; Zhao, 2007). Linking this historic cultural background with the history of education in China and Taiwan allows one to look at educational values and differences between China, Taiwan, and the U.S.

**Historical Educational Backgrounds**

As one of the oldest nations in the world, China views education as the largest cultural transmission (Zhao, 2007). As previously stated, the history of the Chinese educational system
begins with Confucianism and the civil servants exam, which began around 600AD. Schools were mostly private and were for students, usually all male, to learn the Classics and pass the exams. Educational reform began in 1840 after the opium war; this is what began the start of the educational school system found in China today. In 1902, China attempted to follow Japan’s education reform by abolishing the civil servants exam and establishing distinct levels of schooling, including primary, secondary, and higher education. In 1922, the 6-3-3 pattern of schooling was established. During this time, the classics and moral education were still more important parts of the curriculum than math and science. It was not until 1977 that education was established and used as a means of promoting science, mathematics, and language. Compulsory education was established in 1986, and education became a priority of the government starting in 1993 (Zhao, 2007).

Taiwan’s history is similar to China’s, as Taiwan was a part of China from its inception to 1895 when Japan occupied it. This occupation lasted until 1945. The Dutch also briefly occupied Taiwan from 1642 to 1662. The relatively brief Japanese occupation caused some changes in Taiwan’s education system. The main influence being that a formal education system was created by 1919, and mandatory schooling was established for primary school children by 1943 (Chou & Ho, 2007). When it comes to post-secondary education, both China and Taiwan require students to take the common entrance exams, which are reflective of the civil servants exam. These exams are given once a year and their results dictate whether a student will go to college and what college he or she will be able to attend.

The U.S.’s educational history is not as long as China and Taiwan’s educational history. Compulsory public education in the U.S. began in 1642 in colonies as a way to teach religious,

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2 I assume that the reader already has a background in U.S. educational history; if more background is needed I suggest the latest editions of the works by Joel Spring.
Puritanical values. The ability to teach such religious values was the main reason colonists settled in the U.S. (Spring, 2005). The trend of defining education as teaching religious values was solely for White boys. Progressing to an inclusive education system was very slow, as White girls were eventually allowed an education, then other cultural groups, until finally, in 1920, public education was available to everyone (Spring, 2005). With a long history of individualistic cultural values, and a culture that has been established for a much shorter time than those of China and Taiwan, the U.S. has a different cultural background and belief system than China and Taiwan. Cheng (1998) writes that the difference in cultural background is also what affects how each culture views education. According to Cheng, countries like China see education as a means of socialization, since individuals are viewed as a part of the whole community, so it is believed that all students can succeed at high level through hard work. Cheng (1998) compares this to western education, especially in the U.S., where education is viewed as a means of empowering children; children are encouraged to learn and grow based on their abilities.

Since educational learning styles are affected by culture, many students from China prefer to study on a holistic, global level that is related to collectivistic perceptions of the world and self, while students from an individualistic culture prefer a sequential learning style that relates to the influence of Socratic learning in individualistic cultures (Cheng, 1998; Hall, 1967; Heffernan et al., 2010). These differences in learning styles have been linked back to the importance and history of testing in China and the competition behind these tests.

**Aspects of Education in China and Taiwan**

Hoi Suen and Lan Yu (2006) reviewed several Chinese research articles on the Chinese civil servants exams and looked at how the exam’s 1,600-year history shows the affects of high-stakes testing on societies. They found that severe consequences resulted from the testing,
including memorizing model essays, focusing on test-tasking skills, and cheating on the test. Another consequence was that students sought special help and tutors outside of the classroom in an attempt to get ahead of others and to get a better, accelerated education. Since the tests were used for social advancement, these consequences were a result of intense competition.

Many studies have been conducted on the wash-back effects of high-stakes testing in Chinese cultures (Pan & Newfields, 2011). Lam, Yim, Law, and Cheung (2004) placed two groups of Chinese students in different classrooms; a competitive typing class and a non-competitive class. After two weeks, they gave the students the choice between two tests for their final. Option A was an easier test they would most likely score well on. Option B was admittedly harder, but would improve their skills. This study found that students who were involved in a competitive classroom environment were more likely to work for goals that improved their ego (i.e. easily passed tests) rather than tests that would provide an opportunity to master new skills, even though there was a risk of poor performance. Of the group of students who were not in the competitive group, less than half chose the easy test, while more students chose the test that would allow them the opportunity to master a new skill on a harder test. This study showed that students taught in a competitive atmosphere prefer teaching strategies that help improve scores and not necessarily skills.

Other studies have shown that although these skills in collectivist Chinese societies are valued, competition is not necessarily a negative factor in education. King, McInerney and Watkins (2011) found in their study that, like Lam et al., (2004), the competitive classroom spurred students to do better on tests, but this format also showed that students still obtained deep learning, just in a different way than in western cultures. This study found that success in
school can be interpersonally orientated according to culture, so Chinese students do well with testing goals, while Western students do better with personal goals.

Competition has a large influence in China and Taiwan. Much of the competition is from the testing for college entrance, as well as being considered a socialization technique. For competition in general, students and classes are ranked based solely on scores (Cheng & Wong, 1996). Also, students compete to get the best scores on the college entrance examinations so they can enter the best colleges to get the best jobs. Since competition and scores are such an integral part of their education, much of schooling in China and Taiwan is focused on a common curriculum for the common exams without focus on individual student needs (Cheng, 1998). This has led to China and Taiwan, among other East Asian countries, being viewed as countries that focus on rote memorization skills and memorizing facts to simply pass a test (Shi, 2006). Research has also shown that many students prefer this way of learning compared to more intuitive and critical thinking styles of learning.

**Changes in Education**

Although much of the research and history of Chinese and Taiwanese education leads to the strong influence of collectivism and Confucianism, it is important to also note the changes that have been occurring in education in both countries (Chou & Ho, 2007; Shi, 2006). Since its declaration as an independent country, though not recognized by China, Taiwan has worked towards changing education to a more westernized style. (Chou & Ho, 2007). These changes include a more student-centered approach to teaching and learning and a drop in the importance of college entrance exams. However, these changes have seen many roadblocks due to influences from China, culture, and the need for testing (Chou & Ho, 2007).
According to Shi (2006), changes in China have also been occurring. Her studies have found that many students do not see their motivations for learning or the qualifications for good teachers to be closely related to Confucianism values. However, Shi (2006) also found that the biggest motivator for students to do well was testing, and students thought the best teachers were the ones who helped them pass those tests. Even though there have been attempts at change, much of the educational system in these countries can still be linked to old cultural values and systems of education. And although there is no right or wrong way to learn, the focus on testing and memorization does lead to educational differences between China, Taiwan, and the United States. Pan and Newfields (2011) found in their study of teachers and students in Taiwan that the teachers and students had mixed feelings about teaching and learning. The teachers chose more traditional methods of teaching, whereas students wanted more test-based teaching. So the competition was found to affect students more than teachers. The affects of testing competition, teaching, and education also create differences at the college level and can affect student interaction, learning, and adaptation as an international student.

**College Educational Differences: Taiwan/China vs. the U.S.**

Cultural differences inside the college classroom are also related to both how classes are conducted and how studying and research are done. Samuelowicz’s (1987) research showed that collectivist international students are too used to “surface studying” (p. 123) and repeating back facts from the books, instead of looking deeper into their readings. There was also a large concern amongst educators in “independent” cultures that international students, especially those who were not from countries with independent cultures, were not able to think deeply about issues or did not express their own opinions in class (Robertson et al., 2000). This can be attributed to the fact that in other countries, students are only expected to memorize facts
presented by the text and the teachers, and texts are the authority on knowledge and not to be questioned (Ladd & Ruby, 1999). This is the opposite of research found in the western college educational system, where the teacher and readings could be questioned and individual thought is appreciated. (McKay, 2002; Robertson et al., 2000).

**Learning styles and classroom participation.** As previously mentioned, much of the educational system in China and Taiwan is dependent on the importance of the college entrance exams. Students and teachers concentrate on passing these tests so much of the study and teaching techniques are for rote memorization of facts and looking at the big picture goals within education. This has also been found to transfer to learning styles in graduate education, and much of the research in adaptation has to due with culture and not learning styles. Heffernan, Morrison, Basu, and Sweeney (2010) compared the learning styles of Chinese and Australian college students. They found that those students from China preferred a holistic and global perspective of education compared to the sequential, Socratic learning styles preferred by the students from Australia.

Research has also found that although western and U.S. college teachers value outspokenness and opinion sharing in class, many eastern students do not speak out in their classes. Eastern international students do not wish to talk in class because they view teachers as the head of the classroom. They do not want to lose “face” or cause someone else to lose “face,” nor do they want to take up too much time thinking of and voicing their opinions (Durkin, 2008; Heffernan et al., 2010; Trent, 2008; Zhou, Frey, & Bang, 2011). Although not a concept in U.S. culture and education, face has a strong influence on students from Confucianism cultures where face is the part of the self that is seen by others and is kept by being humble and not sticking out.
**Face and humbleness.** Hwang, Ang, and Francesco (2008) studied the influence of the Chinese concept of face on feedback seeking behaviors in Chinese students at the university level. Their studies found that student participation usually consisted of three types: talking to peers outside of the classroom, talking to the professor outside of the classroom, and talking to the professor inside of the classroom. Of these three interaction types, students were most likely to use the two outside of the classroom interactions because they wanted to save face, in case they were asking something that could cause embarrassment. Most students only spoke up inside the classroom if they wanted to improve their face by looking more knowledgeable in front of their peers.

