“NOW, I KNOW THAT STORYTELLING IS POWERFUL”:
CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT NARRATIVES

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I. Introduction

In high school, I studied Latin. Among the four languages my school offered, all European, I chose Latin because I imagined it to be most challenging, but after three years, I discovered that I was discontented. Even though Latin was my favorite subject, I was ready to learn a language that had more face-to-face communicative potential. I arrived at Ohio University (OU) to begin my undergraduate degree in communication studies in fall 2009 and faced a new decision regarding which language to study. This time, many options were available to me, languages from Europe, Africa, and East and Southeast Asia. Growing up in Cleveland, OH, I had close friends of Asian descent. Kenji’s father lived in Tokyo, and countless times I remember him answering the phone in the short, rapid syllables of Japanese. Stephanie's parents came from Vietnam and southern China, and they spoke Vietnamese at home. Inspired by my friends but wanting to pursue a path of my own I chose Mandarin Chinese.

This decision has since simultaneously simplified and complicated my life. My language classes soon became so interesting to me that I started pursuing other classes about China and East Asia in general. I took “East Asia in World Politics,” “Buddhism,” “Asian Geography,” and a history course called “Rise of Modern Asia.” I studied abroad in Beijing one summer, and I wrote linguistics papers about how the Chinese government's English language policies affected the country's students. My interest even spilled into my major course-work as my focus became intercultural communication. In my sophomore and junior years, I conducted interview studies
about Chinese students' studying experiences and their conflict management behavior, respectively.

When the time came for me to select a senior thesis project, I already knew my topic, which I had for the last three years followed nearly to the point of obsession. I feel my path to this study was simultaneously accidental and fated. My urge to study a challenging language could have led me to Russian, Thai, Japanese, or Arabic. On the other hand, noticing the wide gap between the Chinese and American students on campus might have been unavoidable.

Although we are fellow students at OU, the domestic students and members of the largest international student group on campus often seem to lead very different lives. We study in separate groups, eat different food, and speak different languages. I wanted to meet these classmates and build some understanding of how they see themselves as students here in this space. Are we really as different as our actions and daily interactions sometimes imply? These considerations have led me to the broad research question guiding this project—How do Chinese international students narrate and negotiate their social positions in their daily interactions and experiences?

Before considering the scholarly literature and perspectives that have influenced this study, I want to delve into the wider social and historical trends bringing Chinese international students to OU and U.S. universities in general. Mendoza, Halualani, and Drzewiecka (2002) note the relevance of historical and political context in intercultural research. Much of past research in intercultural communication has focused upon the construction of identity through interpersonal
interaction without corresponding attention to larger forces that shape identity such as governmental categories, cultural origin myths, and a group's conceptualization of their own authenticity (Mendoza et al., 2002). If we are to understand the experiences of these students, we must first develop an understanding of the social and historical situation in which they find themselves.

The Chinese international student population at OU has been growing every year. Between 2005 and 2011, their numbers on campus rose by 733 people, the largest increase in any national group (Ohio University Office of Institutional Research, 2012b). International students comprised 7.4% of the total student population in 2011 (Ohio University Office of Institutional Research, 2012a), but students from China comprised 55% of the international students, up from 17.3% in 2005. The experience is not necessarily unique to OU. In the 2011-2012 academic year, international enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities totaled 764,495 students. This was an increase by 5.7% from just the year before (Institute of International Education, 2012b). Chinese students in particular increased by 23.1% between the two academic years, leading them to comprise 25.4% of the United States’s international student population in 2011-2012 (Institute of International Education, 2012b).

In OU's case, much of the increase in Chinese students is due to the Ohio Program of Intensive English (OPIE). In order to study at a U.S. university, where English tends to be the only language of instruction, students who do not speak English natively must pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the
International English Language Testing System (IELTS). These tests are meant to measure students' English proficiency. Not all students are able to obtain the scores necessary to enter U.S. universities, so many colleges have initiated intensive English programs that prepare international students for the English tests and improve their academic English skills. Enrollment in these programs has been growing since 2004, and as of 2011, 72,711 international students are enrolled in these programs nationwide. Chinese students comprise 15.5% of these programs (Institute of International Education, 2012a), but they represent the majority of students in OPIE.

Until quite recently, political and economic reasons prohibited the vast majority of Chinese from studying abroad in the United States. From the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 until 1979, the country was openly hostile toward intellectuals, and its policies limited the number of universities in the country (Cho et al., 2008). The negative atmosphere continued to worsen after the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989 because the Communist Party increasingly viewed overseas students as a threat. The environment toward returning overseas students was far from welcoming, leading many to remain abroad after finishing their education (Zweig, 2006). In response to decades of this brain drain, the Chinese government enacted policies in the late 1990s that devoted billions of Chinese yuan toward the development of nine universities, particularly in the cities of Beijing and Qinghua (Zweig, 2006). Despite these efforts, choices in China remain limited, particularly for those interested in obtaining a post-graduate education. As recent as 2000, only 1,813 public universities, serving a total of 9,097,000 students, existed in China (Lin, 2006).
According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in the same year, degree-granting institutions in the United States served 15,312,000 students.¹ Today, China is still combating brain drain: 92 percent of Chinese Ph.D. holders educated in the United States choose to remain there after graduation (Yong, 2010).

The ability of many Chinese students to finance postsecondary educations in the United States is also a fairly recent development. Almost thirty-five years ago, China was one of the world’s poorest countries. Its per capita GDP was one-fortieth of the United States’s (Zhu, 2012). Since 1978, however, the Chinese economy has grown at an accelerated pace, with an average yearly growth in per capita GDP greater than eight percent (Zhu, 2012). Many more Chinese now have the funds to seek higher education abroad. Additionally, the Chinese central government has lessened its restrictions on overseas study. As a result of student protests against the government in 1986-1987 and the Tiananmen incident in 1989, the Chinese government issued policies aimed at decreasing the number of Chinese studying abroad, particularly in the United States (Zweig, 2006). Since then, in contrast, the necessity of talent for global competitiveness has become increasingly apparent, and China has changed its policies for international study, making them more flexible. In October 2002, the Chinese government even issued a policy that allowed Chinese academics who settled abroad to return to China and give lectures and also to participate in projects for China’s development from abroad (Zweig, 2006).

¹ In comparison to the People’s Republic of China, which has a population of 1.344 billion as of 2011 (The World Bank, 2012a), the total population of the United States is 311.6 million (The World Bank, 2012b).
Meanwhile, several forces in the United States have been working to attract Chinese students. Because many Chinese students are self-funded, universities have begun targeting them as a major revenue source (Charles-Toussaint & Crowson, 2010; Tait, 2010). In addition to the obvious economic in-flow they bring, international students can be beneficial for universities because they increase diversity, offer additional perspectives in classroom discussions, and can help domestic students build a better understanding of individuals from other countries and backgrounds (Charles-Toussaint & Crowson, 2010). Through an understanding of the factors that bring students to U.S. universities, we can begin to form the big picture of their situation.

I believe that the most compelling way to examine Chinese students' stories is on a smaller scale. To look more closely at their experiences, I chose a narrative framework. Much of cross-cultural communication literature assumes the naturalistic viewpoint, according to which people's words and actions transparently portray reality (Ryen, 2002). A central goal of research from this perspective is to collect information from participants. Ryen (2002) explains, “The challenge, then, is first to get the interviewee to cooperate and then to get hold of the data in the form they are stored in the interviewee's cultural reservoir” (p. 336). In contrast, a narrative perspective does not focus on whether stories represent an objective reality. When people tell stories about their experiences, they often forget things, intentionally misrepresent, or choose to include some details over others. Nevertheless, the tellers are still representing truths about their lives in the specific moments of narration with the interviewer—an intersubjective truth. This kind of truth does not reflect any standard of objectivity;
instead, it reflects the truth of personal experience (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). In this study, my goal is not simply to report the experiences of my participants: I intend to concentrate on the act of storytelling itself as a practice that shapes meaning and identity. To accomplish this, I will approach narrative as both a method and a theoretical framework.

I determined that in-depth, semistructured, qualitative interviews would provide a suitable context for Chinese international students to engage in storytelling about their experiences at OU. The goal of qualitative interviewing is to uncover the individual sense-makings of participants (Warren, 2002). Although research literature is important during the first steps of the process, such as determining a topic and research questions, much of the analysis rises out of the experience of the interview (Warren, 2002). The interviews of my participants were viewed, as a whole, as stories about their lives told both to themselves and to others. The “others” that make up the audience of these stories include “I” (the researcher), the readers of this study, and the university community at large. I define a personal narrative as a description of experience. I remain open to non-traditional forms of narrative and recognize that not all have a linear formation with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Narrative represents my central, but not the sole, framework, representing an influential (if not fundamental; see Bruner, 2004; Fisher, 1984) way that individuals understand time, identity, and interaction.

Narrative is central to human understandings of time, experience, and the relationship among the two. Human beings understand time as a series of events,
making narrative instrumental to the human understanding of temporality (Crites, 1986; see also Chawla, 2004). Human beings do not view their lives as strings of unrelated events; rather, they make connections between the events, forming (and understanding) their lives as unfolding narratives (Freeman, 1997). In his essay “Why Narrative? Hermeneutics, Historical Understanding, and the History of Stories,” Freeman (1997) explains that in analyzing personal narratives, people apply the tools of hermeneutics to understand their own lives. Similar to how parts of a book will provide cues for making sense of the entire work, people will retrospectively make generalizations about their lives based on their interpretations of specific instances (Freeman, 1997). Additionally, we access our own historical understandings to understand others’ narratives. Just as another’s story will affect the listener’s worldview, the listener’s worldview will affect his or her interpretation of the teller’s presentation of events (Freeman, 1997). People comprehend both their own and others' lives through a retrospective consideration of specific instances.

While some scholars discuss the historical aspects of narrative, others note that, even though stories at first glance might appear to only recount past experience, all narrative combines past, present, and future (Brockmeier, 2000). The events within narratives do not just reside in the past; they create their own kind of time, which Brockmeier terms “narrative time.” She notes that, although storytellers may be speaking in the present about the past, they are also speaking with an understanding of how their actions will affect their future:
[A]utobiographical remembering is . . . a back-and-forth movement between the past and the present that furthermore relates to the future, even if this might not always be evident. . . . [T]here is always a future towards which it is directed, a future that begins in this very moment and already looms into the present in which I tell my story. (p.54)

This blending of “times” within narrative-telling allows storytellers to build layers of insight into their stories. For example, an individual can tell a story about her viewpoint at a particular time in the past; then, within the story, she can criticize this viewpoint as being naive, unfair, etc., using her perspective from the present (Brockmeier, 2000). This process helps an individual understand her own opinions and perspectives.

The process of understanding time and experience in narrative allows us to approach identity as a narrative construct (among others). Chawla (2004) notes that narrative is approached “not only as a way of knowing our lived reality, but also as a way of being in and with forming reality” (p. 50). In storytelling people articulate their views and sense of self. Stahl (1983) suggests that tellers are simultaneously constructing a narrative and developing their opinions on past events. Storytelling can solidify what the storyteller believes her opinions and identity were in the past, what they are in the present, and what they might be in the future.

Psychologist Jerome Bruner (1987) addresses the role of narrative in constructing a sense of self and history. According to him, the principle function of human thought is not logical analysis but the “interpretation and reinterpretation” of events in narrative (p. 12). An individual chooses one of countless ways to describe the events of a story. This choice is not arbitrary, though. People choose to include
information they feel is important or persuasive and often organize their stories around cultural archetypes, coming to see themselves as these types of characters (Bruner, 1987). In this way, stories influence both the people listening to the teller and the teller him or herself.

In addition to being crucial to negotiating identity, storytelling is a performance of that identity to be observed by others. Although an individual is capable of telling a story to herself (e.g., by writing in a diary), stories are commonly shared with others and serve interactional purposes. Folklorists Bauman (1986) and Stahl (1977, 1983) view storytelling as a performance, essentially an interaction between the teller and other listeners. Bauman (1986) explains that storytelling is socially and culturally situated and has meaning within everyday life:

Briefly stated, I understand performance as a mode of communication, a way of speaking, the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill, highlighting the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content. From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus laid open to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display. It is also offered for the enhancement of experience, through the present appreciation of the intrinsic qualities of the act of expression itself. (p. 3)

Audience members play a role in the telling of the story (and by extension the teller's identity) both by verbally contributing to the story such as telling parts themselves or voicing (dis)agreement. Even if the listeners do not speak during the story, the teller's perceptions of their perspectives shape his or her account of the story. As people construct narratives, they—consciously and unconsciously—use both traditional aspects of storytelling, such as tropes and stylistic devices, and creatively incorporate
their own experiences and innovations (Bauman, 1984; Stahl, 1977, 1983). In this way, storytelling both reproduces and changes the culture of both the tellers and the listeners.

Storytelling may extend beyond the articulation of identity and culture, however. Some have even argued that our identities actually emerge in and through storytelling. Fisher (1984), for instance, suggests that we should view humans as *homo narrans*, storytelling creatures. Storytelling, according to this understanding, is not simply something we do: it is fundamental to us as human beings. Furthermore, narrative is a very inclusive epistemology. A traditional view of rationality holds that knowing a large amount of information about a topic designates someone an “expert.” This title permits someone to contribute their voice to public discourse (Fisher, 1984). Those not deemed “experts” are therefore excluded. Because nearly everyone can tell stories to contribute their voice, we can all participate (Fisher, 1984). Storytelling, then, is linked with voice and agency (Personal Narratives Group, 1989).

Along with narrative, other ideas aided my analysis in this project. The wealth of literature on intercultural adaptation has been particularly influential. I delved into this topic in a previous study, which compared the reported experiences of Chinese international students to Kim's (2001, 2005) theory of intercultural adaptation (see Atherton, 2012). Although my participants' stories seemed to support parts of Kim's theory, I was able to make several suggestions for the conceptual framework. Nevertheless, I learned that every individual's experience is so complex that creating a comprehensive theory is a Herculean task. Moreover, any theory about such matters is
inevitably limited (as theories generally are). Any literature on adaption is therefore not perfect, but it can still provide us with tools to understand some the difficulties involved in intercultural travel.

Kim’s theory of “cross-cultural adaptation,” which describes a stress-adaptation-growth dynamic, is an influential framework of intercultural adaption. As “strangers” encounter new experiences and expectations in the host culture, they find ways to overcome these challenges and grow over time (Kim, 2001, 2005). Aspects of the individual’s personality, the individual’s home culture, and the host culture all influence the adaptation process. An individual whose home culture is similar to the host culture will have a smoother experience adapting than an individual arriving from a very different culture. Additionally, if the host culture is receptive to a person’s home culture, such as in situations where the home culture is prestigious from the perspective of the host culture, that person's adaptation process might be easier. Individuals with flexible and open personalities will also fare better in a new culture than those with less flexible personalities. The process of adaptation is nonlinear: it involves both setbacks and periods of growth.

Kim's (2005) theory categorizes international students as “sojourners.” As opposed to tourists, who spend a short amount of time in a new culture, and migrants or refugees, who stay for long periods of time, sojourners spend an intermediate amount of time in their new environment, somewhere between six months and five years (Furnham, 1988). Sojourners are also characterized by their specific motives for traveling, which typically include career and education related goals (Furnham, 1988).
As Kim's (2005) notes, sojourners are less motivated to adapt to their new environment because they plan on one day returning to their culture of origin. Some international students, however, are often unsure about whether they will remain in the host country after graduation, so whether they fit into Kim's categories of sojourners or more permanent immigrants might be unclear for these students (Atherton, 2012). Those who are uncertain about their future may feel ambivalent about the process of adapting. Although they have more motivation to adapt than a person with plans on returning home soon, they might feel less inclined to develop ties with American culture than someone who feels certain about remaining in the United States for an extended period of time. To refer to individuals such as sojourners, migrants, and tourists, Kim (2005) uses the term “stranger.” However, this word presents that person's experience from the point of view of the host culture (Atherton, 2012). I prefer the word “traveler” to refer to people such as sojourners, migrants, and tourists who move from one culture to another (Atherton, 2012).

As travelers adjust to a new cultural environment, they often experience identity shifts. Kim (2001) conceptualizes this change as “intercultural transformation.” According to her theory, as travelers become familiarized with living in a host culture, their knowledge of this culture replaces their knowledge about living in the home culture. As a result of this process, travelers who return to their home culture experience a stressful period of adjusting back to their old habits and expectations. Even though this view has merits, many travelers experience more complex identity shifts. For instance, although international students often struggle to
adapt to their host culture for social and academic reasons, many also feel that retaining a connection with their home culture is very important (Urban & Orbe, 2007).

In this way, travelers develop a hybrid, transnational identity in which “home” may refer to the original culture, the host culture, or both (Vertovec, 1999). Ghosh and Wang (2003), international student scholars from India and China, respectively, explain, “We switch smoothly and, at times, even unknowingly between our multiple, complex, hyphenated selves, evoking our situational and fluid local, regional, national and transnational identities” (p. 277). Similar to the adaptation process, situational contexts influence the development of a transnational identity. If aspects of a student's home culture, such as language, people, food, music, and clothing, are readily available to the traveler, the development of connections to the host culture may be slowed (Ghosh & Wang, 2003). In contrast to Kim's (2005) theory, which posits that people lose part of their home culture when spending time in other cultures, the transnational identity perspective views travelers as inhabiting two cultures simultaneously.

The process of adapting to a new culture is usually difficult, however. A common challenge is language, an aspect of culture that has great influence regarding an individual's ability to interact with others. In my study, language is particularly important because it affects students' ability to engage in U.S. academic life. Fluency in the host language is inversely related to general and academic stress among international students (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Since culture and language share an
entwined relationship, students with advanced language skills might also be more adept at performing according to their hosts' cultural norms, thereby adapting faster to their new environment (Yeh & Inose, 2003). In her study utilizing both surveys and qualitative interviews, Tait (2010) found that Chinese international students who were more proficient in English tended to use more effective studying methods and generally performed better on examinations.

