The aim of this study was to explore the learning experiences of Chinese postgraduate students at the University of Eastern Finland. Although the participants in this research encountered various challenges, their learning experiences at the UEF were of great benefit to their personal growth and academic development. The negotiation process between inherited learning culture and Finnish learning culture made it possible for the participants to acquire an intercultural learner identity.
THE LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF CHINESE POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN FINLAND
Li Wang

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ABSTRACT

Studies on Chinese international students' learning experiences in Western countries have received increasing attention in the past three decades. The number of Chinese students enrolling in Finnish higher education institutions has increased dramatically, but few studies have attempted to understand the learning experiences of Chinese students in Finnish universities, particularly at the postgraduate level. Consequently, the task of this study is to explore how Chinese postgraduate students perceive their overseas learning experiences at the University of Eastern Finland (UEF).

Data were collected using the case study approach. Sixteen interviews were conducted with Chinese postgraduate students who were on either master or doctoral programs at the UEF. The results demonstrated that the reasons for participants studying in Finland were complex. Before they set off, they had little knowledge about Finland or Finnish universities. Because of this, they were not psychologically well-prepared for the Finnish learning environment. In this study, the participants identified four aspects of pedagogical differences when they compared Finnish learning culture with Chinese learning culture, including the role of textbooks, group learning, assessment of academic performance, and classroom behavior. The results indicated that the participants struggled with a number of academic challenges as international students, specifically English language insufficiency, knowledge gap, interactions with supervisors, and personal concerns related to academic learning. The participants revealed several problem-focused strategies and emotion-focused strategies that they used to cope with these academic difficulties. In addition, they had meaningful developmental suggestions for the students as well as the UEF. The suggestions might be helpful to both Chinese postgraduate students who are already at the UEF and those who plan to study at the UEF. Some of the suggestions might also help the UEF to improve its services and study programs for international postgraduate students in the future.

It is worth noting that although all participants in this research encountered various challenges, they shared the belief that their learning experiences at the UEF were of great benefit to both their personal growth and academic development. Furthermore, the negotiation process between the participants’ inherited learning culture and Finnish learning culture made it possible for them to create a new sense of self and acquire an intercultural learner identity.

Key words: learning experience, pre-departure situation, pedagogical differences, academic challenges, coping strategies, intercultural learner
TIIVISTELMÄ
Tutkimukset kiinalaisten opiskelijoiden opiskelukokemuksista länsimaisissa ovat kolmen viime vuosikymmenen aikana saaneet runsaasti huomiota. Kiinalaisten opiskelijoiden lukumäärä myös suomalaisissa korkeakouluissa on kasvanut dramaattisesti, silti vain harvat tutkimukset ovat paneutuneet kiinalaisopiskelijoiden opiskelukokemuksiin suomalaisissa yliopistoissa, erityisesti maisteri- ja tohtoriopinnoissa. Tämän tutkimuksen pääähdomio on juuri tuolla vähän tutkitulla alueella: tutkimuksen kohteena ovat kiinalaisten opiskelijoiden opiskelukokemukset Itä-Suomen yliopistossa, kaukana oman maansa ulkopuolelta.


Osallistujat toivat esiin useita ongelmakeskeisiä ja tunnekeskeisiä strategioita, joiden avulla he olivat pyrkineet selviytymään akateemisista vaikeuksistaan. Lisäksi ehdotusten lisäksi heillä oli merkittävää kehittämisheadotuksia kiinalaisille opiskelijoille, kuten akateemisen kehittykseen liittyvää yliopistollista harjoitusta. Osallistujia aihetta voisi puolestaan auttaa kaikissa Suomen yliopistoissa kehitettävissä akateemisissä ja oppimisympäristöissä.

Huomattava on, että vaikka kaikki tämän tutkimuksen osallistujat olivat kohdanneet erilaisia vaikeuksia ja haasteita, kaikki olivat sitä mieltä, että heidän oppimiskokemuksensa Itä-Suomen yliopistossa olivat erittäin hyödyllisiä sekä kiinalaisen kielten kehityksen kannalta. Lisäksi osoitetaan oppimiskulttuurin ja suomalaisen oppimiskulttuurin välisen vuorovaikutusprosessin myötä osallistujat olivat pystyneet luomaan uuden käsityksen itsestään ja kehittämään identiteettään kulttuurielämisessä oppijana.

Avainsanat: oppimiskokemus, lähtö edeltävä tilanne, pedagogiset erot, akateemiset haasteet, selviytymisstrategiat, kulttuurielämin oppija
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Higher education institutions in Finland have been progressively focusing on global cooperation and educational internationalization. According to a report provided by the Centre for International Mobility (CIMO, 2015), the number of international degree students enrolled in Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences has increased significantly. Since the academic year 2005, the annual figure has grown by more than 10% (Figure 1). The Finnish Minister of Education and Culture has proposed that the number of foreign students in Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences would increase to at least 60,000 by the year 2025 (Laine, 2016).

![Figure 1. International students in Finnish universities and Universities of applied sciences 2001-2015 (CIMO: International mobility in Finnish higher education in 2015: degree students, p.6)](image)

Among international students on university campuses in Finland, Chinese students have become the largest national group over the past decade. In 2015, the number of Chinese students reached 1,215 (Figure 2), placing China top in the list of predominant countries of origin in Finnish universities (CIMO, 2015). For many young
Chinese, the opportunity to study in Finland is a precious life experience. However, the differences in educational system and learning culture between Finland and China can present some immense difficulties for Chinese students. Yan (2008) pointed out that the greater cultural difference between the home and host country, the more difficult it is to integrate. Since Chinese students come from a non-European, third-world, and Eastern country, they may encounter challenges during the process of relocating to Finnish learning culture, such as collectivism versus individualism, competition versus cooperation, and hierarchical relationship versus interpersonal equality (Liu, 2009).

In the last three decades, pedagogical researchers have shown intense interest in examining the experiences of Chinese students studying in different Western countries (Zhu, 2012). Research in this field is growing particularly in the United States (Greer, 2005; Yan, 2008), the United Kingdom (Quan, He & Sloan, 2016; Turner, 2006), Australia (Gale & Parker, 2014; Ramburuthi & McCormick, 2001), and New Zealand (Skyrme, 2007; Zhao, 2007). According to a review of current studies on Chinese international students, Henze and Zhu (2012) put forward that as one of the largest overseas study groups in the world, Chinese students are the special reference group for general research on culture shock, adaptation and adjustment. Furthermore, the presence of Chinese international students is seen as one of the key reasons for changes in host universities.

Finland, as a non-English-speaking European country, launched its international students’ programs in the late 1980s (Vierimaa, 2013). Due to the relatively short history of international student mobility, studies on Chinese international students’
perceptions of their academic learning at Finnish universities have not gained much attention so far (Zhang, 2015).

In this research, I will explore the learning experiences of Chinese postgraduate students at the University of Eastern Finland (UEF). The UEF is one of the largest and most modern universities in Finland. It has 15,500 degree students and offers a wide range of programs and courses taught in English for international students (International Study Programmes brochure of the UEF). The university also actively participates in numerous international research and education cooperation programs around the world. My interest in exploring Chinese students’ learning experiences at the UEF stems from my own story. After obtaining a bachelor’s and master’s degree in China, I began to pursue my doctoral degree in Finland. During this study process, I gradually realized that studying abroad was challenging and demanding. Like many Chinese students, I performed well in the Chinese higher education system and had high motivation before I came to Finland. In Finland, however, I was sometimes shocked by the unpredicted complexity of Finnish learning culture and my inability to deal with academic difficulties effectively. As a student from a country influenced by Confucian culture, I constantly negotiated my inherited learning culture with the Finnish learning culture and strove to seek my identity. I strongly felt that it would have been beneficial to have been offered some systematic studies to facilitate Chinese international students in fitting in the new cultural environment.

Therefore, considering the significant proportion of Chinese students at Finnish universities, the different learning and teaching culture between Finland and China, the high demand to pursue a degree in a different learning environment, and the limited research on Chinese students in Finland, it seems necessary to investigate the positive and negative experiences of Chinese international students in transitioning into the Finnish academic and cultural environment. A better understanding of the learning experiences of this unique group might be beneficial for both Chinese international students and Finnish universities.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to acquire a clearer picture of how Chinese international students perceive their learning experiences in the new learning environment at the UEF. The study will specifically investigate the perspectives of sixteen Chinese postgraduate students regarding their academic learning. The primary aim of this study has five aspects. Firstly, it is designed to depict the Chinese students’ pre-departure situation, including their reasons for studying abroad and pre-departure preparation. Secondly, it attempts to investigate the academic differences that the Chinese students perceive when comparing their inherited learning culture with the Finnish learning culture. Thirdly, it is designed to explore the challenges that Chinese students encounter in their transition from Chinese learning culture to Finnish learning culture. Fourthly, the study documents the coping strategies and useful resources that could be utilized to overcome difficulties in the learning process. Lastly, the study provides suggestions to benefit both incoming Chinese postgraduate students and the development of the UEF.
1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Firstly, this study attempts to explore the details of the learning experiences of Chinese postgraduate students and represent their voice at the UEF. In contrast to Finnish domestic postgraduate students, Chinese international students are likely to face greater academic challenges due to leaving their familiar educational environment and due to their inability to predict the cultural behavior of their host environment. Consequently, they might find it challenging to successfully integrate and maintain the same academic performance as they did previously. With regard to learning style, for example, Chinese students tend to be more accustomed to organized and rigid learning. They are good at rote memorization, and prefer to work alone (Zhang, 2013). After they arrive in Finland, they might feel stressed when they face critical thinking, group discussions, and oral presentations in Finnish classrooms (Bai, 2016).

In addition, in contrast to other international postgraduate students studying at Finnish universities, especially those from Western countries, although Chinese students experience some common challenges, such as language barrier, financial pressure, and discrimination (Jones & Kim, 2013; Mori, 2000), their acculturation problems are “unique and should be addressed independently” (Liu, 2009, as cited in Li, 2016, p.2). Yan (2008) held the view that it is difficult to perceive Chinese students’ acculturation difficulties, because their strong motivation to succeed and the traditional values of shame have camouflaged their problems. Put another way, Chinese students tend to rely on their families rather than outside resources to handle their problems when they encounter academic pressure. They consider it weak and disgraceful to admit inability or struggles to non-family members (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yan, 2008).

The findings of this study may help Chinese students obtain a good understanding of the cultural foundations of many of the difficulties they experience in Finland, thus enabling a smooth academic transition to the new environment.

Secondly, this study is significant and informative to Finnish students. Chinese international students bring diversity and another worldview to the Finnish campus. It is well known that international perspectives and intercultural communication skills are the two important competences needed by students (Wakefield, 2014). The current study provides the valuable information on Chinese students’ beliefs and behaviors with regard to learning; this information could facilitate Finnish students to familiarize with Chinese culture and develop intercultural competence to deal with issues related to China in their future study and work.

Thirdly, although higher education institutions in Finland are opening their doors wide and aiming to attract more Chinese students, not all Finnish universities are necessarily ready to provide services that are required to meet Chinese students’ needs (Vierimaa, 2013). Due to lack of knowledge of Chinese students’ cultural background and previous learning experiences, Finnish instructors may also encounter teaching difficulties. International students usually have low expectations of services provided by universities. These low expectations could influence their learning experiences and depression levels (Sherry et al., 2004). The UEF is an active member of the international scientific community. Promoting the students’ internationalization and intercultural competences is one of its goals. The findings of this research may help faculty, support staff, advisors, and administrators gain a more thorough understanding of Chinese students’ learning beliefs and behaviors and develop culturally sensitive programs and services at the UEF.
Lastly, this study fills a gap in the existing literature on Chinese international students in Finland. At present, studies on Chinese international students’ learning experiences are mainly focused on North America and other English-speaking countries. The Finnish higher education system has its own uniqueness. The acculturation process of Chinese students in Finland may differ from that of other countries, and is therefore worth further exploration.

1.4 DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

As Kim (1988) pointed out, different concepts may refer to things that are essentially the same, while the same concepts may refer to things that are essentially different. In addition, the definition and meaning of a concept can also be altered by the context in which it is used. In order to help readers have an accurate understanding of the meaning of the concepts used in the context of this study, the following definitions are offered. More detailed descriptions of the concepts will be supplemented in the following chapters.

Culture: there have been many attempts to define culture. Actually, anthropologists alone have already identified more than 250 different interpretations of culture in the literature (Aviel, 1990). However, the concept of culture is difficult to define accurately and is often contested based on the influential theoretical points and methodological approaches taken. In this research, I will adopt the definition of culture provided by Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) who defined culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (p. 6).

Learning culture: culture is not only a contextual resource that supports individuals thinking and learning, but it also continually modifies and creates itself through the process of individuals’ learning (Kumpulainen & Renshaw, 2007). In this study, the concept of learning culture refers to “the whole set of expectations, attitudes, beliefs, values, perceptions, preferences, experiences and behaviors that are characteristic of a certain culture with regard to good teaching and learning, which are not just culturally transmitted and socially constructed, but also individually interpreted, open to change and development” (Wang, 2010, p.9).

Academic acculturation: various concepts are used to describe international students’ intercultural learning experience in a new environment, such as assimilation, integration, adjustment, adaptation, acculturation, transculturation, and transformation. Among them, three commonly used notions are adaptation, adjustment, and acculturation (Zhu, 2012). According to Berry (2005), the term acculturation seems to place more emphasis on the process of change as individuals interact with a new environment. Hence, for this study, I prefer to adopt the concept of academic acculturation and define it as a dynamic process of change that takes place between student sojourners and the target academic culture in host universities (Cheng & Fox, 2008; Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012).

Academic integration: according to Berry’s acculturation model (2005), there are four orientations of an individual’s acculturation, including marginalization, separation, assimilation, and integration. Integration occurs when individuals try to maintain their original culture while at the same time valuing the host culture. Integration is the best orientation of acculturation for individuals (Berry, 2005). This current research defined the concept of academic integration as “the processes by
which one becomes a part of a group (for example, institution, department, etc.) and integrates with its members, while possibly influencing the host group with one’s own life experience and academic expertise” (adapted from Jiang, et al., 2010, p.157).

1.5 STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

This study consists of six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the general information of the study, which includes statement of the problem, the research purpose, the significance of the study, and the definition of key concepts. Chapter 2 presents current studies related to Chinese international students’ learning experiences in Western higher education institutions. It begins with a general review of the core features of Confucian and Socratic learning cultures. The Finnish classroom learning culture is also discussed. The focus then moves to the empirical research on Chinese international students’ learning experiences in Western learning cultures. In this section, the contradictory views on the learning features of Chinese learners are presented. The main factors that influence Chinese international students’ learning and the coping strategies adopted by Chinese international students are also discussed. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical models for the present study on international students’ learning experiences, including cultural differences models and acculturation models. Chapter 4 presents the research questions, the rationale for using case study, data collection and processing, data analysis process, strategies for research validity and reliability, and ethical issues. Chapter 5 outlines the results of the study, including the major themes and subthemes yielded by the data analysis. Chapter 6 includes the conclusion and analysis of outcomes based on the theoretical models of the dissertation. Contributions, implications, strengths and limitations, and suggestions for future research in Chinese students’ intercultural academic experiences are put forward.
2 CHINESE INTERNATIONAL LEARNERS IN WESTERN LEARNING CULTURES

In the past three decades, researchers in the field of education have used quantitative and qualitative methods to develop a systematic understanding of the learning and teaching process (e.g. Heo, Leppisaari & Lee, 2018; Gorry, 2011; Yan, 2008; Zhang, 2003). Studies conducted by these researchers have shown that students’ learning culture may influence their learning experiences. This chapter mainly focuses on existing literature pertinent to Chinese international students’ academic experiences in Western learning cultures. The first part discusses the definition of learning culture. The second part presents the core features of Confucian and Socratic learning culture. The core features of Finnish classroom learning culture are discussed as well. In the third part, it introduces the empirical studies on Chinese learners in Western learning cultures, including contradictory views on the learning characteristics of Chinese students, the main factors that impact their academic learning in Western higher educational institutions, and the strategies they used to cope with the academic challenges in the new learning environment. This chapter synthesizes the previous research findings and offers a stage-setting for the research.

2.1 THE DEFINITION OF LEARNING CULTURE

Before the 1990s, the research areas of culture and learning had been living separately. Traditionally, culture was simply treated as an independent variable that impacted learning (Säljö, 1991). However, learning itself is a process of enculturation into and transformation of different practices, discourses, and norms of a community (Kumpulainen & Renshaw, 2007). Hence, studies on the culture-learning interface have shifted from “culture and learning” to “culture of learning” (Säljö, 1991). Researchers from sociology and cultural anthropology have emphasized that learning within a culture is a dynamic reciprocal process (Kumpulainen & Renshaw, 2007). On one hand, culture serves as a contextual resource that enables individuals to engage in the collective practices of the community and construct their own inner world; on the other hand, individuals continuously modify and create the culture itself during the process of sense-making (Wang, 2010).

In contemporary educational research, there have been many attempts to define learning culture. According to Cortazzi and Jin (1996), learning culture is defined as a set of “taken-for-granted framework of expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about what constitutes good learning, about how to teach or learn, whether and how to ask questions, what textbooks are for, and how teaching relates to broader issues of the nature and purpose of education” (p.169). Heo, Leppisaari, and Lee (2018) conceptualized learning culture as “a set of shared beliefs, values and attitudes favorable to learning” (p.459). These definitions frame learning culture as a normative and ethical factor while ignoring its negotiations and reconstructions. Against this background, this research adopts the definition of learning culture provided by Wang (2010), who defined it as “a whole set of expectations, attitudes, beliefs, values, perceptions, preferences, experiences and behaviors that are characteristic of a certain culture with regard to good teaching and learning, which are not just culturally...
transmitted and socially constructed, but also individually interpreted, open to change and development” (p.9).

2.2 THE CORE FEATURES OF DIFFERENT LEARNING CULTURES

The increasing number of Chinese students in Western universities has led to a growing academic interest in Chinese international learners (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Previous empirical studies attribute academic challenges encountered by Chinese international students to the different learning cultures, termed Confucian and Socratic culture of learning respectively (Liu, 2008; McMahon, 2011; Zhao, 2007). Understanding the contrastive framework of Confucian and Socratic learning culture is a good starting point for exploring Chinese students’ learning experiences in the Western higher education (Zhang, 2013; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). In the following section, I will discuss the core features of Confucian and Socratic learning culture. The Finnish classroom learning culture will also be discussed.

2.2.1 The core features of Confucian (Chinese) learning culture

Confucianism is viewed as the official ideology of China since the second century BCE (Gu, 2006; Sigurðsson, 2017). Over the past two millennia of evaluation, Confucianism has had a significant impact on Chinese life, social structure, and political philosophy. Its influence also extends to Korea, Japan, and other Asian countries.

Confucianism was named after the Chinese philosopher and educator, Confucius (551–479 BCE), who was the first person to a start private school and provide equal educational opportunities to people without discrimination. Like Socrates, the great educator in Western history, Confucius left no writings, but his words and ideas were collected and recorded by his followers in the Analects (Lunyu). The great goal of Confucianism is social harmony (Buttery & Leung, 1998). To achieve this goal, Confucius proposed some important ethical values for individuals which can be crystallized as the following four aspects: benevolence (ren, 仁), righteousness (yi, 义), correct behaviors (li, 礼), and wisdom (zhi, 智) (Zhang, 1997).

Generally speaking, Chinese learners have been strongly influenced by Confucianism for centuries. The core features of Confucian learning culture are presented in four areas: (1) effortful learning; (2) respectful learning; (3) pragmatic learning; and (4) collectivist learning (Tweed, 2000).