Confucianism’s moral ideal of being humble or modest to keep “face” also affects student interaction and beliefs at the college level. Cai et al., (2011) found in their three combined studies of college level students that modesty and self-enhancement were much different in individualistic versus collectivistic cultures. Those in collectivistic cultures, such as China and Taiwan, saw being humble and modest about their achievements as a positive self-enhancer. This was strikingly different from the individualistic western view of not being modest about achievement as a positive self-enhancer. Their studies show that cultural differences affect how modesty and self-enhancement is viewed and how it should be tested and measured. Kurman (2003) conducted a study to compare the two most common explanations of low self-enhancement in collectivist cultures, which are “(a) a lack of a self enhancement motives arising from the perceived centrality of others and (b) cultural restrictions imposed on the self that are manifested by modesty requirements” (p 496). Kurman’s (2003) study also found that modesty was the biggest predictor of self-enhancement in collectivist cultures and cultural restrictions of the self can best explain the differences in self-enhancement levels across cultures. This means
that students from collectivistic cultures will most likely not want to “stick out” or show off what they have achieved. Rather, these students are motivated internally to do well and see it as building identity when they are modest about achievements. With so many differences in culture and education, such as testing, lack of student participation in their home countries, and face and humility, it is important to consider how students from China and Taiwan who study abroad can successfully adapt to a new culture.

**Differences and Adaptation to Education**

Research has found that one of the biggest indicators that an international student will adapt well is their willingness and openness to trying new things and attempting to accept and work with the other culture. Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) found that those who modified specific behaviors to fit in with the new culture were more likely to fit in and adjust. They also found students were more successful if they were even just willing to try new cultural foods. Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006) studied 104 Chinese and Taiwanese international students and looked at the interactions between acculturation in the U.S. and identification with their home culture. They found that those who avoided U.S. culture did not adjust well, and those students who avoided attachments and relationships also had adjustment problems. Results from the study also showed that the quicker students are introduced to cultural differences, the quicker students adjust. These results can also apply to international student adjustment inside of the classroom (Coles & Swami, 2012; Zhou & Todman, 2009).

**Culturally relevant education and its importance.** To help understand international students in the American classroom, teachers and classmates should look at culture and learning styles. To ease transition, teachers can explain some of the expectations in the classroom that could be different from culture to culture, such as citation expectations, and classroom
participation wishes, such as asking questions or giving opinions about the readings (Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Samuelowicz, 1987). Those who work with students from China or Taiwan should understand that these students are not used to talking about their experiences or opinions in a good or bad light, and in fact, culturally, they are not encouraged to do this (Cai et al., 2011; Hwang et al., 2008; Zhou et al., 2011). Students may also not be used to including their experiences or opinions in assignments, but rather, they are used to studying facts and repeating them (Samuelowicz, 1987). These cultural understandings can help students’ transition into a different educational system. When understandings of differences in culture are applied to the classroom to help students learn culturally relevant pedagogy becomes a part of the curriculum (Moore, 2000).

**Culturally relevant pedagogy.** Culturally relevant pedagogy is based on the idea that learning is a process that is mediated by the culture and social structure of the area. This means that no curriculum is natural or culturally unbiased; curriculum relies on culture and political power at the time of its creation (Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moore, 2000). When this idea is applied to a multi-cultural classroom Irvine (2010) writes that “a culturally relevant pedagogy builds on the premise that learning may differ across cultures and teachers can enhance students’ success by acquiring knowledge of their cultural backgrounds and translating this knowledge into instructional practice” (p. 12). When teachers fail to teach in a culturally relevant manner students tend to react in negative ways to their education (Lee, Becker, & Nobre, 2012). This is because learning styles are cognitive schemes that are bound to the culture of each person (Barmeyer, 2004).

Culturally bound learning styles are important in cultural pedagogy because students learn by relating new information to their previous experiences and resources (Irvine, 2010).
Therefore, for students to progress at an optimum level, teaching must be based off of these students’ previous interactions, resources, and experience that is, their culture (Lee et al., 2012). For example, if a teacher tries to teach a lesson in China using examples and learning styles relevant to students from England, students may still learn, but their understanding and ability to fully interact with the lesson will be stunted. It would be better, instead, for the teacher to use learning and teaching styles relevant to Chinese students and culture. Learning styles for Chinese students are still based off of Confucianism values. Chuang (2012) did a research study of the learning styles of East Asian learners from Confucianism based societies and found that these learners valued education that was culturally relevant to Confucianism values. These learning styles were assimilation, passive learning methods, and lessons that reflected on harmonious behavior and acquiring knowledge. They preferred lecture and demonstrations that could be observed and reflected on. This is in contrast to the westerner preferred learning style of active participation, individuality, and open expression in lectures (McKay, 2002). Unless these learning styles can be openly shared in the cross cultural classroom and interact and work together for a culturally relevant learning experience for all learners (Barmeyer, 2004), one group of students in that classroom will be left out and will not be able to learn to their full potential.

**ESL learners’ needs.** Although not a focus of this study, it is important to remember that international students from China and Taiwan are English as a Second Language, or ESL, learners and language barriers are seen as having a large effect on international students when they study in a foreign country (Dorozhkin & Mazitova, 2008; Li & Kaye, 1998). This language barrier can cause many of the communication issues students have and also has implications for student learning. Classroom needs of graduate ESL learners include longer wait times, academic
language needs, and cultural needs (Mak, 2011; Zhou et al., 2011). Since ESL learners speak English as a second language, they need more wait time before answering questions in class, and this has been found to be especially important for Chinese students because they must consider face before answering a question (Mak, 2011). Academic language is something that many ESL learners need help with to fully participate in class and is seen as one of the major requirements for graduate studies usually in the form of classroom discussions and oral presentations (Kim, 2006). Also, many ESL students come from cultures where, “ambiguity is not tolerated well and where a closure-oriented style is encouraged” (Oxford, Hollaway, & Horton-Murillo, 1992, p. 444). This means that students prefer to see the teacher as the head of the classroom and like to be corrected when wrong (Oxford et al., 1992). Therefore, graduate ESL learners need classrooms where teachers are willing to explain classroom expectations, encourage academic language, allow for longer wait time or time to formulate an answer or opinion, and correct students if needed.

**Summary**

Culture affects our perception of self, our communication styles, and how we are educated or chose to educate the members of our society. Research studies show how culture affects education and how differences in culture and education affect cross-cultural interactions. Education and culture in China and Taiwan have been influenced at their core from Confucianism and collectivistic values, which are very different from the U.S. Differences in U.S. and Chinese culture and education, affect international students and their adjustment to U.S. culture when studying abroad. However, these effects can be diminished with cultural awareness and willingness by students to adjust to the new culture and by teachers to adjust teaching styles to their learners’ styles.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The purpose of my research was to look at how culture affects students from China and Taiwan when they come to MSU to study in a graduate curriculum and teaching program. My research question was how do societal and educational cultures affect the U.S. educational experiences of students from China and Taiwan? The sub questions ask what are the societal cultural differences in China, Taiwan, and the U.S., what societal and educational cultural differences affect learning in China, Taiwan, and the U.S., and how do cultural differences affect communication in U.S. university classroom setting? The research literature has led me to define culture as not only something shared by a group of people, but also as something that can change based on each person’s individuality. It is important to identify a research paradigm and approach that aligns with this definition.

Research Design

I chose a qualitative design because I did not want to look at the experiences of my participants as a quantifiable number but as a personal interaction between two cultures: a background culture and an experienced culture. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), qualitative research does just that; researchers attempt “to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). Since my research has shown that culture is not only shared by a group, but also individually experienced, and those in power in a society affect that culture and education, critical theory was my paradigm within qualitative research.

Critical theory can be defined as a social theory where issues of concern focus on the idea of power and justice and the ways that notions such as race, class, ideologies, education, and cultural dynamics interact and how we can better understand these interactions to create justice
for all involved (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). This fits well into the purpose of my study which examines the cultural effects of education on international students studying in the U.S. The study attempts to provide a better understanding of how international students interact with their education and how those who work with them can help with their transition. The transition into a new educational culture is a phenomenon experienced by all international students on a personal and group level and is what guided me to choose phenomenology as my methodology.

Phenomenology is a term that originates from philosophy (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). This philosophical orientation seeks to find the meaning of human experience with a focus on a certain phenomenon (Richards, 2003). Richards (2003) describes phenomenology as a way to thematically describe and capture the essence of a human experience. This is why I chose phenomenology; I wanted to explore the phenomenon of adjusting to a new culture and education culture as experienced by Chinese and Taiwanese international students. Since I wanted to examine the experiences of my participants as an attempt to understand how they can obtain a better experience at MSU in the college of education, my research design of critical phenomenology combines critical theory with the methodology of phenomenology (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Richards, 2003).