Confidence in one's language skills also aids in the process of intercultural adjustment. Chinese international students are more willing to communicate with Americans when they perceive their language and communication skills to be high (Lu & Hsu, 2008). Satisfaction with communication skills and frequently talking with Americans is also positively related to intercultural communication competence among international students (Zimmermann, 1995). Lu and Hsu (2008) found that Chinese international students' willingness to communicate with Americans was positively related to time spent in America.

Personality issues might also be a factor. For instance, Jung and McCrosky (2004) surveyed international students to determine whether communicative apprehension (CA) is consistent between first and second language situations. Specifically, they asked whether CA in a participant’s first language was a better predictor of CA in English than self-perceived communication competence, number of years speaking English, and length of time living in the United States. They found that second language CA was most closely linked to first language CA, suggesting
individual personality was a possible cause of the issue. Both students' skill level in English and their personalities can affect their willingness to interact with Americans.

Another perspective that influenced my study was dialectics. Dominant theories about relationships focus on the individual, viewing actions as strategies enacted by one individual to achieve a desired result. However, relationships cannot be adequately understood by examining just one individual within the relationship. A dialectical perspective (Baxter, 1988, 1990) considers relationships as processes. Contradictory forces within relationships cause change within relationships. Baxter (1988, 1990) identifies three main dialectical tensions at work in interpersonal relationships: autonomy-connection, openness-closedness, and novelty-predictability. The most significant among these contradictions is the autonomy-connection dialectic. Although relationships cannot exist without a sense of interpersonal connection, people cannot be so close that they lose a sense of individuality. The openness-closedness dialectic is a tension between disclosure and privacy. Individuals must provide a sense of intimacy in their relationship, but revealing too much can create vulnerability. Likewise, most relationships must be publicly recognized yet still maintain the sense of privacy among individuals. Finally, the novelty-predictability dialectic represents the desire to maintain consistent identities while maintaining interest in the relationship. Baxter (1990) explains, “To a dialectical thinker, the presence of paired opposites, or contradictions, is essential to change and growth; the struggle of opposites thus is not evaluated negatively by dialectical thinkers. Further, contradictions themselves can undergo change over time” (p.70).
Martin and Nakayama (1999) extended dialectical thinking to the study of intercultural communication. Scholars have many different ways of approaching intercultural communication, and Martin and Nakayama argue that a dialectic perspective, which includes all these perspectives, “moves us beyond paradigmatic constraints and permits more dynamic thinking about intercultural interaction and research” (p.13). They called on researchers to consider six tensions: cultural-individual, personal/social-contextual, differences-similarities, static-dynamic, present-future/history-past, and privilege-disadvantage. These dialectics encourage researchers to approach intercultural communication in a variety of ways, enriching analysis.

Applying a multifaceted view to cultural identity, one can approach it as both predetermined and constantly changing. Mendoza, Halualani, and Drzewiecka view identity as “a contested terrain of competing interests, bringing in the macro social, historical, and political contexts” (p. 313). Identity concerns an individual's experience as well as largely static group memberships such as nationality, race, age, gender, etc. Despite efforts to join a culture, a traveler can always be considered a cultural outsider based on such group memberships. This attitude can create interpersonal barriers and inevitably leads to discrimination (Urban & Orbe, 2007).

In decades before the 1980s, researchers understood culture in many ways, investigating topics such as power and privilege through lenses such as race and socioeconomic status. Since then, however, understandings of culture strictly in terms of nationality have been influential (Moon, 2002). This tendency has received much
criticism. Ono (1998), for instance, contends such framings promote narrow understandings of individuals. Given the multicultural nature of the world, stereotypical understandings that apply to everyone who lives within a country's borders is problematic, especially considering that not everyone has been socialized to believe that they are part of a nation (Ono, 1998). In fact, Ono argues that, rather than reflecting the ways the people under study view themselves, much scholarship serves the interests and perspective of Western society because it furthers hegemonic views regarding less powerful groups. To combat this, members of various groups can consult each other when producing academic work, and work can be made available to people outside of academia.

In addition to nationality, a particularly important aspect of cultural identity is race. Jackson (2002) argues that, although we are aware of belonging to a particular racial category, these kinds of identities really come into play during interactions with others. They are negotiated within relationships. Jackson explains, “identity negotiation is about coordinating one's identity to match, compliment or not resist the presence of other cultural identities” (p. 362). Our racial identities become most important to us during interactions with others who belong to different, socially constructed and thereby privileged (or not) categories.

Although this study is an exploration of the Chinese international student community at OU and will categorize students based on nationality, I must note that group identities are anything but homogeneous. Intercultural communication scholars have conceptualized “culture” in different ways (e.g. nationality, meaning-making
system, cultural identity), but this study will view culture as intersectional, a process that includes both on national identity and individual experience. Chinese international students in America do not belong to a homogeneous cultural group but to many heterogeneous groups, depending on their personal histories and attributes. For instance, differences will be present between a female student from Yunnan Province and a male student from Beijing based on gender and geographic location, but these individuals will also belong to different cultures based on their complex personal histories (e.g. family and school environments, accessibility of media). Although China now enjoys a GDP of $7.318 trillion (The World Bank, 2012a), Chinese nationals represent a wide variety of social classes. Students from wealthy families may not experience the same worries about funding their education as middle- and lower-income students, and economic factors might also influence travel opportunities and peer group connections (Atherton, 2012). Such differences enrich our world, and a peaceful future depends on an appreciation of such differences. This study views communication as the act of “letting our world be enlarged by the presence of others who think, act, and interpret reality in ways radically different from our own” (Sacks, 2003, p. 23).
II. Research Practices

To represent the complex cultural standpoints of individual participants, I chose a qualitative approach because it allows for the exploration of subjective experiences. I collected data for this study through ethnographic interviewing, which involves both in-depth, semi-structured interviews and joining participants in their daily lives (see Chan, 2009; Chawla, 2007). Although I entered the interview with domains of questioning that I wanted to focus upon, my interview protocol was flexible enough to allow my participants room to guide the discussion, covering areas that they felt were important. The observations gathered outside of the interviews enabled me to see aspects of the students' lives that they did not describe in the interviews.

After obtaining IRB approval (see Appendices A and B), I began recruiting interview participants. International Student and Faculty Services forwarded an email from me (see Appendix E) to about 1200 Chinese international students on campus. The email briefly introduced me and explained that I was looking for individuals to participate in hour-long interviews about “your arrival in the United States, your experiences with Americans, your classroom experiences, and making friends.” Over the next few days, I received more than forty emails from interested students. I replied to all of the students, thanking them for their interest in helping with my research and explaining that I needed about twelve participants but had received over forty emails. This also allowed me to answer any questions students had about the project. For example, I provided a copy of the consent form (see Appendix C) to one student who
wished to see it before the interview. After this, I began emailing individuals to arrange specific interviews.

In order to participate in this study, an individual had to be currently enrolled at Ohio University and at least 18 years old. This study excluded students from Greater China, such as ethnic Chinese from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore, accepting only students from the People's Republic of China (PRC). Although students from Greater China might have commonalities with students from the PRC, their national, linguistic, and aspects of their cultural backgrounds would also have many differences and would increase the scope of my study. My study was open to all gender identities and both undergraduate and graduate level students in any academic discipline. Students did not receive compensation for their time, either monetarily or by receiving academic credit. Instead, they might have benefited from the opportunity to share their experiences with a fellow student and contribute their insights to the body of knowledge about the experiences of international students. Additionally, because almost all of our time together was spent communicating in English, students wishing to practice their English skills perhaps benefitted from the opportunity to talk with me, a native speaker of English.

I contacted about twenty students, and I interviewed every student who replied to these emails, a total of thirteen interviews. Of these participants, eight were female and five were male. Six students were majoring in social science disciplines, and five students were majoring in business disciplines. The other two students were studying natural sciences. Nine of my participants were undergraduates. Among the four
graduate students, one was a master's student, and the other three were doctoral
students. The participants' home cities and provinces also represented a wide variety of
geographic locations within China (see Figure 1).

After recruiting participants, I began conducting interviews. All of the
interviews took place in study rooms at the university library that are available for
students. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes to nearly two hours, with most
lasting about an hour. The questions were largely open-ended and pertained to
personal experiences (See Appendix D for interview guide.) I also asked follow-up
questions to encourage participants to elaborate upon their experiences and skipped
some questions when answers had already been supplied in response to previous
questions. Often, I did not ask many of the questions on my interview guide because
the participant covered those topics without prompting from me. The interviews were
all conducted in English.

It is possible that students’ communication might have been inhibited in a
second language because of nervousness associated with public scrutiny of their
speaking skills (Lu & Hsu, 2008). I did, however, try to reassure them that the
interview was not a test of their English language skills. I also mentioned to the
students that I had been studying Mandarin Chinese for three years and that they could
try to explain anything in Chinese if needed. One student took advantage of this to
write down a Chinese word for me that I looked up later. The interviews were audio-
recorded, but in case of technological malfunction and to aid in analyzing the data, I
also took handwritten notes after each interview.
Figure 1: The geographic distribution of participants’ home cities/provinces. Each star represents one participant. In the case of one student, Chongqing and Shanghai are both indicated because she lived in Chongqing before moving to Shanghai at age 12.
After completing each interview and taking several pages of handwritten notes, I transcribed them. Transcription is a process often made challenging by a multitude of presentational considerations. Poland (2002) explains:

Because people often talk in run-on-sentences (actually, the concept of "sentence" does not translate well into oral tradition, or vice versa), transcribers must make judgment calls during the course of their work about where to begin and end sentences. The insertion of a period or a comma can sometimes alter the interpretation of the text. For example, “I hate it, you know. I do.” carries a different meaning from “I hate it. You know I do.” (p.632)

A written transcript unavoidably separates the reader from the lived experience of the interview. Riessman (1993) describes how researchers may find the transcripts of some interviews to be less compelling than the audio recordings of them. Sometimes, it can be more appropriate to edit out the researcher's voice or summarize the narratives instead of presenting them verbatim (Riessman, 1993; see also Riessman, 2008). Using many unedited quotes in a work can cause the participants, or whole groups to which they belong, to seem inarticulate. Editing quotes makes them more readable and, often, more meaningful. Paradoxically, the transcriber must attempt to make the transcriptions as true to the audio-recording as possible while at the same time knowing that the medium is limited and any interpretation is contestable (Poland, 2002).

Following Poland (2002) any editing of quotations in my study occurred after the analysis had already taken place. Most of my editing consisted of removing false starts (e.g., I be—I began studying.) and filler words (e.g., um). I marked all places where I removed the participant's words with ellipses. Words that I have inserted for
grammatical reasons or to clarify are inside square brackets (e.g., I have come [to] school.). Italicized words within brackets represent extra-verbal aspects of our conversation, such as laughing, whispering, or gestures (e.g., I think that 's really strange.[laughs]). I have also italicized words that speakers stressed in our conversations, stress here defined as words I found to be higher, louder, and clearer than the rest of the sentence.

In addition to the interviews, I engaged in some participant observation as part of this study. I arranged to join one student in her role as a Teaching Assistant (TA) for a science lab class. In accordance with the lab's safety regulations, I wore the appropriate apparel of lab coat and goggles during this time. In order to make the participant feel as comfortable as possible in my presence, I refrained from taking notes during this time. I took all my notes after the class finished and I was outside of the participant's presence. I also assumed the role of participant observer during my frequent interactions with Chinese students on campus. For the last two years, I have held an on-campus job as a pronunciation tutor for the Ohio Program of Intensive English (OPIE), and during the time I have been collecting, transcribing, and analyzing the interviews this year, I have also worked an average of eight hours a week helping international students from China, Saudi Arabia, and Oman with their English pronunciation.

I also participated weekly in two student groups, Chinese Language Association (CLA) and Chinese and American Business Organization (CABO). Both of these groups focus on cultural exchange and involve Chinese students in their
meetings. Observation outside the interviews, coupled with consideration of my experiences as an OU student for the last four years, provides me a broader perspective on the interview discourses. I continued to see several of my participants while walking around on campus, during my work hours, and at CLA and CABO meetings (I invited some of them to the meetings as opportunities to practice their English), and these situations allowed me to ask follow-up questions and see how their perspectives changed over the course of the year.

My analysis did not begin at any specific time. Even during the time the interviews were being conducted both the participants and I had ideas regarding what should be included in the final analysis (Briggs, 2002). In addition to my early notes and ideas from the interviews, the participants sometimes voiced these thoughts by directly telling me not to include something in my paper (such as a story one felt was too personal for publication). The process of analysis continued during transcription. I kept a notebook at my desk and took handwritten notes while I typed. After completing the transcriptions, I became fully engaged in “formal” analysis.

The first part of my analysis process was a “cohort analysis,” which eventually became the section “‘If You Keep Trying, You Will Get Tired’: Interpersonal Interactions.” Interpersonal relationships, particularly friendships, were both a major part of my interview guide and a main recurring topic in the interviews, so I knew that I wanted part of my analysis to compare participants' experiences of making friends at OU. On loose-leaf paper, I took notes on each participant's interpersonal relationships, including friendships as well as relationships with roommates, instructors, and family
members. I also noted the length of time each student had attended OU. When I compared the student's levels of relationship satisfaction (e.g., whether they claimed to be happy with the number of friends they had, whether they had opportunities to meet Americans if they wanted, etc.) to the length of time spent at OU, I formed three groups, those students who had recently arrived at OU and had opportunities to meet Chinese students but were typically dissatisfied with their opportunities to interact with Americans; those students who had been at OU for one to two years and were relatively satisfied with the number of American friends they had; and those who had been at OU three years or longer, were content with their friendship circles, and had mostly Chinese friends. These groups do not represent a cycle that I predict Chinese international students will surely follow. When researchers analyze transcripts, they combine the parts of each narrative that fit into a larger story. As each researcher edits the transcripts, aspects of her personality influence the character of the narrative (Riessman, 1993). This analysis represents the way in which I have made sense of the participants' friendship experiences.

After reviewing the interview transcripts to conduct the above analysis, I compiled several sections from each interview transcript that I believed were foundational for each participant's narrative. These sections included recollections of specific events by each participant. For example, I noted Lili's story about getting lost in the airport when she first arrived in the United States, a time when she felt she could not yet communicate well in English. I also included topics that were significant in each interview, such as one student's repeated mentions of food in our interview.
When I considered these foundational parts of the students' stories, I noted that two topics emerged as common among all of the interviews, learning English and identity transformation. I drew from my compilations to form the sections “‘I Want to Overcome This Trouble’: Learning English” and “‘I Will Do Something on My Own’: Narrative Transformations.” Combined with the section “‘If You Keep Trying, You Will Get Tired’: Interpersonal Interactions,” these sections constitute the emergent themes that I noticed among the narratives as a whole.

In the process of this analysis, I realized that two of my participants' narratives stood out strongly among the others. I could not fit them into the cohort analysis, and although they included some of the themes that emerged in the two other sections, their stories were unique. I felt that simply including them with the other stories would diminish the powerful messages and emotions they conveyed to me during the interview, in the audio-recording, and in the transcripts. These two stories, told by Hua and Yulan, illustrated some aspects in common, such as the theme of “destroyed trust.” However, to convey the depth of the stories, they could not appropriately be told at the same time. While these stories occupy the same part of this study, I represent them sequentially and not simultaneously, giving the reader an opportunity to understand the stories more completely than the other students' stories. This format also allows the reader to experience their stories in a way somewhat similar to my experience of conducting the interviews. These stories compose the middle section of my thesis and are simply entitled, “Two Stories.”
The final sections before the conclusion, “‘He Used This to Reflect the Truth’: Poetic Interpretations” and “‘It’s Difficult to Find this Room’: Interview Space” include six poems and six photographs, respectively. About halfway through my time conducting the interviews, I realized that some of the emotional power of what the participants told me in the interviews would be diminished in the form of (even an extended) quotation. As they're normally used in academic qualitative writing, quotations do not very well allow writers to incorporate emphasis in speech, such as pausing or loudness. I composed the poems to highlight themes from the interviews that did not fit within the rest of my analysis, thereby privileging the ways in which the participants actually spoke over the written style preferred in quotations. I also included photographs of the spaces in which I conducted the interviews to provide readers with a better understanding of my experience conducting the interviews. These two sections comprise alternative aesthetic representations of my analysis.

Finally, I shared a copy of my analysis with my participants. This provided them an opportunity to tell me if I had unintentionally misrepresented their views or if they disagreed with my analysis. Also, including participants in the analysis process helps dispel feelings of distrust regarding the researcher’s intentions (Orbe, 2002). This process is also known as the “right to co-interpretation.” It gives participants a way to present their disagreements with the researcher's interpretations, acting to increase the participants' power in the analysis process (Kirsh, 2005; Newkirk, 1996). Most of the students did not offer any disagreements with the information and analysis I presented. I met with one student who wished to discuss what I had written to him.
No interpretation of qualitative work such as this is complete without an examination of the author's own standpoint. I must remember that my cultural standpoint influences my perception of events. As Dunbar, Rodriguez, and Parker (2002) note, “In the contemporary context of American and Western European society, being “white” is the unreflected-upon standard from which all other racial identities vary” (p. 280). I have attempted to ensure that this is not the case in my study. As a young, white, female college student, I bring my culturally based and biased assumptions to my analysis, and this identity affects my entire data collection and analysis process. In the past three years of my college education, I have attempted to familiarize myself with other cultures, particularly those of mainland China. By the time I began data collection, I had studied Chinese for the equivalent of four academic years. I also have experience studying abroad in China, a factor that served as a conversation-starter and provided a level of common ground between the participants and me. During the my writing and analysis process, I assumed the role of MC for the Chinese Student and Scholar Association's annual Spring Festival Gala. Additionally, because I am an undergraduate student, the students might have been more open with me than if I had resembled their instructors.