Effective learning

The Confucian model of study emphasizes persistent and disciplined effort. This belief in the value of effort can be found in some Chinese popular sayings; for instance, “if another man succeeds by one effort, he will use ten efforts. If another man succeeds by ten efforts, he will use a thousand. Let a man proceed in this way, and, though dull, he will surely become intelligent; though weak, he will surely become strong” (Wang, 2006, p.2). Confucius believed that it is continuous effort rather than innate ability that leads to academic success (Chen & Bennett, 2012; Rao & Chan, 2009). To him, everyone is educable regardless of differences in intelligence. Influenced by this
philosophy, Chinese students are usually considered as hardworking students in the world. The academic failure brings shame upon Chinese learners and their family.

Respectful learning
Chinese learners are expected to respect knowledge, scholarly texts, and teachers (Chan, 1999). First of all, Confucius held a view that truth and knowledge are already created by ancient masters. Learning is a process of acquiring knowledge from teachers without challenging them. As Confucius said, “I transmit traditional wisdom and do not create new ideas. I believe in and admire the experiences and insights of our ancestors” (Chan, 2011, p.252). Secondly, a written text is regarded as superior to oral discourse. The behavior of questioning the authority of a scholarly text is disrespectful. Thirdly, teachers who transfer personal wisdom to students should be respected. There is a saying in Chinese to describe the relationship between teachers and students: “If someone taught you as a teacher for one day, you should respect him as your father for the rest of your life” (Wan, 1997, p.20). Traditionally, teachers are listed as one of the most respected categories by Confucian (Tweed, 2000).

Pragmatic learning
Different to the Socratic model based on truth excavation, the Confucian model concentrates on moral development (Gorry, 2011). The purpose of education in the Confucian model is to cultivate an individual to become a moral model and contribute to the harmony of society (Zhang, 2013). In addition, learning is perceived as an efficient way to gain prestige and status in the social environment. For example, most Chinese students are keenly aware that their future hinges on their scores in public examinations. Hence, the National University Entrance Examination (Gaokao) in China has become a key factor in determining the honor and disgrace of Chinese students and their families in the community. However, as for example Tweed (2000) pointed out, when learning only concerns extrinsic goals, it loses its meaning.

Collectivist learning
Confucianism praises collective behavior and group thinking. A student is a part of a group, not an isolated individual. In most cases, the teacher decides what activities should be done. A student’s learning needs often come second to the group collective learning benefits. Chinese learners need a sense of togetherness more than their peers from an individualistic culture (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). As a result of this ideology, when a potential conflict is sensed, Chinese students tend to refrain from voicing their individual views or opinions in order to maintain a harmonious relationship (Hofstede, 1991).

2.2.2 The core features of Socratic (Western) learning culture

The Western learning culture is derived from Socratic philosophy. Socrates (470—399 B.C.), a Greek philosopher, is regarded as one of the founders of Western philosophy. His reputation stemmed from his overt questioning of the knowledge of the elites in Athens’ market squares. He pointed out that status and power cannot be used as reasons not to be questioned. Although none of Socrates’ original writings have survived, his main thoughts relevant to education were recorded by Plato (428/427–348/347 BCE.), one of his favorite pupils. According to the study of Tweed and Lehman
(2002), the core features of Socratic learning culture can be summarized as (1) tendency to question; (2) esteem for self-generated knowledge; and (3) search for knowledge not true belief.

Tendency to question
Socrates valued learning by posing pointed questions. He frequently generated arguments and counterarguments concerning his own beliefs and others’ beliefs. He claimed that raising questions about an issue was a necessary condition for recognizing one’s ignorance of knowledge (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). As he said: “I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know” (Plato, Apology, 21d). From this perspective, skepticism is a valuable starting point for determining what is true and what is not in learning (Kühnen, et al., 2011). In Western learning cultures, learners have been taught to treat information with skeptical attitudes or skeptical spirit. According to Peng and Nisbett (1999), many Western students, starting at a very early age, are encouraged to challenge their teachers with different opinions even before they have fully grasped knowledge.

In contrast to the Socratic-oriented learning approach, Confucius did not attach great importance to critical thinking and questioning. He believed that innovation without the accumulation of knowledge is a failure (Gorry, 2011). He also emphasized the importance of the inheritance and repetition of knowledge. Therefore, Chinese students are encouraged to first learn from masters and then ask questions.

Esteem for self-generated knowledge
Although Socrates had many students, he did not consider himself so much as a teacher, rather as a facilitator whose responsibility was to guide students to generate knowledge. For example, he tried to guide a slave boy to produce the fundamental knowledge of geometry by simply asking the right questions. He perceived himself to teach the boy nothing (Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

The belief that knowledge already exists in an individual indicates that a capable learner can progress without guidance in academic learning (Wang, 2010). Many Western educators advocate freedom of academic choice. They think this can bring greater motivation to learn. Asian learners, in contrast, want more help and guidance from authorities (Pratt & Wong, 1999).

Search for knowledge not true belief
For Socrates, the ultimate goal of learning was knowledge, not just true belief (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). The true beliefs were constructed in the mind of the individual and represented how the individual saw things around them. Moreover, a person can hold true beliefs that may be correct while lacking knowledge about them (Gorry, 2011). Therefore, for Socrates, knowledge was a prerequisite for obtaining true beliefs. Socrates claimed that politicians and poets had true beliefs but lack knowledge.

Unlike Socrates’s point of view, Confucius believed that morality was the ultimate goal of learning. The good character traits and true beliefs were possessed by the ancient masters. Therefore, for Confucius, learning must focus on inheritance from the ancient masters.
2.2.3 The core features of Finnish classroom learning culture

Finland has undergone a thorough education system reform since the 1970s (Välijärvi et al., 2007). The main goal of the Finnish education policy is to provide equal access to education for all citizens regardless of age, mother tongue, socioeconomic, or regional status. (Aho, Pitkänen, & Sahlberg, 2006). Sahlberg (2011) pointed out that emphasizing the principle of equity, the well-being of students, the high-quality autonomy in teaching, and the trust of society in education has a positive impact on the development of Finnish education. Based on a comparative study of classroom learning cultures, Heo, Leppisaari and Lee (2018) suggested that the core features of Finnish classroom learning culture may be demonstrated by the following aspects: (1) teaching autonomy; (2) authentic learning; (3) equal teacher-student relationship; (4) formative assessment; and (5) student well-being.

Teaching autonomy
The philosophy of Finnish education places a high value on pedagogical freedom and responsibility (Toom & Husu, 2012). Teachers in Finland enjoy enviable autonomy in teaching (Aho, Pitkänen, & Sahlberg, 2006). They are free to choose learning content, teaching approaches, and forms of assessment to implement the academic goals of the curriculum. They do not have to follow the predefined structures offered by the Finnish National Board of Education. This teaching autonomy is built on a high degree of social trust and teachers’ professionalism (Niemi, 2012). The highly educated and well-trained teachers make students, parents, and administrative politicians believe that Finnish teachers are capable of teaching in a way that is most beneficial for their students. Moreover, the teachers’ autonomy in the Finnish classroom influences the students’ independence of learning. Finnish students are encouraged to make their own learning process and become self-regulated learners.

Authentic learning
The Finnish education polices and national curriculum guidelines emphasize authentic learning content and resources related to real life (Heo, Leppisaari & Lee, 2018). Teachers in Finland are encouraged to use different approaches to implement authentic learning, for example, using practical tasks and real cases related to learning goals, emphasizing cooperation between different disciplines, encouraging learners to think in a holistic and creative way, and integrating inside and outside classroom activities. Finnish educators believe that authentic learning is significant for students to achieve successful learning outcomes and results (EURYDICE, 2013; Halinen, 2015).

Equal teacher-student relationship
The equality of the teacher-student relationship is a central aspect of the philosophy of Finnish education. This equal and close relationship is associated with the joy of learning and successful outcomes for students (EURYDICE, 2013). Toom and Husu (2012) stressed that a positive teacher-student relationship stimulates students’ interest in the subject and helps them engage in learning activities. In the Finnish classroom, the teacher is considered as a partner of the students, engaging in thinking processes together with them (Postareff & Lindholm-ylänne, 2008). As for the students, their individuality is valued and respected (Heo, Leppisaari & Lee, 2018). They are encouraged to interact with their teachers and voice their own opinions. The classroom atmosphere is flexible and loose (Sahlberg, 2007).
Formative assessment
The purpose of student assessment is to understand and improve students’ learning. Different countries carry out student assessment in different ways. The majority assessment in Finnish education is formative assessment, which is defined as “all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 7). In the Finnish classroom, continuous assessments are conducted by teachers regarding students’ work, performance, and skills. Instead of numerical grading, the assessment results are marked on a scale from “very good” to “needs practice” (Hendrickson, 2012). The learning growth and progress of students is carefully traced and shared with students and parents. This assessment method is beneficial to students’ learning habits and their development of self-evaluation skills (Heo, Leppisaari & Lee, 2018).

Student well-being
Student well-being is an important issue in academic learning. A high level of well-being is related to successful learning outcomes (Gibbons & Silva, 2011). In Finland, the framework of well-being includes “the delivery of teaching and learning, personalized learning and support, behavior, discipline and character education, professional practice, effective leadership, and school planning” (Heo, Leppisaari & Lee, 2018, p.467). In Finland, students have access to get a free education at all levels from pre-primary to higher education (EURYDICE, 2013). Students with special needs are also highly valued. The support from schools and the government is aimed at ensuring every student can be fully engaged in learning and educated in a positive atmosphere.

In sum, students in different cultures learn in different ways. Understanding the core features of the learning culture inherited by international students and the learning culture of the host country can provide a deeper and wider insight to explore international students’ overseas learning experiences (Heo, Leppisaari & Lee, 2018; Gorry, 2011). In the following section, I will present an analytical review of previous empirical studies on Chinese students’ learning experiences in Western learning cultures.

2.3 EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS’ LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN WESTERN LEARNING CULTURES

2.3.1 The contradictory views on the learning characteristics of Chinese learners
Since the encounter of Confucius and Socrates, the discussions on the drastic differences of features between Chinese learners and Western learners have seemly never ceased (Hodkinson & Poropat, 2014). According to the previous research, views on the learning features of Chinese learners are contradictory (Chan, 1999; Rao & Chan, 2009). Some scholars view Chinese learners as quiet, passive, obedient, or lacking critical thinking, while others consider them to be open-minded, active, and independent. In the following, I will elaborate on these two very different viewpoints.
Stereotypical views on Chinese learners

In some existing literature, the Chinese learning style is considered less intelligent and desirable than Western learning style (Mathias, Bruce & Newton, 2013; Shi, 2006). The most common stereotypes of Chinese learners are that: (1) they are rote learning; (2) they are reluctant to challenge the authority of the teacher; and (3) they are entirely passive (Xu, 2017; Shi, 2006).

There is a commonly held belief that Chinese learners rely heavily on rote learning. Rote learning, defined as “learning in a mechanical way without thought or meaning” (Biggs, 1994, as cited in Chan, 1999, p. 300), is often thought to relate to surface learning approach rather than deep learning approach (McMahon, 2011). The distinction between surface leaning and deep learning was originally identified by Swedish scholars Marton and Säljö (1976). In their study, a group of students were asked to read a text and then reported what they had learned by means of a series of questions. From these reports, Marton and Säljö (1976) identified two different levels of learning approach: surface-level and deep-level. The former processing focused on memorizing words and phrases, while the latter processing concentrated on understanding meanings. Undoubtedly, deep learning is seen to be linked to recognized achievement and success. Chinese students are negatively considered by some Western instructors as adopting the surface-level approach to learning, because they often memorize notes word for word without critical and independent thinking (Gu, 2009). Ho, Holmes, and Cooper (2004) similarly revealed that Chinese students’ learning process is seen as reproductive as opposed to analytical or skeptical. The similar opinion is expressed by Samuelowicz (1987) as well. In his survey, over 30% of Australian lectures felt that Asian students were more comfortable with memorization and unwilling to think deeply. Kennedy (2002) concluded that although Chinese students tend to outperform Western students in some international competitions of sciences and mathematics, their capacities for creativity and original thinking were poor.

The second stereotype is that Chinese learners are usually obedient and reluctant to publicly challenge their teachers. There are two key explanations for this phenomenon. Traditionally, the Chinese teacher enjoys a relatively high social status and authority. Although the influence of the Confucianism on the Chinese learners is declining in Chinese contemporary education, the hierarchical relationship still requires obedience from Chinese learners (Shi, 2006). Face-saving is another key reason for reducing the likelihood of Chinese learners challenging their teachers (Heffernan, et al., 2010). Saving face is a common phenomenon in a collectivist society, especially in China (Fang, 2003). With a strong sense of face saving, learners from a collective culture are not encouraged to speak out and express their true opinions (Hofstede, 1991). Kennedy (2002) also showed that the dignity of the teacher is important in the Confucian tradition. The behaviors of challenging teachers and expressing independent judgment are perceived as disrespectful and brash.

The third stereotype concerns passive learning. While Socrates encourages individuals to evaluate and generate knowledge by themselves, Confucius believed that as truth and the associated good character traits are already known by the ancient masters, one is expected merely to engage in the effortful learning (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Thus, Chinese learners are more likely than Western learners to expect the instructor to provide fixed answers directly rather than exploring knowledge led by the instructor (Shi, 2006). Zhao (2007) found that most Chinese learners are passive in answering questions and engaging in group discussions. When asked to express their own opinions in class,
they tend to hide behind others. For many Chinese students and teachers, the two-way communication is normally perceived as an ineffective teaching approach because it wastes time (Branine, 2005; Chan, 1999). Teachers that let their students explore and search for the correct answers by themselves are regarded as lazy and irresponsible (Zhu, 2002). Wang (2010) states that most Chinese students overwhelmingly agree that their own thoughts were not as important as a good teacher’s, and they expected teachers to give them detailed instructions and help them pass the examinations. Liu (2008) investigated Chinese international students’ perceptions of learning experiences in the UK and indicated that Chinese international students did respond well to more highly structured and rigid instruction in marketing courses.

Positive views on Chinese learners

The Confucianism has multi-dimensionality and its influence on Chinese learners is interpreted differently by scholars and researchers (Xu, 2017). Recently, new studies have brought new understanding of Chinese learners’ characteristics (Biggs, 1994; Tavakol & Dennick, 2010). For example, Rao and Chan (2009) suggested that the Chinese learning style is more complex and dynamic than it appears and that the previous research is over simplistic and culturally biased. Gan (2009) indicated that the unique learning features of Chinese learners should be re-examined and more empirical research is needed. In this section I will outline some viewpoints that differ from the stereotypes mentioned above.

Rote learning

Although some scholars assume that Chinese students prefer memorization rather than deep understanding (e.g. McMahon, 2011; Pratt & Wong, 1999), Watkins and Biggs (2001) revealed that memorization is an inseparable part of understanding; Chinese students tend to adopt surface learning and deep learning at the same time. Wang (2010) found that Chinese students use deep-level approach concurrently while they memorize knowledge. Those findings are consistent with Prosser and Trigwell’s (1999) study, which argued that the correlation between memorization and understanding is not mutually exclusive; instead, the two are generally simultaneous. Other evidence also demonstrates that memorization is not a synonym of surface learning. Tweed and Lehman (2002) have concluded that Chinese students are more likely to learn through a sequential four-stage process: (1) memorizing, (2) understanding, (3) applying, and (4) questioning or modifying. The engaging of memorization should not be seen as an end in itself; rather, it is an initial process moving to the other three stages (Kember & Gow, 1991). Moreover, scholars argue that rote learning is not “culturally based or fixed, but contextual” (Mathias, Bruce & Newton, 2013, p.223). Wong (2004) found that Chinese students are more suited to the Western approaches to learn when they stay in Australia longer. In the same vein, a study conducted by Shi (2006) revealed that Chinese students actually adopt various approaches in their learning process. They tended to look for appropriate learning strategies instead of relying on rote learning completely. Xu (2017) believed that the phenomenon of rote learning exists not only in Chinese education, but also “in all the ancient civilizations in human history, and have continued to dominate in educational practices worldwide since, western, eastern, and any place in between, persistently in all subjects and fields through relentless examinations, tests, and assessments” (p.444).
Passive and quiet learning
The picture of passive and quiet Chinese learners is common. However, there is no sufficient empirical evidence from a holistic review to explain whether Chinese students are passive and quiet. According to the research of Cortazzi and Jin’s (1996) findings, Chinese students are not “passive” but actually “reflective” learners. They do ask questions but their questions are built by a slow process based on solid knowledge and sound reflection. They are afraid to make mistakes that could be laughed at by other students. This learning style results in a misunderstanding between Chinese students and some Western teachers or researches. While Western instructors prefer students to ask questions simultaneously in the process of learning, Chinese students are more likely to adopt sequential talk (Watkins, 2000). They feel uncomfortable with guessing, predicting and impulsive questioning (Kennedy, 2002). In addition, Gardner (1989) and McMahon (2011) both pointed out that there is a difference in view between Confucius and Socrates regarding the order of skills and critical thinking. Western teachers expect their students to explore knowledge first with questioning and then develop skills, whereas Chinese teachers expect their students to first develop skills to accept knowledge without questioning, after which critical thinking can follow. Although the perception of teaching and learning order is different, different learning approaches might not influence academic outcomes significantly. Cheng et al. (2011) investigated the relationship between learning approaches and academic outcomes from 129 local American students, 121 Chinese students in the United States, and 134 Chinese students in China, and found that although both Chinese students in China and Chinese students in the United States were less active than local American students in class, the learning achievement of the three samples did not appear obviously differ.

Authoritarianism
Some literature has also challenged the view of authoritarianism in Chinese teaching and learning. For example, Gardner (1989) suggested that the perception of Chinese teachers as highly directive should be re-examined. He found that Chinese teaching is a mixture of “directing” and “holding by hand”, “authoritarianism” and “student-centeredness”.

Similarly, Shi (2006) investigated 400 Chinese students about their learning experiences and perceptions. He indicated that the learning characteristics of modern Chinese students are quite different from the descriptions given in previous research. One interesting finding of his study was that most Chinese students tend to prefer equality with their teachers and lecturers rather than an inflexible hierarchy.

Due to specific cultural antecedents and social structures, the investigation of the characteristics of Chinese learners is complicated (Gao & Watkins, 2002). It seems inappropriate to take Western-centric concepts as universally valid and impose those concepts on non-Western subjects (Shi, 2006). Doing so might run the risk of judging Chinese students with the standards of Western education and putting Chinese students and Western students on opposite sides of a dichotomy. Therefore, more empirical research should be done on the learning characteristics of Chinese students from a cultural perspective.
2.3.2 The main factors affecting Chinese international students' learning in Western learning cultures

For international students, acculturating into a new academic environment is a process involving potentially complex and conflictual negotiation. Reviewing the previous literature on Chinese international students, many studies have been done to identify the factors that negatively affect Chinese students’ academic learning (e.g. Bai, 2016; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Zhang, 2013). In this section, I will focus on three main factors: (1) insufficient English proficiency, (2) incongruous educational system, and (3) lack of institutional support.

Insufficient English proficiency

Lack of English proficiency is a stumbling block for most Chinese students in integrating into a new academic environment (Mori, 2000; Wan, 1999; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Although Chinese students are required to pass standardized tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOFEL), the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) before they pursue their educational degree abroad, their high scores fail to predict their adequate level of English proficiency (Yan & Berliner, 2009). Many Chinese students report that they have difficulties in understanding lectures, participating in classroom discussions, and in academic reading and writing (Edwards, Ran, & Li, 2007; Fu & Townsend, 1998; Sun & Chen, 1997). Many Chinese students therefore recognize the need to improve their English listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities.