**Research Participants and University Setting**

I chose my research participants from students who were a part of my cohort at MSU. I began my research with a focus on East Asian international students, but since all of the East Asian students in my cohort were from China or Taiwan, I narrowed my focus to the societal culture and educational culture in China and Taiwan. Since I personally knew all of my participants, I asked for their participation after class by explaining the research and giving them an informed consent form. My research participants were four female students in the curriculum
and teaching master degree program at MSU. Three of the participants were from China and one was from Taiwan. Joy, Serenity, and Sunny were my participants from China. Joy is 23 years old and from the Hunan Province in China. She described herself as not very shy and was the most talkative in the individual interviews. Sunny is 27 and also from the Hunan province in China. She was less talkative but often expressed herself through facial expressions, hand gestures, and physical contact. Joy and Sunny were roommates back in China and were roommates at Midwest University as well so they were often together and would talk about shared experiences in college. Serenity is 23 and from Shangqiu, China. She was the participant that I was the least close to as we mostly interacted only in class; however, of the four participants, she was the most outspoken and seemed to have the most confidence in her English ability. Autumn is 26 and only described herself as being from Taiwan in her questionnaire. She was the only one of the four with teaching experience; she taught for two years at a cram school. Autumn was a very active learner and described herself as a perfectionist. From my reflections and perceptions of them, I saw that all four tended to work and talk together during classes, but Joy, Autumn, and Sunny seemed to be a close knit group that Serenity joined once in a while and during classes.

MSU is a public university located in a small city in the Midwest. According to MSU’s website, the campus has over 20,000 students from 41 different countries and 639 international students, 243 of which are from China and Taiwan. The curriculum and teaching program in the college of education, school of teaching and learning is described on the MSU website as a program that aims to reflect 21st Century curriculum and is based on the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and the program also aims to create innovative master teachers. Many of these classes focus on U.S. educational issues, curriculum, pedagogy with books about the history of U.S. education, as well as issues with the U.S. educational system. Class sizes were
small with a maximum of 22 students, and the particular master cohort that the participants and I were part of had eight international students.

**Role of Researcher**

It is important for me to identify my role as the researcher, as I was personally involved with the participants as a friend. I got to know the participants through classes, then through interactions with three of them after class and on weekends. Since I was closely involved with these students and I was part of their in-group, it was important for me to always keep record of my personal “I” that could become involved in the research. This transparency allowed me to make sure the data I interpreted was a fair representation of the results and allows the reader to understand how the personal “I” may have had made it into my research (Peshkin, 1968).

Therefore, I not only kept a researcher journal of reflections of my data collection with participant interviews, but I also added a part of my own voice into the research through a journal of my interactions with my participants similar to an autoethnography.

Autoethnography is “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Therefore, this journal not only allowed me to be transparent in my personal “I,” but I was also able to gain a critical analysis of how I think culture affects my own education and the education of my participants. I was able to look at the multiple layers of interactions, such as influences from home, family and friends, schooling, government policies, and intercultural interactions. These past and present experiences all combined to create the different ways my participants and I interacted with our education. I was also able to reflect on how my past interactions and conversations with my participants influenced me and affected my views on
international students and this study. All of these reflections were kept in a researcher journal and were used as part of the data collection process for my research.

**Instrumentation and Procedures**

My research was done by collecting data through a researcher journal and a set of three interviews with the participants. The journal served as a form of data collection that allowed me to look at everyday interactions between my participants and the U.S. culture and classroom. I chose to structure my other three forms of data collection based on the reasoning for the three-part interview structure as suggested by Seidman (2006). Seidman (2006) writes that in order to have in-depth phenomenological interviewing, the interviewer should conduct a 3-part interview with the participants. Interview one should be a history and background of participants, interview two should be the details of the experience, and interview three is a reflection of the experience. In my data collection methods, I chose to incorporate the three interview reasons into my three forms of data collection: a history, details of the experience, and reflection on the experience. I chose to do the history as a Word document questionnaire, the details as a one-on-one interview, and the reflection as a group interview. This data collection format was chosen because, as I will explain in the following sections, I thought it would give the best results for the group I was working with and with the time constraints I encountered.

**Researcher journal.** Data for the researcher journal was collected throughout the study. I wrote and reflected on the interviews after each one was finished and thought about how my own personal “I” could have come up in the interview and how I felt about my interactions with the participants. I also reflected on interactions outside of the interviews. Through observation in the classrooms I shared with my interviewees, I looked at classroom participation between the U.S. students and Chinese and Taiwanese international students and if participation changed based on
how long they had been in the class. I also looked at my own personal reflections on my interactions during and after class with these students. I then looked at my own perceptions of how U.S. education works and how it differs from education in China and Taiwan. By exploring my own experiences in U.S. education and combining my new experiences in working with international students along with my literature research, I created a personal research narrative that connects to the wider cultural and social understandings of Chinese and Taiwanese international students and their education.

My journal was successful in the sense that I was able to constantly reflect on my personal “I” within my research and my own personal views while interviewing my participants and writing up my data analysis and conclusions. However, the journal did not lend itself to becoming an adequate data source for my research due to lack of time with my participants. After getting HSRB approval, I found that I only had six more class sessions with my participants and four of those classes were presentations or small group work, so I could not do much observation about their classroom interactions and participations. I had been collecting data since I had known my participants, which stretches beyond the period of my data collection for this study. I used my pervious interactions with my participations as data (Glesne, 2006) and attempted to reflect on their previous classroom participation and interactions in my journal. I was not able to have many out of class reflections due to the business of the end of the semester, but I was able to reflect on how my past interactions with my participants and what I already knew of them affected my interviews.

**The history questionnaire.** With the amount of feasible working time I had with my participants, due to their own personal class needs and going back to their own countries, I found I could only conduct two interviews with them. The questions for the history questionnaire
included participants’ basic background information (e.g., a description of their hometown and family life, a description of the schools they attended growing up and in college, their English education, and their reasons for attending our University) (see Appendix A). These questionnaires were sent to each participant via e-mail with an explanation of the purpose of the required information and instructions on how to complete the questionnaire. Participants were then asked to fill out these questionnaires and then send them back to me via email.

The questionnaires did not turn out to be an adequate source of data like I had hoped they would be. Even though I thought sending my participants the questionnaires would give them time to think over their answers and type out their thoughts, all of the answers given on the questionnaires were simple, short, and to the point. For example, when I asked them to describe the schools they attended growing up, the answers were all just listing the school name, the number of students in their class, and whether it was a private or public school. I would have liked to compensate for the lack of information on the questionnaires by asking about them in the individual interviews, but my participants did not understand that I needed the questionnaires before the interviews, so there was no way for me to use the questionnaire responses to guide my interview questions/process.

**Individual interviews.** The individual interviews were chosen as a way to try and understand the personal experiences of each of my participants and give each participant a chance to talk about their experiences in their own way and at their own time (Fontana & Frey, 2000). These interviews were semi-structured in format where, as I had a list of possible questions (see Appendix B) I could use, but I would ask questions based on the flow of conversation and would just make sure that all of the areas of questioning were covered. By viewing these interviews as an interaction between two people trying to gain a better
understanding of one person’s experiences, I was able to gain rich qualitative data about each participant’s experiences and how each participant viewed their experiences (Fontana & Frey, 2000).

The individual interviews were conducted in a semi-private location in my campus office. This did not affect my interviews because we were not interrupted by others; however one interviewee, Serenity, asked to move to an even more closed off space when we began to discuss how she had changed since she has studied in the U.S. for almost a year. This was easily done and the rest of the interview went smoothly, as we did not move until the last five minutes of the interview. I scheduled the interviews for an hour each, but they only lasted between 45 and 50 minutes. This allowed for natural conversation as suggested by Fontana and Frey (2000).

Although I did not have written reflections in my journal from my interactions with my participants before the study, I knew that what I knew of my participants from before the study influenced some of the wording in my questions or how I thought my participants would answer the questions. For example, on a visit to my hometown with Joy and Sunny, they explained to me the concept of face and how it is used in their hometown and how it is important to keep face. In this story, Joy told Sunny she had lost her face when she couldn’t eat a spicy food their town was known for. Since I knew that Sunny knew the concept of face that I had found in my research, I mentioned it during the interview with her when she was describing being very aware of how you look and dress in China but not in the U.S. I asked if this was the concept of face, and when she asked what I meant, I went on to explain that I was asking about the concept of “keeping face” that she had explained to me during our winter trip to my house. She then realized what I was talking about and agreed with me that face was important in social interactions. This is an
example of how my previous interactions organically tended to influence some of my follow up
interview questions.

**Group interview.** For the last form of data collection, I chose a group interview. Since
the nature of the final interview is supposed to be a reflection of the experience all participants
share (Seidman, 2006), a group interview would allow for a deep reflection on the commonality
of those experiences. A group interview allows participants to experience a conversation about
their shared experiences and find where opinions are similar and where they differ (Fontana &
Frey, 2000). I also wanted to help with the issue of the language barrier making it harder for
participants to fully explain themselves when they were not sure how to describe a situation or a
feeling in English. By having all four of my subjects who speak Chinese interview together, I
was able to allow them to ask each other how to express a thought in English if they only knew
how to say the thought in Chinese.

For these interview questions, I wanted deep reflections on all my participants’
experiences here at MSU, so I selected a few questions that I sent to my participants a day before
the interview so each participant could think about how they wanted to respond to the questions
and formulate their answers ahead of time (see Appendix C). Not only was this a request from
my participants after experiencing the first interview, but giving the questions ahead of time was
helpful in accommodating ESL learners, as it made sure they understood what questions were
being asked before they were asked, allowing for more time to process the questions and plan
their answers (Mak, 2011).