Perhaps because the interview participants responded voluntarily to my request for participants, I experienced few problems starting our conversations. During the interviews, I felt that everyone seemed eager to share their experiences. Even though I have made a concerted effort to understand my participant's stories, I know that all attempts at portraying these narratives are inevitably imperfect. Riessman (1993)
notes, “Whereas traditional social science has claimed to represent the experiences of populations and cultures, the new criticism states that we cannot speak, finally and with ultimate authority, for others” (p.15). Rather than representing concrete realities, I intend for these stories to invite reflection in readers.

One should approach interviews as another type of interactional context, not as a situation devoid of the qualities that make other contexts worthy of study. De Fina (2009) notes that in analysis researchers should interrogate the extent to which the researcher or the participant drove the narrative, how the narrative relates to other parts of the interview, and how each person’s expectations were negotiated in the interview. Conversational dynamics of the interview are just as important to analysis as the content of the participant's words.

Power relations in an interview context are also typically far from equal. In an interview context, the interviewer holds more power than the interviewee regarding control over content and length of the interview as well as how the participant's identity is defined within that situation (Briggs, 2002). Through publication of interview data, privileged people, often not group members themselves, create popular conceptualizations of marginalized groups. Briggs explains, “The power invested in interviews to construct discourses that are then legitimated as the words of others points to their effectiveness as technologies that can be used in naturalizing the role of specialists in creating systems of difference” (p. 913). I have crafted my analysis with these considerations in mind, and I stress that the analysis I present here consists of my experiences of the interviews, perhaps not the exact meanings of the participants.
Still, although it is impossible for the storyteller to portray through language events as s/he experienced them, without language these experiences would not be shared (Riessman, 1993; see Riessman, 2008).

Through an engagement with the narratives of Chinese international students studying in the United States, I hoped to obtain insight into how some students perceive their social position and experiences within U.S. society. These individuals experience both the stress of pursuing higher education and the difficult task of adapting to a new linguistic and cultural environment. Based on the interview discourses, collected via in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation, my analysis determined what challenges they faced and how they met these challenges. I hope my project will serve to make available the experiences of this increasingly important yet largely unheard group on U.S. college campuses.

In the following sections, I present my participants' stories as I experienced them. I begin with a cohort analysis of interpersonal interactions on campus, focusing on friendship. I turn next to stories about learning English, then to narratives of transformation, with emphasis on the power of narratives to develop identity. My next part consists of two stories by the female students Hua and Yulan, which highlight the fragility of trust in cross-cultural interpersonal relationships. I then include six poetic interpretations and six images of spaces in which the interviews took place. Finally, I close with a discussion of how this analysis has affected my own interactions with individuals culturally different from myself and ways in which I hope the university can improve its environment for international students.
III. “If You Keep Trying, You Will Get Tired:”

My goal, when I began the interviews for this study, was simply to listen to my participants discuss their experiences as international students. However, a large part of my interview guide (Appendix D) focused specifically on their relationships with friends, classmates, and instructors. In retrospect, this seems somewhat incomplete. Other aspects of life, such as schoolwork, are important for international students as well as college students in general. The main reason for most students' decision to study in the United States is to obtain a degree, and eagerness to explore other cultures varies widely between individuals (Arasaratnam, 2005). In my email for recruiting participants, I did inform them of my intentions, specifying that I would ask about “your arrival in the United States, your experiences with Americans, your classroom experiences, and making friends.”

When designing the interview guide, I thought that interpersonal interactions would be a sizable component of students' experiences, and now, I see that my own experiences led me to focus the interviews on this topic. Much of my experience with international students has been on an interpersonal level. Among the Chinese students I know, I have met most as friends of friends or through student groups. Because I am not a Chinese international student myself and have only occasionally worked with Chinese classmates, my only background relating to Chinese students' educational lives comes from my job with OPIE, where I have worked for the past two years as an

2. The title of this chapter was adapted from a quote by Qiang: “I think it’s really tough for a Asian student to connect with American students. Because, for a relationship, if you just keep trying, keep trying, keep trying, you will get tired. . . . I want this relationship. It’s not a business.”
American English pronunciation tutor for mostly Chinese, Saudi Arabian, and Omani students. Because the job focuses exclusively on English skills, I am most familiar with that aspect of their academic lives. I have also noticed during my time at OU how infrequently one sees Chinese and American students walking, studying, or eating together. Even my American classmates studying Chinese language or majoring in East Asian studies often do not have Chinese friends. Although Chinese and American students occupy the same university space, interactions between the groups can be rare.

It is notable that our interviews also constituted an interpersonal interaction and can, in themselves, be viewed as cross-cultural processes. In addition to using our interviews as opportunities to practice English, several participants noted that they responded to my request for an interview because they wanted to meet an American student. I was, perhaps, a representative of white American students (as a whole) for some of my participants, as seen when they used second-person language such as “you guys” in our conversations, including me with the dominant OU student body. Our varying identities in the interview situations perhaps created an appropriate environment for discussing cultural differences between Chinese and American groups on campus and the interactions (or lack of) between them.

After I finished transcribing the interview recordings, my thematic analysis illustrated shared experiences among students who had been at OU for various lengths of time. For each student, I noted information about their interpersonal lives, such as how many friends they seemed to have, how satisfied they were with their current
friendships or amount of friendships, the people whom they interacted with most on campus (e.g., teachers, classmates, or friends). I then compared this information with the length of time the students had been at OU and separated most of the students into three general groups. Similar themes emerged among students who had recently arrived at OU, those who had been here for 1-2 years, and those who had been here longer.

Disconnected: Six Recently Arrived Students

Six of the students I interviewed had arrived at OU at the beginning of the current semester. None of them reported having very close American friends on campus, possibly because they had not lived at OU for an extended period time. Many, however, expressed a desire to connect with Americans. Although the students varied regarding the extent to which they socialized with Chinese students, they all faced difficulty in finding opportunities to interact with Americans, a reality that seems somewhat paradoxical considering they are constantly surrounded by Americans on campus. Here I will highlight the stories of three of these students, one graduate student and two undergraduates.

The first student I interviewed was a doctoral student named Wenjie, who had only arrived in the United States a few weeks before. Wenjie studied in a natural science discipline and worked as a TA for a science lab class. After some brief email exchanges, we discovered that the only appropriate time for us to meet in the near future was for an hour after I finished work and before she began her first pre-lab presentation, which would be in front of a group of mostly American undergraduate
students. She expressed anxiety about this meeting: “I’m nervous about the presentation because there are maybe one hundred students there, and I will do presentation for the first time.” Our interview lasted just over thirty minutes, perhaps brief because of the time constraint and Wenjie's professed nervousness about her presentation.

During the interview, Wenjie confided that, even though she was in the United States, she still spent much of her time interacting with Chinese people. Her department had a large concentration of international students, many of whom were Chinese. Wenjie explained:

I think because in the department . . . many Chinese people there, and I just talk to American people in class and with my teachers. And in the TA meeting, maybe I can talk with American people, but in my private time, I just have a lot of Chinese people around me. And my roommates are all Chinese people.

Wenjie noted that her most prominent interactions with American students occurred while she was at work as a TA. Although these situations posed a communicative challenge for her, Wenjie could anticipate which questions the students might have because of her familiarity with the lab setting. In one situation, she described:

One student come to me and ask me, “Should I dispose this solution into the sink?” Then, he said so fast I didn’t hear that, but he give me the test tube. [Gesturing, pretends to hold a test tube and tip it over] Then, I know, he want to dispose this solution, so I tell tell him, “Don’t dispose that in the sink. In the container. In the hood.” And then, it’s okay. . . I can understand him because the situation I know.

In addition to our interview, I decided to accompany Wenjie for three hours as she assumed her role of TA. During this time, she assisted students with the lab procedure and data analysis. She also oversaw the students’ safety, which included
ensuring they were correctly using the materials and always wearing their lab coats and goggles. One of the chief difficulties seemed to be the equipment names, but Wenjie and her students often solved the issue by pointing to a similar object in the room.

During Wenjie's time helping students, she had few problems providing instructions or answering their questions. Once, a student asked the name of an instrument, and I supplied the name because Wenjie hesitated a couple seconds. In this situation, she might have been able to come up with a response if she were given a little more time. Later, a student needed an instrument that was similar to, but not exactly like, another one in her box of supplies. Wenjie took a minute to discover the girl was not asking for the instrument she already had. When Wenjie realized this and left to look for the instrument, the girl looked at me and rolled her eyes, perhaps expressing frustration. I felt somewhat uncomfortable at this: confusing the two items seemed like an easy mistake to me. Although that girl did not know it, I had not been in a science lab since high school and knew almost nothing about the equipment they were using. Compared to me, Wenjie was the expert.

When all of the students were finished with their experiments and were completing the lab calculations, another Chinese TA entered the room. She explained to us in English that the group of students in her lab had all finished, and Wenjie took turns chatting with me in English and the other TA in Chinese whenever she was not busy helping students. Wenjie explained to me that the other TA was from the same department as Wenjie, and the women were also roommates.
Aside from Wenjie, the rest of the recently arrived students were undergraduates. Similar to Wenjie, they faced problems finding situations in which to interact with Americans. I will focus on two of these students. In order to avoid solely interacting with other Chinese students, these students chose to live away from the university's designated international student dormitory. Despite this decision, these students still found few opportunities to meet Americans. One of these participants was a male student called Youli who was majoring in a social science discipline. He was from a province near Hong Kong and attended a Chinese university for one year before transferring to OU. During our interview, I noted Youli's unique speaking style. In general, his voice was somewhat loud. To emphasize certain parts of his story, such as dialogue, his voice would become louder and higher. The content of Youli's speech was often just as adamant as his voice implied. For instance, we briefly discussed Beijing, where each of us had spent some time. When I mentioned Wangfujing, a shopping district, which I had visited once while I was there, Youli instructed me not to shop there because it was too expensive. Admittedly, my travels in Beijing provided a sort of instant rapport with some participants as we carried on our conversations.

When I asked Youli who his closest friends are, he replied that he did not have close friends, perhaps because he had only lived in the United States for about two months at the time of our interview. He told me that he had a few (not close) friends, most of whom were Chinese. Living outside of the international student dormitory had enabled him to meet some Americans, including his American roommate. Although he
had a good relationship with his roommate, they did not share interests and had not
become close friends. Youli described one friend who was a girl from China who lived
in the international student dormitory:

Another friend is one girl live in the [international dormitory]. She is very
clever. And we become friends because all the foolish people live around her,
and when I met her, she said, “Oh, you are the normal people.” So, we become
friends. But not closest friends.
Emily: So, what's a normal person in her view?
Youli: . . . We can talk something. Some topic we all like, and [I am] not
foolish like, as I mentioned that before many Chinese playing games, just want
to shopping, not studying. That's the foolish people, and I believe they [are].
And so, all the Chinese live around her, she just feel all terrible. And, when we
meet, okay. That's the friend, but closest friend, no.

Youli's friend appreciated his company because she viewed him as a “normal” (i.e.,
not materialistic or lazy) person. This exchange also might indicate that one reason for
Youli’s lack of close friends is that, according to him, his personality was different
than most Chinese students he had met. Youli, like many participants I spoke with,
differentiated between Chinese students who were serious students and those who
were not. Additionally, Youli felt that his interests contrasted with those of the
American undergraduate student population. Many of his American classmates were
very eager to visit bars near campus, but although Youli had accompanied them on
several instances, he had not developed an interest in the activity.

Three other undergraduate students in their first semester decided to live in the
international dormitory, and although they had more Chinese friends than the
undergraduate students who lived elsewhere, they also reported having difficulty
meeting Americans. One of these students was Qiang, a male undergraduate, who was
planning to major in a social science discipline. Before enrolling at OU, Qiang spent three years at a high school in the southwestern United States, where he knew both domestic students and members of the school's large Chinese population. At the time of our interview, Qiang was enrolled as a full-time OPIE student. He was friends with some of the Chinese students in his class, but similar to Youli, he also described divisiveness among his Chinese classmates. The students who had not recently arrived were not friendly to him and liked to demonstrate what they saw as their superior knowledge of class material and policies. According to Qiang, the Chinese population on campus regulated the behavior of its members in a way that prevented much intercultural interaction:

If a Chinese hang out with American, you have a big target behind you, Chinese.
Emily: Hm?
Qiang: The Chinese have a big target behind him. Maybe if you are American, I am Chinese, right? You are American, I am Chinese, and we hang out with each other. Right now, I can feel I have a big target behind me.
Emily: A big target?
Qiang: Yeah.
Emily: Why?
Qiang: Because people will start to talk about you. [whispers] “See. He hang out with Americans.” Chinese will say that. They will talk behind you. Maybe sometimes they're joking, but you don't like it. Like, sometime maybe they just say [mockingly], “Wow. You're so cool. You hang out with American.” So maybe you don't like people talk behind you. . . Sometimes, I try to fix it, like I try to hang out with [Americans]. But I tried a lot, but it doesn't help. It doesn't happen for me.

Although Qiang made attempts to foster connections with American students, his own willingness was not enough to build a lasting friendship. Because he was studying in OPIE, all of his classmates were international students, and he met some American
acquaintances because they lived on different floors of his dormitory. He described a situation that exemplified his difficulties connecting with Americans:

Once, I sit with my friend. [Her] name is Kate. And, I sit with her and doing my homework. And she talk to her roommate, and they just start a conversation like this. Like, they say, “How was your day?” And, my friend Kate say, “I'm fine.” And, Kate just ask, “How was your day?” Then, they just start a conversation. Her friend just start to say, “Oh, my day was so bad. Blah. Blah. Blah.” . . . I just sit there, think, “Should I join? What can I say?” It doesn't connect with me. So, I was just doing my homework. They finish, then go. I also think, “How can they start that conversation that long?” They just keep saying, keep saying, keep saying. I try to join the conversation, but I don't know which way I can [enter it].

Qiang expressed frustration that he could not easily join in domestic students' conversations as his American acquaintances were able to do. Rather than language barriers, Qiang cited cultural differences as the source of these issues. Although his English skills were advanced enough that he could usually understand what the Americans were saying, he could not understand popular culture references or the ways in which Americans engaged in small talk.

**Mostly Satisfied: Two Mid-Career Students**

The second group of students had attended OU between one and two years. In contrast to the recently arrived students, these students enjoyed some fairly successful friendships with American students. Still, they were not entirely satisfied with their ability to make non-Chinese friends. The student I will focus on here is an undergraduate named Yang, the thirteenth student I interviewed. Believing I had enough to write about based on my interactions with the first twelve participants, I had not anticipated conducting a thirteenth interview. However, I received an email from

3. Name has been changed.
Yang, whom I had earlier contacted about an interview, but he had not responded. He explained that his classes had made him too busy to respond earlier but that he still wanted to meet.

Yang was originally from north central China, and he came to OU directly after finishing high school in China. Currently, he was majoring in business. When he entered our meeting room, I noticed that he wore expensive-looking, black clothes, and he said that his father owned a very large, successful company that he hoped Yang would one day take over. Upon his arrival at OU two and a half years ago, Yang spent his three quarters in OPIE. He knew mostly Chinese and other international students from those classes, but he met his first American friend through the OPIE conversation partners program. Yang had kept in touch with her for the last two years and still considered her a friend. When he left OPIE, Yang made more American friends through class group projects, a situation he described as the best opportunity for international students to make American friends. He also met other students through an organization to which he belonged. That organization helped spread Chinese culture on campus through events and classes, and he met one American friend through a Chinese art class sponsored by it. However, Yang did not always have much time to spend with his friends practicing English. I asked:

How often do you interact with American students?
Yang: . . . I don't know others. For me, usually, it's twice or three times a month.
Emily: Mh-hmm.
Emily: That's when you meet your friend at the coffee shop or something?
Yang: Yeah. Mh-hmm. But, it depends. It depends. Actually, I've been so busy for this whole month. I got a lot of tests and quizzes.

Paradoxically, Yang's rigorous schedule of classes, although they are in English, might have prevented him from entering situations where he could practice English skills, such as visiting with English-speaking friends.

Yang and the other student in this group, a female undergraduate named Xiaohong, had much in common regarding their friendships with Americans. They both met their closest American friends through the conversation partners program. Besides these participants, none of the others mentioned the conversation partners program. Additionally, Yang and Xiaohong were both involved in student groups on campus, a Chinese cultural group and a community service group, respectively. They both recalled positive experiences through their involvement with these organizations. Only one of the other participants, Lizongyue, indicated that he was involved in a student group, but he had only recently joined his group. The OPIE conversation partners program and student groups on campus might prove to be a useful way to encourage interaction between domestic and international students and help international students adjust to life in their host culture.

Resigned to Difference: Two Late-Career Students

The last group consists of two students, Dengke and Lizongyue, who had each spent three to four years at OU. Although these students had interacted with both international and American students during their time here, they currently had mostly Chinese and other international friends at the time of our interviews. Both attributed
this to cultural reasons. Here, I will focus on Dengke, a master's student in a business discipline. As an undergraduate, Dengke had both American and Chinese friends, including American friends he made in the dormitory as a freshman. Many of these friends had since graduated and moved away, but Dengke said he still kept in contact with several Chinese, male friends. Dengke had remained at OU in a graduate program that included almost entirely international students. Although many of them were Chinese students, Dengke explained that he was not close to them because the newly-arrived students tended to stick together. Instead, his closest friend in his program was an international student from Africa.

Dengke had lived in the United States for three years, but he explained that barriers still separated him from many Americans:

Very important thing is my English is not very good. . . . I know I can't just understand every detail. I mean . . . for example, you guys talk about some TV program or some interesting topic that I've never heard. Or maybe it's very significant in your childhood, but I never heard about it, and I cannot get the point. I cannot just laugh with you guys.