Listening

Concerning listening competence, speech speed and accents are considered as the main impediments for Chinese students. Xue (2013) investigated fourteen Chinese graduate students at a public university of the United States and found that the students were frustrated and unsatisfied with their inability to catch up with the speaking speed of their group members. Similarly, using an ethnographic investigation with thirteen ethnic Chinese students in New Zealand, Holmes (2004) found that the limited listening proficiency of Chinese students played a negative role in their learning and communication experiences. In addition to speaking speed, accent also increases the difficulty of listening. A study conducted by Zhang and Zhou (2010) revealed that Chinese international students found it very hard to understand lectures because of the various accents of multicultural professors. In the same vein, Xue (2013) noted that the Chinese students in his study complained about their group members’ accents.

One reason for the listening comprehension difficulties experienced by Chinese students is that many students in China practice their listening skills using Standard English materials (Xue, 2013). The audio materials are recorded at a controlled speed. The adopted speed in the language tests is 130-150 words per minute (College English Test, Band Four; CET-4) or 160–180 words per minute (College English Test, Band Six; CET-6), which is slower than the natural speed of international English Language Testing System (IELTS), requiring 220-300 words per minute (Sang, 2010). In addition, the audio materials used by Chinese students are authentic British English. Lack of exposure to different accents in academic settings might also contribute to Chinese students’ listening comprehension difficulties.
Speaking
International Chinese students also experience difficulties with classroom oral interactions. Wan (1999) conducted a study of Chinese students’ intercultural learning experiences in an American university, and the survey data, drawn from the participant observation and informal interviews, revealed that when Chinese students were asked to answer questions in complex English sentences, they chose to avoid speaking even if they knew the answers. Greer (2005) found that Chinese students went through a double translation process before communication occurs. That is, they have to think in Chinese first, and then translate their thinking into English before speaking. This affects their timely response to questions in the classroom.

A key factor in explaining Chinese students’ difficulties with spoken English is that in the Chinese educational environment, the traditional grammar-translation method and teacher-centered lecture play the dominant role in English teaching for many years. Instead of focusing on the improvement of oral skills, students are mainly taught using the traditional teaching approach which concentrates on grammar, translation and vocabulary learning (Gu, 2006). In Shi’s study (2007), Chinese students report that their English teachers often explain English texts in Chinese, and chances for students to discuss the text in English are rare. Although other teaching approaches, such as communicative language teaching, have been introduced in China for many years, they cannot completely replace the dominant role of traditional teaching approach.

Reading
As for the problems in academic reading, Chinese students’ reading speed and strategies have been much discussed in the previous research (Edwards et al., 2007; Holmes, 2004; Wang, 2010). Holmes (2004) uses New Zealand’s domestic students and Chinese students to compare their reading speed, and the result demonstrates that Chinese students’ reading speed is slower, and they usually have to read texts twice. His findings are consistent with the study of Edwards et al. (2007), which revealed that Chinese students can only read a few pages at a time when they are required to read an academic paper. Similarly, participants in Shi’s (2007) study also reported that they were shocked by the amount of reading materials assigned by their Canadian teachers.

Besides reading speed, many Chinese students lack the expected strategies for reading journals, which require questioning, analyzing, contrasting, hypothesizing and extracting information from materials (Holmes, 2004). Using data from a longitudinal study of Chinese international students in a New Zealand university, Skyrme (2007) found that the participants in her study were not accustomed to reading strategies. One participant reported that he did not know how to extract meaning from the textbook and combine it with the content of his lectures. His Chinese educational background had taught him only how to repeat the detailed information from articles.

Writing
Writing in English is another big language challenge for Chinese students in their academic life, especially for the students whose major is Humanities and Social Sciences (Zhang & Zhou, 2010; Yan, 2008). Chinese students do not receive enough academic writing training before they come abroad. Take the requirement of the College English Band Six (the higher level English test in China) for example, college students are required to complete an essay of only 100-150 words, accounting for 15% of the total score (College English Test Syllabus, 2011). One participant, in Yan’s study (2008), reported that he was frustrated and depressed with the academic writing
after he came to the U.S., because he had to do huge numbers of written assignments every day, and his Chinglish expressions confused his professors. In the same vein, a participant, in the study of Zhang and Zhou (2010), recalled that he had never written an English essay of more than 2000 words when he was in China.

Unfamiliarity with the academic writing conventions is another important factor contributing to writing difficulties. Volet and Renshaw (1996) put forward that Chinese students are “unaware of the conventions regarding acknowledging quotes and referencing sources and therefore unwittingly guilty of plagiarism” (p. 206). It seems that Chinese students are at great risk of committing plagiarism. In Chinese collectivist culture, plagiarism does not receive much attention because the focus of communication is on expressing the collective ideas. Students in Chinese educational context are encouraged to memorize classic texts from famous people and cite their words directly in the writings (Fu & Townsend, 1998). They seldom practice the standardized citations or referencing of academic writing (Zhang, 2013). In Sun and Chen’s (1997) study, one participant mentioned that in China “whenever you have an idea, you simply write it down. In the United States, you are required not only to have an idea, but also to show how and where you got the idea” (p.27).

Incongruous educational system

Aside from the language insufficiency, Chinese students also encounter other educational shocks when studying abroad. Some academic problems can be traced back to the very different systems of higher education. In the study at Victoria University, Zhang et al. (1999) revealed that Chinese international students found the academic “rules” they encountered in their first year in Australian universities were significantly different from their previous academic environments in China. Most students reported that they were not explicitly informed about the new academic “rules”. Since the “rules” were different and implicit, it was difficult for them to follow. A study conducted by Holmes (2004) suggests that Chinese students need to be better prepared for the educational shock when they encounter in a different educational system. Similarly, Yan and Berliner (2009) did a qualitative study at a large public university in Southwestern America by interviewing 18 Chinese students aged 22 to 38. Drawn from the survey data, they identified inadequate educational preparation and unfamiliarity with classroom norms as the main factors that impede Chinese students’ integration.

The incongruities between the Chinese and the Western educational systems lead to many difficulties for Chinese students. In the following section, I will present the three main academic difficulties faced by Chinese students: (1) difficulty being an independent learner; (2) ineffective communication with western teachers; and (3) inactive participation in group work.

Difficulty being an independent learner

Chinese students are accustomed to the teacher-centered schema and have very high expectations of their teachers (Turner, 2006). They usually believe that teachers should dominate their learning process and are responsible for their learning outcome. Good students are expected to follow their teachers’ instructions and do exactly what teachers say (Yan, 2008). From an intercultural perspective, Jin and Cortazzi (1991) describe the students’ expectations for teachers as follows:
They seek guidance from their teachers, who are expected to be moral leaders and social leaders, experts who know everything in their specific area and who can plan for and instruct students. The crucial relationship is that between teacher and student, which is seen in paternalistic terms. The teacher should tell students what is what and how to proceed. The teacher should be sensitive to any student problems and should be helpful in social and everyday issues arising out of daily living. Like a parent, the teacher should care for students academically and socially. (Jin & Cortazzi, 1991, p.86)

The expectation for teachers in the Chinese educational system is different from Western educational values. Teachers from Western cultures typically view students as independent learners, who are responsible for their own learning (Yan, 2008). As a result, Chinese students encounter many difficulties when they are expected to be responsible for their own self-management and self-discipline in a new academic environment.

Turner’s study (2006) pointed out that it is not easy for Chinese students to switch from the idea that teachers should take responsibility for students’ learning to the idea that students should develop full responsibility for their own learning. In her study, she investigates a group of nine full-time Chinese postgraduate students in the UK. The survey data, drawn from the participants’ interviews, indicates that the participants’ underlying sense of identity as teacher-dependent learners was unchanging significantly over the year. The participants continued to believe that it is the teacher’s responsibility to decide what they should learn and that their academic outcomes depend heavily on the teachers.

The evidence from Warring’s (2010) study supports Turner’s (2006) finding. Based on the analysis of data collected from questionnaires of 27 bachelor students enrolled with marketing major at a New Zealand Polytechnic, Warring (2010) noted that it took a long time for Chinese students to develop a new belief that they should take full responsibility for their own learning. The results of that study showed that although by the end of the program the Chinese students became more confident and believed they had greater responsibility for learning, such as selecting textbook readings, conducting research, and revising independently, their ability for independent learning was below average and they still held the belief that teachers should be responsible for “giving examples”.

**Ineffective communication with Western teachers**

Growing up in the Chinese educational system, Chinese students are taught to be careful and cautious about what they should and should not say and how they should speak to their teachers. In other words, because the teaching norm is based on the hierarchical, formal, and social relations of Chinese society, Chinese students tend to favor indirect communication style for the purpose of preserving harmony with their teachers (Holmes, 2004; Yan, 2008).

Indirect communication is an important skill for Chinese people. Communicators in Chinese culture are expected to be environmentally sensitive and able to convey or obtain the meaning of implicit verbal information so as to avoid conflicting or embarrassing situations (Wakefield, 2014). Influenced by the philosophy of indirect communication, Chinese students seldom demand, reject, or criticize their teachers directly. Instead, they prefer to use vague language or drop communicative hints. Therefore, when Chinese students encounter Western education which value open and highly verbal communication, they feel uncomfortable about revealing their
opposing opinions or debating with teachers in a straightforward manner. At the same time, teachers from Western cultures sometimes do not know how to interpret Chinese students (Yan, 2008). Zimmerman (1995) revealed that the level of communication with their native teachers contributes to international student’s academic success. However, Chinese international students are under considerable pressure in the process of integration into the Western communication style (Henze & Zhu, 2012).

A study conducted by Holmes (2004) indicated that the model of Chinese students’ intercultural communication probably puts them at a disadvantage in a culture that rewards open and direct interaction. As a result, Chinese students may experience the separation between learning and communication when studying in a new cultural environment.

The finding of Holmes (2004) is consistent with Yan (2008). Using a semi-structured interview, she investigated nineteen Chinese international students studying in different departments at Arizona State University. The participants in that study reported that an indirect communication style negatively influenced their relationship with American teachers. For example, one participant indicated that he was reluctant to negotiate with his supervisor regarding certain academic requirements, because in Chinese traditional culture, a good student should focus on working hard rather than challenging the teachers’ demands. The refusal indicates that they had the low capability and insufficient effort, which made them lose faces.

Inactive participation in group work
The group work does not receive enough attention in Chinese classroom because influenced by the exam-driven educational philosophy, Chinese teachers and students do not have enough knowledge about group work, and teachers lack teaching skills to arouse students’ motivation to participate in discussions. Therefore, it could be inferred that the previous educational experiences in China might lead Chinese students to hold an unfavorable view of the group work or show less enthusiasm toward it when initially exposed to an English-speaking academic environment (Han, 2009; Turner, 2006; Xue, 2013).

Wan (1999) points out that Chinese students are familiar with the formal and controlled question-answer communication in the classroom. They feel uncomfortable with informal discussion, which seems chaotic to them.

Holmes (2004) contends that the differences between two educational systems served as one of the key factors for Chinese students’ low interest in group work. The preference of Chinese students for lecture-dominated learning mode explains their reluctance to involve themselves in group work when they are in a cooperative learning environment.

The findings of Wan (1999) and Holmes (2004) echo the conclusions of Xue (2013). In the study, Xue (2013) conducted a qualitative study to investigate fourteen Chinese international graduate students’ experiences with group work at the University of Alabama. The analysis of data from in-depth interviews confirmed that although the participants in his study accepted the group work after half a year or one year, their initial attitudes toward group work were unfavorable. Xue (2013) found that along with inadequate English language skills, unfamiliarity with group work and its functions contributed to the difficulties in initial acculturation. Some participants expressed the opinion that they were trained by the teacher-centered approach to learn and have had few opportunities to discuss in China. After they came to the U.S., they considered group work a waste of time because they did not regard their peers
as reliable sources of knowledge. Moreover, they did not know when, what, or how to speak with group members in discussions due to the lack of appropriate knowledge, such as critical thinking.

Lack of institutional support

Having a good institutional support is very important for Chinese international students to acculturate in a new learning environment (Henze & Zhu, 2012). Bai (2016) pointed out that the support “does not only refer to tangible support such as a culturally friendly environment and facilities, but also moral support from people whom international students interact with, such as classmates, faculty, and staff members” (p.102). With sufficient academic support, Chinese international students could find extra resources to solve their problems and lower their levels of academic stress.

However, Heng (2017) notes that Chinese international students lack comprehensive academic support when it is needed. Using a hybrid sociocultural framework in his study, Heng interviewed 18 Chinese international students who stay in the U.S. for one or two years from three institutions. Drawn from the survey data, the findings reveal that Chinese students desire better academic support from their institutional community. One-third of participants reported that they were not satisfied with the level of academic orientation which includes, for example, how to select courses, where to find the locations of classroom and facilities. Some participants indicate that they do not know how to seek academic or non-academic help if they encounter irresponsible instructors or inappropriate compulsory course assignments. The study also reveals that the initiative academic help provided by teachers would enable Chinese students’ learning motivation, self-esteem, and psycho-emotional well-being, especially during the initial stages of the study programs.

The findings of Zhang (2013) are consistent with the conclusions of Heng (2017). In her study, she conducted individual interviews among three Chinese international students at one of the largest private research universities in the northeastern of the United States. The results revealed that the participants in that study often failed to take advantage of the support from teachers and consultants because they felt that they could not get their support immediately. Instead, family and friends were the important sources of help for them. One participant reported that he still had to solve the problems by himself after the consultations because of the unclear guidance from the teacher. The findings suggest that universities need to provide more coordinated support for students, such as making it easier for students to obtain information on the assessment and evaluation expectations.

Personal concerns might also hinder Chinese international students’ willingness to seek for academic support, for example, limited English-speaking ability, the sense of shame driven by Chinese culture, lack of knowledge of counseling services, and cost considerations. Yan (2008) pointed out that the professional academic service system is not popular in China and students lack familiarity with counseling concepts. When Chinese students encounter difficulties in a new learning environment, they are not aware that the support service is available to them. Even if they do know about the service, some of them usually hesitate to seek help. According to the findings, Yan (2008) suggests that Chinese students should get rid of the shackles of traditional Chinese culture and take the initiative to find more institutional support.
2.3.3 The main coping strategies adapted by Chinese international students in learning

Coping is intertwined with academic learning (Yu, 2016). Coping is described as thoughts and behaviors that people utilize to deal with the stressful situation in order to adapt to the new environment (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified two broad categories of coping strategies: problem-focused coping (actively taking actions to solve or alter the problem itself), and emotion-focused coping (regulating emotional distress associated with the problem). International students may encounter many academic challenges in the new learning culture, and the strategies they use to cope with these challenges will impact their learning outcomes and personal growth (Chun, Moos, & Cronkite, 2006; Yu, 2016).

The preference of coping strategies is influenced by cultural values (Yeh & Inose, 2002). Research has demonstrated that endurance or forbearance coping is a common strategy adopted by Chinese international students (Cao, Zhu & Meng, 2018; Yan, 2008; Zhang, 2013). In the study at Arizona State University, Yan (2008) found that the enduring strategy utilized by Chinese students contributed to their ability to survive the intense academic pressure. According to Yan, although Chinese participants encountered many challenges in their transformation from the inherited learning culture to the new learning culture, they believed that suffering was a part of personal growth, and the process of enduring suffering was a sign of maturity. Frank's (2000) finding was consistent with Yan's study. He found that the endurance strategy helped Chinese students to patiently cope with academic difficulties.

Yeh and Inose (2002) noted that when many Chinese or other Asian students have emotional difficulties, they tend to keep the pressure on themselves instead of seeking professional help. Cao, Zhu, and Meng (2018) found that Chinese students were reluctant to disclose mental health needs to others beyond family or social networks. And they rarely utilized mental health services or initiated a counseling relationship. Yan (2008) also revealed that it was difficult for Chinese international students to express their emotional problems to professionals. There are at least two reasons for this. First, anxiety about seeking help and language barriers may prevent Chinese students from accurately expressing their problems to professional counselors (Anthur, 1997). Second, given that Confucianism encourages endurance and sacrifice, most Chinese students do not even consider consulting professionals to solve their mental health problems when they encounter difficulties in learning. Even if they are aware of the existence of consulting services, they might hesitate to seek professional help, because sharing their inner world with strangers may make them feel shameful and uncomfortable (Yeh & Inose, 2002; Yan, 2008).

Further, Cao, Zhu, and Meng (2018) investigated sixteen Chinese international students about their coping strategies in dealing with academic pressure at a university in Belgium. The analysis of data from in-depth interviews revealed that Chinese students often use problem-focused strategies to cope with competency-related pressure (such as language barriers; and self-management). For other types of academic pressure (such as intercultural communication, academic resources, and workload), Chinese students tend to adopt emotion-focused strategies to internalize these pressures. According to Cao, Zhu, and Meng (2018), the possible reason for this difference was that the competency-related pressure may directly influence Chinese international students’ academic outcomes, while other types of stress, such as intercultural communication, might just affect their academic integration rather than
academic success. Because Chinese culture attached great importance to academic achievement, Chinese international students were compelled to take active actions to improve their self-efficacy. By contrast, when they dealt with other types of academic stressors, they were less willing to take the initiative actions or disclose their inner world to others.

2.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY

Under the influence of different cultures, education has different paradigms. Transferring from the previous learning environment to a new learning environment is a process of cultural learning. When Chinese students study abroad, the mismatch between their inherited learning culture and the new learning culture might lead to learning shock. Thus, in order to achieve their academic goal, Chinese international students need to adopt strategies to respond to new learning demands. In light of this, this chapter provided a review of relevant literature about the core features of Confucian and Socratic learning cultures. The Finnish learning culture was also discussed. Under the Confucian-Socratic framework, the learning characteristics of Chinese learners were analyzed. As the learning culture impacts international students’ learning experiences, this chapter selectively reviewed the empirical studies on Chinese students’ learning experiences in Western learning cultures, including the main negative factors related to Chinese students’ academic learning and the strategies used by Chinese international students to cope with academic difficulties.
3 THEORETICAL MODELS ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS’ LEARNING EXPERIENCES

As discussed in Chapter 2, learning is embedded in culture. Since the purpose of this research is to explore the learning experiences of Chinese postgraduate students in a Finnish university, this chapter will present the crucial models related to cultural differences and acculturation of international students in the higher education.

3.1 MODELS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Culture has a profound influence on how people think and act (Dodd, 1998). When most people simply perceive another culture through their own cultural lens, the differences between cultures may lead to misunderstandings and even conflicts. Some friction can also occur in the context of intercultural education (Hofstede, 2002). A number of theoretic models are used by researchers from the discipline of education to understand how cultural differences may affect intercultural education settings. Two of the most influential frameworks in intercultural comparisons are the context model of Hall (1976) and the cultural dimensions of Hofstede (1980; see Cardon, 2008, for citations of both authors).

3.1.1 Hall’s high-context and low-context cultures model

Based on the amount of information that a person in a given culture prefers to manage, Hall (1976) proposes two key terms “high-context cultures” and “low-context cultures” to compare the differences in cultural issues. Context is “the information that surrounds an event; it is inextricably bound up with the meaning of that event” (Hall & Hall, 1990, p.6). In Hall’s concept, context makes it possible for people to deal with the amounts of complex information. He points out that meaning does not exist without a combination of context and information.