The group interview was conducted in an empty classroom down the hall from my office
and was audio recorded and videotaped in case I needed to use the video to discern between
voices. The interactions of the group went as well as I had hoped and even had conversations that
surprised me. The participants interacted well with each other and felt comfortable enough to even disagree with each other during the interview. An example of this is, at one point, everyone said that Chinese/Taiwanese teachers did not like to be wrong, but Joy said she felt free to correct her teachers. Joy then admitted that she only felt comfortable doing this because she was a very good student and knew the teachers would listen to her. At times my participants also spoke to each other in Chinese to help each other describe something they were thinking. This mostly happened when they were describing Confucianism values and phrases and how they felt this culture affected them.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for phenomenological research interviews involves finding significant statements from the interviews and organizing those statements into themes (Creswell, 2012.). I specifically used the spiral data analysis method, as described by Creswell (2012), where the researcher considers the data in a “spiral” and “engages in the process of moving in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach” (p. 182). The data is considered by working with several different ways of data analysis circling around and around until one exits with an account of the phenomena. The data is first organized into files, then the data is read, reflected upon by the researcher, and note taking begins. The third “loop” in the spiral is where the data is coded and placed into data themes that give context, comparisons, and descriptions. The fourth and final step is to take the themes from the third loop and create a representation of the data in textual form.

I chose to use the spiral analysis for two reasons. The first was that I felt overwhelmed by my data and was not sure how I would organize it all. Spiral data analysis helped me to organize my thoughts and work with my data in workable steps that I could split into several readings and
reviews of my data. The second reason is because I felt spiral data analysis allowed me to embrace my role as the personally connected researcher and immerse myself in the data until I was able to make connections I may not have seen before by reading my data several times for several different purposes.

For my data analysis, I first transcribed the interviews using the audio recordings. For the first loop in my analysis, I took the transcripts and just read carefully over each one of them with no highlighting or underlining, just reading. During these readings, I got to know the information that was in each of the transcripts, and then I began making connections and themes in my head. Next, I read over each of the transcripts again for my second loop, and this time I highlighted any phrases or quotes I thought would be useful or important to use in my coding. As I was highlighting all of this, I began to think of different codes I could use for my highlighted sections, such as “testing pressures” and “culture of Confucianism,” and I wrote these codes down on a piece of paper. Once I highlighted passages from every transcript and wrote my codes on a piece of paper, I began to think of themes that the codes could fall under. I had a separate piece of paper for each theme. Each piece of paper was titled with the theme with the corresponding codes written underneath it. For my third loop of the spiral, I went back through all of the transcripts, and, using my theme and code papers as a guide, I labeled all of the highlighted passages with the code and tabbed the passages with the theme they corresponded to. These themes and their underlying codes are what guided my writing of the results in the fourth and final loop and created the conclusions I could draw from those themes.

The final loop of data analysis is where my chose my warrants, or a claim that my data supports, and assertions, or support for my warrants, for my data to create my textual results. The themes I had created from my codes could all be categorized onto overarching themes and these
overarching themes became my warrants. I then used the codes from each theme to find quotes to create my warrants for each assertion. For example, one of the overarching themes I found was that of Confucianism’s affect on my participants and how Confucianism is still used and relevant in their lives. I then looked for quotes labeled with the code “CCC” (culture, Confucianism, or change) and found quotes that helped with the assertion that Confucianism affected my participants. Each of these assertions and their warrants was then written into a type of vignette where the assertions and warrants were presented as an anecdote of what each of the participants said. My textual representation of my results includes direct quotes from my participants to ensure authenticity and proper representation of my participants’ voices, especially in relationship to their perceived experiences, since this is the basis of phenomenology (Lester, 1999). However, to ensure fluency of quotes and to protect the face of my participants, all instances of fluency interruption, such as repetition of words or filler words (“um…uh…”), have been removed from quotes.

Validity

For the validity of my research, I used several “checks” from qualitative research. Spiral data analysis lends itself to a “constant comparison check” (Richards, 2003, p. 287), so I continuously compared my codes with other codes as I analyzed my data to make sure I made all new possible connections and comparisons. My researcher journal allowed for transparency of my researcher bias (Glesne, 2006), and although I know where my past interactions affected my interviews, I see the impact of my prior interactions and knowledge of my participants, not as liability to the trustworthiness of my data, but as a way to elicit more authentic connections across my participant interaction with societal and educational culture. Validity also came from my triangulation of multiple data sources (Glesne, 2006) of three types of interviews and my
researcher journal. These multiple sources of my own reflections and different interviews allowed me to make sure the data was reoccurring by coming from multiple sources.

Summary

The research question was explored using qualitative critical phenomenology research that focused on the phenomena of experiencing education in a different culture as an education major with a critical theory focus on the results. There were four participants in the study, three from China and one from Taiwan. All were in the masters program of curriculum and teaching at MSU and had a relationship with the researcher. The data collection process from a questionnaire, individual interviews, and a group interview provided many rich resources for data. Data collection also included an autoethnographic journal by the researcher to include personal observations, as well as making the researcher’s personal involvement in the study clear. The data was analyzed using a modified format of Creswell’s (2012) spiral data analysis and results were given in a textual format and validity is assured through multiple sources of data, constant data comparisons, and researcher transparency.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of my research was to look at how culture affects students from China and Taiwan when they come to MSU to study in a graduate curriculum and teaching program. My research question was how does societal and educational culture affect students from China and Taiwan educational experiences in the U.S.? The sub questions asked what are the societal cultural differences in China, Taiwan, and the U.S., what societal and educational cultural differences affect learning in China, Taiwan, and the U.S., and how do cultural differences affect communication in the U.S. university classroom setting? My data was analyzed using the spiral data analysis (Creswell, 2012) technique. The data was read through, coded according to reoccurring ideas that came up during the interviews, and then sorted into themes. The themes that emerged were culture, Confucianism and change, educational differences at the secondary and college level, and educational restrictions encountered by teachers in Taiwan and China. I utilized these themes below to present my findings by providing summaries and direct quotes of how my participants’ thoughts, feelings, and responses corresponded with each theme.

Culture, Confucianism and Change

One of the first themes that emerged with my participants was culture, specifically, their own culture and the differences they see in U.S. culture. The first question in each interview asked the participants to describe the culture in their home country. I could see from all four women's answers that they were very aware of the cultural differences between China or Taiwan and the U.S. and how those differences affected them on a personal and educational level. I was most surprised in my group interview of the perceived importance of Confucianism by my participants.
Influence of Confucianism. The influence of Confucianism on culture and their lives was an idea discussed for a large portion of the group interview. Joy began the discussion by stating, “You will find that a lot of...behaviors\(^3\) you have do or a lot of thought you have had that is affect by...the thought that from original from the traditional Chinese...Confu...Con...” and then Autumn helped Joy by stating, “Confucius,” almost knowing that Joy could not remember the English word. Sunny and Serenity both agreed with a nod and a “Yes” that Confucianism was important in their culture and in their lives. I soon discovered that my participants viewed Confucius’ influence as the biggest aspect of their culture, in terms of how they went about their daily actions. His values greatly influenced their culture. These values were listed as humbleness, keeping face, and respecting and obeying teachers and parents. My group focused on being humble and keeping face, as these were concepts I perceived as not being a part of the culture in the U.S.

Serenity said that the idea of being humble was also called living in “the middle.” From my discussions and interactions with my participants, “the middle” seemed to be the idea of avoiding being an outlier in any way by making sure your actions match the actions of those around you, or, as Serenity described, “be the middle: to not be too bad or too good, can just be the middle but not say a word this way or that.” An example of being in the middle was given in a common Chinese phrase that Joy translated for me after the group discussed it: “The gun will choose... the first bird to fly up.” This phrase is used to articulate that one should strive not to be the first to act, but to wait until others act the same way. This idea of the middle influenced how they each were raised and how they interacted now in the U.S. When trying to stay in the middle,

\(^3\) All quotes from participants have had filler words and repetitions removed to help with fluency and understanding of the quotes.
you should be concerned with what you are doing compared to what others are doing. This affects everyday decisions, such as what to wear.

Serenity gave me an example of how the middle affected daily interactions with her family when she wanted to wear a dress in the summer:

“My father, when I want to wear a dress…when the summer is coming and my father says if there are ten students, ten persons in the class who wear [then you can wear the dress, but if you are the first one, then that is not appropriate.”

This same influence occurred when Joy wanted to buy a car while in the U.S. She said, “The first question my mother will ask is how about [Sunny]?”. Joy and Sunny then went on to explain that Joy’s mother not only asked about every Chinese person she knew Joy knew, but then went on to make sure that the car Joy picked did not stick out too much either. Sunny, Joy, Serenity, and Autumn all mentioned at multiple points in the group interview that they felt the need to be aware of the opinions of others, at least when they were in their home countries. Even though Joy often stated through examples and stories that her mother was the one who asked if what she was doing was in the middle or not, she also showed me that her mother and other Chinese people were very aware of how they live. “So my mother said the Chinese people just…live in between the others’ opinions. Yeah, they really care about that…because…they do not want to lose their face.” So the concept of being humble by living in the middle also affects the second aspect of Confucianism brought up by my participants: face.