Dengke's remarks echo Qiang's description of being unable to enter his American friend's conversation with her roommate and also his realization that distance is not merely linguistic. Despite spending several years in the United States, many of the participants described experiencing difficulties understanding American students' cultural references and informal speech. Dengke's example of “what's up?” shows the sometimes opaque nature of American slang:

[In China,] I just learned English to pass the exam, but I don't think one day I [will] have to use English. By that time, I learned a lot about the grammar. And, I just know “what's up?” means “What's the matter? What's the
problem?” . . . When I come here, my friends or someone said, “what's up?” I feel like, “What? You ask me what's the problem? I don't have any problem, so what's your problem?” But after that, my friend told me “what's up?” means just “Hi.” I said [to my friend], “What I should say to them when they said, 'what up?'” They said, “You can just say, 'what's up?'”

After our interview, I asked Dengke the same question I addressed to all of the students near the end of their interviews, “Is there anything you would like to ask me about this study?” Dengke took the opportunity to ask me about my experiences studying Chinese. After asking me to say something in Chinese, he critiqued my pronunciation of his name and pointed out that the Chinese name given to me by my first teacher, 莫兰, literally means “not a flower.” Although mildly embarrassing at the time, I appreciated this turn in the interview. Martin and Nakayama (1999) explain that, while an individual might be privileged in some situations, that person will be disadvantaged in other contexts, creating tension between privilege and disadvantage. In the context of my interviews for this thesis project, I held the advantaged position of interviewer, but in our conversation about my Chinese language skills, Dengke held the privileged position of native Chinese speaker. Here, Dengke had the power to ask questions, and he also held a more powerful place as one with a more comprehensive knowledge of the language.

This interaction with Dengke reminded me of Martin and Nakayama's (1999) privilege-disadvantage dialectic. Although as a participant in my interview study, Dengke is disadvantaged in comparison to me, he also held prestigious positions regarding his extensive knowledge of the language I was studying. Although I was a little nervous displaying my marginal skills, this experience was an opportunity to
remind myself a little about how it feels to be in the position of someone answering the questions rather than asking them.

I have stated that thirteen students participated in my interviews, but only ten of these students populate the categories that I have created. I do not want to give you the impression that all of the Chinese international students at our university would fit into these categories. I do not want you to think, as a result of the temporal ordering of my participants, that Chinese international students follow a path from few American friends to some American friends back to few. Instead, I have devised these groups to draw comparisons between students whose experiences, according to my perspective, held commonalities. Coincidentally, my categories follow the length of stay at OU as well as the interpersonal relationships of my participants.

Indeed, three of my participants do not fit into these categories. We will hear stories from two of them, Hua and Yulan, in their own later sections. The other, Lili, I will now turn to briefly. Lili was an undergraduate student majoring in a natural science discipline. She was beginning her third year at OU and expressed that, although she had tried to forge connections with both the Chinese and American student populations on campus, most of her interpersonal relationships had ended badly. At the time of our interview, she focused heavily on her studies and spent her time with her Southeast Asian roommate and her Chinese boyfriend. Near the end of our interview, I also asked Lili if she had any questions for me about the research. She questioned me about what I was looking for in the interviews and eventually asked:
How many people replied your email?
Emily: About forty.
Lili: Oh, that's nice because what I knew [from] Chinese facebook is that a lot of people didn't. They don't want reply this email because we kind of have really bad experience about interview by Americans.
Emily: Really? When?
Lili: It's not about you guys. It's not really about you guys. It's like a girl, I believe she graduated already. She really into Chinese culture, want be friends with Chinese. She kind of taking pictures of those event we have. You know, it's like dancing party or about like Chinese New Year. She kind of follow . . . certain people she were friends with that time. I didn't know if she really post the pictures onto blog, but someday . . . someone hacked into her computer or something. They stole the picture. They made up the story. They said Chinese here is really doesn't care about study. We hang out only with Chinese. . . . We cannot make us into this cultural because of the language, and the OPIE program is stupid. For those people who are out of OPIE, they cannot understand the lectures because some of the joking part, the point, we cannot understand. It just like talk about all the sad story, but this is not the overview, you know. It's only like certain one, like, say, I said my own story, but it's not for like all of Chinese here.
Emily: Of course not.
Lili: Yeah, they made all the story up. They just see the picture and like read the comments about what they are thinking about that time. And they post this bunch of pictures online, onto blog, and they mention this is Ohio University. . . . It's like even like person's face showed up in that pictures, so it's not only about like random people because it's certain big face in the pictures, and people were mad. That's kind of the thing they worried about when there's another interview going on.

Before Lili's mention of this former study, I had not known anything about it. I was surprised that this study even existed, and more surprised by how it might have influenced participation in my own study.

Another student, Mengdi, mentioned this former study at the beginning of our interview several weeks later, and after I asked her about her experiences at OU, I asked her what she knew about it. She said they were infamous in China and showed me the photograph series on her smart phone via a Chinese website. Mengdi explained

that the captions, all in Chinese, were not very flattering for the individual students as well as the group of Chinese studying abroad as a whole. I asked her if, when she and her parents were planning for her to attend OU, they knew about that this series was about OU. Mengdi replied, “Actually, my parents and I also . . . know these things, and we look up these pictures. But, my parents said, 'It's up to you. If you want to study, you won't be influenced by others.'”

Learning about the previous photograph study has given me much to consider regarding American-Chinese interactions at OU as well as my own study. My experiences listening to my participants have taught me that lasting relationships between the groups on campus are difficult to form. Lili and Mengdi's comments about the former study show me that trust can be very fragile. In our interview, Lili expressed concern that what she said would be generalized to the entire Chinese student population. My intention here is to simply present some students' experiences. Commonalities do exist among them, but they each merely represent themselves. Considering them all, however, I see the need for work on both ends, Chinese and American, to increase dialogue and understanding.
IV. “I Want to Overcome This Trouble”: Learning English

At OU, learning English holds an important place in the lives of many international students. Those who have more advanced skills enjoy freedoms and privileges that fellow students with only more basic skills do not share. Many students enter the university through OPIE, where they must obtain high scores on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) in order to advance to higher levels of the program and progress to “academic classes,” which fulfill degree requirements. Graduate students must either receive high scores on the speaking section of the TOEFL or pass a SPEAK test before they can accept positions as teaching assistants. Learning English therefore has immense social and academic power at OU.

Despite the necessity of learning English to succeed as a student at OU and the ubiquity of Americans on campus and around town, many students still face struggle and anxiety in their attempts to acquire the language. Additionally, international students who belong to large national groups on campuses might experience more stress. Instead of being forced to make friends with members of their host culture, who would help them adjust to their new situation, they have more opportunities to spend free time with friends from their home country (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2006). Chinese students in particular represent a sizable group on campus, and many of them find it easy to interact mostly with members of their home culture and not seek out opportunities to practice English.

5. The title is adapted from a quote by Mengdi: “I have inspiration to do [my English schoolwork]. I want to overcome this trouble of [communicating], just the obstacles, maybe.”
Since my email for recruiting participants implied that the interviews would be in English, one of the motivations for students who responded might have been to practice their English. Some participants explicitly told me this was the case. For example, when I was observing Wenjie's lab class, she told a Chinese colleague that she was participating in my project in order to practice English. Other participants such as Lu, Qiang, and Dengke added that they agreed to be interviewed because it was an opportunity to meet an American student. For years on campus, I had noticed a lack of interaction between American and Chinese students, so these admissions struck me as unfortunate but not unexpected. In a sense, I hoped that my interviews would do a small part to foster communication between our groups. In this section, I will explore three students' experiences learning English at OU.

(Un)successful English Experiences: Effects on Confidence

One of these students was named Bingqing. Originally from Beijing, she was currently a student in OPIE with plans to study business. Bingqing was eager to talk and described herself as not shy. Like Youli, whom I introduced in the previous section, Bingqing was a student in her first term at OU who chose not to live in the international dormitory. She felt that too much contact with other Chinese students would prevent her from immersing herself in English. Bingqing described her experience arriving two weeks before the beginning of her first semester:

You just living by yourself, and sometimes you will feel a little lonely because this is the stranger areas. I don't know everything, and my English is not very good. Maybe sometimes I'm afraid to face . . . American or don't want to speak Chinglish because it's not very good. And, I think maybe for me it's very difficult. But, all of this situation is just beginning, so, yes, I think when I spent
this two weeks, I am beginning independent. So, I try to speak to
Americans . . . or everyone [who] can speak English. I would like to try to
talking with them.
Emily: So, who did you try talking to?
Bingqing: For example, . . . I have some trouble about my bank, . . . about my
account. I would like to come to Chase bank because this is the opportunity for
me to communication with my banker. Even though, sometimes, I can't
understand, but he's very nice. He will explain this questions very slowly.
Maybe sometimes he will write down some key words and show me what
about this means. And, another examples, undergraduate students have
orientation. So, in this orientation, I meet my friend . . . She's the Spanish, but
she can't speak Chinese, and I can't speak Spanish. So, we just can speak
English.

Like many of the participants I interviewed, Bingqing linked the time period just after
she arrived with feelings of apprehension toward using English. With time, however,
Bingqing became more willing to approach Americans and use her English. Positive
experiences, such as interacting with the patient bank worker and making English-
speaking friends, might have increased her confidence. If she felt she performed well
in these situations, she might be more willing to enter future contexts knowing she will
have to use English (see Lu & Hsu, 2008). Additionally, because she was normally
outgoing but had no roommate, loneliness might have propelled her toward seeking
relationships.

I was quite impressed by the lengths that Bingqing went to in order to immerse
herself in English. Bingqing told me how she avoided making friends with Chinese
classmates as well as speaking to her parents so that she would not have to speak
Chinese:

Sometimes I will keep space with my classmate[s] because I try to reduce my
Emily: Do you think you speak Chinese a lot now or a little?
Bingqing: I think, sometimes . . . a lot now because I need to skype to my parents. . . But, my parents often remind me, “You cannot often contact us, because if you contact us, you must be speak Chinese. It's not very good.”

To me, avoiding contact with one's parents is a very large sacrifice for a person just entering college. Bingqing, however, explained that she had an independent personality, and because she had lived at a boarding school before enrolling at OU, she was accustomed to spending time away from home. Still, I feel that Bingqing and her family might be trading a close relationship for Bingqing's English skills and her pursuit of higher education. Families separating to provide children with better English educations have in fact become increasingly common. For instance, over 40,000 South Korean children live abroad with their mothers to attend schools in English-speaking countries while their fathers remain at home. These are becoming known as “wild geese” families (Onishi, 2008, see Chawla & Rodriguez, 2010). From my standpoint, I find it difficult to cast judgement on these families. Instead, I am saddened that families feel the need to separate so that children can succeed academically, overcoming their positions as non-native speakers in the face of English hegemony.

Whereas Bingqing's positive experiences encouraged her to speak English, another student, Mengdi, described how she approached English-speaking situations with caution due to fear of negative experiences. I briefly introduced Mengdi at the end of the previous section. Similar to Bingqing, Mengdi was a full-time OPIE student who planned to major in business. Her personality contrasted with Bingqing, however. Whereas Bingqing was outgoing, Mengdi described herself as shy. Mengdi said she
felt more comfortable approaching Americans when she is accompanied by a friend with more advanced English skills:

I'm not confident for my English, and I'm not very optimistic to make friend because I think my English is not good. I'm afraid the American will not willing to talk to me or something like that, so [sighs] I just find maybe my friend will accompany with me, and if we are together, we can talk to the American people. [laughs] I have the courage to talk to them.

Emily: Why only with your friend?
Mengdi: Because some of my friend is full time academic student, and he can speak very well English.
Emily: Mh-hmm.
Mengdi: Because my listening is not very good. I'm afraid to listen the American. . . . I'm afraid I cannot understand what they said.
Emily: Have you ever had experiences where you couldn't understand?
Mengdi: [quickly] Yeah.

I asked Mengdi to provide an example, and she then shared a story about a time when she attended a party with a friend where there were many American people. A friend of her friend asked if there was a “trash can.” Although Mengdi did not understand, she still nodded. Then, the man asked her where the trash can was. Mengdi was confused and brought her friend back over to help her answer the man's question. She said she felt embarrassed about this situation. Perhaps uncomfortable situations such as this caused anxiety about using English in the future.

Her story reveals the tension between trying to avoid uncomfortable situations and seeking opportunities to build English skills. The solution of having a friend accompany a language learner might be counterproductive if the friend is the one who does most of the talking: in an effort to prevent circumstances from being uncomfortable in the future, one avoids them entirely, not seizing opportunities to learn the English skills that will make situations less uncomfortable. On the other
hand, if the friend is mostly there for support, his presence is very beneficial. Co-
national friends can provide international students support during difficult times
(Trice, 2004). I believe Mengdi’s decision to respond to my interview request, as well
as to arrive unaccompanied by friends who could translate for her, demonstrates her
commitment to improving her English. Although Mengdi understandably still had
insecurities about her speaking and listening, she found a way to deal with
uncomfortable language situations. Bingqing learned that practicing language can be
positive and enjoyable. Although they used different methods, both adapted to difficult
language situations they experienced at OU.

Never Been Better: Skill Building

Through encountering new language situations, my participants described how
they built on their language skills. I was surprised to find that some students reflected
on their communication skills at the moment of our interview. One of the questions
from my interview guide was “Tell me about a time when you feel you communicated
very successfully with an American.” I asked ten students this question. For two of the
remaining students, Yulan and Hua, I left out this question because it did not fit well
into the context of our interview. The last student, Yang, recalled such situations
without any prompts from me. The first three students I interviewed responded in the
way I had anticipated, with an example of a specific situation during which they
communicated well. As I interviewed more students, however, I began encountering
several unexpected answers to this question. Several students did not reply directly to
my question, but they instead used the opportunity to reflect on their speaking skills in
general or at the present moment of our interview.

One of these students was Dengke, a master's student in a business discipline.

He responded to my question by asking another question:

I don't know. What do you think?
Emily: I don't know. It's about your experiences.
Dengke: . . . Now, I'm just communicating with you, right?
Emily: Mh-hmm.
Dengke: So, what do you think?
Emily: I think I can understand you.
Dengke: Yeah, if you have some words that you don't understand, you just ask me, right? So, I try to explain . . . I think I can. I will be better and better.

I do not believe that Dengke misunderstood my question. Instead, his response
revealed what is more important to him, my evaluation of his language skills at that
moment of our interview. Although Chinese students at OU experience pressure to
speak English well, and their skills may be under constant evaluation, students such as
Dengke might not feel they have the authority to be the judges of their own skills.
Because he could not offer his own evaluation, he decided to ask me, a native English
speaker, to provide an evaluation.

Dengke's response also reminds me that language skills are dynamic: a
learner's success depends heavily on the conversational partner. Dengke's remark “if
you have some words that you don't understand, you just ask me, right?” emphasizes
the necessity of patience and mutuality in interactions. Any degree language skill is
meaningless if the other person does not take the time to listen. Actually, many of the
world’s worst conflicts have emerged in areas of language homogeneity, so language
is hardly a glue that holds communities together (see Rodriguez & Chawla, 2010).

This sentiment appeared in another interview, as well. Mengdi answered, laughing, “I think this time is most successful.” Earlier, Mengdi described how she was often too concerned with her English skills to approach an American without the support of an accompanying friend. Because no friend was accompanying Mengdi in our interview, she had to rely on only herself and me to understand and to make herself understood.

Another one of my questions also raised what I thought were some interesting responses. Although I had not included this question in my interview guide, I found myself asking the question, “What is your favorite memory from being in the United States?” to several participants. One of the students to whom I asked this question was Bingqing, whose response closely echoed Mengdi’s. She answered:

Arriving here? Favorite memory? Let me see. I think it's not one favorite, just the same situation experience for me. I think maybe when I can understand the speaker, speaking something and I can communication with them, I think this is favorite memory for me.
Emily: Do you have any—  
Bingqing: This situation.  
Emily: Do you have any examples of when this happened?  
Bingqing: So, I think maybe I communication with you, but even though sometimes I can't understand you, but we can communication with each other. So, I like this feeling. I think this is very good, and from this communication, I will have a lot of the self-confidence because I know other people can understand me, so I think this situation, the same situation for me is my favorite memory.

Similar to Bingqing's earlier story about her interaction with her banker and making a friend in her first few weeks at OU, these comments seem to show that successful communication can build confidence. This story is also an example of how storytelling can be therapeutic as we fashion identities that perhaps we did not even know we had
(Brockmeier, 2000; Freeman, 1997). Prior to our interview, Bingqing might have felt as if her English skills were completely at fault during each situation in which she was not understood. However, I could understand her, even if we had to pause occasionally to look up a word or ask for clarification. Other people might not understand her because they simply do not want to make an effort or feel they are in a hurry.

All of the examples chosen here illustrate both the difficulty of interacting across language barriers and the possibility of successful communication despite those barriers. Many of the students' fears about using English become unnecessary because the people with whom they interacted were patient and helpful. In other words, relationships and mutuality were more important than linguistic skills. In Mengdi’s situation about the “trash can question,” she does not really know whether the man actually looked down upon her because of their communication problems. He might have just been making conversation, or perhaps he was just happy to eventually receive an answer. I believe many of the students appreciated the interview situation because it gave them ample time to construct their stories and responses to my questions.

The interviews provide new perspectives on the importance of language skills to an individual's, or even a group's, identity. Although American students like myself take for granted the fact that we will be able to take classes that fulfill our major's requirements or understand generally what a professor is saying, international students such as many of those I interviewed struggle daily to learn English so that they can be interpersonally and academically successful. Paradoxically, the interviews also led me
to question somewhat the necessity of advanced language skills. Although some of my participants described their English as being at a low level, all of them were able to communicate complex stories and emotions to me. Our interview setting was quite different than a classroom, but I believe it was no less a site of learning on both ends. As long as every person has enough patience, perhaps our language skills only have to be good enough. For such realizations, and because of the wonderful personalities that brought them about, these interviews have become some of my favorite memories, as well.
V. “I Will Do Something on My Own”: Narrative Transformations

Through a reading of the transcripts, I realized that many of the students shared stories about life transitions. In a way, I understand that this kind of story is very appropriate for the experience of international students as well college students in general. Students find themselves in a new country, speaking a new language, adjusting to a new educational system with new expectations, and constructing a new interpersonal network. Much literature exists on the process of adapting to a new culture. Kim's (2005) theory refers to a traveler's increasing proficiency in the host environment as “intercultural transformation” (p.391). Studies have documented that the travelers' feelings of satisfaction with living in their host culture and of belonging within it generally increase over time, perhaps as a result of personal growth achieved through meeting the struggles of adjustment (Kim, 2005). That the students I interviewed would experience somewhat similar patterns of growth seems to be natural, yet participants used different strategies for coping with life's challenges.