According to Hall (1976), in high-context cultures, people tend to give high priority to long-term and intimate relationships. Information is widely shared by family, friends, and colleagues. As a consequence, the structure of social hierarchy is valued, people hesitate to disclose their inner feelings, and the information is mainly transmitted through internalized context rather than the explicit verbal messages (Kim, Pan & Park, 1998). By contrast, in low-context cultures, people tend to give value to individuality. Interpersonal relationships are relatively less connected. Therefore, the social hierarchy has less influence on people, the expression of individuals is self-opinionated, and the information is transmitted through the explicit code (Hall & Hall, 1990). Nonverbal and contextual cues are usually ignored (Hall, 1976). People from the high-context cultures may consider people from low-context cultures are blunt and impolite, while people from low context may consider people from high-context are mysterious and unwilling to disclose information. In general, compared with individuals from high-context cultures, individuals from low-context cultures
are more easily to develop short-term relationships with strangers because they rarely use internalized contexts in conversations (Hall, 1976).

The concept of high-context and low-context cultures is useful because it explains how people in a certain culture interact with others and provides a perspective for understanding cultural differences. Based on Hall’s framework, Kim, Pan, and Park (1998) identified five theoretical dimensions of high-context and low-context cultures, which included (1) social orientation, (2) commitment, (3) responsibility, (4) confrontation, and (5) communication.

Social orientation

In high-context cultures, bonds between people are relatively close and stable. The community, institution, society are seen as individuals’ extended family (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). People show their loyalty and cohesiveness in their organizations. They are willing to make necessary sacrifices to fulfill collective goals. Furthermore, individuals from high-context cultures exhibit stronger exclusivity than those from low-context cultures do. However, in low-context cultures, the bonds between people are loose and somewhat fragile (Hall, 1976). Individuals primarily focus on their own welfare and interests, so they might leave or quit when groups do not positively influence their personal development. In their view, there is no big distinction between insider and outsider. People from low-context cultures believe that it is important to maintain one’s independent identity regardless of the external circumstances.

Commitment

Due to the intimate interpersonal bonds and high cohesiveness, individuals from high-context cultures demonstrate high commitment to complete action chains (Kim, Pan, & Park 1998). In other words, they usually do what they say. They might feel shame if they do not live up to their commitment. Therefore, individuals from high-context remain extremely cautious attitudes towards their words and promises, especially in the case of unclear relationships. They tend to be reluctant to start something when a situation is uncertain (Hall & Hall, 1990). By contrast, in low-context cultures, because the interpersonal relationships are relatively less connected, people do not feel constrained to complete the action chains (Hall, 1976).

Responsibility

Social orientation and commitment are associated with responsibility. In a high-context culture, the influence of social hierarchy and norms on individual roles and responsibilities is greater than that in low-context cultures (Kim, Pan, & Park 1998). Those in positions of authority are responsible for the actions of their subordinates. Subordinates tend to rely on their superiors to make decisions. By contrast, people from low-context cultures tend to be independent workers. Subordinates may be more involved in the decision-making process. As a consequence, responsibility is spread throughout the system and is hard to nail down (Hall, 1976). If something goes wrong, the scapegoat is usually found at the lowest level (Kim, Pan, & Park 1998).
Confrontation

In high-context cultures, people see issues and people involved as a whole (Kim, Pan, & Park, 1998). Therefore, criticizing an idea is to criticize the person who holds it, which makes an individual feel embarrassed or lose face (Nishimura, Nevgi, & Tella, 2008). In light of this, people tend to use avoidance or non-confrontation to maintain social harmony and close relationships. The concept of face in a high-context culture is an obvious burden on its people, because individuals need to avoid disputes by suppressing their feelings and interests. On the contrary, in a low-context culture, people distinguish conflicts from related people (Tella, 1996). Even if their opinions are inconsistent, it does not affect their friendly relations. Thus, open and direct criticism and confrontation are valued in low-context cultures.

Communication

In high context cultures, individuals tend to rely on context-based information to communicate (Kim, Pan, & Park 1998). And communication is carried out in a roundabout and indirect way. In other words, because information is widely shared by the members of high-context cultures, it requires both senders and receivers to have extensive cultural programming which is used to compensate for any relative inaccuracy in language. Generally speaking, communication in high-context cultures is more economical and faster than that in low-context cultures (Nishimura, Nevgi, & Tella, 2008). In low context cultures, individuals are more likely to employ the direct verbal style. Because information is less widely shared by communal members, it requires less cultural programming. The sender does not need to encode the indirect meaning, and the receiver does not need to decode the implicit meaning as well. For people from low-context cultures, the information is obtained mainly through the content of the communication, not the context of communication (Hall & Hall, 1990).

The limitations of Hall’s context model

Although Hall’s high-context and low-context cultures model is commonly used in intercultural studies, it is strongly criticized by some researchers for its limitations (Chuang, 2003; Holliday, Hyde & Kullman, 2010). For example, Cardon (2008) claimed that Hall’s model lacked empirical validation. Although Hall provided many cultural anecdotes to prove his conclusion, he barely revealed how he used tools or measurements to develop his cultural model. This approach cannot fully satisfy the social science community. For Hall, he “rarely used his findings in his writings except in a very general way” (Guth, 2014, p.22). Furthermore, Ryan (2011) pointed out that Hall’s cultural model is too simple. The cultural stereotypes might lead to more misunderstandings and obstacles in intercultural comparison. He believes that the results of these stereotypes violate the original intention of creating a cultural model.
3.1.2 Hofstede’s cultural dimensions model

Geert Hofstede is a social psychologist from Dutch. His empirical cross-national studies offer a new perspective on the study of cultural differences (Fang, 2003). Based on the analysis of 116,000 International Business Machines (IBM) employees’ values of workplaces in 40 different countries and regions, Hofstede identified his four-dimensional model for understanding the cultural differences among people of different nations in 1980 (Hofstede 1980). These four dimensions are named as (a) power distance, (b) individualism (as opposed to collectivism), (c) uncertainty avoidance, and (d) masculinity (as opposed to femininity). The fifth cultural dimension of long-term orientation (as opposed to short-term orientation) was formally incorporated into the model by Hofstede and Bond in 1991. Later, the sixth dimension of indulgence (as opposed to restraint) was further identified by Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov in 2010, but this has not yet been fully added into the model.

As there were no IBM official offices in China until the late 1980s, China was not included in the list of 40 cultures in Hofstede’s original model. However, it was later incorporated into the model in 1988 (Fernandez, et al., 1997). In light of the cultural perspective of this research, I present a comparison of China and Finland based on Hofstede’s five-dimensional model in Figure 3 below.

![Figure 3. Hofstede’s value measures for China and Finland (based on Hofstede et al., 2010).](image)
PDI: Power Distance Index; IDV: Individualism Index; UAI: Uncertainty Avoidance Index; MAS: Masculinity Index; LTO: Long–Term Orientation
Power distance in relation to education

Hofstede et al. (2010) define power distance as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (p. 61). Power Distance Index (PDI) scores refer to the degree of dependence relationships in a country. In small power distance (SPD) countries, subordinates depend less on bosses and have limited tolerance of unequal distributions of power; while in large power distance (LPD) countries, subordinates are highly dependent on the boss and hesitate to approach and contradict bosses directly.

From an educational perspective, in LPD nations, like China, the relationships between students and teachers tend to be more hierarchical and formal. Teachers are regarded as “gurus” who transfer “personal wisdom to students” and are highly respected (Hofstede, 1991, p. 37). Students are supposed to follow teachers’ instructions and advice. It is disrespectful or undesirable to contradict or criticize teachers publicly. If students behave inappropriately, teachers typically ask parents to intervene and expect them to help students to correct mistakes. The educational style in LPD nations is teacher-centered and the success of students’ learning is highly determined by the excellence of their teachers. However, in SPD countries, the relationships between students and teachers are equal. Students are encouraged to question teachers and think independently. Parents often take the side with the student rather than advocate for the teacher if a student misbehaves. The educational style in SPD nations is student-centered and the learning outcomes rely heavily on the excellence of students.

Individualism/ Collectivism in relation to education

According to Hofstede et al. (2010), individualism pertains to “a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him- or herself and his or her immediate family only” (p. 519). By contrast, collectivism, the opposite of individualism, refers to “a society in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lives continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (p. 515). In the individualist society, individuals are more independent from the groups, and their interests can prevail. However, in the collectivist society, groups protect individuals, but in turn individuals must be loyal.

When applying the individualism-collectivism dimension to a school setting, there are strong differences between cultures. In the individualist society, the purpose of learning is considered to be “how to learn” and learning is not limited to one age group; whilst, in the collectivist society, learning is a one-time process, mainly for young people who are expected to know “how to do” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.119). “How to learn” emphasizes how students apply the knowledge they have learned to deal with new and unknown situations; in contrast, “how to do” encourage students to learn necessary skills and virtues from teachers and prepare themselves to be qualified group members (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Chinese culture values collectivism. The aim of education in China is to gain prestige and higher social status. Moreover, the virtues of harmony and maintaining face are fundamental concepts in Chinese schools. Students hesitate to speak differently in a large group. Instead, they prefer a carefully planned conversation or a conventional
verbal exchange agreed by a group. Confrontations, debates, and open discussion of conflicts should be avoided in order to not to hurt others (Hofstede et al., 2010; Zhang, 2013).

**Masculinity/ Femininity in relation to education**

Hofstede et al. (2010) uses masculinity and femininity to describe the polarization between gender roles in national cultures. In nations with high MAS scores, “men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.519); by contrast, in nations with high femininity scores, the roles of men and women overlap.

In an educational context, masculine societies, like China, emphasize academic grades and competitions. Students are encouraged to compete openly and make themselves visible in class. Teachers tend to praise good students rather than weaker students. Students are very concerned about exam scores and rankings, which are considered the essence of learning. Failure in academic performance is unacceptable. By contrast, in feminine-oriented societies, the behaviors of students are characterized by solidarity and negotiation. Students are less concerned about grades. Passing exams is regarded as sufficient and average students are perceived as a norm. Teachers tend to praise weaker students rather than good students.

**Uncertainty avoidance in relation to education**

Hofstede describes uncertainty avoidance as “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.191). The uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) refers to the degree of anxiety, rule orientation, and employment stability. Individuals from countries with high UAI scores are characterized as being busy, fidgety, emotional, aggressive, or suspicious, while individuals from countries with low UAI scores are perceived as being “dull, quiet, easygoing, indolent, controlled, or lazy” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.197).

According to Hofstede’s exploration of this dimension in the context of education across cultures, students from a country with low UAI scores are more comfortable in unstructured learning situations. They are concerned with vague objectives, broad assignments, and good discussions. It is acceptable for teachers to say they do not know all the answers to questions and use plain language to teach; by contrast, students from a country with high UAI are more comfortable in a structured learning situation. They are concerned with the precise objectives, detailed assignments, and right answers. Teachers are considered as the experts and they use academic language to teach.

In the Chinese educational context, there are some questions about the accuracy of this dimension. Generally speaking, China is a weak uncertainty avoidance country and Chinese people are relatively comfortable with a higher degree of uncertainty. According to the findings of Hofstede, education in China should be characterized as unstructured, and where innovative approaches are more important than correct answers. However, when applying the UAI into the Chinese teaching and learning environment, characteristics of uncertainty avoidance do not match the description of Hofstede. These contradictions in the dimension of uncertainty avoidance have
caught the attention of Hofstede and other researchers. Bond (1988) suggests that UAI is particularly important in Western countries, but in East Asian countries, an additional dimension of value is playing a role, including values associated with the doctrine of Confucius. Later, Hofstede and Bond (1988) thought that there might be a fifth dimension, which was eventually officially named as long-term orientation. The confliction between the uncertainty avoidance dimension and Chinese value properly demonstrates Western ethical values are guided by religion and the pursuit of one truth, while the ethical values of Confucianism are not guided by religion, but rather by the practical situation and the endurance to the different truths (Hofstede & Bond, 1988).

**Long-term / short-term orientation in relation to education**

Long-term orientation (LTO) stands for “the fostering of virtues oriented toward future rewards—in particular, perseverance and thrift. Its opposite pole, short-term orientation, stands for the fostering of virtues related to the past and present—in particular, respect for tradition, preservation of face, and fulfilling social obligations” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.239). Individuals from long-term orientation consider that truth is contextual and can vary depending on the situation. They are characterized as being adaptable, perseverant, and more likely to save for the future. Conversely, individuals from short-term orientation culture emphasize finding absolute truth, respecting tradition, and pursuing quick results.

In an educational context, students from a country with LTO, like China, are more likely to see academic failure or success as the result of their own effort. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) pointed out that students in long-term orientation cultures tend to demonstrate a “talent for applied concrete sciences” and appear “to be good at basic mathematics and at solving formal problems (and not theoretical and abstract science)” (p.217). Sacrificing short-term interests for long-term benefits are encouraged. Conversely, students from a country with STO tend to attribute chance as the source of academic achievement. They are good at theoretical and abstract science, not mathematics and formal problems solving. Short-term goals and continuous progress are emphasized by students from a country with STO.

**The limitations of Hofstede’s theory**

Despite the popularity of Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions, many researchers have raised some extensive criticisms. For example, McSweeney (2002) accused Hofstede of using the survey as the only research tool and simply equating culture to the nation. McSweeney (2002) also pointed out five dimensions of the cultural model seems to be unable to deal with the complexity of cultural differences, and the data from IBM is now obsolete. In response to McSweeney’s (2002), Hofstede (2002) agrees with his view that the nation is not the best way to measure cultural differences but often the only way to do that. Hofstede (2002) welcomes other researchers to define more dimensions with new research instruments, but he refutes the criticism of outdated data. He claims that the data has a deep foundation, and recent replications demonstrate no loss of effectiveness. Additionally, Fang (2003) argues that Hofstede’s fifth dimension is not only unfamiliar to the Western mind,
but also confusing to Chinese mind, because in Hofstede’s fifth dimension, the values of long-term orientation and the values of short-term orientation are not opposites but interrelate with each another. Fang (2003) also states that the research samples of the fifth dimension have a flaw. The first four dimensions of Hofstede’s culture are based on surveys of IBM employees, while the fifth is based on samples from university students. Meanwhile, the questions about values in the questionnaire are not appropriate for students to answer because many of the questions are too conservative. Therefore, Fang (2003) calls for a new perspective to possibly revise the fifth dimension in the future.

The most common criticism of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions is that oversimplified images of national culture will create individual stereotypes (Fang, 2003; Sanderson, 2007; Signorini, Wiesemes, & Murphy, 2009). In other words, it might run the risk of predicting an individual’s behaviors based on national cultural norms (Sanderson, 2007). In order to avoid this drawback, the name of each cultural dimension in this study is simply used as a terminology that refers to recognized behaviors of Chinese students, rather than making assumptions or predictions about students of a particular nationality.

### 3.2 MODELS OF ACCULTURATION

The first classic definition of acculturation was put forward by anthropologists in the 1930s (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). It refers to changes that take place as a result of interactions between different cultural groups. In the 1960s, psychologists have begun to study acculturation at the individual-level (Lakey, 2003), that is, how individuals change under the influence of a different culture. Since then, researchers have been exploring models of intercultural transformation, trying to understand the process of sojourners changes in a new environment. This section will mainly review three types of models: (1) the stage model, (2) the cyclical and recursive model, and (3) the strategies model.

#### 3.2.1 The stage models

**Four-stage model**

Lysgaard’s (1955) U-curve model and Oberg’s (1960) culture shock model are representative stage models that have been used for half a century. Lysgaard (1955), based on the investigation of the experience of Norwegian students in the U.S., found that individuals who stayed in the United States for six-eighteen months experienced more acculturation difficulties than those who spent less than six months or more than eighteen months in the United States. He used a U-shaped curve to elaborate the acculturation process: honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment. In the initial stage (honeymoon), individuals are superficially immersed in the host country’s culture and are excited about the new scenery, sounds, and smells. In the second phase (crisis), individuals gradually lose interest in the cultural freshness of the host country. They begin to be overly concerned with the differences between the new culture and their own culture, coupled with frustration and helplessness. In the third stage (recovery), individuals gradually accept the host culture. They are able to resolve
some problems in their daily life. The final stage (adjustment) is the mastery stage where individuals obtain the ability to function and live effectively in the host culture (Black & Mendenhall, 1991). Oberg (1960) proposed a pattern of acculturation that is very similar to the U-curve theory. He described that individuals may experience culture shock when they move to an unfamiliar environment. Culture shock generally includes four different stages: honeymoon, rejection / hostility, beginning resolution, and acculturation (Muecke, Lenthail, & Lindeman, 2011). While culture shock is generally negatively associated with psychological adjustment of individuals, culture shock has also been regarded as a stimulus for acquiring new skills (Zhou, et al., 2008).

Five-stage model

Adler (1975) viewed the transitional experience as a process from low self-cultural awareness to high self-cultural awareness. He proposed a five-phase model to describe the transitional experience: contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy, and independence. At the contact stage, individuals view the new environment mainly from their own cultural perspective. They usually feel excited about the new experience. However, the cultural differences have been ignored. At the second stage, the loss of support from the original culture and the misunderstanding of the new culture will affect individuals' self-esteem. The awareness of cultural differences is growing. At the reintegration stage, individuals show strong rejection of the main culture. They move closer to the solutions of difficulties. In the stage of autonomy, individuals' understanding of the host culture has increased. Their cultural flexibility and skills have developed. At the final stage, individuals can fully accept cultural differences and similarities. They become more independent. Similar to Adler’s model, Yoshikawa (1987) put forward a five-stage development model based on his experience in the USA. He described individual acculturation as contact, integration, reintegration, autonomy, and double swing. Later, Burnett and Gardner (2006) summarized the transitional experience of Chinese international students in a similar five stages to Yoshikawa’s (1987): encounter, disorientation, reaction, independence, and internalization.

Six-stage model

Based on concepts from constructivist psychology and communication theory, Bennett (1993) proposed the intercultural sensitivity model to describe how people experience and participate in cultural differences. The model consists of six phases: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. In the first three stages, the sojourners consider their culture as the center of reality, while in the latter three stages, the sojourners gradually acquire intercultural competence and can view their own culture from the lens of other cultures. The basic assumption of the model is that the more sophisticated a person’s perception of cultural differences is, the greater his competence in intercultural relations will be. According to Bennett, the movement of an individual’s intercultural competence is one-way and permanent, although there may be setbacks in some positions.
3.2.2 The cyclical and recursive model

The stress-adaptation-growth dynamic model

From a psychological perspective, Kim (1988) used a stress-adaptation-growth dynamic model to describe the transformation of immigrants and sojourners. According to Kim, the “stress” leads to change and personal growth. Specifically, individuals may encounter difficulties which are caused by mismatch expectations in the host culture. These difficulties may create stress which leads to a defensive reaction. Then individuals will activate their adaptation competence and ultimately achieve personal growth. Contrary to the stage models of acculturation, Kim’s model pictures acculturation as a continual cyclical and recursive progression (Figure 4). It indicates that with the growth of time, the intensity and extent of stress will slowly disappear, and the individuals’ acculturation competence will gradually increase.

The problem with Kim’s (1988) model lies in her assumption that acculturation is a process of separating from one’s original culture while engaging with the host culture. According to her, when sojourners learn and acquire unfamiliar elements of the host culture, their inherited culture will have a negative impact on their acculturation process. She seems to regard the relation between original culture and host culture as a competitive game rather than a win-win situation. Thus, with the development of enculturation of the host culture, sojourners’ inherited cultural attributes will be eliminated ultimately. Second, Kim is optimistic about the outcomes of acculturation while ignoring other possibilities (Berry, 1997). In addition to pursuing the complete acculturation to the host culture, sojourners should have other choices (Schwartz, et al., 2010).