**Face.** The concept of “face” surfaced many times by Joy, Sunny, and Serenity. Through my discussions and interviews with them, the best way to describe the concept of face was keeping up appearances: by not looking bad or losing the respect people already had for you. Losing or saving face influenced education and impacted student and teacher interactions. With
the Confucius attribute of respecting teachers and teachers having power in the classroom, teachers must also worry about keeping that power and looking the part (keeping face). In the group interview, Sunny mentioned, “in American, its nature for the teachers, professors to say ‘I’m Sorry’…if they find they have make some mistakes during the class…but in China maybe we…” and her thought was completed by Serenity, “…teachers are supposed to be the right person, never make mistakes. They’re supposed to be that kind of person if maybe they say they will be really embarrassed, they don’t want to show… they are sorry or something.” Sunny, Serenity, and Autumn all thought that teachers worked hard to keep their face by not admitting to wrongs. Joy said that she agreed, but she experienced a different authority where “they will encourage me to say something [different from the teacher].” She then attributed her teacher’s willingness to let her speak out to her high scores on tests; her face would not change since she had good rapport and face due to her high scores. Since Joy’s face was strong with her teacher, her teacher felt comfortable being corrected by Joy, as something said by Joy would not affect her teacher’s face. Student face was important for good student teacher interaction.

The influence face had on students was mainly through test scores. Students must attain high scores, so they can go to college; this influenced how they were treated at home and at school. This was something agreed upon by all four of them during the group interview; those with the highest scores have the best face and get treated the best. The concept of face was also brought up in the individual interviews as a motivation for students. Sunny stated, “to keep my parents face… it’s the reason why children in China is so...is maybe so hard. Because all the people will be compared with others.” In my other conversations with Sunny and Joy, they said that if you do not do the same or as well as your neighbors, your parents will make you work harder by having you attend cram schools and study more. Sunny told me of a time this
happened to her. She did not want to go to a cram school during the winter break, but because her neighbor was going, her mother made her go, as well. These comparisons students made also happened between each other. Autumn said that she observed in her all girls school that “lots of girls like to compare…not only grades…you health and your shoes.” The idea of face and humbleness together permeated the decisions and actions of my participants, and it was something I felt they did not enjoy about their culture and wished would change.

**Change.** The interviews showed that the participants thought there was some change going on in their countries with respect to societal culture. When trying to describe the culture of China, Sunny stated that it was “changing and traditional and … modern mixed together.” She said that younger people in the city tended to be different. These differences included the younger generation wanting to speak out more, to be different from others, and to be more accepting of those who were different or not in “the middle”. Serenity also agreed and said that when it came to some of the cultural ideas of being in “the middle,” “people dislike difference, I think, in general. Not necessarily me or Joy or Autumn. For adults like the older people like 30….years…those kind of people.” Although my participants were more open to differences and changes among their peers, they were still influenced by those older than them in their culture who viewed differences negatively and desired a strong united front. I got the sense from my participants that they did not like this aspect of their culture and wished it was different. Even though there were small changes that seemed to be happening, the traditional cultural influences still affected them. These cultural influences also affected the educational systems in China and Taiwan.
Educational Culture

The second theme I found through my interviews was that of educational culture. The educational culture of Taiwan and China seemed to focus on the idea that for students, education was everything. Students must focus all their energy on their studies and obtaining good grades on the tests. Such a strong focus on passing tests affected how students were taught.

Education is everything. The Chinese and Taiwanese people believed that education was everything to a student, not just because learning was important to function in society and to get a good job in the future, but as a way to advance yourself and your family. Serenity stated this in her individual interview:

[P]arents think education is everything for their children. They want their children to …get really high score in the test…and to also enter the really good college …which means good job…and good future…and I think like the only thing they value is the test scores.”

All four of my participants focused on the idea that in secondary education, grades on the tests and passing the college entrance exams were seen as the most important thing for a student. Sunny described this as the “traditional education system so people just [value] the good …scores,” and children are compared and valued by those “who can enter the…good schools, good colleges so focus on…the children’s scores.” Joy said, “I think every parents will notice the education is very important for the, for their children.” She then went on to say that this was especially important for the poor families in China because “the only way they can change their life is get the best college, it is the only way.” Changing their life not only applied to students but also students’ families because if your son or daughter did well, you would reap the benefits of your child doing well. My participants viewed getting into a good college as the only way to
advance yourself. Hard work and any education alone would not do; it needed to be the best college. This was difficult though, since getting into the best college depended only on your scores on the test, and there were very few good colleges to get into.

Obtaining high scores on the college entrance exams was a concept that was repeated over and over again by all four women. The importance of the college examination could affect your decisions for your future. In both China and Taiwan, the test was only on one day per year, so you only had one chance to get the score you desired or you must wait an entire year to try again. This happened to Serenity. She did not get the score she desired on the test the first time taking it, so she spent a year studying, took the test again, and still only gained entry into a college that she described as “not very good.” Getting a high score on the exam meant you could get into a good college, which there was a shortage of. “We open a lot of new school to let other students to the college,” explained Autumn who went on to say that some of these new universities were “just like the senior high school.” Joy felt the same sentiment, “In China, they have a very big difference between the first level to the second level to the third level [of college.]” Serenity said there was a “shortage of the good quality university in China.” Serenity said that getting into a good college was important because “to go to a good college will make you more competitive in the labor market. Joy added that “[entering] the very better college is very important because after you graduate the best …college you… needent(sic) to find a job.” Joy meant that you would be guaranteed a job based off your college’s name alone. Getting into a good college was not only difficult because the only way to enter the college was by getting a high score on the exam, but there were not a lot of good colleges to get into. This made competition very fierce among students. Joy described this competition as affecting the students’ interactions with each other. “But in China, the students is very envy for others. They will talk
about very bad thing for others to you they do not too…protect their classmates. They think they will not like their classmates [because] they will very competitor.” This was different than what Joy said she experienced in the U.S. where she saw the students helping one another. Although getting good grades, going to college, and competition was also important in the U.S., my participants and I viewed the importance of education in China and Taiwan as different from the U.S., due to how intensely students must study.

**Student life.** This desire for high scores also affected what students did within their education. According to my participants, students spent an average of 10 hours per day studying and working to prepare for the tests. The participants said that studying was a student’s entire life. Joy described this as a “hell” where “you need to spend over 10 hours to study.” She then explained that with this studying you “can’t go out [of] the school maybe one time a week…so you stay on campus.” Serenity said of her high school experience, “we are full time students from 6:00 am to 9:00 pm. The whole day, we spend our whole day in school. Yeah, even sleep in on the desk. It’s really miserable.” Even breaks were spent studying, and Sunny said, “The students… young children or maybe high school students will go to the training class in summer holiday or winter holiday or will to learn.” These training classes were called “cram schools” and there were many varieties of these cram schools for different subjects; however, all of these schools simply focused on how to pass the tests in that particular subject. This was surprising to me because although the U.S. valued high scores and testing, students were also encouraged to pursue many extracurricular activities and receive breaks and vacations where students often do non-academic related activities.

Compared to their home countries, my four participants commented that education at the college level was different in the U.S. Students’ and parents’ attitudes shifted from great concern
for the test scores to concern for just finishing college. Sunny discussed with me that after studying for years and finally passing the exam and entering college, “some students will feel…‘oh okay, I entered the good college. I can relax’…So after four years, some students in college maybe…don’t gain much knowledge.” Joy described college as “paradise” because “before you go to college, you will spend… over 10 hours to study but after you entry the college you will be very, very relax.” Autumn said that her parent’s views on grades changed. She said, “When I study university in college, parents not put emphasis on my scores…they just hope I can pass all the subjects.” Autumn further explained that they also wanted her to join clubs or activities that had to do with what she was interested in or wanted to get a job in. So after entering college, students tended to not work as hard as they did in high school. I also saw this with my participants, as they would often tell me outside of class that college in the U.S. was much more difficult because there were more assignments, and everyone in the U.S. seemed to take their college education more seriously than in China and Taiwan. Between the differences in culture, educational systems, and even views of college, there were many differences between Chinese/Taiwanese college education and U.S. college education, as viewed by my participants.

**Educational Differences Between China/Taiwan V. U.S.**

**Paper assignments.** There were differences that were briefly mentioned when it came to assignments, such as the need for citations, as stated by Joy and agreed upon by the other three in the group interview. Joy said that “in America… you cannot quote, use the other ones words. You need a quotation for everything you borrow with others, but in China…the practice is not like that.” But the biggest difference my participants saw was giving your opinions and ideas on assignments and in class. In regards to offering opinions on a paper, the group felt they were encouraged to think of different answers or give their own opinions. Sunny said, “I became more
serious about the assignment here and… I think the professor will encourage you to press out many… of your own opinions if you want.” Autumn also said that “before, [in Taiwan], we focus on…some question we have only one right answer but here… many questions is also integrate maybe integrate you ideas, some background of yours.” Serenity then said, “I agree with only one… answers thing.” I personally observed this difference with my participants. After class one day, they discussed with me that at the beginning of the school year, they felt unsure during reading assignments. They would come to class have focused solely on what the author said and did not realize the teachers wanted their own opinions about what the author said. They later understood that they were supposed to look for where they agreed or disagreed with the author and write about that, as well.