The method of storytelling also lends itself to the theme of personal growth and transformation. On the surface, the students were simply responding to my questions about their experiences, but the stories they told also affected the tellers themselves. As Bruner (2004) wrote, “In the end, we become the very autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives” (p. 694, emphasis his). In narrating their experiences, my participants were creating vehicles for shifting their

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6. The title is adapted from a quote by Yang: “Probably I will go back [to China after I graduate], but as I said, not directly take over my father's business. I will do something on my own. Maybe I can find some opportunities when . . . doing my own stuff.”
own identities. In a sense, they were performing narrative identities, which are the stories we tell about ourselves to both ourselves and to others. Because these students have developed an understanding of where they have been in the past, they open up new possibilities for identity transformations in the future.

**Articulating Identities**

To accomplish this process, which is a storied narration, some of the participants described turning points they experienced in the past. In many cases, the participants seemed to have made a conscious choice to change. The more I look at these stories, however, whether these changes were made consciously or not is unclear to me. The students perhaps only knew they were making changes in retrospect (see Freeman, 1997). Yang, for instance, described a change he made in his academic and personal life. Although he was initially afraid to speak English, and inevitably make mistakes, he began academic life at OU hesitant to use his voice:

When I came to OU, my English [was] not really good. And I can't open my mouth to speak English. I'm afraid of, you know, the same feeling like I'm afraid of making mistakes. I'm afraid of, okay, they're not understand. They don't understand me, or I don't understand them. And then, I was like okay, I will just listen, listen, listen. Then, I found in class, we are required to participate. So, it doesn't work if I don't open my mouth, and I actually got almost an “F” in my first quarter, and I realized that okay, it's not good, and it doesn't work if I continue to do this. So then, I practice pronunciation with partner and also pronunciation lab. And also, you know, talk as much as I can with all the instructors. . . . Studying in OPIE really, really makes me stronger, you know what I mean? . . . Everyone makes mistakes. So, that's what I thought after I realized the problem, so I kind of encourage[d] myself. Okay, I have to speak. I have to speak. No, I have no choice because, if I speak Chinese, Americans will not understand. So, what I'm going to do is just okay, don't [be] afraid of making mistakes, because they also make mistakes, too.
When they are speaking, really? Right?
Emily: Americans? All the time.
Yang: Yeah. . . . I don't care how difficult this language is, but the common point of all language is to understand. If I say something simple enough or something that they can understand, that's all. That's the main point. Speaking is for understanding. So, I was like, okay, I'll open my mouth and speak something. Then I [was] just getting better and better. After I got out of OPIE, in the academic classes, . . . I realized that's a really correct, right decision. . . . When I studied in academic classes, it requires a lot of readings, especially speakings. If you cannot [make] your professor understand you, then you don't know [what] your problem is.

When Yang began studying at OU, he placed a high value on speaking without errors. Recognizing this stance was preventing him from achieving success in his academic life, Yang decided to prioritize simple understanding over perfection. His identify shift led him to improve his academic performance and develop a more positive sense of self. Perhaps the additional practice had since enabled Yang to speak at the skill level he had first desired.

Another student contrasted her fears before arriving in the United States with her determination after arrival to meet Americans. Xiaohong was an undergraduate student majoring in a business field, and she had spent about a year and a half in the United States. Prior to attending OU, she completed a two year degree at a Chinese college, and some of these credits transferred to meet requirements for her current degree. Originally from Southwest China, Xiaohong's family moved to the eastern part of the country when she was younger. The summer before she came to the United States, Xiaohong's parents moved again, this time to Beijing. Xiaohong described how she wrote about this period in a speech for a public speaking class:
I wrote how I [felt] before I came here. I felt like I'm afraid of leaving home because I never did this before. And, I learned how to live by myself in American and study hard, and try to know more people, make more friends and adapting [to] this culture. And I think fighting fears help me to be more confident and independent. So, that's kind of [what] this paper [was] about. . . . I talk[ed] about the summer before I came here. 

Emily: What happened? 
Xiaohong: Like, my parents are moving, moving to Beijing, and I need to help them, and I need to like pack my stuff and prepare for coming here. 
Emily: So, how did that feel? 
Xiaohong: I didn't realize, I need to like spend some really good time with my parents. I was scared and sad because I knew I was going to leave. And I want to spend more time with my parents. 
Emily: Now that you're here or back then? 
Xiaohong: Back then . . . I know my mom will miss me a lot. So, that's not really feel very good at that time. [laughing] And, it's getting better right now. Because I cried a lot in the airport in front of my parents. So, they were really worried about me. 
Emily: Mh-hmm. 
Xiaohong: Mmm. [laughs] 
Emily: What about right after you came here? 
Xiaohong: [When] I came here, I tried to be more optimistic. So, I will talk to people before they really want to talk to me. [laughs] 
Emily: What happened? 
Xiaohong: I was like, I will try. 
[Both laugh] 
Xiaohong: If you don't want to talk to me, okay you can just ignore me, but if I don't try, I may not have a lot of friends here. 

In contrast to Yang, Xiaohong's main goal was to make friends, not to practice English. Their methods for achieving their goals were the same, however. Similar to Yang, Xiaohong made a decision to speak frequently and not worry about other people's perceptions of her. Instead of worrying that others would judge her grammar, Xiaohong speculated that some people just “don't want to talk” to her. Perhaps Xiaohong was more concerned about American students' perceiving her as an outsider. Because of language, appearance, and labeling, international students might find
themselves in positions of cultural outsiders despite attempts to fit in (Urban & Orbe, 2007). Chinese students in particular might be prone to these experiences because they differ from the majority of American students (i.e., white students) racially as well as nationally and linguistically. Although Xiaohong may have experienced exclusion based on any of several aspects of her identity, she chose not to let those experiences negatively influence her identity.

In stories such as Xiaohong’s, I found close connections between making American friends and learning English. In some situations, whether the students were trying to make friends in order to practice English or practicing their English skills in order to make more American friends was unclear. English language skills, American culture, and relationships with Americans seemed to be all connected. In order for the students to gain any one of those three, students must have experiences (see Figure 2).

In addition to Yang and Xiaohong, undergraduate student Lili made a firm stance regarding her identity. Although Lili tried to make friends with Chinese and American students on campus, most of her efforts were not successful in the long term. She explained that her close interpersonal circle now consisted of two people. Near the end of our interview, I asked Lili, “What's important that I know about your experiences?” Lili emphasized that the most important aspect of her life currently was academics:

I mean, my life here is really simple. The most thing I concerned about is my degree, the study, the classes I'm taking. I don't really worry about friend, friendship, or romantic relationship. . . I mean, I believe what my parents said, like at certain age, you have to worry about certain things. Now, the most important things about me is my career, for the future.
Figure 2: Outcomes of experiences at OU. Knowledge about American culture, English language skills, and interpersonal relationships with Americans all emerge through experiences.
This narrative is perhaps a way for Lili to reinvent herself. During the time she was attempting to make friends with others on campus, she might have told the story differently, without placing academics so high above interpersonal relationships in importance. Viewed from this perspective, her unfortunate interpersonal experiences do not have profound negative effects on her identity. Instead, her bold claims display her confidence. Indeed, unlike the students who had been at OU for less than two years, Lili did not express a need to meet Americans and practice her English. During our interview, I noted her impressive intonation, similar, I thought, to a native English speaker. We know that stories have to power to show the same self in very different perspectives and Lili could have told her story in a way that portrayed her as lonely and overworked, but in her story, she narrated a self that was self-assured, confident, and enthusiastic about her future professional life.

**Envisioning the Future**

In telling their stories, my participants articulate how the past influenced their present situations, but other stories revealed how participants made plans for the future. One participant, Lizongyue, was in the process of transitioning from his current role as a graduate student to his future role as a faculty member. Lizongyue was a doctoral student in a social science discipline. He had been at OU for almost four years and recently learned that one of his papers had been accepted for publication in a prestigious journal. Out of a desire to make the most of his last years as a student, Lizongyue sought out a position on a student governing body:
I think I can be the bridge between the international students and the American students [on Student Senate]. So, after my study here, I don't think I will be a student again, so these are some last years of my students career. I'm satisfied I still have such opportunity to do these things.

Lizongyue's story serves as a bridge to understand his experiences as a graduate student late in his career. As a faculty member, he will soon be unable to participate in student life. His first publication is an important milestone for his future career, and that Lizongyue’s decision to become more involved coincided with beginning his professional life is not an accident. I believe his transition out of his student role has led him to realize its meaning for him, as well as the unique opportunities associated with it. Bruner (2004) writes, “We seem to have no other way of describing 'lived time' save in the form of a narrative” (p.692). According to this understanding, Lizongyue's story led him to partition his career temporally into student and faculty member stages. He decided to become involved in campus life because he was able to recognize the end of his current life stage.

Whereas Lizongyue's story helped him make decisions for the time being, Yang's story helped him organize his own plans for his future. I asked Yang how he had changed since he arrived in the United States. He replied:

I think of things independently, not only by force from my father or my mother. Okay, my father told me, “You need to take business class.” Okay, I will take business classes. . . . I'm now in college of business, and I'm taking business classes, but I got a different idea from it. My father actually wants me to take over his business, but now, what I think is, I take business [classes], but not only to take over his job. Also, I can do something else by my own, using this knowledge or I mean expertise we learned in the university. Probably, it's the best if I can open up my own business, not only take over [my father's].
Yang's story is a narrative of transformation, changing from someone simply following his father's advice to someone who makes his own plans. At the same time, the story is a narrative of compromise. Even if Yang one day succeeds in starting his own business, he still studied business at OU because of his father's “idea.” Also, Yang left open the possibility of running his father's business afterwards and/or simultaneously running his own. The story balances two ideas and identities, Yang's and his father's, and it reveals a tension between independence and connection to his family. In this story, Yang seemed to narrate that he can accomplish both.

The participants' stories serve not only to depict their experiences for me but also to form their identities. Although their identity negotiation is deliberate, one should not view them as being untruthful or inauthentic. The stories influence the storyteller just as much as they influence the listener, perhaps more—they are mutual co-performances. If a participant describes a change in his or her behavior at a particular time, she may or may not have been aware of the change at the time it occurred. Much detail is added to our actions and motivations after the fact, when we are compelled to craft the experience into a story.
VI. “Now, I Know that Storytelling is Powerful:” Hua's Story

All thirteen of my participants offered a variety of perspectives on international student life at OU. Each story was unique, yet similar themes emerged across the group. Two students, Hua and Yulan, however, told me stories that stood out prominently among the others. Both of them recalled negative events that profoundly affected their experience at OU as a whole. In Hua's case, the event was one trip home and its resulting situation in her academic department. For Yulan, it was an ongoing series of negative encounters with faculty and staff members. I found I could not choose individual sections of these interviews to incorporate in my earlier analysis. If I only included a few lines from their interviews, no reader could understand the huge importance of these events in Hua and Yulan's lives. First, I will focus on my interview with Hua. Then, I will turn to Yulan's experiences.

Hua was a female doctoral student from southwest China. Although Hua originally attended a Chinese university, she transferred to a school in the upper midwestern United States as part of a dual-degree program between her Chinese university and the U.S. university. After completing her undergraduate degrees, she moved to another midwestern university and spent two years completing her master's degree. When I met Hua, she had lived in Athens for a little over a year.

In addition to Hua's geographic relocations, I found that she narrated experiences of change and transformation both within herself and in people around

7. The title is adapted from a quote by Hua: “I don't know why [people in my department] tend to believe one story. Now, I know that storytelling is powerful. I try to explain to people that I'm very close with that. Even this is like a sword that hurts two people, not just one. And then, I guess it's not very good experience generally for me at work and personally here in Ohio.”
her. A particularly strong image arose when Hua described her early adjustment to American food. Although for the first few weeks of her time in the United States Hua enjoyed trying American food, she soon began suffering from health problems such as chronic stomachaches and weight gain:

The first year . . . put on thirty pounds. I'm not even myself. I'm like a balloon. When I get off the plane, like flight back home, my mom trying to pick me up . . . And I was looking around and she doesn't recognize me so much because I was really, really overweight. I was . . . like around hundred forty pounds back then. It's kind of huge. I mean, for Chinese, this weight is overweight, is too big. And my mom was shocked, and, “How come you grow this big?” I said, “There's no food choice. We can only go to . . . the only Chinese store, like . . . one or two times a semester. And the food doesn't [last] long. I have to stay with my meal plans at school.”

Hua's long-term solution to this was to avoid eating American food in favor of Chinese food. This was at first difficult because, although her dormitory had a kitchen in the basement, the hall staff discouraged her from using it because her style of cooking would set off fire alarms. Hua described, “So the basement were full of smoke, and the alarms will ring. . . . Smoke detector will detect it.” The viewpoints of Hua's hall staff changed, however, when Hua began helping her dormitory win the school's Iron Chef competition. Hua explained, “Eventually, I win that for three times. My RA was very okay with my cooking in the basement.” That Hua’s RA accepted her cooking after it brought positive recognition to the community is noteworthy. Perhaps this is linked to productivity: only when people contribute to groups are they considered valuable.
Another instance at Hua's undergraduate university proved to be more serious than a kitchen unprepared for southwestern Chinese cooking. American students held an anti-Chinese rally on campus:

A couple of them get jobs. And then this group of American students are not happy about it, so they protested against Chinese students, having this huge banner on, “No Chinese Students on Campus.” Stuff like that. . . I just talk with this international advisor, and he told me the reason we admit international students is to educate the rest of the American students because have never seen a person from another culture all their lives. So, just for you to think about why they do this or, if they have a firsthand experience with any of you guys, they might not protest.

In response to this rally, Hua joined other Chinese students for a “Chinese speak-out” in the student union where they responded to the American students. After the students on the panel pointed out some difficulties faced by international students, such as paying much higher tuition than domestic students, no more anti-Chinese rallies were held.

Both of these last two stories highlight the changes international students brought to Hua's undergraduate university campus. At first, the university was unprepared for international students. Hua's dormitory kitchen was ill-equipped to accommodate her style of cooking, and some domestic students viewed the Chinese international population from a one-sided perspective. Although the process was often difficult, the presence of students such as Hua eventually helped the university better accommodate international students and promoted a more comfortable environment for diverse students. The university’s plan for raising global awareness among the students seems to have succeeded, but Hua mentioned that the school discontinued the
“global awareness scholarship,” of which Hua had been a part, after she graduated. Hua explained that the university might have canceled the scholarship because of monetary concerns. The removal of this program seems somewhat tragic to me because it shows the university did not value the improvements that had already occurred, the recognition of which might have led it to prioritize this scholarship in its budget.

Hua's undergraduate university was not the only one to experience change, however. Hua also found herself changing mentally as she remained in the United States to pursue a master's degree. Hua explained that because she spent much of her time to reading, she was not often able to practice her other language skills. I asked her how she felt about her language when she first arrived, to which she replied, “Oh, I was quite confident back then.” We both laughed. Hua went on to explain that her high school had emphasized foreign language, and her first major in her Chinese college was English. Although as an undergraduate she felt confident about her speaking and listening skills, she experienced difficulty understanding her undergraduate classmates' vernacular expressions, such as slang and idioms. I asked her when she first felt like she had questions about her English. She answered that the first time was during her first term at OU, when she began working as a teaching assistant for an English oral competency class:

This is a huge challenge for me as I'm a foreigner. This is not my first language, and I teach my American students, “Oh, here’s the way you speak.” And I feel sometimes ironic about myself. Well, I think I know most of the communication stuff, but my experience here doesn't fully resonate with my
students' experience because whenever I try to find examples to explain the terms to my students, I just cannot find any.

Because of her role as instructor to undergraduates, Hua's English faced perhaps the most scrutiny yet. She was a non-native English speaker whom American students suddenly expect to be an expert speaker. As an undergraduate student at OU, I have often heard classmates complain about international TAs' English abilities.

International TAs in the United States receive many more complaints regarding their language abilities than their domestic counterparts. When English proficiency standards for international TA's have been raised, however, evaluations have not improved. This suggests that the low evaluations are instead a result of American students' perceptions of their TA as foreign (Mao & Meyer, 2007). In my own experience as an undergraduate student, this is no less the case at OU, where the domestic student culture considers these remarks socially acceptable. Even though Hua was comfortable with the course material, the act of teaching heavily relies on language and culture, aspects of Hua's identity that vary substantially from her students'. Hua explained that her language is “old school,” as a result of her extensive reading during her time at U.S. universities, and contrasted it with her American students’ informal, contemporary language.

Perhaps the most profound change in Hua's sense of self occurred as a result of a problem with a colleague from her department. When Hua mentioned that she had not had much time to make friends or have a social life since entering in her doctoral
program, I asked, “So, do you have any friends here?” Hua replied that she had a couple friends, but her first experiences with friends at OU were not very good.

Hua proceeded to relate a story about an American classmate who accompanied her on a trip to her hometown almost a year before. While Hua told me this story, I rarely interrupted her except to use “back-channels” and ask for clarification when something was unclear to me. Hua spent two weeks before the trip educating her colleague about life in China, her colleague still acted in embarrassing ways. Hua explained that the woman laughed and shouted loudly on the train in Shanghai and in her community. Hua explained, “shouting and laughing loudly is not appropriate, and I told her very explicitly, 'As we're adults, you should know this is the cultural norm that you should think about, and then, just respect people around you.'” Her colleague, however, was not happy with these reminders and eventually moved to stay with another female student from their department who lived nearby. That student also had negative experiences hosting their colleague. Hua described that, at her Chinese friend's house, their American colleague would “stand in bed with shoes, and also sit on her father's antique table.”