![Figure 4. Stress-adaptation-growth dynamics (Kim, 1988, p.56)]
The Affective, cognitive and behavioral model

From a socio-psychological perspective, Anderson (1994) proposed the affective, cognitive, and behavioral model to conceptualize the transition process (Figure 5). Four major stages constitute Anderson’s model: cultural encounter, obstacle, response generation, and overcoming. At each stage of Anderson’s model, the interactions between affective and cognitive lead to behavioral responses, which are central to the acculturation process.

According to Anderson, intercultural adaptation begins with cultural contacts after individuals enter the new environment. In the second phase, individuals will experience many obstacles. These obstacles come from either the environment (e.g. local bureaucratic processes, accommodation difficulties) or the self (e.g. lack of language knowledge, lack of social support from the familiar culture, loneliness). In the third stage, the obstacles will put individuals in a state of disequilibrium. Thus, individuals will generate various behaviors. The purpose of these behaviors is to improve individuals’ compatibility with the environment. The fourth stage is the overcoming stage, and adjustment is usually (but not always) achieved. It is worth noting that the stages of obstacle and response generation form a repeating cycle before the overcoming stage is reached.

Figure 5. Anderson’s Affective, cognitive and behavioral model (Anderson, 1994, as cited in Zhu, 2012, p.32)

In sum, Kim’s (1988) stress-adaptation-growth model and Anderson’s (1994) affective, cognitive, and behavioral model have something in common. First, both of them emphasize acculturation as a cyclical and recursive process. Second, contrary to previous studies, they believe that intercultural obstacles not only bring stress and anxiety to individuals, but also stimulate their growth and development (Zhu, 2012).

3.2.3 The strategies model

Berry (2005) develops a classic strategies model for acculturation. According to him, acculturation is “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (Berry, 2005, p.698). Different to previous unidimensional acculturation
models which posit that if a person becomes more attached to the host culture, his/her retention of the heritage culture will be correspondingly weakened (Cheung-Blunden & Juang, 2008). Berry believes that the process of acculturation does not automatically imply that individuals will abandon their original culture (Schwartz et al., 2010). In Berry’s concept, not all individuals acculturate in the same orientations (Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010). They could choose the different ways of adapting to the host culture.

According to Berry (2005), the acculturation model has two basic dimensions: (1) a relative preference for maintaining one’s heritage culture and identity; (2) a relative preference for having contact with and participating in the larger society along with other ethnocultural groups” (p.704). These two dimensions create four types of orientations or strategies for individuals (Figure 6). Specifically, integration occurs when individuals strive to maintain their original culture while at the same time valuing the host culture. Assimilation refers to the refusal to retain the original culture and the complete acceptance of the host culture. Separation describes individuals avoid the cultural contact with the host country while maintaining their original culture. Marginalization is present when individuals reject their original culture and avoiding involvement with host culture at the same time. Berry (1997) found that the most preferred strategy used by sojourners is integration which can produce fruitful outcomes. Berry also indicated that sojourners experience less socio-cultural stress when they employ integration; whereas the socio-cultural stress of marginalization is high. The assimilation strategy produces a modest level of socio-cultural stress.

![Figure 6. Berry's acculturation orientations/strategies (Berry, 2005)](image)

Although Berry’s model contributes to the research on acculturation, it has been criticized by some scholars (Weinreich, 2009; Piontkowski, Rohmann & Florack, 2002). For example, Del Pilar and Udasco (2004) questioned the validity of marginalization as one of the four approaches of acculturation. They argued that the possibility of developing one’s own cultural identity without drawing on the original culture and accepting the new culture is very low. Furthermore, Schwartz et al. (2010) suggested that there might be multiple subcategories in Berry’s concept of integration.
3.3 CHAPTER SUMMARY

Numerous researchers from social, psychological, and educational science have contributed their knowledge and experience to advancing people understanding of the learning experiences of international students in higher education (Zhou, et al., 2008). Due to the complexity of intercultural experience, each model created by these researchers only holds “a piece of the puzzle” (Zhu, 2012, p.34). In other words, although each model has its own merits and features, there is no single model that can fully explain the intercultural experiences of international students.

After critically reviewing the influential cultural differences models and acculturation models, the current study adopts Hofstede’s five-dimensional model (2010) to understand the inherited learning culture of Chinese postgraduate students. The main reason for choosing Hofstede’s five-dimensional model is that its cultural dimensions make it easier for people to understand why one culture is so different from another. In addition, the names of each cultural dimension in Hofstede’s model (power distance, individualism, etc.) offer a nomenclature for the phenomena of cultural differences, alleviating the need for a lengthy description.

Berry’s (2005) acculturation model is appropriate for this study in exploring how Chinese students acculturate in the Finnish learning environment. The reason for selecting this model is that it is the first model that proposes that receiving-culture acquisition and heritage-culture retention are two independent dimensions. Although Chinese international students may encounter some similar acculturative difficulties, not all individuals experience these difficulties in the same way. This bi-directional perspective helps us understand the attitudes and behaviors of Chinese students in Finnish higher education.
4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

In order to explore and elucidate the learning experiences of Chinese postgraduate students at the UEF, this chapter will discuss the research questions that this study would like to address, the rationale for using case study as the qualitative research approach, the details of data collection and processing, the procedure of data analysis, the strategies for research validity and reliability, and ethical issues.

4.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research task: how do Chinese postgraduate students perceive their intercultural learning experiences at the UEF?

Research questions:
1) How do they end up to study at the UEF?
2) How do they perceive pedagogical differences between the UEF and their previous university in China?
3) How do they perceive academic challenges at the UEF?
4) How do they cope with the academic difficulties in the transition process?
5) According to their learning experiences, what suggestions do they have for incoming Chinese students and for the UEF?

4.2 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

The term qualitative research is defined in many ways by different researchers in higher education (Savenye & Robinson, 2005). Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2011) conceptualized qualitative research as an approach that allows researchers to “examine people’s experiences in details by using a specific set of research methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observations, content analysis, visual methods and life histories or biographies” (p.9). According to Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (2007), qualitative research lay the emphasis on identifying “how people interact with their world (what they do), and then to determine how they experience and understand that world: how they feel, what they believe, and how they explain structure and relationships within some segment of their existence” (p.99). Mertens (2014) stated that “qualitative approach is used in research that is designed to provide an in-depth description of a specific program, practice, or setting” (p.236). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) defined qualitative research as “involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). Inherent in almost all definitions is that qualitative researchers tend to view social life as a meaningful construction in which interconnected elements can be described (David & Sutton, 2011). Put another way, the focus on meaning in this sense is a reflection that qualitative approach emphasizes the subjective and the constructed nature of social reality.
Qualitative research has several key features. First, it is strongly associated with inductive approach (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Inductive approach, according to David and Sutton (2011), refers to setting out to explore a field when little is known about it or when one wants to get new perspectives on it. Hence, qualitative researchers do not use a pre-emptive structure in the data collection, but rather “generate or construct knowledge, hypotheses, and grounded theory from the data collection during fieldwork” (Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p.34). In order to yield deep insights regarding human experiences and opinions, participants in qualitative research are not selected randomly, but purposively in an effort to carefully represent their motives, feelings, choices, behaviors, and incidents of interpersonal cooperation and conflict in details (Denzin, 1994). According to Savenye and Robinson (2005), qualitative researchers usually draw conclusions during the process of the study, while constantly testing and revising those conclusions.

Second, the product of qualitative research is thickly descriptive (Geertz, 1973). Qualitative research tends to use a wide and deep angle to explore multiple dimensions and layers of real life (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). In pursuit of this, qualitative researchers do not collect data in the form of numbers, but rather conduct observations, in-depth interviews, and field notes in a linguistic form. This means that qualitative researchers try to provide readers with accurate and deep descriptions about what is happening among participants within a specified setting. In a sense, the use of thick descriptions from the perspective of the participants helps researchers and readers understand the reality in a natural and holistic way (Fetterman, 1989).

Third, the researcher in qualitative research is the main instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1998). Put another way, researchers in qualitative study function as a tool in exploring the meaning of human experience. Qualitative researchers generally contend that it is important to put the researcher him- or herself into participants’ shoes, because the researcher needs to understand something from the perspectives of other people (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Thus, rather than using standardized instruments or rating scales, qualitative researchers collect data themselves by interview questions, observation records and fieldwork notes (Creswell, 2007). Because qualitative researchers try to get close with their participants in a study, the findings from one study should not be generalized to other contexts (Savenye & Robinson, 2005).

The choice of the research approach should be determined by the explorative questions (Creswell, 2012). This study takes the form of a qualitative approach, because rather than attempting to find statistically significant relationships, this research intends to examine the learning experience of Chinese postgraduate students at the UEF and seek for the meaning from it (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). The research questions and aims lend themselves to a qualitative research approach.

4.3 THE RATIONALE FOR USING CASE STUDY

Creswell (2007) states that there are five common qualitative approaches in social sciences research, which includes narrative research, phenomenology, case study, ethnography, and grounded theory. The term case study is closely linked to qualitative research (Gray, 2009). As one of the first types of approach in the field of qualitative methodology, case study accounts for a large proportion of research in many disciplines, such as education, business, law, management, and public administration, to address a wide range of research questions (Harrison, et al., 2017). According to
Flyvbjerg (2011), “much of what we know today about the empirical world has been produced by case study research, and many of the most treasured classics in each discipline are case studies” (p.302).

Human individuals, families, organizations, communities, even countries in a particular context can be studied as cases (Gray, 2009). Yin (2009) defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). He held the view that case study is the best approach when the main research questions focus on “how” type of questions, and when a researcher intends to explore an issue within a bounded system or particular setting (Yin, 2003). According to Starman (2013), “a case study is a description and analysis of an individual matter or case with the purpose to identify variables, structures, forms and orders of interaction between the participants in the situation (theoretical purpose), or, in order to assess the performance of work or progress in development (practical purpose)” (p. 31). Flyvbjerg (2011) stated that case study research gives emphasis on a particular thing in a particular time and a particular place and that the product of an investigation is descriptive and heuristic in nature. In some sense, the description and analysis of a case study focus on developmental elements in relation to the environment (Harrison, et al., 2017).

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of case studies (Robson, 2007, cited in Anyolo, 2015, p.51)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages of Case Studies</th>
<th>Disadvantages of Case Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Case studies consequently give an opportunity to carry out a study in depth, which can capture complexities, relationships and processes</td>
<td>The credibility of generalization from case studies is challenged, as they depend on a different logic from that familiar in survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case studies encourage the use of multiple methods of collecting data, and of multiple data sources</td>
<td>Case studies typically seek to focus on situations as they occur naturally and hence observer effects caused by the presence of the researcher can be problematic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The boundaries of case studies are flexible and can often be tailored to the time and resources you have available</td>
<td>The flexibility nature of case studies makes it difficult for the researcher to keep to the deadlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case studies are less artificial and detached than traditional approaches such as experiments and surveys</td>
<td>Case studies are soft opinions and this may often lead to them not be acceptable in some course regulations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case studies can be used for a wide variety of research purposes and for widely different types of cases</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Like other research approaches, case study has its strengths and limitations which should understand and acknowledged. Several advantages and disadvantages of case study approach are described in Table 1 (Robson, 2007).

It is clear from Table 1 that the most important advantage of the case study is that it provides researchers with an opportunity to obtain detailed and relevant data in real-life situations (Harrison, et al., 2017). This intensive research approach uses multiple data sources (such as participant observations, in-depth interviews, and field notes) and runs deep (Yin, 2003). Thus, the case study has a high level of internal validity, which makes a research very valuable. It is widely believed that the case study approach is preferable when a researcher has little control over a complex social phenomenon but desires to understand it (Flyvbjerg, 2011). According to Starman (2013), the case study approach allows a researcher to get as close to his or her area of interest as possible, and therefore new hypotheses and deeper layers that previous theories have missed can be created. However, the major problem of the case study approach is that it lacks generalizability (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Because case studies are conducted in a particular context, their high specificity cannot offer enough grounds for other scientific researches (Yin, 2009). This study attempts to understand the learning experiences of Chinese postgraduate students at the UEF in details, thus, the strength of case study approach allows the researcher to obtain in-depth relevant data within a specific context (learning context of the UEF). The aim of this study agrees with the rationale for conducting case study research. The data collection process will be discussed in the next section.

4.4 DATA COLLECTION AND PROCESSING

After I justified the rationale of the case study approach in this study, I utilized the semi-structure interview with sixteen Chinese postgraduate students at the UEF to gather the data. The choice of the semi-structure interview was influenced by the study purpose and the questions that this research would like to address. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), interviewing is a powerful and efficient way to make meaning of people’s experiences through language. And semi-structured interview is a tool which is “flexible and likely to promote fruitful reflection by the participants” (Mill, 2001, p. 385).

4.4.1 Pilot interview

An interview has been widely regarded as a valuable data collection tool (Creswell, 2007). Through the use of interviews, qualitative researchers can understand the experience of people and how they make meaning of that experience (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). According to Fontana and Frey (2005), interviewing is an interactive process in which the interviewer engaged in conducting dialogues with interviewee(s) for the purpose of obtaining research relevant information. Three main types of interview are frequently employed in higher education research, including structured interview, semi-structured interview, and unstructured interview (Schwandt, 2007). The key feature of structured interview is that it mostly contains structured and explicit questions. The interviewees have limited freedom in a structured interview. The semi-structured interview is more flexible. While it is organized with a set of pre-determined
questions, it allows unanticipated questions to emerge from the conversation between interviewer and interviewee(s). The unstructured interview does not have any pre-determined set of questions or a specific framework for questioning. The interview follows the direction of interviewee’s response (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Glesne, 2011). According to Flick (2009), case studies are closely linked to semi-structured interviews and unstructured interviews because interviewees’ opinions are better expressed.

This research employs a face-to-face, semi-structured interview. A strength of the semi-structured interview is that it allows interviewers to delve into totally unforeseen issues (Yin, 2009). Rather than following a list of pre-determined questions, the interviewer has an opportunity to explore spontaneous issues raised by interviewees (Creswell, 2009). This flexibility is helpful for researchers to find out more information about complex behaviors, beliefs, and experiences of interviewees. In this study, the use of the semi-structured interview not only provides an opportunity for the researcher to probe for the learning experiences of individual participants at the UEF in depth, but also allows participants to illustrate their opinions which they feel are significant.

In order to ensure that the interview protocol can yield important information related to the research aim, I conducted a pilot interview prior to data collection. According to the principle that the sample size of a reasonable pilot study is 10% to 20% of the actual study (Baker, 1994), I selected two Chinese postgraduate students to participate in the pilot interview. One student was in the field of education and another came from the field of chemistry. This pilot study allowed me to make minor adjustments to the interview questions in the following two aspects. First, I redefined the criteria for selecting participants. Prior to the pilot interview, I was looking for the participants who should currently study at the UEF at least one semester. However, the participant, who had been studying education at the UEF for seven months, reported that he could not confidently answer some questions in the interview because his learning experience was limited. Based on this reality, I adjusted the study time of the participants at the UEF to one year. Second, I adjusted the content of one question in the interview protocol, because participants responded that it overlapped with another question Item 12 (Appendix 4 and Appendix 5), which sought to gather information about the language challenges that Chinese postgraduate students encountered, had overlapped the question about the English level of participants. Hence, it had been revised in the interview protocol. The pilot study not only allowed me to refine the participants’ criteria and interview questions, but also enabled me to identify the pitfalls in interviewing techniques, including the use of recordings, avoiding noise interference, and time control. Most importantly, the pilot interview made me aware of the importance of the skills of asking sensitive questions.

4.4.2 Participants recruitment and their profiles

As qualitative research focuses on rich details and information, there are no specific rules on sample size (deMarrais, 2004). However, given the purpose of a qualitative research is to get a deep understanding of human experience, a large sample size may not imply a better study because it may lead to a superficial analysis and a purposeless research (Watson, 2014). Put another way, more participants cannot guarantee the profoundness of a study. With this in mind, I selected sixteen participates to provide meaningful and insightful information in my current study.
In addition to the sample size, the selection criteria for participants are also crucial to qualitative research. In this study, the criteria for selecting participants included: (a) they should be born, raised, and completed a Bachelor’s degree in China, (b) they should be currently postgraduate students at the UEF, and (c) they should have completed at least one year of study programs during the period of interview. The first criterion was mentioned because it could ensure the purity of the sample. If some participants have studied overseas before coming to Finland, they might not feel the similar way as those who went abroad for the first time. The homogenous sampling strategy allows me to have an in-depth understanding of an experience shared by the participants with similar characteristics while comparing. The second criterion was mentioned because it was related to the subjects of this study. The reason why I chose Chinese postgraduate students rather than undergraduates as the research subjects was that Chinese postgraduate students accounted for a large proportion of Chinese overseas students at UEF. Therefore, it was easy to recruit them to participate in this study. Moreover, their perceptions of academic learning may be more representative, since they had been educated in Chinese higher education as bachelor students before they came to Finland. Meanwhile, Finnish educators may have higher academic expectations of postgraduate students than undergraduate students, such as hoping them to become independent researchers with critical thinking. The third criterion emphasized the length of study time at the UEF. The participants should have ample opportunities to experience the different learning culture in various situations at the UEF.

The selection process went through several stages. Firstly, at the initial stage of the recruitment, I contacted some Chinese postgraduate students who studied their program at the UEF through email, phone, Facebook, and Wechat. During the communications, I described to them the nature and requirements of the current study. I also encouraged them to share their stories, because their experiences would not only help potential Chinese postgraduate students but also facilitate the university educators to understand the cultural background of Chinese students. Secondly, in order to avoid the number of volunteers who have responded was insufficient, I used the snowball sampling technique in the recruitment (Marshall & Rossman, 2006), which meant the initial volunteers were asked to forward my interview information and recommend their friends who were qualified to participate in this study. Thirdly, after several rounds of interactions, there were eighteen volunteers on my potential participants’ list. Because two participants did not participate in the interview for personal reasons, I finally had sixteen participants in this study (Table 2). These participants were aged from 25 to 36 at the time of the interview, and they had never studied abroad before coming to the UEF.

After identifying the participants, I emailed each of them and expressed my thanks for their voluntary participation. The informed consent form (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2) and a protocol of interview questions (see Appendix 4 and Appendix 5) were attached so that the participants could familiarize with my study. The participants were allowed to contact me when they had any questions about this research. The interview time was scheduled according to participants’ availability in a follow-up email. The site of each interview was chosen in a place that was convenient for the interviewees and was conducive to recording dialogues.
Table 2. Demographic profiles of interviewed Chinese postgraduate students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding of the participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Degree program</th>
<th>The length of study at the UEF</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1M</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Four years</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2M</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Two years</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3F</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Two years</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4F</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Two years</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5M</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Two years</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6F</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>One year</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7M</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>One year</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8M</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>One year</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9F</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Forestry</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Two years</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10F</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Forestry</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Two years</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P11M</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Three years</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P12M</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>One year</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P13F</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Forestry</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Two years</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P14F</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Two years</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P15F</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Three years</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P16F</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Three years</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.4.3 Interview implementation and data processing

According to Creswell (2007), developing empathy and rapport with interviewees is an essential component in qualitative research, which can lead to higher quality data. Johnson and Christensen (2014) pointed out that the more comfortable and trusting the interviewees, the more stories and details they will cover. Ryan and Dundon (2008) highlight six practical guidelines to develop bonds in the relationships between interviewers and respondents, which included (1) be prepared, (2) be credible, (3) be patient, (4) be engaged, (5) be aware, and (6) be sensitive. With these principles in mind, at the early stage of interactions, I introduced myself, my background, and my research motivation to participants in detail. I also clarified the role of the participants in the research and explained the reasons why their experiences were important to this project. In order to understand interviewees better, I sacrificed research-specific time to look for the common background between me and them. Off-topic strategies (Ryan & Dundon, 2008), such as finding common interest in news and sports, were utilized to pave the way for deep investigation. The interviews were conducted in a relaxed and open atmosphere, which helped to increase interviewees’ engagement and trust in the research and generate more detailed data. Meanwhile, I also noticed that my status as an inside researcher might create bias throughout the study. According to Dwyer and Buckle (2009), when a researcher is an insider to the group studied, his or her membership status might be detrimental to data collection and even analysis to some extent. Asselin (2003) also suggested that the insider researcher should keep naive to the phenomenon which they are studied. Since I shared the similar cultural background and learning experiences with interviewees, I was consciously warning...
myself to be an outside researcher to get the objective data. In fact, I quite enjoyed this double status as an insider researcher and an outsider researcher in the data collection.