**Giving opinions/speaking out in class.** When asked about students talking in class, all of the participants agreed that questions were allowed, but Serenity said that “they want you to ask the questions after the class,” and that was what most students did. Asking questions after class was something that my participants did in the U.S., as well. I often observed them waiting until after the class to approach the teacher and ask a question about the lesson or an assignment. When it came to giving opinions in class, the participants viewed this in different ways. Joy thought that “on the one hand, it’s because is very shy for them to talk to … the professor before the one hundred students but… another nobody really care about it because they are just waiting for the teacher’s paper.” Joy went on to explain that this paper is a paper that they were given by the teacher and simply had to memorize this paper to get high scores the tests. Sunny, Serenity, and Autumn viewed differences in giving opinions as a difference in teacher encouragement. Autumn said, “I think American is quite different because…American teacher give us more space and time to… share our ideas about this. We can communicate this something… that I
think is very important here.” She then described that in Taiwan, “if the teacher ask any question, most of the students keep their head down, no one… want to answer.” Sunny said that although you could probably share your opinions in class in China, it was different in the U.S. because “you want to talk about every opinions you want to talk about; you want to speak out. Especially…different… to hers or different to teachers you can discuss.” Serenity saw these differences as cultural and said in her individual interview, “You see that is the difference between Chinese education and American education…Chinese teachers will not encourage you to do the critical thinking a lot…what my teacher will do in class will just show us some truth in the textbook and to… make them maybe more interesting for us to listen to.” The textbook was seen was the truth that was not usually questioned, so teachers in China only worked to make the textbook more interesting for students. However, teachers did not ask the students to critically think about the information in the textbook. My participants saw the environment as much different in the U.S. and attributed it to the culture of the U.S.

U.S. culture in the classroom. The participants viewed U.S. culture as having more freedom. Autumn said you had “more freedom here.” During her individual interview, Sunny said, “I think the best thing maybe you don’t care about other judgment here.” Serenity felt that Americans “just want you to be yourself.” To describe U.S. culture Joy simply said, “I think… just are…Freedom.” This concept of freedom seemed to be the opposite of face and humbleness since my participants often talked with me about how they were glad they did not have to worry about what to wear, say, or how to act in the U.S. These ideas of being free to be yourself and discussing your thoughts and experiences translated to their views on what they could eat and wear and how they interacted in the U.S. college classroom. The participants felt that the American classroom had an atmosphere that fostered creativity and opinion sharing. Autumn
said in her individual interview that she saw this as a cultural difference compared to Taiwan. “I think is also kind of culture. You know when I got here, I was so surprised when teacher ask any volunteers, lots of students raise their hands, or any questions, lots of students raise their hands to ask question.” Within their previous educational experiences, the four women were not usually asked for their opinions or their questions during class, because they were often taught that there was only one right answer to a question. Although the idea of sharing opinions had been surprising to all four women, they said that the environment of the classroom helped them adjust. Serenity said that although she was not used to sharing ideas, “here the environment encourage you to do that kind of thing.” Sunny also had a similar experience saying she “became confident here because the classmates and all the professors give us so many encouragement and encourage us to speak out ourselves opinion and… encourage us to think.” The culture of being free to express ideas and opinions was not only encouraged in class, but my participants felt as though teachers and peers helped foster the sense of comfort in giving opinions and sharing ideas.

**Issues in classroom participation.** Although there was a difference in the classroom atmosphere, and all of the participants felt encouraged to give their opinions, there was often still a gap in the willingness to participate. This gap was a result of the language barrier and adjusting to the cultural differences. Joy said that giving opinions in class could be difficult because “firstly is the language barriers and also…I do not want to waste my classmates time to explain what I am talking about and on the other hand, maybe my teacher…ask more questions about this one and I am still confused…and then the another hand is that maybe my, my opinion is not make sense for the other countries students because we have the different backgrounds.” Along the same lines, Serenity stated that it was “so hard…not only because our language is not good
enough to express our opinion freely, but also because…you know it’s hard to… organize your thoughts sometime. It just not get used to some…activity, like professor ask your opinion about something and it’s hard to find some creative answer and you … will be afraid to answer.” After class, my participants often talked about how they wished they had more time to think about their answers to questions raised in class or about their opinions during class discussions. Sunny also spoke of language being a problem, but then said, “I think another difficult is about the different culture, different background of education just like the, the class 6700 class just most of the time talk about the educational system in America.” She went on to explain that since they didn’t know much about the American education system, it was hard to give opinions or speak in that class. I also saw this in classes when any of the four women would sit next to me. They would ask me what something discussed in class meant, and although they asked me for clarification about everyday issues, I had difficulty explaining to my Chinese peers what the issue was. Joy also told me once that she felt it was difficult to share an opinion in class because she did not feel that her U.S. peers would understand her since her opinion relied heavily on Chinese culture and educational views. She also did not want to take the time to explain herself if no one understood her because she was not confident enough in her English skills.

**Perceived differences and changes.** The four women also said that although there were many differences in education, they still learned from the experience and had changed. Autumn said that one of the changes she has had here:

“I think the most huge change is learning, learning way. In American, teacher just guide you how to do this assignment…you can do this assignment in your own way. But in Taiwan… teachers always have strict… directions…if you don’t follow this direction,
you will fail. Something like that. So change the learning way, yeah. And I have more creative thinking and critical thinking.”

Serenity told me that she “feel[s] more comfortable speaking in front of people.” Joy said that she knew she had changed, but it was hard to express those changes, except now she “will just…think ‘okay everything acceptable, I just need time.’” All of the changes experienced by my participants applied to views on differences in education and between people. However, the strong influence of culture in their home countries will make it difficult for these changes to stay with my participants. Joy stated the fear that the other participants had as well and said, “I think when I go back to China, I will change back.” This was a fear because of the pressures of culture and education that they would experience as teachers in their home countries.

**Educational-Cultural Restrictions**

Although not a theme I expected to encounter in my research, the theme of educational-cultural restrictions occurred in every interview. I named this theme “educational restrictions” because it was the idea that one’s’ classroom was restricted to the curriculum and culture of the area you teach/learn in. This was no exception for my participants, but their restrictions, although similar to the ones experienced in America, were affected on a much deeper cultural level, as I discuss in Chapter Five.

**Testing pressures on teachers.** The biggest educational restriction for teachers, as was brought up by all four participants in every interview, was the pressure of the tests and college entrance exam and how those rankings affected them as teachers. Joy’s quote best explains these affects. “They will be ranking [the] average scores of each class so every time you class…is behind others, maybe the next year no parents want to send the children to your class so you will be fired.” Joy, Sunny, Serenity, and Autumn all said that if your students’ scores were not high
enough on the tests, then you would be fired, so teachers tended to work their students very hard to get them to gain the most information for the test as possible. Sunny also commented on this, saying the pressure for teachers to get their students to get good scores on the tests was the only reason she did not want to become a high school teacher; there was just too much pressure.

**Changing the classroom.** The pressure to achieve high scores on the test was also related to the difficulty faced in changing teaching strategies in your classroom. “It’s hard to be different in China” was the sentiment brought up by Serenity and agreed upon by all in the group interview. This idea was carried out on two different levels in education during the interviews. The first was if you wanted to change anything about all the classrooms, you need to be the person who is closest to the, as the participants put it, “boss.” The idea of having power and a good relationship with the boss was how things changed. They even commented that if your idea was best for the school, but you were not close with the boss, then your idea would not be implemented. However, a teacher’s idea would likely be implemented if they were close to the boss, even if the idea was not necessarily good for the school. According to my participants, if you wanted to make a change, you needed power.

As mentioned above, changing teaching methods or strategies in their own classroom also had restrictions. Joy was the first to mention that if you wanted to change something in your own classroom, you first needed to guarantee that the change made would garner higher test scores for your students and would still follow the schedule that the other teachers and students in your school had. Sunny then commented, “But it’s difficult for the teachers to do both of the things with the same time.” In order to teach differently or use strategies much different from other teachers, you needed to make sure that your new teaching strategies fit in with the school curricular schedule and ensure high scores. Even small changes in the classroom were affected
by this concept, as explained to me in two stories. Autumn, who had two years of teaching experience in a High School, said that when she first arrived at her school, she gave her students many worksheets, but the senior teachers did not want her to stick out or give more worksheets than they did. “They just like warn me ‘you cannot use the worksheets to teach your students.’” She and Sunny both said this warning came because it created a difference between you and the other teachers, and students would question why one class got extra worksheets but their class did not. Joy said the same thing happened to one of her friends who was teaching in China. Joy’s friend wanted to give her elementary students a treat at the end of the semester, but the senior teachers told her “you can’t do that because my…students do not have that one.” These stories could be best related to the idea that in China and Taiwan, if you changed your class, you were basically asking everyone to follow you, even if the change was something as small as an extra worksheet or a treat for your class.