What appeared to be the most upsetting aspect of the trip for Hua, however, was her colleague's actions after they returned to Athens. Even though they had tried hard to host the woman well, she complained about Hua and their Chinese colleague to the other members of their academic department:

Meals. Traveling expenses. She went around Xi'an and then the southwest big cities. And then, that's like more than two thousand dollars I think their family paid for it. It's pretty much in Chinese way. Like, when you come, we host you
wholeheartedly. But when she come back and then complain to our other colleagues about us not being thoughtful, not being nice and our family don't speak to her. And then, that's not the very good experience, and she just spread all those stories to other colleagues and then professors even. I think it's very astonishing to meet people like this. I understand that some parts she's not happy about, but it's not very good experience for me and my friend to study here, too, because people look at us you know very weird eye, “I see what those Chinese done to the innocent American girl.” So, that's not a very good experience. So, after that, I do not . . . just make close friend with people. Never. Ever.

Upon her return to the U.S, one of the professors Hua worked with soon stopped replying to her emails. These experiences were a contrast to her previous, largely positive interactions with Americans. Hua emphasized that this particular experience made her scrutinize earlier experiences, now wondering whether the Americans she had known were indeed being genuine. During those months, Hua even considered transferring out of her current program to a different university, but she decided to stay for academic reasons. She was currently in the middle of her program, so she would have to spend additional years to complete her degree if she transferred.

These experiences show the complicated character of the department's environment for international students. Hua noted that the American student who accompanied her to China did not return to the program at the beginning of the current academic year. Hua said she was curious about the situation, but other members of the department were silent on the issue. Additionally, Hua mentioned that she had not received an explanation from her professor about why s/he did not respond to Hua's emails. Interestingly, Hua noted that the dean of her college had the department install a hot water dispenser because drinking hot water is a common practice in China.
Although adjustments like this are helpful to an extent, they are superficial, and Hua's story shows larger issues within the department such as exclusion and prejudice.

Although Hua had experienced some unfortunate situations since beginning her program, I believed our interview also included many positive aspects of her life. First, Hua had many good friends. Her current roommate was a long-time friend who was from her same hometown in China and attended the same universities for her undergraduate and master's degrees. Hua also had American friends from the school where she obtained her master's degree. These friends were been helpful to her when she needed advice about life in the United States. Second, Hua explained that before the incident with her colleague, almost all of the people she had interacted with in the United States had been very good to her. Finally, she was succeeding in her academic life: Hua planned to soon begin her dissertation proposal. All of these were positive aspects of her life; however, her negative experience with her former classmate overshadowed them in our interview.

This incident served as a turning point for Hua's experience studying in the United States. She began telling me the story in response to a close-ended question ("So, do you have any friends here?") that I had not initially intended to bring about a long story. In hindsight, this story was critical to understanding her experience because she returned to the incident several times, connecting her feelings about Athens and the United States to the feelings of doubt she feels as a result of this incident. Bruner (2004) noted that one can see the meaning of a personal narrative by imagining how the overall story would have been different if details had been
changed. If Hua had not continually returned to the effects of the China trip in our interview, the tone would have been much more optimistic. In her telling, Hua emphasized the feelings of self-doubt and suspicion of others that this experience has created. This result is not all negative, however. She acknowledged that in some sense these feelings are good because she is less apt to be too trusting of strangers, and she has learned to separate her home and work lives.

Another positive outcome of the situation is that Hua has still managed to grow in other aspects of her life. At the beginning of our interview, Hua mentioned that she had spent the previous summer volunteering to teach in a minority community in southwest China:

I really feel strongly about this community. This is a huge community that we help each other. And also, I always reflect on my own identity by coming from southwest China. Now, I'm going back to teach and how strong I feel about my roots.

Although Hua must spend most of her time adjusting to U.S. academic culture, she is still learning about and contributing to her community back home.

Hua's story is rife with the tension between changing and staying the same. Her presence in her U.S. universities acted as a catalyst for change as people reacted, often negatively, to the introduction of Hua and other Chinese students. The campus and departmental environments, however, often resisted adjusting to Chinese populations. In the case of the anti-Chinese rally in her undergraduate university, students shared perspectives and came to an understanding. Because her department at OU was not
able to address their issues, Hua, and perhaps other members of her department, had no resolution to their conflict.

Hua has also experienced the tension between changing and remaining the same on an individual level. Instead of trying hard to adapt to a typical American diet (and perhaps an American waistline, as well), Hua made the decision to prepare most of her own food using her home province's style. She has also remained committed to her goal helping out her home country and province. She explained that western China remains under-developed because the central government has assigned it the task of producing resources that are consumed in the developed eastern part of the country. Although she remains loyal to her roots in southwestern China, her experiences in the United States have also caused her to change in both positive and negative ways. Even though her newfound doubt has made her life uncomfortable in some ways, it might prevent her from being overly confident or trusting in the future.

Recounting early days in Athens, Hua believed the town to be more liberal than the previous two midwestern cities in which she had lived. After a year, however, she concluded that the environment might be more complicated than she had thought:

I just guessed [Ohio University is] more diverse, but eventually I came across this not very good experience, and I hold my mind back. Maybe it's still conservative. Or at least not very much welcome people from other cultures. I'm not sure. I'm still testing.
VII. “I Just Don't Know What Happened There:”

Yulan’s Story

The second individual interview I examine in depth is with Yulan, a non-traditional undergraduate student majoring in a social science discipline. Yulan belonged to an influential family in Beijing. She grew up living in the university where her grandfather worked and attended a college before working in a government office on environmental affairs. Similar to Hua, Yulan experienced a series of negative interaction during her time at OU, which led her to loose trust in people, particularly Americans.

This was not the first time I met Yulan. I had interviewed her two years ago for a class project. At that time, she had been at OU for less than a year. When I was recruiting participants for this current study, she replied to my request via email, but I did not recognize her name because I had used a pseudonym to identify her, just as I have here. I was pleasantly surprised to see her again when she arrived for this interview. Yulan was nearing graduation, and she still described her experiences at OU as largely negative. At the beginning of our interview, Yulan remarked that people in her life had told her to talk to someone about her problems, but she felt she did not have enough time in her schedule to seriously consider visiting psychological services on campus. I felt that one of the motives for her responding to my interview request might have been therapeutic. I was struck by her insightful, unique perspectives on

8. The title is adapted from a quote by Yulan: “And one day, one of my friend ask me, ‘Did you do that form with your advisor?’ And I just don't know what happened there. I said, ‘My advisor never told me that. Nobody tell me I need to do that.’”
intercultural relationships and her strong feelings about her experiences at the university.

During the interview, Yulan described her time in the Chinese education system, which served as a contrast to her experiences at OU. In China, she attended a school in which many of her teachers were native English speakers. Because of the high cost of tuition, most of her peers belonged to elite families in government or business. The professors knew this and therefore tended to avoid conflicts with their students. When I asked Yulan how she might have solved problems at her previous school, she explained that her strategy involved using family influence:

[Our relatives] may call [the instructors], “Hey, do you want the foundation or something like that next year?” Or “[laughing] Do you want your money next year? If you don't want get trouble or the media come to get some interview, you better do something. Not harm my child” or something like that.

Emily: But do you think your status is different here?
Yulan: I think in China the professors are really nice to students. I mean those professors who teach classes. Then, they really nice to us, but here, I just found those who became a professor going to do something [laughing] strange to [Chinese international students].

Yulan was probably familiar with the workings of the Chinese educational system because of her background growing up in a university. Because her grandfather held a prestigious position, the head of a major in a Chinese university, Yulan's family ties might also have been particularly influential in Chinese education. Other students whose families do not have as much money or influence might have had to solve their problems using different methods.

Although Yulan's family wielded much power within the education system, she also alluded to their respect for education and teachers, explaining, "as the tradition in
my family, then for kind of like in China, . . . the instructors could be someone like family members for their students, and like we respect them like parents." This respect for instructors, in my speculation, might also prevent open conflicts with students, who may be willing to accept the authority of their teachers.

Throughout the interview, Yulan discussed her educational experiences in China and at OU almost exclusively. She did not spend much time on topics such as making friends, adjusting to American food, or traveling unless I asked her about those topics specifically. Her emphasis on her relationships with instructors and advisors and her experiences navigating the school’s bureaucratic system implies the central importance of academics within her life. Yulan characterized her conception of school life as a simple time:

I come to school, be a student, and I try to make things simple, and just come to class, studying, and talk with professors, classmates, and do my homework assignments. . . . If I have a job, I need to consider more. I mean like personal relationships and lots of things . . . I mean the relationship in school should be the most simple place.

Her description reminded me of Confucian ideas, specifically that conflict will be avoided if all people accomplish their role-specific tasks. Her time at OU, however, had proven to be as simple as she had hoped. The most complicated part was her interactions with her academic advisor. Their relationship has been difficult for a long time. Once, Yulan arrived at the advisor’s office for a scheduled meeting, but her advisor was not there. Half an hour later, the advisor returned to her office and scolded Yulan for appearing at her office without making an appointment. Another time, Yulan was not able to find an English class listed in her degree requirements on the
university’s course offerings page. Her advisor refused to look at the course offerings page herself, insisting that Yulan had read the course offerings page incorrectly. Yulan eventually went in person to the English department and learned that the course for which she was searching had not been offered for several years and would not be offered again in the future. The course was on her degree requirements in error, and it was therefore not listed on the university’s course offerings page.

Most recently, Yulan and her advisor had clashed about Yulan’s paperwork to adjust her degree requirements for the university’s transition from quarters to semesters. Because her advisor did not inform her that she needed to fill out a particular form, Yulan heard about it from her friend, another student, about a week before the deadline to submit. Although it may have been that her advisor thought Yulan would know by herself that she needed to complete the paperwork, Yulan noted that the particular bureaucratic system of the school was unfamiliar to her. On one occasion, Yulan called China’s education system “different” from the U.S. system. She explained that international students need more guidance to navigate the U.S. university system:

Actually, as international students, we don't know what the school really wants, really needs us to do, and we got this information from our advisors. If they didn't tell us or they forgot to tell us, then we just have no idea.

Yulan drew a sharp division between international and domestic students. International students do not have the same background knowledge of American bureaucratic systems to be able to navigate the university's policies.
When Yulan returned to school for the current semester, she discovered that the form still appeared on her university online to-do list as if the school had not registered that she had ever submitted the form. When she inquired about the problem at her college office, the workers said her advisor had lost Yulan’s form. They instructed her to return to the same advisor and complete the form again, and when Yulan requested a new advisor, the workers responded that she could not change to a new advisor.

Yulan was determined not to return to her current advisor. She was concerned whether the advisor would be able to submit the form successfully on this second occasion. Yulan adopted a forceful strategy:

On that day, I talked to that office, said, “Well, if you can't deal with this problem or I have to go back to that advisor, then I probably need a lawyer to talk, to go with me.” And they solved that problem. . . I think, “Okay, this the way America works.”

Here, the university bureaucracy occupies a position of power over Yulan, a student. Although Yulan could not call on the aid of her family’s influence to solve this issue, she found a new way to deal with her problems, calling on her ability to sue the school. This raised her status in comparison to the office workers.

Using this kind of persuasive method signifies a shift in which aspect of Yulan’s identity she chose to emphasize. In her study of immigrant women in Canada, Pierce (1995) found that her participants chose which aspects of their identities to emphasize in different situations. For example, one woman chose to emphasize her role as a mother over her status as a second language learner when confronted by her
landlord with the news that her family might be evicted. Although the workers at first saw Yulan as a student, a relatively powerless position, Yulan chose to highlight her identity as a consumer, a more powerful position in American society:

I pay for your service. I hire you to do this. And I already give you my money, so give me your service. Then, we can sit in other angle that is the boss and employees. I pay that, so I want my product. Then, well, actually we always think education is another story. Even students pay and instructors got those money. Actually, got those money from their students [laughs]. Then, they're still kind of like our boss. Then, well, it's strange. The employees pay money.

Interestingly, Yulan did not adopt this strategy with her advisor. The advisor might have been a more personal relationship, similar to that of an instructor ("like a family member"), so this kind of threat might have been inappropriate here. Although Yulan perhaps felt unable to confront her advisor personally, she had one skill that helped her cope with the uncertainty of adapting to a new bureaucratic educational system. She relied on her ability to read people’s opinions of her through their body language. Yulan explained how this skill allowed her to see through her advisor’s politeness:

My advisor, she always smile, or kind of like smile. But when I saw her, I just feel she's showing her teeth to me, but not smile. Because, the kind of like smile, well the smile feeling, never come to her eyes. Um, like, she really feel unhappy but still smile. You know that.

Emily: Yeah.

Yulan: That feeling that's like that. But some others, maybe one of my instructor, he is really tough person. [laughs] And always give low scores or really strict for our homework assignments, but when I, when I ask some questions, even not really a problem he give us, but he still trying to help, or help with other professors' assignments when I feel confused about those things. Or give me some advice to help to deal with some problems in my life. . . . He does not always smile, but I could see that his eyes that his care about that, those things.
Yulan stressed that she developed this kind of skill because Chinese culture requires much to not be said aloud. Instead, according to Yulan, people focus more on body language to convey and receive messages. In contrast to her new skill of emphasizing her power as a consumer and threatening to sue, something she viewed as an adjustment to “the way America works,” Yulan found that her interactional skills as a Chinese person were also useful to her. She knew which faculty and staff would be kind to her based on their body language. New skills for navigating the bureaucracy existed simultaneously with her old skills.

One aspect of the U.S. education system to which Yulan struggled to adapt is an occasional lack of structure. Yulan meticulously planned her schedule based on the course syllabus and teachers’ instructions from class. When a teacher added a last-minute assignment online, Yulan explained that she did not always have enough time to complete it:

In the evening, they email something or just add something on [the online system] and then maybe we just don't know or we go to bed early [laughs]. Then, next morning, we just find, oh my god, before the class, we have another homework there.

Another reason these last-minute assignments might have been difficult for Yulan is that she was working in a second language. Although Yulan stated that she did not experience significant language problems, she said that she needed a little more time to complete assignments in English than she would need if those assignments were in her first language. Additionally, she noted that she must preview course materials before classes so that she will not miss important information during lectures. This
caused her to be disadvantaged in comparison to native English speakers when an
instructor unexpectedly assigned homework with a short deadline.

In addition to the difficulties Yulan faced in adjusting to a new education
system, she reported feeling suspicious that her negative treatment at OU was the
result of discrimination toward Chinese students. Although she did not know for
certain whether the faculty and staff treated all international students, or even all
students in general, poorly, Yulan and her Chinese friends felt that they received bad
treatment from the university. Though she did not use the exact word, I believe Yulan
felt that she was a victim of racism. The views expressed by candidates in the 2012
presidential election in particular caused her to question American motives:

Then, I may have that opinion that professors in the university—in the United
States always do something, well, try to harm international students or at least
the students come from China. And, well, when the political stuffs comes out,
then things got more complex, like the current time . . . and all of those
[presidential] candidates trying to more tough to China . . . Then we think, that
is why those professors do that to us. Because their leaders do that, and this
country, well, those peoples in this country choose that guy to lead them, so his
opinion is their country's opinion. So they want our money . . . How do you
expect us think about this country?

Although the views of presidential candidates are a very political matter, they
nonetheless shaped Yulan's perceptions of her personal experiences. Rather than
seeing the candidates' remarks as distant from the feelings of the Americans she
personally knew, Yulan seems to have seen them as clues to what Americans thought
but would not say aloud to her. In Yulan's mind, I believe the personal and political
were tightly connected.
Yulan's word choice during the interview implied that she viewed some faculty and staff as purposefully hostile. Yulan used the word “hurt” thirteen times to describe faculty and staffs’ actions toward her and other international students. She used the word “harm” eight times. The frequency of these words suggests to me that she has thought through these interactions and come to a very clear conclusion about how she was being treated at this university.

In addition to her relationship with her advisor, Yulan also felt herself to be “harmed” by one of her instructors last summer. At that time, Yulan returned to Beijing because of family concerns and took three online classes. For a political science class, she realized she was unable to begin the online final exam:

I ask for help from my professor, and she just said it's my problem. My computer have some problem. But the other two classes are fine. No problems there. And I asked if the [online system] just can't work for this course, and then if I can write a paper instead of those multiple choice. Then, she just ignore my emails.

In one sense, this might be an instance of discrimination against international students. When I visited Beijing in the summer of 2010, I found Internet there was typically slower and had more problems than Internet in many places I had been in the United States. One possible reason why Yulan was not able to load the final exam might have been that her Internet connection was not strong enough to open the website. The teacher then could have been discriminating against international students with less reliable Internet in their home countries.

Yulan’s discussion of this conflict elevates it from an interpersonal issue to an international one. She described, “You know ... the funny for this? That class is
international relationship. I mean, if a professor cannot understand this, how can I expect her to teach students how to deal with international relationship?” This class “international relationship” is most likely “international relations,” a branch of political science dealing with how countries, not individuals, interact, whereas “relationship” is typically interpreted as what occurs at an interpersonal level. In this situation, Yulan viewed her teacher as failing their international relationship because of her lack of sympathy for Yulan, who was a member of a different national group, and her situation.

Other times, Yulan stressed commonalities between people of all nationalities and how faculty and staff at OU often even lack characteristics that everyone should hold in common. Yulan explained, “I just can’t understand if a professor do not know the really basic polite things. Let others finish their sentence. I think that’s really basic knowledge for everyone. Even children . . . know those things.” This statement contrasts to her previously stated differences in background knowledge between international and domestic students. Instead, here she discusses what everyone should know. Although no one is exempt from universal standards of politeness, some members of the faculty and staff perhaps believed they do not need to apply these standards to international students, or at least those from China. These sentiments emphasize Yulan’s feelings of discrimination and division.