The interview agenda had three parts. The first part concentrated on the participants’ pre-departure situation. Most questions were raised with “how” rather than “why”. For instance, I avoid asking, “Why did you choose this particular university?” Instead, I asked how they chose this particular university. In this way, I hoped to have participants make the meaning of their behaviors. The second part of the interview focused on the in-depth details of participants’ current learning experiences, including the academic differences they perceived, the challenges they encountered, the strategies they used to cope with the learning difficulties. For instance, I asked participants to name particular items which they believed to be different from their inherited learning culture, and then asked them how these academic differences impacted their learning and how they handled these differences. The third part of the interview focused on the self-reflection and suggestions for the UEF and the future Chinese students. The length of interviews of each participant ranged from 45 to 118 minutes.

Originally, the focus of one part of interview questions was on pedagogical differences perceived by participants, such as learning forms, student assessment, and classroom atmosphere. However, over several interviews, many participants felt that the use of a textbook was a big issue needed to be discussed. Therefore, the data collection extended to the discussion about the use of textbooks. This extension enabled me to get rich and more extensive materials.

The language used in all interviews was Mandarin which was the official language of China. Compared with English and Finnish, the participants felt more comfortable and confident in using their first language because they could share their unique experiences and feelings effectively and accurately. With the participants’ permission, I recorded all the conversations.

After the data was collected, I listened to the interview recordings repeatedly in order to improve my understanding and interpretations. I also checked the information to make sure there were no gaps needed to be filled in. The interview data was transcribed verbatim in the original interview language. And then the transcription was translated into English later by myself. Kvale (1996) suggested that in order to improve the readability of the text, it is not necessary to maintain the translation of interview excerpts as the exact linguistic form in sociolinguistic studies. Therefore, unnecessary repetitions and redundancy in this research were omitted without mispresenting the meaning of interviewees. And then, I sent each English translation back to the participants to check for the accuracy. After I got the confirmation from the participants, I began to conduct data analysis.

4.5 DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data is often presented in the form of words, including rich and subjective information (Wong, 2008). In qualitative study, researchers attempt to reduce a large amount of collected raw data and then responsibly make sense of them (Lecompte & Schensul, 1999). According to Flick (2013), qualitative data analysis is “the classification and interpretation of linguistic (or visual) material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning-making in the material and what is represented in it” (p.5). Wong (2008) defined data analysis in qualitative research as “the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts,
observation notes, or other non-textual materials that the researcher accumulates to increase the understanding of the phenomenon” (p.14). Coffey and Atkinson (1996) held the view that data analysis in qualitative research is an ongoing process. This means that at the beginning of data collection, researchers should conduct data analysis simultaneously. In other words, the process of data analysis and data collection is interwoven and permeable. Thus, the data analysis in this research started simultaneously as soon as the data was collected.

This study used a qualitative thematic analysis to analyze data from participants’ interviews. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, organizing, and presenting themes within qualitative data (Alhojailan, 2012). Because thematic analysis is not tied to particular epistemological or theoretical perspective, it is a flexible and popular tool in qualitative data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It allows researchers to link an analysis of a theme to the whole content. Furthermore, it provides researchers with an opportunity to understand the potential of any issue in depth via interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In order to generate insights of interpretations on how the participants perceive their learning experiences in the different learning culture, the procedure of the thematic data analysis in this study followed the six-phase strategy provided by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.87, Table 3).

Table 3. Phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description of the process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Familiarizing with data</td>
<td>Transcribing, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Generating initial codes</td>
<td>Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Searching for themes</td>
<td>Gathering data and collating codes into potential themes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reviewing themes</td>
<td>Checking the themes in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic “map” of the analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Defining and naming themes</td>
<td>Ongoing analysis to refine each theme and generate clear definitions and names for each theme.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Producing the report</td>
<td>Selection of vivid, compelling text extracts relating to the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report.</td>
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The initial phase was to get familiar with all aspects of raw data. Although this mechanical work progressed slowly, I had to say that it provides a good fundamental for the further analysis. I repeatedly listened to the recordings and read the data in an active way. I immersed myself in the transcripts in order to develop the feeling of the interviews. I also took notes and made ideas when I was listening to the recordings and reading transcripts.

After I completed the work of the first phase, I moved to the second phase to analysis data, aiming to generate initial codes. In a qualitative research, the process of coding refers to “fracture the data and rearrange them into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category and that aid in the development of theoretical concepts” (Maxwell, 2004, p.96). Because the size of the data set was relatively small, the production of initial codes was done manually. In the coding process, I used writing notes, colored pencils to highlight the segments of data, and
then sought similar pieces of the same code. All data had been given full and equal attention.

The task of the phase three was to identify themes. When all the raw data was coded in phase two, I began to sort them into major candidate themes and sub-themes, and then collated all initial coded data related to the research questions and literature within the identified themes. I used a thematic mind-map to help me understand the significance of each theme. The major candidate themes, sub-themes, and all data extracts were retained completely for combination, refinement, elimination, or discarding for the next reviewing stage.

The intention of the fourth phase was to review and refine the themes. I re-read all original data and rechecked their coherence in the individual themes. And then I examined entire data set to see whether they represented the research aim and questions accurately.

The phase five focused on defining and naming themes. In this phase, I identified the key characteristics of each theme and ensured that there were not overlapped between the themes. After the careful consideration, the concise of theme names was given to make sure readers could have the sense of what the themes were telling about. The final phase focused on producing the report about the result of data analysis which could be found in Chapter four.

4.6 STRATEGIES FOR RESEARCH VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

According to Johnson and Christensen (2014), research validity refers to “the correctness or truthfulness of the inferences that are made from the results of the study” (p. 279). One potential threat to the validity of the qualitative approach is research bias (Maxwell, 2013). This problem frequently occurs in qualitative research because qualitative research is more open-ended and less structured than quantitative research. The researchers tend to write up what they want to find. They might obtain data through selective observation and selective information. Furthermore, their personal perspectives might influence research conduction and data interpretation (Maxwell, 2013).

In order to promote qualitative research validity, Johnson and Christensen (2014) recommended sixteen strategies in their book. Based on their suggestions, I applied several strategies in this study. Firstly, during the research, I always kept in mind that as a researcher, I was both an insider and an outsider of this study. To get rich data, I needed to encourage participants to provide more information about their learning experiences. But just as important, I had to be careful not to let my background and opinions influence the thoughts and feelings of the participants in the interview. In addition, I conducted a pilot interview on two Chinese postgraduate students at the UEF prior to the interview. This pilot interview helped me reflect my predispositions and biases.

Secondly, I used negative-case sampling strategy to reduce the effect of the bias. Identifying discrepant data and negative cases is an essential part of the validity testing in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013). During interviews, I encouraged participants to share both their positive and negative stories in their experiences. The data which disconfirmed my expectations and generalization could expend my research perspectives.
Thirdly, the triangulation strategy was used to cross-check information and conclusions. Johnson and Christensen (2014) defined triangulation as “a validation approach using multiple investigators, methods, data sources, and/or theory in the search for convergence of results” (p.299). Many approaches can be used to enhance the confidence in the ensuring findings. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) identify four forms of triangulation: (1) data triangulation which is the use of a variety of data sources; (2) investigator triangulation which is the use of different researchers or evaluators; (3) theory triangulation which is the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a set of data; and (4) methodological triangulation which is the use of different methodologies to investigate a problem (cited in Zhang, 2013, p.74). I utilized investigator triangulation to improve the trustworthiness of this study. Through my project, I shared research problems with my peers who had received training in qualitative research. Their knowledge and experiences contributed to the trustworthiness of this study. Furthermore, the valuable feedback from my supervisors made me aware that I should separate my personal experiences from that of participants, and support each claim with sufficient data.

Last but not least, I utilized participants’ feedback to facilitate the validity of the research. After the interview, I immediately transcribed the interview, and then sent the transcript and my on-the-spot notes to the participants by email. I asked participants to check whether there was any misunderstanding in the transcripts and notes. In addition, in the analysis process, if I found that the meaning of the text was ambiguous, I would immediately contact the participants for confirmation. When I reported the data, I tried to use many low-inference descriptors instead of jumping into conclusions. I expected readers to evaluate the participants’ experiences by themselves.

4.7 ETHICAL ISSUES

Research ethics refer to “a set of principles that guide and assist researchers in conducting ethical studies” (Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p. 279). This study was conducted under the guideline of the Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics (2003). Because the current qualitative research involves the experiences of Chinese students, it may put them in a potentially vulnerable position. Thus, the treatment of participants was the most important and fundamental ethical issue that I confronted.

Before conducting interviews, I shared my personal background with participants and explained the purpose of the study. I also told them that their participation might have potential benefits for future Chinese students who want to study in Finnish higher education.

After that, I asked the participants to read and sign a letter of consent (Appendix 1) if they decided to participate in this research. In this consent letter, I told them that the interview I conducted with each of them was audio-recorded. I guaranteed that all the information about them were confidential and anonymous during and after the research. Their involvement in the study was completely voluntary. If they did not want to continue, they had rights to withdraw from the research at any time without penalty.

I designed the interview questions carefully so as not to violate participants’ privacy. Meanwhile, during the process of the interview, I informed the participants...
that they were free to raise any questions about the study. Meanwhile, they also have rights to refuse to answer questions.

All interviews were digitally recorded and stored in a password-protected external hard drive. I was the only person who knew the password to access. All relevant paper materials, such as consent forms, on-the-spot notes, and transcripts, were stored in locked drawers and will be deleted and destroyed as soon as the study is complete.

4.8 CHAPTER SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to explore the learning experiences of Chinese postgraduate students when they study at the UEF. I used case study approach to fulfill my research purpose. Sixteen participants were recruited by a snowball sampling technique. This technique is regarded as an effective way to collect data for a qualitative research (Creswell, 2007).

I followed the steps of data analysis specified by Braun and Clarke (2006) for this study, including getting familiar with raw data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, producing the report. Through the interwoven process of data collection and data analysis, several data validation strategies recommended by Johnson and Christensen (2014) were utilized, which included reflexivity, negative-case sampling, triangulation strategy, low-inference descriptors, and participants’ feedback to increase the validity of this study.

I conducted my research under the guideline of the Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics (2003). I also put the detailed consent letter and interview protocol in the appendix section for readers. In the next chapter, I will discuss the results of this research.
5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data obtained through the interviews yielded rich information. The accounts of these sixteen Chinese postgraduate students revealed that the learning experiences of these individuals were varied and not easy. In this chapter, the merged themes from interview transcripts were organized based on five research questions (Figure 7). The first research question focuses on the pre-departure situation of Chinese postgraduate students before they came to Finland. The second research question moves to the pedagogical differences that the participants perceived between the Chinese and Finnish learning culture. The third research question addressed the academic challenges encountered by the participants. The fourth research question centers on coping strategies that the participants applied in their learning experiences. The last question focuses on the suggestions they would like to make for incoming Chinese students and the UEF.

Figure 7. Categories of research findings
5.1 PRE-DEPARTURE SITUATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The pre-departure situation of international students might influence their learning experiences in a different learning culture (Zhang, 2013; Zhu, 2012). In order to obtain a full picture of Chinese postgraduate students’ learning experiences, it is necessary to get to know their reasons for studying in Finland and academic preparation before departure.

5.1.1 Reasons for studying abroad

Previous studies have identified a range of factors that influence international students’ decision to study abroad; e.g. Higher education institutions’ reputation, career opportunities, cost of living, better learning environment (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Zhu, 2012). In this research, data analysis showed that the reasons of the participants for studying in Finland were diverse and multi-faceted. These reasons were categorized into three aspects (Table 4), including (1) disappointment in Chinese society or education; (2) confidence in Finnish society or education; and (3) suitability of the UEF as a host institution.

Table 4. The main reasons for studying abroad mentioned by the participants
(Note: P = Participant; M = Male; F = Female)

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<th>Categories of main reasons for studying abroad mentioned by the participants</th>
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Disappointment in Chinese society or education. In this study, participants chose to go abroad for three main reasons: (a) improving job prospects; (b) having face (面子, meaning having honor); and (c) longing for independence.

Improving job prospects
According to Chen (2007), improving future career and job prospects is a significant factor influencing Chinese students’ study-abroad decision. Chinese students expect a foreign degree to provide them with better opportunities in the job market (Zhu, 2012). The findings of this study were consistent with those of previous researches. Most participants stressed that foreign degrees played an important role when they made their decision to study abroad. For example, participant four gave a negative comment on her previous work experiences and she hoped that the Finnish higher education would benefit her future career. She stated:

In China, I worked as a marketing manager for a well-known company. After working there for three years, I suddenly realized that this job was not my dream. I was overwhelmed by it. In the third year of my work, I flew over 90 times. Sometimes, I met my clients in three different cities in one day. I got angry easily and felt unhappy. Although my salary was good, I finally decided to quit my job. Then, I went to Tibet to look for my inner peace. It was a pleasant journey in my life. Every day, I went to temples to hear monks chanting. Every night, I sat on the roof watching stars. After spending one month in Tibet, I found out that my real interest was teaching. I wanted to open a private kindergarten. I know my dream sounds crazy. I might encounter many difficulties in my future career but I want to give it a shot. So, I decided to go aboard to learn knowledge and skills of education. (P4F)

Participant two had a similar experience before he came to Finland. He used to be an English teacher in a key high school in China. The exam-driven education made him feel disappointed with his career. Thus, he wanted to change the status of his work through overseas education. He concurred:

The school which I worked for was a key high school. I was not willing to work there as an English teacher because I did not like exam-oriented education. The competition was too fierce. As a teacher, my most important responsibility was to ensure my students get high scores in the National University Entrance Exam. If my students were unable to achieve high scores, the director who was in charge of teaching would criticize me. No teacher would like to cooperate with me in teaching. And my salary would be impacted. Moreover, if the number of high-score students in my class did not reach the requirement set by the school — for three consecutive years, I would be asked to stop teaching. That means I would lose my job. The exam-oriented education also made students lose their individuality, creativity, and learning interest. They were required to live at school and only had two days off once a month. Every day they got up at 6:00 a.m. and then started their learning at 6:40 a.m. They were required to sleep at 10:30 p.m. in the night. Students were like robots and studied all day long without enough rest and fun. I felt so sorry for them, but I could not change anything. After the careful consideration, I decided to escape and wanted to work in a university. In my eyes, universities’ teachers have more freedom. Western countries have a different education value and I want to experience it. I hope by the time I return back to China, I have more career opportunities. (P2M)
Having more chances to get a bright career future is an important reason for most international students studying abroad (Chen, 2007; Cowley & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2018). The statement from participant two and participant four showed that they were influenced by some negative factors from their workplace before going abroad. Both of them had a clear career goal. Focusing on employability, most participants in this research emphasized that the degree of overseas studying was a “career ticket” which enabled them to overcome the threshold of their future occupation (Zhu, 2012). For them, getting a foreign degree is a good springboard to increase employability.

Having face

Previous research indicated that Chinese people place great emphasis on the university ranking and academic achievement (Wang, 2010; Zhang, 2013). This is related to the concept of “face” in Confucian heritage and philosophy. In this study, some participants expressed that a foreign degree raised their profiles internationally which made them “have face” (有面子, meaning have honor). For example, participant nine said that her educational background of non-key universities made her feel inferior when working with people who graduated from key universities. She shared her story as follows:

None of my undergraduate and master’s universities was a “key university” in China. Sometimes, when people asked me which school I graduated from, I was reluctant to tell them the name of my university. When I competed for the same job with other graduates, there was no doubt that many companies preferred to hire students from prestigious universities. Even at work, students who graduate from a “key university” have more opportunities to get promoted. My academic background made people underestimate me. And I gradually realized that I needed a foreign degree for my “halo effect.” As long as I have an overseas degree, my future boss and coworkers will not care too much about my non-key school background. In my opinion, the foreign degree can help me rebuild career confidence. In the future, I will never feel inferior when I work with students who graduated from key universities. (P9F)

The “key university” and the “non-key university” mentioned by participant nine are the results of the key school system (KSS) in China. In this system, ordinary students and excellent students are distinguished by their test scores. Excellent students can receive a better education while the low-score students cannot. The reason why such a system exists in China is that: teaching resources are limited. Although the elite education can promote the development of the country to some extent, for ordinary students, their education rights are ignored (You, 2007). The students with low scores are at a disadvantage in personal and career development because employers more or less think that students from a non-key school are not qualified for the job. The accounts of participant nine were specific. She was mainly drawn to a foreign degree because she felt that it could rebuild her confidence and reputation at work. Participant ten had a similar experience. She claimed:

The ranking of universities in China determines students’ future and honor. After the annual National University Entrance Exam, many Chinese parents will hold a great celebration for their child in a big restaurant. This celebration is just as important as a wedding banquet. All their relatives and friends will attend. However, this happy time only belongs to the students who are admitted to good universities. The year of
my National University Entrance Exam was a nightmare. I was only accepted by an unknown college which ranked around 700. I had never heard of its name before. I locked myself in my room for the whole summer, and my parents rarely went out. I knew the unknown university I was going to study made my parents feel humiliated or embarrassed. I was very disappointed with myself. After graduating from that unknown college, I decided to pursue my master’s degree in a foreign university with a better reputation. Only in this way could I save my parents’ face. (P10F)

In the eyes of many Chinese people, entering a key university means academic success, which brings honor and pride to their family. Growing up in this culture, Chinese students always have a heavy burden on their shoulders. They study hard to succeed not solely for acquiring knowledge, but for the face of their family. Chen and Lan (1998) pointed out that Chinese students have a greater sense of responsibility to their parents than students in Europe and the United States. The report of participant ten seems consistent with this conclusion. She cared about her parents’ academic expectation. And she was willing to study hard to get into a foreign university in order to save her parents’ face.

**Longing for independence**

Under the influence of one-child policy, Chinese youth has received full attention from their parents, even grandparents. Although they long for independence after they grow up, they find it difficult to separate from their parents emotionally because their parents make many sacrifices for them. In this study, two participants mentioned that they chose to study abroad because they wanted the independence. Participant eight was an only child in his family. He said that the overprotection from his parents made him yearn for freedom. He felt that studying abroad could keep him away from his family. He referred:

*I am the only child in my family. My parents own a company. So, traditionally speaking, I should inherit my family business after I graduate from university. However, I turned my parents down. Maybe some people think that I am not a filial son because I rejected my parents’ good intentions. But I am a grown-up adult. My parents have protected me too much. Most of the time, I feel like I am just a spoiled child. In China, my parents can always find ways to take care of me wherever I go. So, I decide to go abroad. To be honest, it was hard to make this decision because it hurt my parents’ feelings. (P8M)*

Participant thirteen had a similar story. Although she was grateful to her parents for taking care of her, she wanted her parents not to interfere with her life too much. She said:

*I know my parents love me. However, it is difficult for us to communicate our values. They often tell me what is right or wrong based on their own experiences while ignoring my opinions. I used to discuss with my parents about how much I can determine my issues, and how much they can interfere with my problems. But it did not work out. They just cannot control their worries and interventions. In fact, I feel very tangled. On one hand, there is nothing wrong with listening to my parents. Filial piety is a virtue of Chinese culture. On the other hand, I hope to have my own life. Maybe I will make mistakes, but this is the price of growth. I think my parents do not understand me; they just want to keep me in a safe zone. I had to choose to study abroad to avoid*
The desire for independence and the interference from parents make the Chinese youth feel entangled. As mentioned by participant thirteen, filial piety is deeply rooted in Chinese families. It demands strong loyalty and respect for one’s parents (Zhang, 2013). The participants’ accounts echoed Zhao’s (2007) study. She pointed out that in the context of parents-children relationships, Chinese parents feel that they have the right and responsibility to interfere with their children’s lives, regardless of how old their children are. By the data analysis, it was recognized that longing for independence is another important factor influencing Chinese students’ study-abroad decision.