With changes being difficult to make in one’s own classroom and in a school, all four women understood that change could not really happen no matter what because of the impact of the test. Autumn commented that although change was starting to happen in Taiwan, “it’s hard because we need to follow the schedule because we need to meet the future exams.” Change was not happening quickly, nor did it really look like change had happened at all to Autumn. Joy expanded upon how engrained the testing culture was in Chinese culture:

“You know it’s hard to change with the national, you know the national test for entry the college because we did this kind of thing from maybe 500 years ago, something like that … if we changed something, I mean do not do this kind of thing, maybe we need to change the whole things in China first, maybe the governments, the relations…like that. Maybe, and then the educational system will change.”
With such deep roots in testing from the ancient Chinese culture and the huge pressures that came from the importance of education and testing, the change my participants wanted to see in their home countries could not happen in the near future.

**Summary**

My interviews and interpretations of the data from my journal reflections and knowledge of the participants helped to answer my research question and sub questions. The societal and educational cultural differences that affect both learning and communication in China and Taiwan were the Confucius concepts of face, humbleness, and the importance of education. Because of the importance of face and humbleness, my participants and their families felt it was important to be aware of what those around you thought about you and to not do any actions that were very different from others. My participants were not used to speaking up in class or sharing their opinions. My participants felt that the environment in the U.S. encouraged them to begin sharing their thoughts and ideas, and they enjoyed this environment. However, my participants also felt that they could not take these new ideas and views back with them to their home countries due to the effects of culture and testing on education.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

For this study, I planned to find out how students from China and Taiwan learn and interact in the education classroom at MSU. The primary research question that guided this study was: How do societal and educational culture affect students from China and Taiwan educational experiences in the U.S.? My literature review and analysis of the data collected from the interviews of my participants produced three major themes. The themes were: the current relevance of Confucianism culture to students, the effect of culture on learning styles and participation by international students, and culture restricting teacher ability to personalize curriculum or teaching methods. The results were discussed under each of the sub questions that helped guide my study to answer my primary research question.

What are the Societal Cultural Differences in China, Taiwan, and the U.S.?

The largest societal cultural difference my research found was that of Confucianism. It became apparent during my data analysis and findings that Confucianism had the biggest effect on the culture of China and Taiwan (Suen & Yu, 2006; Zhao, 2007). My participants stated that this culture affected their own lives when they stated that Confucianism was something that still influenced their decisions. This was because of the concept of face.

Face. The effects of Confucianism within interactions applied to the ideas of face or how you looked to those around you. In a study about how culture affected the self, Markus and Kitayama (1991) found that Asian cultures viewed individuality as being affected by working well with others, fitting in, and having successful interdependent relationships. At the same time, U.S. culture did not pay attention to overt connects to other individuals. My participants also saw this in their own observations and interactions, as they felt the freedom in U.S. culture was not concerned with the opinions and feelings of others, something they could not do in their home
countries. My participants also felt the influence of the cultural aspect of being concerned with face and interactions with others affected their interactions with those still at home (Cai et al., 2011). My participants also stated that for a student to have good social standing, or face, they needed to have high test scores, another Confucius influence.

**Testing.** Confucius’ idea of the importance of testing and advancement through education was still seen as a strong influence in education in China and Taiwan, according to my participants. Research also suggested that testing and education were still very important in Chinese society (Pan and Newfields, 2011, Cheng, 1998). This was because, according to my participants, getting a high score on the test, especially the high-stakes college entrance exam, meant you had a better chance at a good job and a bright future. This went along with the Confucius idea that the most educated should have the highest positions and that the proof of your education should be through an examination (Cheng, 1998; Chou & Ho, 2007; Suen & Yu, 2006). My participants also stated that students and teachers were valued based on their test scores, so students and teachers made every effort to improve test scores. The cultural effects of the importance of face within social interactions and testing lead to the differences in learning styles between international students from China and Taiwan and students from the U.S.

**What Societal and Educational Cultural Differences Affect Learning in China, Taiwan, and the U.S.?**

With the Confucius influence of face and testing, educational differences that effected learning had to do with learning styles and teacher dispositions. Culture’s effect on education was inherent in the learning styles of students and how students interacted with their education (Chuang, 2012; Irvine, 2010; Lee et al., 2012). The major educational effect on students was competition due to the testing culture. However, I also found that educational restrictions for
teachers were based on this testing culture. Teachers faced testing pressures and an inability to make changes in their classrooms.

**Competition in education.** Students are ranked and valued by scores on their exams (Cheng & Wong, 1996), so competition between students is high in China and Taiwan. Scores were important because good scores means getting into a good school, according to my participants, who stated that competition was fierce because there is a lack of quality colleges. They also talked about how education focused on skills to pass the test especially when it came to their English education experience (Cheng, 1998; Shi, 2006). However, the competition and rote memorization is not all bad since it is still a culturally sound educational system: one that is based off of the culture of China. Students still learn and have understanding of their subjects (King et al., 2011), but some teachers and schools are unhappy with this method of teaching and wish to change it, but changing even a small part of the educational system is difficult.

**Educational restrictions.** All of my participants said that they felt the pressure as teachers to teach a certain way and not try to change because “it’s hard to be different in China.” The educational restrictions from culture, as stated by my participants, came in three forms: restrictions due to the pressures from the test, restrictions to changes in the classroom, and restrictions to changes in the school system.

**Testing pressures.** Teachers are pressured to teach in such a way that increases their students’ chances to get higher scores on the exams. Teachers need to get their students to get high scores on the exams because if they do not, they will be fired, which was a sentiment shared by all of the participants. The pressure to get high scores on tests has restricted teaching in many ways. One of those restrictions is test based questioning and teaching (Chou & Ho, 2007; Suen & Yu, 2006). Autumn stated Taiwan was trying to change this system and its teachers were
attempting to teach with different styles (Chou & Ho, 2007); however, these changes have shown to be difficult because of the testing pressure.

*Changes inside the classroom.* All four women talked about the concept of not being able to make changes in your own classroom due to testing pressures and not being able to stick out or be different from other classes. Stories were shared of young teachers being told by the elder teachers not to give their students extra worksheets or an extra treat if the other classes did not get the same. This could be equated with the Confucius idea of humbleness and whole group mentality where everyone needs to have the same opportunities (Hwang, 1999). The participants also discussed how changes in their own classroom could not happen unless they were not only following the time line as all of the other classes, but they also had to guarantee that these changes would improve test scores.

*Changes to the school system.* Difficulties in changing the school system as a whole were also discussed on two levels by the participants. One was change within an individual school and that if a teacher wanted to induce change, they needed to be in with the “boss.” A bad relationship with the boss would mean your idea would not be used. The women also stated that since everyone followed the most powerful person in a group, the relationship with that person was important to create change. This can be related to the power relationships and respect for authority in Chinese culture (Gao, 1996; Hofstede, 1980). The second notion of change brought up by the participants was the idea that nothing could really change in the Chinese and Taiwanese educational system unless the test changed. However, China and Taiwan’s educational history has shown that not much has changed in education throughout the years and testing is still important (Chou & Ho, 2007; Suen & Yu, 2006).
How Do Cultural Differences affect Communication in the U.S. University Classroom Setting?

The educational and cultural differences affect communication for Chinese and Taiwanese students at the U.S. university level due to initial inadvertence to speaking out in class. Because of cultural learning styles of reflective and observational learning in Confucianism based cultures (Chuang, 2012), one of the largest adjustments found in my research was that my participants were not used to having to give their opinions in class or during lectures. Autumn even commented that she was surprised students willingly volunteered to answer questions in class since students in her country did not usually volunteer to answer questions. Research indicated that this could be attributed to the idea of wanting to keep their own face (Durkin, 2008, Heffernan et al., 2010, Trent, 2008) or due to not wanting others to lose face (Heffernan et al., 2010; Trent, 2008). The participants also talked about needing to be humble and not stick out in classes to answer questions. This has been attributed to the idea of not seeking self-advancement through talking about your good deeds but by keeping silent (Kurman, 2003).

Implications of the Study

My study has implications for both international students and those who work with international students. The culture that we are raised in affects us in how we interact with others and how we adjust to a new culture. Western and eastern cultures are very different, so their approach to teaching and learning varies, as well. Westerners tend to gain value from personal individualism, taking care of the self first, and speaking out (McKay, 2002), whereas easterners tend to be concerned with the individual related to others, taking care of group needs first, and being humble rather than speaking out (McKay, 2002; Robertson et al., 2000). Educational
differences include citations and paper writing (Samuelowicz, 1987), as well as preferred learning styles and ways of thinking (Heffernan et al., 2010; Shi, 2006). Classroom participation and willingness to share ideas and experiences is also affected (Hwang et al., 2008; Ladd & Ruby 1999; Robertson et. al., 2000). This means that international students from an Eastern culture, such as China and Taiwan, have a background that will affect how they react to and interact with certain situations. Those who work with international students should be aware of these possible differences and the effects these differences can cause. Teachers who have international students should ensure that students understand that giving opinions or speaking out in class is wanted and encouraged. Those who teach students from other cultures should also try to be up front with students about expectations in the classroom. If a teacher expects that students share ideas in class and use proper citations in a paper, the teacher should explain this to students and also give examples of how these interactions could look. Teachers should also try to make their classrooms have an environment that encourages the types of interactions they want to see in their classes.