In Yulan’s view, interactions occur on both an interpersonal level and an international level. She described how each person is a representative of her home culture and country:
I was a young kid, my teachers always told me that, when you go out of our country, you are the example to show others what a Chinese person like, what the country like, what our culture's like. Then, they may, maybe someone, well some Americans, they don't know what, what China is. They, they may never left their home. They stay in the city or stay in their hometown for their whole life, then they saw a foreigner then do something really terrible. Then, they will think, “Oh my god, Chinese people, all of those people doing things like this.”

This perspective acknowledges the tendency of people toward stereotyping members of other groups. People may have limited experience with members of a group and make generalization based on how they have experienced the few members with which they have personally come into contact.

Although Yulan acknowledged that her own experiences might not be representative of the entire university, they are still quite meaningful for Yulan herself.

Yulan noted the power of her experience in forming her opinions of OU:

I don't know if this only problem for me or in this whole university because I can't take all of those majors, so I can just, uh, take the experience from one advisor. Then, if she can't handle her work, her job, I mean, it's one hundred percent for me that I can got the conclusion like those professors or advisors in this university cannot do their work. So, that is the, well, kind of like unfair, but for me it's fair enough. And, I take the sample, and the sample one hundred percent not succeed, so this program has failed.

These messages do not prove optimistic for the future of international cooperation.

Near the end of our interview, Yulan remarked how she and her Chinese friends often think that, although time in school is often difficult, people tend to fondly remember the places where they study. In the case of OU, however, Yulan said that she and her friends do not want to return to the school once they leave and will not remember it fondly. Although Yulan mentioned she enjoyed traveling in the United States, OU, as
the main source of her experiences in the United States, negatively impacted her view of the country in general:

And when those students grow up and became, became someone in the, in the companies or work for their, for your government [laughing], then how can I expect them do things successfully? If I really need to cooperate with someone from other countries, I may not choose . . . the United States as the first place because I can't trust those people can handle their work or really focus on their work.

The hosting of international students at U.S. universities has been noted as a method of spreading American ideas worldwide (Cho, et al., 2012). Increasing enrollment of international students might have a positive impact on students’ views of the country, but if they do not receive the support they need at colleges and universities, especially considering that many international students may experience serious problems such as culture shock and homesickness, this opportunity may instead cause animosity.

I believe Yulan's story shares much in common with Hua's story. Both women seem to have difficulties trusting Americans after having some profoundly negative experiences. Although Hua weighed the option of leaving OU, neither she nor Yulan decided to change schools or drop out, probably because they both sensed that they would soon finish their degrees and could go elsewhere. They are able to endure uncomfortable situations for their academic pursuits. In Hua's case, the environment in her department might have improved after the classmate who accompanied her to China left the program. In Yulan's case, though, the situation seems to only have worsened the longer she remained in the United States.
Yulan's story (as well as Hua's, to an extent) did not always follow a linear format. Even when I tried to ask about other aspects of Yulan's life, she continually returned to her conflicts with the faculty and staff at OU. I see her narrative as following a static form, which narrative theorist Brockmeier (2000) describes as, “an altogether immovable picture emerges, a fixed constellation determined by an all-dominating experience or by irresolvable contradictions and conflicts” (p.67). To me, Yulan seemed to be unable to move beyond these negative experiences. At each turn, Yulan’s narrative expressed her feelings of insecurity and divisiveness resulting from these truly corrosive interpersonal relationships.
VIII. “He Used This to Reflect the Truth:”9 Poetic Interpretations

Although traditionally social scientific research is published in an essay format, writers sometimes employ alternative forms such as poetic representation. The reasoning behind this kind of representation is manifold, including poetry's ability to uncover themes not immediately apparent (Chawla, 2008), to shift the focus to private emotions (Richardson, 2002), to address aesthetic concerns (Faulkner, 2007), and to foster critical thinking about the interview texts (Chawla, 2008; Richardson, 2002).

Some scholars have expressed concern regarding the use of poetry in research without an accompanying expertise in poetic craft, but many individuals use poetry in these cases to fulfill non-aesthetic goals, such as promoting social justice, presenting a participant's authentic voice, and critiquing social structures (Faulkner, 2007).

I do not intend to present these poems as contributions to the field of English literature. Having never studied or written poetry before, I do not consider myself even an amateur poet. Instead, the poems serve as an alternative way to experience the interviews, one that privileges the speaking styles of individual participants over the formal rules of English grammar. The poetry format also brings the reader closer to my experience of conducting the interviews by focusing on individual parts of the interviews that had particular meaning for me.

The idea to use a poetic form of presentation for the interview material came to me in a meeting with my thesis advisor, who has experience with this method of representation (see Chawla, 2006). In order to prevent theoretical insights from

9. The title for this section was adapted from a line in the poem “Self-Segregation.”
constricting the writing process (Chawla, 2007), she encouraged me to write the poems before conducting significant research on the topic of poetic representation. After participating in six interviews, I had felt that the form of a block quote would not be suitable for all of my material. In particular, I felt that the participants' language conveyed powerful emotions. I could feel these emotions in our conversations and hear them in the audio recordings, but I felt they would not transfer easily to the printed page, particularly when encased by text on both top and bottom. Instead, some parts of our conversations could stand for themselves, without heavy explanation on my part. In retrospect, such feelings first led me to begin a project such as this. I did not want to talk with Chinese international students so that I could analyze what they said and blend their words together. I wanted to hear their individual stories. Poetic form, then, appears to be a suitable format for the presentation of their stories and feelings. The poems that follow represent the participants' words in conversation with me.

The first of these poems arises from the sixth interview I conducted. The poem shows only the voice of the student, Qiang, edited by me. At the time of our interview, Qiang was an undergraduate student in his first semester at OU, but he had previously attended three years of high school in the American Southwest. He described his experiences moving away from home by himself as a teenager:
Leaving Home
Qiang

Like three years ago,
two thousand nine.
I remember,
I didn't feel sad.

Usually,
I love my mother more than my father
because my father is really tough for me.
But I remember,
when I leave my city,
Wuhan,
my father didn't go with me to the Beijing.
My mom go with me.

So, when I leave the Wuhan,
I just hugged my father,
and I start to cry.

That's my first time
have that really close touch with my father,
and I realized
I don't know why.
I should be cry with my mother
or my sister,
but I just look at my father's face.

I finally think about it.
He did a lot for me,
and I really appreciate.

But, in Beijing,
I start to realize,
I'm going to a new world.
A new life.
I didn't cry.
My mother cried a lot.
A lot.
Just look at me,
then cry.

But I didn't feel sad at that time.
I feel like
Curious.
My next poem also deals with the theme of coming to America. The speaker in
the poem is Wenjie, the doctoral student in a science field. Wenjie was my first
participant, and our interview was only a few weeks after the beginning of the school
year. Wenjie was a relatively proficient English speaker, but because she had just
arrived from studying in a Chinese language university, she was adjusting to using
English on a regular basis. In this poem, I intentionally kept Wenjie's filler words and
false starts so that the poem would closely mimic her speaking style at the time of our
interview. I think many language learners can identify with this style.
Central Park
Wenjie

I first go to New York because my aunt is in the New York.
Yeah.
So I live there for a week,
two weeks.
Then,
I come here.
Yeah.

I go to New York City.
And,
I think there are a lot of,
uh,
peoples and different colors.
I think

I think it’s similar like Shanghai in China.

Yeah.
Um,
and,
uh,
and people there were very kind and can help you,
and some people even can talk,
can speak Chinese.
Yeah.
So,
uh,
and,
oh,
just one thing
I am surprised is because near,
nearby my aunt house there are another house, right?
And the,
in there,
there are many children in there and maybe four or five,
but in Chinese,
in China,
one family only have one child or maybe not in the city,
but so I think it’s a good childhood for children
to have so many children together.
I may have a whole day sitting in the Central Park, and I see the people around, and I think it’s funny because um, there are different people, uh, different people, and I’m just sitting there and enjoy the sunshine because, uh, when I come here, I’m busy. I have a lot of things to do, so I just miss that time. I have time to rest, and I think it’s a good memory.
My favorite part of this poem is “and some people even can talk,” which shows a different understanding of language, as Chinese-centered instead of English-centered, though in our interview her pause there was short and showed she was probably just searching for the correct word.

The next poem details a conversation between recently arrived undergraduate student Mengdi and me that details a challenge she faced during her first few days on campus. Mengdi's words make up most of the poem, but my words and nonverbals (in italics) and some description accompany her:
Looking for Walter Hall
Mengdi and Emily

Her,
Me,
the Recorder.

She laughs.

I ask,
*Any really memorable experiences?*
Um, yeah.
Maybe when I first came,
first day, second day came here.
My roommates and I have to find
the International Education Walter Hall.
*Mh-hmm.*

Just like that. I don't know.
I can't remember the name of that hall.
*It's next to Baker, right?*
Yeah. Yeah.
*I think it's Walter Hall.*
Oh, yeah. And it took us one,
one hour and half an hour
to find it.
*Why?*

She laughs.

Because we lack a sense of direction,
and we just look up the map.
It also took me that long time.
And we thought, “Wow, such big university.”
But now, I think it's not very big, actually.
*Why?*

Not laughing anymore.
Because we are familiar to this. We know this university. We know how to get there. How to get there. This, how. How to get that, how. You know, when you know this goal, or the destination, you won't think this a far distance.

She laughs.
*Mh-hmm.*
Still laughing.

But if you don't know the destination, where it is, it will be a terrible.
The next poem is part of my conversation with Lu, a female undergraduate student from Beijing studying a social science discipline. Although Lu had received a high enough TOEFL score to make her only English requirement a single OPIE composition course, she was a little shy during our interview and professed that she was nervous about her language skills. In an effort to encourage Lu to speak, I asked her many questions, but this strategy backfired. At the end of our interview, Lu said she felt I was too serious, another reason why she might have felt nervous. At first, because Lu did not offer much elaboration in answer to my questions, I mistakenly believed that I would not be able to use much of Lu's interview.

I soon realized, however, that Lu repeatedly returned to several themes in her answers. One of these topics was food. Often, she would begin discussing food in response to questions that could have been answered differently, covering topics such as surprising things about American culture or memorable experiences at OU. Maybe food was a topic about which Lu felt the two of us could have common ground, or maybe food is just a large part of her life and personality. In my experiences studying in Beijing and my conversations with international students at OU, I have learned that adjusting to new food is also a large difficulty for many people as learn to live in a new country. I have compiled a couple of our exchanges about a particular food in the following poem:
A Question of Cheese
Lu and Emily

What do you normally eat for breakfast?
Bread and cheese.
You eat cheese?
Yeah, I love cheese.
And some of my friends don't like cheese
and I a little don't understand them.

Do you think a lot of things in the dining hall have cheese?
Yes, I think every dining hall had cheese
because some Americans told me,
Americans love cheese,
and they have cheese in every food.
Is that true?
Um,
you could probably find cheese on anything,
I think.
The structure of this poem reflects the interrogational style of our interview, with me rapidly asking questions and Lu responding. In the end of this poem, Lu turns the tables on me by asking her own question, probing my experience of American culture as I had been probing her experiences throughout the interview. My response is heavily qualified, though. Expectations might be placed on me to be an expert on American culture, but like most anyone placed in the position of a cultural expert, I fail to meet those expectations.

The following poem consists largely of Youli's description of his life. Like Lu, Youli was also an undergraduate in his first term at OU studying a social science. As I noted in the Interpersonal Interactions section, Youli's voice was typically very emphatic during our interview. Stressed words in his sentences were very loud and, at times, almost shrill. He also had a talent for emphatic repetition that I hoped to represent in this poem:
Sometimes you will feel boring because
the life just like a point,
like a linear
because you get up for the
class,
breakfast,
eating,
exercise, and
get back and
review the textbook and
sleep.
That’s too procedural.
Nothing change.
No surprise.
Sometimes you will feel your world is,
not boring,
I,
I don’t mean boring,
I just mean

It’s like static. It doesn’t change.

Yes, like that.
I had initially intended to use the statements that became this last poem in the section that came to be titled “Narrative Transformations.” I thought the sentiment Youli conveyed in these sentences served as a contrast to the positive identity construction that other participants experienced. Youli was in limbo, struggling to make meaningful American acquaintances or develop an enjoyable life in Athens. Regarding her own use of poetic representation (i.e., Chawla, 2006), Chawla (2008) notes, “In the verse form, I was able to address what I deliberately left out in previous forms of representation” (A Forward Movement section, para. 5). In the end, I decided that Youli’s experiences contrasted too much with the others in that section, but they still represented an important aspect of life for many students, both domestic and international, and deserved inclusion.

The last poem included here is a reflection by Lizongyue, a doctoral student in a social science discipline. Lizongyue, although interpersonally and academically successful, noted that he does not have many close American friends. Perhaps in response to my questions about his friendships, at the end of our interview, Lizongyue discussed what he saw as the major reason for this:
So here's the thing.
I think the culture is really important factor.

So, once I heard a funny talk, you know, Peter Russell.
He's a Canadian funny guy.
And he mentioned an interesting thing.
He said he was mental retard when he was young
and he sent to some institutional program,
and he said when he went to the cafeteria for lunch,
he said students with same type of problem,
same type inabilities,
they together to have their lunch.
So, he ask,
“Why students that have some problem with eyes can sit together?”

He used this example to reflect the truth.
When I went to the dining hall here, I found that
of people with different race,
people with different race backgrounds
sit together normally,
not always but normally.
Black students sit together.
White students together.
Indian together.
Some Latino together.
Chinese together.

So, you know,
we are not American citizens.
We are not born here,
but for some other groups, like black students,
they are natural American citizens,
but still I think there are some cultural difference
between their group and maybe like
You,
white groups.
So, this is very difficult to overcome.
Before I came here,
I think I can make a lot of
very good,
close
American friends.
But now, I realize,
not because American students are not good,
not because they are not friendly.
They are fine,
but just cultural difference is hard,
very hard to get close with them.
Although the title of this poem might imply purposeful divisions, Lizongyue's mention of his own hopes before arrival shows that students are not intending for this situation to occur. Writing this poem, I put “You” on its own line in the third stanza because the second person was used repeatedly throughout the interviews to refer to white Americans and Americans in general. I came to wonder whether some students saw me as a representative of the white American population on campus. If so, “You” was often used as a rhetorical device, such as how Lizongyue uses it in this poem, to refer to the white population on campus. Lizongyue's discussion of how his opinion slowly changed reflects his long experience in the United States compared with many of the other participants.

The use of poetic representation for my interview material has helped me more clearly show the actual speech of the participants as I experienced it. Additionally, the format is flexible, allowing me creative license to emphasize the aspects of the interview that I find most revealing, such as my decisions to capitalize the words “Curious” and “You” in the “Leaving Home” and “Self Segregation” poems, respectively. Although I provided some descriptions regarding how I came to write some of the poems and their meanings for me, large amounts of explanation and analysis are unnecessary; instead, the focus is on the reader's interpretations of the poems and the emotions that they convey. Rather than seeking any objective standards for the quality of research poetry, Faulkner (2007) contends that one should judge work based on the author's own ideas of what poetry is and what they plan to
accomplish with it. I hope these poems have helped you share the emotions of my participants and build an understanding of their lives as international students.
IX. “It’s Difficult to Find this Room:” Interview Space

*Figure 3:* The inside of library room 208, where I interviewed Wenjie, Lizongyue, Lu, Yulan, Yong, Hua, and Dengke.
Figure 4: The door to room 208 is the last at the end of this hallway. Several students mentioned that this room was a little difficult to find, but it was my first choice for interviews because it was completely soundproof and not in a highly trafficked area of the library.
Figure 5: The outside of room 214, where I interviewed Lili, Qiang, Youli, Bingqing, and Mengdi. This room was very soundproof but still highly visible by people working at the computers outside.
Figure 6: The inside of room 214.
Figure 7: The inside of room 111, where I interviewed Xiaohong. I decided not to use it for further interviews because it did not provide adequate soundproofing from the study room next door.
Figure 8: The outside of room 111. Despite the presence of tables and chairs outside this room, it was in one of the less heavily trafficked parts of the library.
X. Conclusion

Fisher (1997) wrote that we understand our entire lives based on the retrospective process of storytelling. In this section, I will look back at this text in hopes of understanding its role in shaping the university's identity, my participants' identities, and my own identity. This process also resides in Brockmeier's (2000) “autobiographical time,” because I look to the past not only as a way of understanding the present but also with knowledge that it will impact the future. I will take a final look at each section of this document before revealing a little about how this project has influenced my life. Finally, I make some recommendations for improving cultural diversity on our campus.

The section titled “If You Keep Trying, You Will Get Tired” examines experiences of relationships, particularly friendships. For this section, I noted that several of the participants related similar experiences. Many of the students who were currently in their first semester at OU expressed having difficulties connecting with American students on campus. Their experiences varied in terms of their ability to make friends within the Chinese student community on campus. For instance, undergraduate Youli reported that he had some Chinese friends on campus, but they were not his close friends. On the other hand, from my time in Wenjie's science lab, I concluded that she was close with a Chinese colleague who was also her roommate. Two students who had been at OU for about two years and, despite not being fully satisfied with the number of American friends they had made, still enjoyed fairly successful friendships with Americans. The third group of students had spent more
than three years at OU and seemed resigned to not having made close American friends. Finally, I noted that the categories I created were merely for the sake of presenting my perceptions of the students whom I interviewed. I also pointed to a former study mentioned by undergraduates Lili and Mengdi, in which a photo story about Chinese students at OU became infamous in China for negative portrayals of Chinese studying abroad.

The second section, “I Want to Overcome This Trouble” presented some insights about learning English. I drew on stories from Bingqing and Mengdi about positive and negative experiences with language. Although initially unwilling to speak English, Bingqing found that positive experiences encouraged her to use her language skills. Mengdi, on the other hand, recalled how embarrassing experiences caused her to fear using English without an accompanying Chinese friend with more advanced skills. These examples show how interpretation of past experiences, whether positive or negative, can influence future willingness to speak a language. In addition, an individual's conversational partner is also important. Dengke's question about whether I could understand him, as well as other students' remarks that our interviews were successful or gave them confidence, demonstrated that understanding was best achieved in situations where individuals could ask questions or seek clarification. In hindsight, it also indicated that, more than anything else, students may need affirmation that they can be understood.