Confidence in Finnish society or education. A range of variables influences Chinese students’ decision to study in Finland. These variables include: (a) the high reputation of Finnish education; (b) the easy and fair application process; and (c) the safe society.

The high reputation of Finnish education
As described in section 2.2.3, Finland enjoys a high reputation for its education. The most effective basic education system and the great strength of higher education make Finland a “superpower of education” (Schatz, Popovic & Dervin, 2015, p. 172). In the interviews, Chinese students, especially the students from the Department of Applied Education Science, clearly showed their curiosity and interest for studying education in Finland. As participant twelve commented:

*I studied education in China before I came to Finland. Just as many yoga enthusiasts want to study yoga in India and Tai Chi enthusiasts want to study Tai Chi in China, I prefer to study education in Finland. Although Finland is not the birthplace of education, the brand of Finnish education is attractive. As far as I know, no country other than Finland has made education their national image. Many Chinese people may not know where Finland is, but they know the quality of Finnish education. I am curious about how this educational system works and why it is so successful.* (P12M)

The feedback from participant twelve was supported by participant fifteen who highlighted that the Finnish teaching philosophy sparked her curiosity:

*My first contact with Finnish education was in 2015. I had read an article about Finnish education on the internet. What impressed me most was that Finnish education placed great emphasis on the personalization of students. And teachers in Finland respected the needs of each student. But in China, we adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to children’s education. In fact, this is wrong. Education is not about shaping your child into what you want. It is about helping your child maximize their strengths. I remember one of Albert Einstein’s quotes which says “everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid”. I chose to study education in Finland because I really admire the advantages of Finnish education and want to figure out what Chinese education can learn from it.* (P15F)

For participant fifteen, she stressed that it was inappropriate to set only one assessment task to test a person’s ability and intelligence in Chinese education. She was attracted to the advantages of Finnish education and hoped to learn something from it. In the
same vein, participant six said that the reason why she selected Finland as her host country was that she was impressed by Finnish educational values which seemed to be different from the values of Chinese education. She expressed that she wanted to know the secret of Finnish education success.

After my graduation, I worked as an English teacher at a training institution in China. I felt happy when I was with my students. And I decided to make education my lifelong career. But later, things that happened in my class led me to reflect on our educational goals. The students who studied at my training institution were from rich families. They often bragged about their fashion clothes, expensive watches, and their family’s luxury cars. When I asked them about their dreams for when they grow up, most of them answered that they would like to be rich people. Their answers shocked me. In my eyes, the purpose of education is to let children find their own value in the process of learning. But in China, most people use money to judge one’s educational success. For me, education has lost its meaning. In China, I had read some education reports about Finland. At that time, I did not have much knowledge about the details of Finnish education, but I was impressed by its educational aims and values. Students in Finland can really learn for themselves. Therefore, I came here [to Finland] because I want to know the secret of its education. (P6F)

When I further asked participant six to specify what secret she wanted to know, she explained that “I have to say that Chinese people have become more and more practical. Learning is regarded as a tool for wealth and reputation. Finland is a rich country. But in contrast to the value of Chinese education, the education here focuses on personal growth, not on high scores or wealth. I am curious how they make it happen.” Obviously, students who majored in education in this study were attracted by the high-quality performance of Finnish education. The feedback from them showed that they want to satisfy their curiosities and learn from the best. In addition to the students from education major, students from other disciplines indicated that the good research atmosphere of Finnish education was the main reason for them to come. For example, participant three commented:

Before coming to Finland, I received six admission letters from universities in other countries. Why did I choose Finland? Because I feel that the research atmosphere here is not commercialized. From my perspective, when scientific research and business are linked together, the purpose of scientific research will not be pure. I want to do solid work in the physics field, but the commercial atmosphere in the academic world can influence me. In Finland, I can do research that I am interested in, even if it doesn’t belong to a currently “happening” field in academia. Under the guidance of an experienced supervisor, I can make great progress. (P3F)

Compared to Chinese doctoral programs, participant five felt that Finnish doctoral programs had better quality and the higher reputation. He explained that a doctoral student who studied social sciences in China could get a Ph.D. degree within three years. The short training time of the doctoral program made him hold a skeptical attitude towards the quality of Chinese doctoral programs. Furthermore, he indicated that the number of qualified professors had not increased at the same rate in China. Some professors lacked the ability to supervise doctoral programs.
I do not trust the quality of the doctoral program in China. Take Ph.D. students in social sciences as an example. They can earn a doctoral degree from a Chinese university within just three years. But in a western university, it takes a Ph.D. student five to seven years to obtain a degree. During the three years of doctoral study, Chinese students complete courses credits, three papers, and a dissertation. How is it possible? How can universities guarantee the educational quality? My former supervisor encouraged me to come to Finland because he used to work as a teacher at a Finnish university. He told me that Finland has the best education in the world. Through the doctoral study, I can not only acquire new knowledge in my discipline but also obtain language skills, intercultural communication skills, and other soft skills. (P5M)

China’s first Ph.D. program began in 1978 with 18 candidates. In 1982, six of these eighteen candidates received doctoral degrees. Since then, the number of doctoral candidates has increased at a rapid rate and has grown by 23.4% annually (Asia Times, 2009). According to the data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC, 2016), by the end of 2016, 342,027 students were studying doctoral degrees in Chinese universities. Although the number of doctoral students in China has been growing over the last three decades, the low quality of Chinese tertiary education has aroused people’s concern. Just as participant five said, three years of training is too short to guarantee doctoral students’ qualification. Due to the insufficient training, many Ph.D. graduates have troubles when they want to work in internationally competitive academia.

The easy and fair application process
In addition to the high quality of Finnish education, some participants indicated that the relatively easy application process is the reason they want to come. For example, participant seven shared his experiences as follows:

If you can prove that you are qualified to be a doctoral student, the application process is quite simple. I found my supervisor on our school website. Then I sent him my resume, the paper publications, and research proposal by email. And I asked him if there were any possibilities for me to complete my research under his supervision. My supervisor responded to me quickly. He said he was interested in my research topic and hoped that we could set up an interview. After that interview, I was admitted as a Ph.D. student. I was so lucky to have my professor supervise my study. (P7M)

The feedback from participant ten was consistent with that of participant seven. She told me that she spent one year applying for an American university but failed, which made her feel frustrated. Then, she turned to Finland for further study. To her surprise, the application process in Finland was different from that in the United States. The admission was not as difficult as she had thought.

I had applied to American universities before I came to Finland. In my opinion, applying to a Finnish university is much easier than to a U.S. university. First of all, Finland has a total of fourteen universities, and each university has a good reputation. It takes very little time for an applicant to choose a university or a program. However, in the United States, there are at least 1,500 universities, which means an applicant needs to spend more time collecting application information. Second, the admission to Finnish universities only requires the IELTS test while American universities require the TOEFL test as well as the GRE test. IELTS tests one’s English skills (speaking, reading, writing,
and listening) while the GRE exam tests the person’s verbal ability and quantitative ability. It is clear that GRE is harder than the IELTS. Third, Finnish universities do not require an application fee, while American universities do. If applicants are not admitted, they have an added economic pressure. (P10F)

After comparing the difficulty of applying for the postgraduate program in Chinese universities and Finnish universities, participant one felt that it was easier to apply for a postgraduate program in Finnish higher education institute. He reported:

I think the doctoral application in China is difficult. First of all, in China, you can only apply to one university at a time. If your application fails, you have to wait until the next year. But in Finland, you can apply to many universities at the same time. Even if you are rejected by one of the universities, you still have the opportunity to get an offer from another university. You do not have much pressure. Second, the postgraduate entrance examination is complicated in China because the admission exam includes four subjects. But if you apply to Finnish universities, you only need to prove your English ability, provide your Curriculum Vitae, and submit a good research plan. I am a person who is not good at exams. So, I prefer the application with fewer tests. Third, I think the admission rate of postgraduate students in Chinese key universities is low. For example, last year, there were around 70 students who had applied for the master program in business at my former university in China. In the end, only 15 students were admitted. It was very competitive. (P1M)

As mentioned by participant one, the low admission rate at China’s key universities has affected some Chinese students’ decision on where to continue their study after receiving a bachelor’s degree in China. According to the report from the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, in 2018, the number of applicants for master’s degree reached 2.38 million, an increase of 18.4% over last year. Although China is a big producer of postgraduates, the admission rate of postgraduates programs is not high (Figure 8). For example, in Zhejiang University, the admission rate of the master’s program offered by the Business School in 2018 is 28:1, which means that 28 people compete for a single spot, and only one person can be admitted (China Graduate School Enrollment Data Survey Report, 2018). Moreover, during the application process, Chinese students can only choose one university. They do not have multiple choices in the application. Participant one indicated that the postgraduate entrance exam is very competitive. Many students start to prepare for this exam as early as in the second year at university. In order to get good grades, they even go to the cram schools to improve their examination skills.
Participant eleven, in the interview, said that the unfairness existing in the graduate entrance examination made him turn to study abroad. He complained:

*My initial plan was to apply for a doctoral program in China. Through the internet, I found a professor whose research area aligned with that of mine. I then contacted him and asked him if I could get enrolled. The professor said that although he appreciated my ability, I could only apply for this program two years later. His feedback surprised me. Why did I have to wait for two years? The professor explained that although the doctoral entrance exam had not started yet, the person admitted had already been confirmed. I had no chance to get the admission even if I had high scores in the entrance exam. I thanked the professor for his honesty. Without his honesty, I would waste my time on the application. Later, I learned that if students want to pass the doctoral entrance exam, they have to first build a good personal relationship with their future supervisor. Through the personal relationship, the applicant can obtain the content of the entrance examination in advance. I guess the guy who was admitted by the university might be an officer, a rich man, or a friend of that professor. Whoever he was, he had privileges. In the academic world, one’s personal relationship plays a more significant role than one’s knowledge and abilities. That is ridiculous!* (P11M)

The unfairness mentioned by participant eleven is a consequence of the corruption that can be witnessed in Chinese higher education institutions. For most ordinary Chinese people, obtaining a doctoral degree is a difficult process. However, some Chinese officials or businessmen who seek doctoral degrees have privileges and a so-called “green route” for entrance exam and graduation. They do not need to take the courses or exams of a doctoral program seriously; they can complete their dissertation and pass the defense in two or three years (Huang, 2017). This kind of corruption in universities not only wastes the scarce educational resource but also causes a crisis of
trust in higher education. This might result in the universities blocking out many real talents who remain outside the threshold of academic research.

The safe society
The findings showed that safety was another significant factor that influenced Chinese students’ choice. Participant two said that he grew up in a single-parent family. His relationship with his mother was very close. When he told his mother that he decided to study abroad, his mother was worried about his safety. Thus, he chose Finland as his host country.

My parents got divorced when I was five months old. I grew up with my mom. When I told her I was going to study abroad, she cried because I was the only child she had. I had five offers from universities in different countries. Given my family’s economic situation, I preferred to choose a country where the cost of living was not high. But in the end, I decided to come to Finland. The reason for choosing Finland as my study destination was that I did not want my mother to worry about my safety. As far as I know, Finland is the safest and happiest country in the world. (P2M)

Participant seven also shared his opinion on the safety of the study destination. He emphasized that studying in the United States was always the dream for Chinese parents and their children. But as gun violence had been increasing in American campuses, Chinese people’s attitudes towards choosing American universities as the host universities had changed. Finland, as a top safe country in the world, has gradually attracted more Chinese international students to come.

For international students like me, safety is an important factor we must take into consideration when we are abroad. Many years ago, most Chinese parents sent their kids to the U.S. because of their American dream. But now, the situation has changed. With the increasing rate of gun violence in American campuses, many Chinese parents become increasingly concerned about the safety of their kids. For them, it is dangerous and abnormal to have guns. The gun violence can happen to ordinary people on ordinary days. A report on the internet showed that in 2017, 114 people died from gunshots. It is a shocking number. Even if some American universities have a high academic reputation in the world, I am not able to convince my parents to let me study in the U.S. My uncle is an engineer. He worked in northern Europe for nine years. He has a good impression of Finland. He said that Finland has the lowest crime rate in the world and the Finns are friendly. So, he suggested that I study in Finland. (P7M)

When I asked participant seven whether the experience he had had so far in Finland reflected what his uncle had said, he said yes. And he added:

I often study in the library until one o’clock in the morning. Although it is late, I never feel insecure on my way back home, even in the dark winter. Once, my bicycle broke down on my way to school. I had knocked on the door of a nearby house and asked for help. The man who opened the door was a middle-aged man. He not only loaned me the tools but also helped me fix the bicycle. I was touched by his kindness. I read an article which said that Finns and Chinese might be distant relatives. Although it is just a guess, I would like to believe it. Finns and Chinese have similar personalities. They are shy, hard-working, brave, and tough. For me, Finland is a safe place to live (P7M).
In general, when potential foreign students choose their study destinations, the factors they consider most are the university’s reputation, the quality of education, and the job prospects (Chen, 2007). However, as crime rates continue to increase in recent years, potential foreign students and their parents have increased their awareness of the safety. As participant seven said, it seems a little daunting when studying in an unfamiliar environment because some crimes are random. In other words, sometimes, victims are attacked for no particular reason whatsoever, but simply because they are presented in a certain place at a certain time. In comparison to other countries, Finland is a multicultural country with a stable economy and politics, so it is an ideal place for international students to stay.

**Suitability of the UEF as a host institution.** The reasons of the participants studying at the UEF include the following categories: (a) the academic reputation of the faculty; (b) the suitability of postgraduate programs; and (c) the availability of financial aid.

**The academic reputation of a faculty**
The reputation of an institution’s faculty played a significant role while international students selecting a host institution (Wadhwa, 2016). The finding in this research was consistent with the previous studies (Arambewela & Hall, 2008; Cubbilo, Sanchez, & Cervino 2006). Some participants in the interviews reported that the good academic reputation of their supervisors influenced their decision to study at the UEF. For instance, participant seven indicated that he was impressed by his supervisors’ publication when applying to a host university in Finland. He believed that he could finish his research successfully under the guidance of this professor. He described:

> The one of reasons I came to this university because of my supervisor’s reputation. In the field of his research, he has published 72 journal papers, 159 conference papers, and 61 other scientific papers. The number of his publications impressed me. Moreover, in contrast to many Chinese professors, he provided many details of himself on his personal homepage, including the number of doctoral students he had supervised, the countries he had visited, and what his hobbies were, etc. This information was helpful to me in getting to know more about him. Although I hadn’t seen him before I came to Finland, his webpage shortened the distance between me and him. In my eyes, he is a professional, approachable, and confident professor. I think I can effectively improve myself under his supervision. (P7M)

Participant one had the similar experiences. He said that his previous university in China was a non-key university which did not have much cooperation with foreign universities. Thus, when he decided to study abroad, he had no idea which country or university he should choose. After the consideration, he started with searching academic articles related to his research direction. In the end, the professor whose articles were cited the most turned into his supervisor.

> I had no idea which university I would go to when I decided to study abroad. My previous university was a non-key university in China, which did not have many cooperation programs with foreign higher education institutions. So I had to gather the information about the overseas study by myself. I searched for academic articles using Google scholar regarding my research interest. Among the list of articles, I found one article which was cited more than 500 times and the perspective of the research was unique. I then reached this scholar and asked him about the possibility of becoming his
doctoral student. Now, he is my supervisor. I guess the main reason why I am at this university is the quality of my supervisor’s publications. I trust his research ability. (P1M)

A professor’s reputation is one of the brands of a university (Dennis, et al., 2016). Participant one and participant seven chose the UEF as the host university because they were attracted by the reputation of the professors. The feedback from them indicated that they firmly believed that they could achieve their academic goals under their professor’s supervision. The reason why a professor’s reputation plays a significant role in the international student’s decision-making process is that it can evoke students’ emotional attachment and trust. With those positive feelings, international students might have less anxiety in the process of cross-cultural adaptation and feel greater satisfaction (Jillapalli & Jillapalli, 2014).

The suitability of postgraduate programs
The data showed that most of the participants from the natural sciences chose the UEF because of the cooperation programs between the UEF and Chinese universities. For instance, participant thirteen from the forest sciences said that her previous university in China had a long-term cooperation with the school of forest sciences at the UEF. When she applied for the master program provided by Western universities, the name of the UEF was the first university came into her mind. She described:

My former university is located in the Southeast of China. It has a long-term cooperation with the school of forest sciences at the UEF. Every year, some students from my university were sent here [the UEF] to study. Due to this cooperation, the name of the UEF was not new to me. When I was searching for study destinations, I found it was easier to obtain information about the UEF. This was because the students who were earlier involved in the cooperation program shared rich details with me. And some of them said that if I wanted to participate in this program, they would love to help me with the application. Maybe I am a person who tends to choose what I am familiar with, so I ended up choosing the UEF. (P13F)

When I asked how many Chinese students (to her knowledge) were in a similar situation to hers, participant thirteen said that there were two other students from her previous university who had made the same decision. Participant sixteen was a doctoral student who was studying chemistry. She added:

My university in China had an exchange program with this university. When I finished my exchange program at the UEF, I found that the time left for me to apply for the doctoral program in China was not enough. So I talked to my Finnish professor and asked him for the chance to complete my doctoral study in his program. He had a good impression of my previous work, so he agreed. (P16F)

Some participants studying social sciences indicated that they selected the UEF as a host university because the good international programs are available. For example, participant four and participant six from educational science said that when they applied for the master program related to early language education, the program provided by the UEF fit their needs.
My interest lies in teaching kids. So, I checked all the master programs in education offered by Finnish universities online. Finally, I chose the UEF because only this university offered a program related to early language education, which is consistent with my interest. (P4F)

I used to be a language teacher in China and I was interested in language education. Chinese children begin to learn English at the age of nine, but their speaking ability is not good. I think the reason why they do not speak English well is not that they do not work hard enough, but that there are some problems with our teaching methods and concepts. Therefore, the master program on children’s language education at the UEF attracted me. I hope I can learn more advanced teaching methods. (P6F)

In the interviews, a few of the participants in the field of social sciences suggested that the university should make more Chinese students know its postgraduate programs of social sciences. Participant twelve said that he was very satisfied with the doctoral program he was studying at the UEF. However, he was aware that not many Chinese students in China knew this suitable program. He hoped that more Chinese students could come to achieve their academic goals at the UEF.

I think our department needs to strengthen the cooperation with Chinese universities. Although it has good programs, the international Chinese students are not aware of them. When I applied for Finnish universities, I went through all the Finnish universities’ websites and finally found the program which I was interested in. I am lucky to be a doctoral student here, but how about the students who are struggling to look for a suitable program in the field of education? They need to know about this program. (P12M)

Participants five from the business school had the same feelings as participants twelve. He said that he spent more time looking for the program of the UEF than his friends who studied chemistry, because his friends had cooperative projects with UEF in Chinese universities, while his former Chinese university did not have.