For international students who study education in a different culture but plan to go back and teach in their home countries, they need to be aware of the fact that they are culturally bound to their country’s style of education. What international students study in the U.S. may not translate at all to their home country where they will most likely end up teaching. Participants in this study showed that although they enjoyed their experience here and like what they have come to know as the American teaching and learning style, they cannot take all of their experiences and new expertise back home. Research does suggest that teaching and education can be culturally bound and that certain learning styles that are effective in one country or culture may not be as effective in another (Heffernan et al., 2010). Therefore, those students who wish to
study education in a country other than their own should consider cultural differences between
countries as a factor in choosing which country to study in. This is because their education
culture may not translate between the two countries. Also, for teachers of education who work
with international students, it is important to try to understand the educational culture that your
students come from, so you can understand what background information the student knows or
does not know and adjust your teaching accordingly.

As someone who is planning on teaching abroad in an East Asian country, more
specifically, South Korea, a place that is also heavily influenced by Confucianism, I have learned
that I will need to pay attention to the teaching and learning styles of my students. I should not
expect my students to willingly speak out in class, even if I ask them to. I should remember that
they want to save face. I should try to encourage my students to speak out in other ways, such as
having them work in small groups or having students write their questions on a piece of paper to
hand in anonymously during class. I also learned that if I have high school students who are
thinking about studying abroad, I should work with them to research the cultural differences they
might encounter so they can adjust better. Also, since I grew up in a western culture, I can help
them understand what expectations they will probably have in college classes so they will be
better prepared to participate when they arrive at universities such as MSU.

Limitations

The limitations of this study were easy to see. Firstly, as the researcher, I was deeply
involved in the study and my study participants, so it was possible that I could have drawn
conclusions that I wanted to see. However, both previous research and multiple individual quotes
from my participants allowed me to say that this data and these conclusions are valid. Also, my
closeness with the participants became a strength within my data analysis. Because I was close to
the participants, I was able to explain the meaning my participants had behind quotes so the reader could better understand what each of my participants was trying to say. The study was with a very small sample of only four students and in a very short time frame of four weeks. This study could benefit from being done again on a more longitudinal scale by observing international student interactions over the entire course of their study from the time the students have their first class on the American campus to the time they finish their studies. This study also only looked at Chinese and Taiwanese students who were studying education in the U.S., so the results about the use of their U.S. education after they return to their home country is limited to educators. It would be interesting to conduct a study over multiple majors to see if the same issues arise.

**Study Summary**

The research question that this study set out answer was how does societal and educational culture affect students from China and Taiwan educational experiences in the U.S.? Students from China and Taiwan were influenced by culture and their education before coming to learn about education here in the U.S. The culture of China and Taiwan was mostly collectivistic with large influences from Confucius, so being humble, having strong interpersonal interactions, and having an education were pushed in these societies. Education in China and Taiwan was mainly based on testing and competition for high test scores among secondary students. In college, students tended not to participate due to cultural effects of “face” and being humble.

The research was done by conducting three types of interviews, including a questionnaire, a personal interview, and a group interview, to collect data about the interactions and observations of international graduate students in MSU’s curriculum and teaching program.
The participants were four students, three from China and one from Taiwan. The researcher also took a role in the research by keeping a personal journal of observations and interactions with the participants. The data was analyzed using a spiral data analysis (Creswell, 2012) method and then results were written in textual form.

The data along with research showed that the students from China and Taiwan were greatly influenced by their culture and saw that influence in their interactions in class and with peers. The largest influence was that of Confucianism. The Confucian values of keeping face with others and that anyone can help themselves though education and testing had the largest effect, according to my participants. Face and testing affected education in China and Taiwan and led to initial issues when my participants came to the U.S. to study. These included not being open with their opinions and experiences in class, as well as not being encouraged to think critically about ideas and text before coming to America. Although the participants found they liked the American culture and educational styles, they thought that they would not be able to take what they had learned and utilize it back in their own country.

The implications for this study showed that those who teach international students should be aware of cultural differences in teaching and learning when preparing lessons. International students should also be aware of these cultural differences when choosing where to study, so they understand what new educational experiences they will encounter. They need to understand that these new educational systems may not transfer back to their home countries. Those who wish to teach abroad have the same implications. They need to be aware of culturally relevant pedagogy to have the most successful classrooms.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE

East Asian Culture Study: Background Questionnaire

This questionnaire is being used simply to gain simple personal information and information on your background for the purposes of this study. You may type all of your answers if you choose. Any names given will be changed to a pseudonym (fake name) when used in the research report. All forms will be kept in a locked personal area belonging to the researcher (Amanda Ark).

**Basic Information:**

Name:       Age:   Home Country and City:

Please tell me a little about your home: (example: what is your home life like, do you live with only your parents or do you live with other members of your family, is it a large or small city, how would you describe the community, is your city known for anything, what do people do in your city, is your community close or do you only interact with neighbors and family)

**Educational Information:**

What Schools did you attend growing up?

Briefly describe each of these schools (class sizes, private or public, etc.)

What College or University did you attend and what degree did you get?

Do you have any teaching experience?

How many years of English education have you had?

Why did you come to America to study?

Why did you come to Bowling Green State University?
APPENDIX B: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Culture Questions

- How would you describe the culture in your home country?
- What would you say your culture values?
- How would you describe American culture?
- What would you say American culture values?

Home Education Questions

- How involved is the Government in Education in your home country?
- How involved is the community in Education in your home country?
- How involved are parents in Education?
- What was/is your biggest influence to do well in school?
- What is the Teacher’s role at all levels of Education?
- What is the student’s rule at all levels of Education?
- What is emphasized in Education?
- Is getting a degree important?

American Education Questions

- How would you describe American education in the elementary and high school level?
- Are the roles for students and teachers different here than in your home country?
- How would you describe the American College Classroom?

Communication Questions

- Are you comfortable giving opinions in class or online?
- What are the biggest obstacles you face as international students?
- Do you think your participation has changed? In what ways?
- What advice would you give to new students from your countries about studying at MSU?
APPENDIX C: GROUP INTERVIEW SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Do you think your English education prepared you enough to come here? Why or Why not?

2. What was one of the hardest things to adjust to in classes at MSU?

3. How do you think your home countries cultures affect you if at all?

4. What advice would you give someone from home who told you they were coming to MSU? What would you tell them about classes and everyday life here?

5. A few of you mentioned in your interviews that you "think differently" than the American students. Can you talk more about that?

6. What are the biggest differences between college in China/Taiwan and college at MSU?
APPENDIX D: CONSENT LETTER WITH HSRB APPROVAL

Informed Consent for International Classmates

Dear Classmate:

My name is Amanda Ark and I am a Graduate Student in the Curriculum and Teaching program working on my Masters Thesis. As an international student studying at [Redacted], also in the Curriculum and Teaching program, you have had multiple opportunities to engage with faculty, fellow students and US teachers. I, Amanda Ark, would like to know more about your experiences and how your background has affected these interactions. I believe that your previous experiences and background from an East Asian culture affect your interactions with others and your participation in classes. I would like to capture some of your thoughts and ideas on what you have been encountering as well as reflections on my own interactions with you.

The primary purpose of this research is to understand how culture affects interaction and participation of East Asian students in Midwestern University Classrooms. To compile this research, I will ask you to participate in (60-90 minute) individual interviews and one focus group interview (90-120 minutes long). These interviews will take place at a mutually agreed upon time. In addition, I will be keeping a journal of our interactions inside the classroom (class discussions, group work, etc.) and outside of the classroom during conversations for the rest of the Spring 2013 semester. I will be using these notes as part of the data. There is no form of payment or additional incentives given for participation in this study.

BENEFITS

I hope that this study can provide deeper and more authentic understanding of how East Asian students interact and participate in Midwestern University culture. I hope to help students have a better experience in their studies by observing how differences in culture affect interaction between: East Asian students and their American classmates, East Asian students and their teachers, and participation in classes. I also hope this study will help those who work with East Asian students to realize that there are cultural factors that affect education, not just language barriers.

CONFIDENTIALITY

With your permission, excerpts from your interview(s) and observations of your interactions with the researcher outside of and in classes will be included in the research reports that may be published on secure, scholarly websites and as journal articles. If you withdraw from the study, any interview responses and observation notes will be destroyed and not used in the final report. Due to the nature of focus group interviews, where 4 participants are involved, there will be other interviewees in the room that will hear your responses and therefore we cannot guarantee confidentiality of those responses. The questions asked in the focus group will be open questions about your experiences here at [Redacted] and in your home countries. The observations and interview responses will not be used for any additional purposes without your additional permission. The data collected will be stored in a locked office and only Amanda Ark will have access to it. Due to the small nature of this study someone reading the report that knows you personally may be able to identify you from the information given, however the researcher, Amanda Ark will keep your identity confidential and pseudonyms (fake names) will be used to refer to you in the research study. There
APPENDIX D: CONTD.

are no extraordinary risks related to participating in this study. Therefore, risk of participation is no greater than experienced in daily life.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to participate without any consequences. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your relationship with [redacted] or the researcher (Amanda Ark). You may decide to skip questions or end participation at any time without penalty. If you decide to participate now, you may also withdraw from the study at any time. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact. Amanda Ark (akark@[redacted], (937)844-7146) or the faculty advisory for the project Sharon Subbereuth (subbere@[redacted] (419)372-7510). If you have questions regarding the conduct of this study or about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of [redacted] Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 (redacted).

CONSENT

I have read and been informed of the above information. I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

[ ] I would like to use the following pseudonym (fake name) ____________________________

Participant name ____________________________

Participant signature ____________________________ Date ____________________________