The third section, “I Will Do Something on My Own,” highlighted how the students used stories to construct and perform their identities. Some students did this
by describing turning points, such as Yang's decision to practice English and Xiaohong's decision to try harder to connect with people on campus. I believe these stories demonstrate the need for experiences within the broader American culture in order to gain the cultural knowledge, English skills, and interpersonal relationships that they desire. At other times, participants told stories that gave me more insight into their individual identities, such as Lili's intense concentration on her academic pursuits and future career plans, Lizongyue's transition from graduate student to faculty member, and Yang's description of developing independence. These stories illustrate how narratives are a vehicle for moving identities, helping us shape a sense of self that is dynamic.

The next two sections focused on the stories of individual participants. “Now I Know that Storytelling is Powerful,” recounts the story of a doctoral student named Hua. She had spent considerable time in the United States, completing both undergraduate and a master's degrees at other midwestern universities before arriving in Athens to begin her current studies. Hua described many changes that she had undergone during her studies. Even though she had both positive and negative experiences, a particularly unpleasant situation from within the past year overshadowed her narrative. Accompanying Hua on a trip home, a colleague from her department had not behaved as expected. The negative experiences continued upon their return to the United States as the other student spread stories throughout the department, thereby leading to Hua's negative perceptions about her life in the United States.
“I Just Don't Know What Happened There” is my analysis of nontraditional undergraduate student Yulan's narrative. As a member of an influential family and the granddaughter of a man who held a prestigious position in a university, Yulan enjoyed a relatively powerful position in the Chinese education system. The U.S. system, in contrast, was a big adjustment for her. In addition, profoundly negative experiences with her advisor and some professors exacerbated her feelings of exclusion and animosity. I believe Hua and Yulan's stories show how intercultural relationships can break down, leading to feelings of suspicion and perceptions of divisiveness.

In the final sections “He Used This to Reflect the Truth” and “It's Difficult to Find this Room,” I presented six poems that I adapted from the transcripts of our interviews and six pictures of the spaces in which the interviews took place. These poems provided an alternative way of presenting ideas that arose in our conversations. In contrast to simply displaying words as block quotes, the poem format emphasizes the speed and pauses of human speech. Whereas quotes generally present all information as equal, poems also highlight important information. Additionally, I intend the photographs to provide readers with a better understanding of the contexts in which the interviews took place. The settings of the interviews cannot be conveyed with words alone. I see these poems and photographs as more closely reflecting my experience within the interviews and presenting the messages that most impacted me during the conversations.

The act of organizing the interview transcripts and analyzing my experiences has been a learning process for me. Although I know I have much more to learn, I am
developing a better understanding of some intercultural travelers' experiences. The participants spent much time explaining macro social contexts, describing divisions within the Chinese international student community, financial struggles and excesses, pressures to study, and circumstances that enable some students to avoid studying. The largest impact of these will be on my own interpersonal behavior. Throughout the year, the interview experiences have altered my understanding of the interactions I witnessed and participated in on campus.

I remember one evening in particular. One of the student groups I was involved with held an end of semester gathering at the apartment I shared with four roommates. Three of my roommates and I attended, as well as two Americans studying Chinese and two Chinese international students who were currently enrolled full time in OPIE. Overall, I think the evening was somewhat successful, and I believe at least the other Americans believed that, as well. However, during the event and for some time afterward, I developed an unease regarding the inclusiveness (or divisiveness) of our gathering, the root of which I attribute to my experiences in the interviews. The Personal Narratives Group (1989) explains:

Unlike the reassuring Truth of the scientific ideal, the truths of personal narratives are neither open to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the world views that inform them. Sometimes the truths we see in personal narratives jar us from our complacent security as interpreters "outside" the story and make us aware that our own place in the world plays a part in our interpretation and shapes the meanings we derive from them. (p.261)
My security has been “jarred” inasmuch as I have come to question interactions that previously would have gone unnoticed.

Specifically, I noticed my American friends behaving without an understanding of the perspectives of our Chinese friends. They spoke very quickly, used copious slang, and made popular cultural references distinct to white Americans of our generation. My Chinese guests and I cooked dinner, but my American guests and roommates stood nearby and chatted among themselves. Afterward, remembering hearing several participants mention their difficulties understanding clips from American comedy shows they had seen in classes, I dodged a suggestion from one of my roommates that we all watch *Arrested Development*. Instead, we played a card game. The next semester at CLA and CABO meetings, I began noticing that Americans would often use advanced vocabulary or cultural references in the presence of Chinese students whom I strongly suspect did not understand them.

Not all of our differences are linguistic. These situations reminded me how several participants, including Qiang and Dengke, mentioned interpersonal barriers that resulted from American slang or differences in American and Chinese cultural backgrounds. Dengke explained, “for example, you guys talk about some TV program or some interesting topic that I've never heard. Or maybe it's very significant in your childhood, but I never heard about it, and I cannot get the point.”

Such problems remind me of cultural differences within a national borders. For a moment, consider a different kind of cultural difference. My mother is nearly forty years older than I. She grew up in the 1950s, and I grew up in the 1990s. From her
childhood, she remembers watching *Howdy Doody*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, and *Captain Kangaroo*. Other than, perhaps, being able to recognize these titles, I have no knowledge of these once popular shows. I would not expect my mother to talk about these shows with me as if I were familiar with them. If she and some others who were familiar with those shows discussed them in my presence, I would feel excluded, as if I could not enter their conversation. If my mother discussing *Howdy Doody* in front of me would be considered impolite, why would American students discussing *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* in front of classmates who grew up on the other side of the world not also be considered inappropriate?

I do not believe that individual people are to blame for these communication problems, which emerge from a confluence of related cultural issues. I firmly believe that, even though much exists that we do not have in common, Chinese and American students can still find much common ground in conversational and relational matters. After all, we are all culturally different from nearly everyone we meet, whether that difference is racial, national, political, sexual, generational, or otherwise, but we still spend several hours a day in conversation with others (Rodriguez & Chawla, 2010). Perhaps we white American students are trying to deemphasize our differences with international classmates by speaking to them as we would to other white American students. Perhaps we are trying to make them feel included by talking to them as we would to our white American friends. I believe this strategy is not working. Perhaps we are just unaware of how their lives are different than ours. Ignoring our differences
will only serve to make more division, and furthermore, it negates the possibility of ever learning from those differences.

**Meditations on a More Inclusive University Environment**

Considering the narratives that emerged from our interviews, OU and its students, faculty, and staff might consider implementing some changes. I believe the most significant way to improve all of our lives is through education. We can achieve this through several methods. On the small scale, we can make more of an effort to reach out to others: introducing ourselves to a culturally different classmate, refraining from complaints about an international TA's accent, or just being equally ready to listen to everyone. In the long term, we might consider implementing some kind of diversity training on our campus. The Gay Alliance's SafeZone program conducts workshops aimed at dispelling myths and providing participants with skills to provide supportive and inclusive environments for all kinds of gender and sexual identity (The Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley, 2012). In many places on campus, I have seen the stickers people receive from participating in this training. A similar model might be useful for increasing awareness about international students on campus, with special emphasis on large groups such as Chinese students. This might even work well on a small scale, perhaps as a class of OPIE students delivering workshops to basic level communication, education, and area studies classes as part of the curriculum.

The stories stress the importance of interpersonal relationships with Americans, for cultural exchange, companionship, and the opportunity to practice English skills outside of the classroom. Ironically, even though the students are
surrounded by American students, meeting those students is not always easy. To remedy this, I recommend an extension of OPIE's conversation partners program. The two students who had longtime American friends, Yang and Xiaohong, had both met their closest American friends through this program. Our campus also has a sizable learning community program. Perhaps a good way to connect domestic and international students on campus would be to require learning community members to participate in the OPIE conversation partners program.

We must also keep in mind that making very close friends with an American is not always a pressing need. Chinese or other international student friends also provide students with good company and might help prevent some homesickness. As in the case of Dengke, a student does not have to have very close, longtime American friends to learn a language well. American casual friends, classmates, and acquaintances can also help someone practice English. A large social network is also needed to provide social solidarity where one dwells and resides.

Hua's experience in particular brings some ideas. Because interpersonal issues, even those in which the initial conflict did not occur on campus, affect student participation and comfort in the university environment, they should have a channel available for resolving conflicts. The university might provide a service to mediate any conflicts between students, even those which did not occur on campus. According to my understanding, such services do not currently exist, or at least are not widely known by students. In Hua's case, the conflict came to impact her departmental life, as well, showing that outside conflicts still impact the campus environment.
We all encounter major conflicts within our own cultural groups. In a context with sharp intercultural divisions, such as the divisions between domestic and international students at OU, people might be all the more willing to attribute these conflicts to larger cultural differences instead of individual personalities. Would Yulan or Hua have been so negatively impacted by their conflicts had they occurred with fellow Chinese? We can never know, but their shared position in a minority group understandably gives them reason to wonder whether this treatment is the result of racism.

Yulan's story also provides some insight regarding possible improvements. Perhaps the most important of my recommendations for the university is to provide international students with ample opportunities to receive psychological services from culturally trained counselors. At the beginning of our interview, Yulan remarked that people in her life had urged her to receive help for her problems, but she felt she did not have enough time in her schedule to seriously consider visiting psychological services on campus. One motive for Yulan in responding to my interview request might have been therapeutic. Perhaps students could have the option to telephone a counselor instead of going to the medical center in person and waiting for an appointment.

Finally, the school might consider adjusting some policies. Advisors who typically deal with domestic students might assume that international students have the same background knowledge as Americans involving the working of the school's bureaucratic systems and forget to inform them of necessary tasks, so the school
should make sure to educate advisors about perhaps having to explain the workings of the university in greater detail to international students. In the dormitory, RA's can also help educate new international students about university policies. Although it is already the case in many departments, students should also be free to switch advisors if they encounter conflicts with their current one. I offer these suggestions based on my interviews, but I am only somewhat familiar with the complex workings of the university. My hope is that more knowledgeable individuals will read this and determine solutions that are realistic for our situation. Intercultural communication will never cease to be challenging, but we can always better prepare ourselves for meeting the challenge.

As much as this study consists of my participants' stories, it is also my story of hearing them and learning from their stories. I still hold labels such as white, female, and American, but my identity is also dynamic. I hope I am little wiser, and even more curious, at the end of my journey than I was at the beginning, wherever you consider those beginnings and endings to be. I am eternally thankful to the students from China who made this journey alongside me. I want to end with a line by sociologist Catherine Riessman (1993), who reminds us, “Ultimately, it is unclear who really authors a text . . . The meaning of a text is always meaning to someone” (p.15).
XI. References


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XII. Appendix A: IRB Certification

CITI Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Human Research Curriculum Completion Report
Printed on 4/26/2013

Learner: Emily Atherton (username: Ylme42)
Institution: Ohio University
Contact Information: Department: Communication Studies
Phone: (440) 281-6424
Email: ea272208@ohio.edu

Group 2: Social and Behavioral Investigators and Key Personnel:

Stage 1. Basic Course Passed on 01/18/11 (Ref # 5463754)

<table>
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<th>Required Modules</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Completed</th>
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<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
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<td>History and Ethical Principles - SBR</td>
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</table>

For this Completion Report to be valid, the learner listed above must be affiliated with a CITI participating institution. Falsified information and unauthorized use of the CITI course site is unethical, and may be considered scientific misconduct by your institution.

Paul Braunschweiger Ph.D.
Professor, University of Miami
Director Office of Research Education
CITI Course Coordinator
A determination has been made that the following research study is exempt from IRB review because it involves:

Category 2: research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior.

Project Title: Chinese International Student Narratives

Primary Investigator: Emily Jane Atherton

Co-Investigator(s):

Advisor: Devika Chawla

Department: Communication Studies

Robin Stack, CIP, Human Subjects Research Coordinator
Office of Research Compliance

Aug. 30, 2012

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved (as an amendment) prior to implementation.
The following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below. This review was conducted through an expedited review procedure as defined in the federal regulations as Category(ies):

Project Title: Chinese International Student Narratives - Observation

Primary Investigator: Emily Jane Atherton
Co-Investigator(s):

Faculty Advisor: Devika Chawla
(if applicable)

Department: Communication Studies

Rebecca Cale, AAB, CIP
Office of Research Compliance

Approval Date: 10/30/12
Expiration Date: 1/21/13

This approval is valid until expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

Adverse events must be reported to the IRB promptly, within 5 working days of the occurrence.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved by the IRB (see an amendment) prior to implementation.
XIV: Appendix C: Human Subjects Consent Forms

Ohio University Consent Form

Title of Research: Chinese International Student Narratives

Researcher: Emily Atherton

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

**Explanation of Study**

This study is being done to obtain more information about the experiences of Chinese students at Ohio University.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to answer some questions about your background, your life at Ohio University, and your interactions with others at Ohio University.
You should not participate in this study if you are not from mainland China or if you are under the age of 18.

Your participation in the study will last about 30 minutes.

You will be audio recorded.

**Risks and Discomforts**

During this study, you might be uncomfortable speaking in a second language.

(If you need help understanding something, please ask the researcher. 如果你有任何不明白的术语，研究人员会予以解释。)

**Benefits**

This study is important to society because it will provide information about the experiences of Chinese students on U.S. college campuses.

Individually, you might benefit by having an opportunity to practice speaking English.

**Confidentiality and Records**

Your name will not be recorded in any notes. Emily will keep a list of all the participants' names, but it will be destroyed on or before May 3, 2013. False names will be used instead of the participants' real names in any essays or articles about this research.

The audio recordings will be stored on Emily’s personal computer. Only she will have access to them. They will also be destroyed on or before May 3, 2013.
Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:

- Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
- Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Emily Atherton at ea272208@ohio.edu.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:

- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
- you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction.
- you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study
- you are 18 years of age or older
• your participation in this research is completely voluntary
• you may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you.

Signature______________________________________________ Date____________

Printed Name___________________________________________

Version Date: 8/24/12
You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

**Explanation of Study**

This study is being done to obtain more information about the experiences of Chinese students at Ohio University.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to allow the researcher to observe you in your role as Teaching Assistant or as you accomplish daily activities on campus or in town.

You should not participate in this study if you are not from mainland China or if you are under the age of 18.

Your participation in the study will last no longer than two hours.
Risks and Discomforts

During this study, you might be uncomfortable using a second language.

If you need help understanding something, please ask the researcher. 如果 你有任何不明白的术语，研究人员会予以解释。

Benefits

This study is important to society because it will provide information about the experiences of Chinese students on U.S. college campuses.

The observation portion of the study will aid the researcher in her analysis of your interview from earlier in the semester.

Confidentiality and Records

The researcher will take notes after the observation is finished. She will not identify you by name in these notes.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:

* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;

* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU

Contact Information

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Emily Atherton at ea272208@ohio.edu.
If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:

• you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
• you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction.
• you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study
• you are 18 years of age or older
• your participation in this research is completely voluntary
• you may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you

Signature______________________________ Date__________

Printed Name______________________________

Version Date: 10/30/2012
XV. Appendix D: Interview Guide

This study is being done to obtain more information about the experiences of Chinese students at Ohio University. I would like to hear about your background, your life at Ohio University, and your interactions with others at Ohio University.

Demographic Information

1. Where is your hometown?
2. What is your major?
3. Are you an undergraduate or a graduate student?
   Probe: (For graduate students) Where did you study for your undergraduate degree?
4. What travel experience do you have (excluding China)?
5. How long have you been in the United States?

Arrival in the United States

6. Tell me about your reasons for choosing to attend Ohio University.
   Probe 1: Why did you decide to study in the United States?
   Probe 2: Why did you choose Ohio University specifically?
   Probe 3: Had you attended other schools in the United States previously?
7. Tell me about your experiences with American culture before arriving in the United States.
Probe 1: What expectations did you have upon arriving in the United States?

Probe 2: Were these expectations confirmed upon arrival? Why or why not?

8. Tell me about your experiences just after you arrived in the United States.

**Interactions with Americans**

9. How often do you interact with Americans on campus?

   Probe 1: Tell me about your first interaction with an American student.

   Probe 2: Could you tell me about some other incidents that you remember?

10. Do you think you have many opportunities to interact with American students?

    Probe: If so, tell me how you do or do not take advantage of these opportunities? And why?

10. Tell me about a time you experienced a cultural misunderstanding.

11. Tell me about a time when you feel you communicated very successfully with an American.

**Student/Classroom Experiences**

12. Tell me about your first experience in an Ohio University classroom.

    Probe: Have you had any other memorable experiences in American classrooms?

13. Tell me about your experiences with student groups on campus.
Probe 1: Are you involved with any student groups? If so, how did you get involved?

Probe 2: If not, why did you choose not to get involved in a student group?

**Friends**

14. Tell me about your friends at Ohio University.

   Probe 1: Are most of your friends Americans or other international students?

   Probe 2: How did you meet these friends?

15. There are many Chinese international students on campus. Tell me what you think about this.

   Probe 1: Is it easy to make friends with Chinese students?

   Probe 2: Tell me about a time you made a friend with a Chinese student.

16. Tell me your opinion of the American students on campus.

   Probe 1: Is it easy to make friends with American students? If yes, why? If not, why not?

   Probe 2: Tell me about a time you made a friend with an American student. Describe to me the experience.
Closure:

17. Would you like to add anything to these responses that I might have missed?

18. Would you like to ask me any questions related to this study?
Dear Students:

I am an undergraduate student majoring in communication studies. This year, I am working on a research project about experiences of Chinese international students studying in America, and I hope to interview Chinese students on campus.

The interviews will take about an hour. I will ask about your arrival in the United States, your experiences with Americans, your classroom experiences, and making friends.

If you are interested in being interviewed, please contact me at ea272208@ohio.edu.

Thanks,

Emily Atherton