It took me a lot of time to find a suitable [Ph.D.] program. Before applying, I knew very little about the doctoral programs in Finnish universities. I carefully searched for projects that were relevant to my professional interests and feared missing out on vital pieces of information. But for my friends in chemistry or forestry science, their application process was easier because their Chinese universities had a relationship with the UEF. (P5M)

The comments from participant twelve and participant five present a question to the UEF: how to make its postgraduate programs known to more Chinese students in China? According to the participants, they had troubles seeking the information they needed. Some of them complained that even when they got the information related to their application, they were not able to draw a full picture of the program based on the simple descriptions online. As participant twelve said “finding a postgraduate program is like looking for a needle in a haystack if you do not have the knowledge of the host country and its universities”. In his opinion, the cooperation programs between the UEF and Chinese universities can make Chinese students’ application more efficient and available.
The availability of financial aid

Although China’s economy is growing at a rapid pace, people have not enjoyed matching results in terms of their development. The gap between the rich and the poor in China remains at a high level. According to the “2015 Wealth Report” published by Credit Suisse Research Institute, China’s middle class has reached 109 million people, but only accounts for 11% of the country’s adult population and is 15.9% below the global average. In other words, at present, 89% of the population in China still lives below the middle-class level (China National Information Center, 2015). The National Health Commission of the People’s Republic of China reported that the average annual income of a rural Chinese family in 2015 was 49,497 RMB (about 6,553 Euro), while the average annual income of urban families was 88,683 RMB (about 11,740 Euro). For most Chinese students, studying abroad is luxurious. The availability of financial aid influences their choices of universities (Dennis, Ahlburg & McCall, 2002).

As participant six said:

Finnish universities began to charge tuition fees for Asian international students in recent years. So, when I planned to study in Finland, I was worried about my financial situation. I do not have much money. My parents are farmers and they couldn’t give me any financial support. I applied for a total of four universities and inquired them about the opportunity to waive tuition fees for my master’s program. In the end, only the University of East Finland exempted me from my tuition, so I chose this university. (P6F)

Participant three came to the UEF for the same reason as participant six. She said that she did not want to be distracted by the financial issue when she was studying abroad. Thus, she decided to choose the UEF as her final host university although she had other options. Just as she described that:

Some of my friends studying in the US or the UK told me that the financial issue was a big burden for them. Sometimes, they could not focus on their studies because they had part-time jobs to do. Their stories made me ponder: what life do I want abroad? Do I have enough money to pay the rent? Do I have enough money to buy food? Do I have enough time to focus on my studies? I do not want to be bothered by monetary issue. In addition to the University of Eastern Finland, I received an admission letter from another Finnish university at the same time. Although this university ranked ahead of the UEF, I didn’t choose it. I chose the UEF as my host university instead because it not only exempted my tuition fees but also provided 500 euros per month for living expenses, while another university only exempted my tuition fees. (P3F)

Finland is known for its free education. However, from the fall term of 2017, Finnish higher education institutions started to collect tuition fees from students coming from outside the European Union (EU) or the European Economic Area (EEA). The implementation of this policy means that the higher education in Finland was no longer a public responsibility, but a private welfare (Cai & Kivistö, 2013). The fee-based education policy might influence Chinese students’ choice of universities. In the interview, most participants firmly indicated that they tended to choose universities with financial aid during the decision-making process. In their opinion, the financial issue is one of the major obstacles to their learning acculturation.

In conclusion, it is important to be aware that the decision-making process of Chinese students studying in Finland is a complex process. In other words, there is a
range of factors potentially impacting Chinese students’ decision to come to Finland. Generally speaking, the decision-making process of overseas study has three stages: firstly, international students have the intention to study abroad; secondly, they select a host country for higher education; and finally, a host institution (Chen, 2007). However, in some cases, these three stages do not take place in order. For example, the choice of a host institution does not necessarily follow the choice of a host country. International students may skip the stage of choosing the host country and select the host institution directly. The finding in this study is consistent with that of previous research (e.g. Chen, 2007; Ma, 2017; Wadhwa, 2016).

5.1.2 Pre-departure preparation

Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day (2010) emphasized that the pre-departure preparation can not only help international students understand the differences and similarities of academic conventions between their home country and the host country but also enrich students’ skills to handle the challenges in a new learning and living environment. Although international students cannot prepare everything for a new learning environment, the preparedness for the new educational culture is important (Shaheen, 2004; Zhu, 2012). In the interview, all participants generally felt that pre-departure preparation was necessary, however, they were actually overconfident and mainly focused on daily life-orientation. For instance, as participant one commented:

If I could turn time back, I will come more prepared before coming to Finland. In China, I thought I knew the Western culture well. I had several foreign friends. I often ate Western food and watched Western films with them. Therefore, I was very confident about my study in Finland. I thought I would adapt to the new environment quickly. However, after arriving, I realized that learning in a different cultural environment was a completely different thing. For example, I found that being able to communicate with foreigners in English did not mean that you could understand academic language. I remember the first time I attended the doctoral school’s seminar. I only understood 10% of the speakers’ content. And I didn’t know how to express my ideas at the end of the discussion. If I had valued and prepared for the academic language in advance, I would not sit there like an idiot. That experience hit my confidence severely and I felt depressed for a long time afterward. (P1M)

For participant one, he simply equates eating Western food, watching Western movies, and making foreign friends with understanding the Western culture. This overconfidence has made him encounter a great deal of learning shock after he entered the Finnish education system.

Participant eight expressed that he was excited about the journey to study abroad. He searched for some information about Finland, including geography, climate, and natural environment before his arrival. But he admitted that his knowledge about Finland and Finnish higher education was insufficient. He commented:

I did not take pre-departure preparation seriously. In my eyes, although the education in China and Finland was different, the gap was not big. Looking back on my learning experiences in China, I never did academic preparation in advance for my high school and university. Why should I be bothered to prepare for overseas study? I just thought...
that wherever you go, learning was the same thing. However, reflecting on the journey, I would have done better if I had more knowledge about Finnish education before my departure. (P8M)

Zhu (2012) pointed out that without good preparations of the host university’s norms, customs, and values, the rapid transition into the new learning environment would lead to a “hard landing” for Chinese students in the initial phase (p.171). Many of the participants in the interview indicated that they were not psychologically well-prepared for potential academic difficulties before they came to Finland. In participant eight’s mind, his learning would not be impacted by the new educational convention. Upholding this belief, he underestimated the academic difficulties he was about to face.

5.2 PEDAGOGICAL DIFFERENCES PERCEIVED BY THE PARTICIPANTS AT THE UEF

When talking about the academic experiences at the UEF, all participants in this study indicated that they encountered significant pedagogical differences from what they were used to in China. These differences include (1) the role of textbooks; (2) group learning; (3) assessments of academic performance; and (4) the classroom behavior (Table 5). When students study abroad as international students, they experience a high level of negative emotions when they integrate into the new academic environment (Yan, 2008). Correspondingly, according to the study of Räihä, Moilanen, Dobozy, and Saukkonen (2017), students could also experience confusion and distress even in their own home country when completely new teaching methods are applied.

Table 5. Summary of pedagogical differences perceived by the participants between the UEF and the participants’ previous Chinese university
(Note: P = Participant; M = Male; F = Female)

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<th>Categories of pedagogical differences between the UEF and the participants’ previous Chinese university</th>
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5.2.1 The role of textbooks

For most participants, a textbook was one of the most important channels to obtain subject knowledge. They viewed textbooks as a tool with authenticity and authority which helped them to establish a subject knowledge system. While studying in Finland, participants found that textbooks did not seem to play a decisive role in their learning activities. In their opinion, Finnish higher education emphasizes discovering knowledge rather than transmitting knowledge. Participant two shared his opinions on textbooks. He commented:

In China, I liked studying with textbooks. It was an effective way to gain knowledge. First, textbooks are written by some experts and published by the National Education Press. Chinese students never doubt the authenticity of textbooks. Second, textbooks have a basic framework of a subject, including definitions, features, classifications, and associations between various elements etc. With this framework, I can have a clear picture of a discipline. All I need to do is to absorb and digest knowledge from textbooks. After I started my study in Finland, I found that there were no textbooks in my courses. Usually, teachers just required students to read papers. In my first semester, I felt like I was a man walking in a desert without a map or a compass. No one told me what kind of knowledge I must learn and master. I had to build up my knowledge framework based on assimilating thousands of information on my own. (P2M)

Participant two believed that textbooks represented the authority of knowledge. In his view, the knowledge offered in the textbooks should be real, credible, and indisputable. His attitude toward textbooks seemed to be influenced by “respecting learning” of the Confucianism which was discussed in section 2.2.1. In Chinese learning culture, knowledge is learned through the authoritative textbooks, while in the Western learning culture, knowledge is self-generated by individuals (Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

Participant fifteen had a similar opinion to participant two. In addition to agreeing that textbook knowledge was authoritative, she held the view that a textbook was a tool for systematic learning. She stated:

Knowledge is a system. We should learn knowledge step by step, from simple to complex. Learning from textbooks is the first step for me to acquire the knowledge of a subject. In China, I had the habit of previewing textbooks. By doing so, I could obtain the framework and basic knowledge of a discipline. In my opinion, textbooks help me to learn knowledge systematically and effectively. I do not think Chinese learning style is suitable for Finnish educational environment. In Finnish class, the information provided in the readings is piecemeal and unsystematic. And the content of a teacher’s lecture is unpredictable before the class. You must discover and accumulate knowledge by yourself. (P15F)

For participant fifteen, knowledge was a hierarchy system, like a pyramid, made up of different levels. Her feedback resonated with Pratt et al.’s (1999) study that Chinese students tend to regard a textbook as a box containing the basic and essential knowledge of a subject. Students were supposed to obtain knowledge step by step. And a teacher’s responsibility was to transmit knowledge through textbooks. In participant fifteen’s mind, although the transmission approach was prevalent in Chinese class,
in Finnish educational environment, students were expected to interpret knowledge individually and independently. This finding was consistent with the Hofstede’s collectivism versus individualism dimension which was mentioned in section 3.1.2. In a collectivist society, knowledge is rooted in tradition and should be transmitted by authoritative books; while in an individualist society, knowledge is associated with new discoveries (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Participant six said that she was tangled in tons of reading materials; sometimes she felt she learned nothing after she completed the reading tasks.

I think teachers in Finnish universities emphasize more journal papers than textbooks in class. This teaching approach makes me feel a little pressure because it is different from my learning habits. In China, the activities of teaching and learning mainly focus on one textbook. Reading other books and journal papers come second. In Finland, we skip textbooks and jump to the reading materials directly. Because I was not trained by this teaching approach in China, I do not know which papers or books I should start first. Sometimes, the views of reading materials are not consistent, I have no idea which one is better. Too many sources make me confused. I need a textbook to give me a guide. (P6F)

For participant six, textbooks were the principal source of a subject’s knowledge. Compared with her learning habits in China, she felt that the Finnish teaching approach, which jumped in reading materials without textbooks, was somewhat abrupt. In participant six’s view, the ranking of the reading materials could help her complete reading tasks effectively. She was also aware that she lacked the ability to distinguish the different perspectives of reading materials because of her lack of a solid knowledge foundation. The finding echoes Wang’s (2010) study that Chinese students seemed to regard textbook knowledge as a basic concept. The inconsistent views from different sources made them unsure which knowledge they should study. Meanwhile, they also believed it was teacher’s responsibility to rate the importance of academic articles for students.

Some participants in the interview hold different attitudes towards the use of textbooks. For example, participant eight thought that learning without textbooks was not a big issue in the new environment. He stated:

I do not think textbooks can affect my study. If you want to learn, you will find ways to overcome any difficulties. In my opinion, learning without textbooks can improve my abilities to discover and evaluate knowledge. It helps me be an independent learner. Although I have to spend more time reading materials, I enjoy this process. I think Finnish students are good at critical reading. Their learning ability is far ahead of us. We must catch up. (P8M)

The response of participant eight showed that he had a positive attitude toward the difference he encountered in Finnish higher education. For him, learning without textbooks was not an obstacle, but an opportunity to learn a new and important skill. Since his independent learning ability was not good enough, he must put more efforts to catch up. Participant three had a similar opinion. She expressed that relying on textbooks would affect her freedom of academic thoughts:

In China, we mainly rely on textbooks and teachers to learn knowledge. We think that the textbooks’ viewpoints and teachers’ thoughts are our ideas and thoughts. We seldom
doubt what we have learned. In my opinion, this is wrong. Why do we let only one book determine what we should learn? Why can’t we have another idea? If the knowledge in textbooks is wrong, it will adversely affect our academic views. (P3F)

The feedback from participant three indicated that she did not believe students could benefit from textbooks. In her mind, relying heavily on textbooks could turn students into machines that only repeat knowledge. In order to meet the academic demands of the university, Chinese students needed to improve the ability to think critically in the academic area. For her, she felt that without textbooks, she could have more freedom to seek what she was interested in. The comments of participant three supported the study of Wong (2004) and Shi (2006). Both of them pointed out that the learning context played a significant role in students’ learning process. Chinese students actually tended to adopt various approaches in their learning when they were in the Western educational system.

5.2.2 Group learning

The group learning in this study mainly refers to group presentations and group discussions inside and outside the classroom. In Finland, higher education emphasizes learning by cooperating in groups (Zhang, 2015). It requires group members to play an active role in giving presentations or participating in discussions. The data from this study showed that most participants believed that group learning could help them improve knowledge, discover new ideas, and develop cross-cultural communication skills. Some participants, however, felt that group learning may have its own drawbacks when it comes to certain aspects.

Some participants in this study explained why group learning was not valued in Chinese learning culture. For example, participant fourteen expressed that in Chinese students’ eyes, a teacher who asked students to discuss by themselves might give the impression of irresponsibility. She commented:

Education in China is teacher-centered, so group learning which focuses on students’ autonomy is not popular in the Chinese learning environment. In my mind, Chinese teachers lack the experience required for organizing group work and students do not have the enthusiasm to participate in cooperative learning. Sometimes, group learning could cause troubles for a teacher. When I was in high school, one of my teachers, who just graduated from a university, liked arranging group discussions in his class. Later, the school dean talked to him and suggested him to stop this teaching method because some parents complained that their children’s test scores had dropped. The parents thought that this young teacher was irresponsible and that he wasted a lot of time. In the exam-oriented educational environment, no one cares about students’ thoughts. Although group learning encourages individual opinions, it is not an effective way to improve test scores. What students need to do is to listen to teachers, take down pages of notes, and spend much time practicing. After we studying in Finland, although Finnish teachers encourage us to share our individual ideas in group discussions or presentations, we do not know how to do that because we have been accustomed to the previous mode of imparting education. (P14F)
As described previously in section 3.1.2, in an exam-oriented education environment, the purpose of students’ study is to enter a good university with high scores. In order to achieve this goal, they should listen to their teachers, take notes in class, and practice everything the teacher said. The individual opinions are not important because Chinese education emphasizes standard answers. In many Chinese students’ minds, a model teacher should transmit everything he or she knows in detail. If a teacher does not teach all the time and instead, asks students to discuss among themselves to find the correct answers, he or she would either be considered an irresponsible teacher or considered to be a teacher who was unqualified in teaching (Zhao, 2007). Participant one agreed with participant fourteen. In his view, Chinese students were not trained to learn in groups. He said:

In China, we do not take group work seriously. I think there are two reasons that contribute to this phenomenon: first, both Chinese students and teachers are under heavy learning and teaching pressure. Group learning costs a lot of time and is not suitable for Chinese education. In other words, if students are given much time to express their personal opinions, the teaching progress will be delayed. Thus, in traditional Chinese educational culture, a classroom should be quiet and well organized so that knowledge can be transmitted and acquired effectively. Second, influenced by the value of harmony, Chinese students do not like to be challenged or to challenge others. Group members might have different opinions about academic issues. These differences may cause conflicts. I remember my first experience of being challenged by my classmates in Finland. At the end of my presentation, some of my classmates had different thoughts from my viewpoints. Although, before my presentation, I was informed that western students had the habit to question and challenge the presenter, I still felt uncomfortable when I encountered this situation. I think it would take time for me to get over this issue. (P1M)

The benefits of group learning have been widely researched and advocated (Gillies, 2004; O’Donnell, 2006; Zhang, 2013). For example, the research of Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (2006) revealed that when compared with individual learning and competitive learning, group learning could produce more academic achievement. However, the feedback from participant one showed that the result-oriented concepts and Chinese traditional culture have negatively influenced the popularity of group learning in China.

Participant sixteen felt that the Chinese education emphasized competitive learning rather than cooperative learning. She said:

In China, when students are doing assignments, teachers and parents often say, “do not talk to each other, please finish your assignment independently”. In their eyes, cooperative learning is an excuse to be lazy because some students do not listen carefully in class, and they only want to complete their assignments by cooperating with others. More importantly, the competition in between Chinese students is fierce. I remember when I was in high school, I had to take several examinations every month. After each exam, the school would announce test results in the information column. Everyone could see the scores and the rankings of other students. In order to beat the opponents in the examinations, none of the students were willing to share their knowledge. Therefore, cooperative learning is impossible in our educational environment. In Finnish classroom, students are encouraged to participate in group study. But I do not
know how to share my knowledge and ideas with other group members, because I was used to individual study. (P16F)

Participant eleven indicated that the fierce competition made him unwilling to share knowledge with his peers. For him, getting high scores was important in Chinese education. If he shared his knowledge, his peers would surpass him in exams. He reported:

In China, I didn’t like to share the core knowledge with my classmates because we were competing against one another. If I shared my knowledge with others, they may rank higher than me in the exams. If I had low scores, my teachers may dislike me or did not want to pay attention to me in class. And my parents may yell at me or beat me. The worst thing was that I might lose the chance to go to a reputed university. So, I would not share my knowledge with my peers. I believe most Chinese students have a similar mindset to me. Grades are everything. (P11M)

The emphasis on competitive learning was deeply rooted in participant sixteen’s and participant eleven’s minds. Like many Chinese students, they grew up in a highly stressed educational environment since childhood. In order to have a good future, they had to fight hard at each examination. For participant sixteen and participant eleven, these competitions have led them to internalize the individualistic notion of competitive learning. This finding was consistent with the masculinity theory of Hofstede mentioned in section 3.1.2. In Hofstede’s country ranking for masculinity versus femininity, the masculinity index of Finland is lower than that of China, which means that Finnish education is more focused on group learning rather than competitive learning.

In the interview, many participants reported that the learning experience at the UEF had changed their previous attitudes toward the concept of group learning. They felt that working cooperatively could make their study much easier. For instance, participant thirteen, who had less experience of group learning in China, expressed that she benefited from the after-class group work. She described:

One of my compulsory courses was related to mathematics, which was very difficult. The reason why I felt this course was challenging was that I lacked the basic knowledge of this subject. To make things worse, the teacher of this course did not use PPT slides when he was teaching, nor did he have any materials for us to preview before class or review after class. This course made me crazy. I did not understand what the teacher taught in class and I also didn’t know how to pass the exam. Other international students had the same feeling as me. Just when we were at a loss, a Finnish student in our class offered to help us. He had more knowledge than our international students in this area. He created a learning group and taught us after class. Because of his help, I finally passed the course examination. (P13F)

The comments of participant thirteen indicated that she had benefited from the supportive system of group learning. The help of the group could keep her move forward when she got stuck with some learning issue and wanted to give up. This finding was consistent with the conclusion of Laal and Ghodsi (2012) that group learning could create a healthy, positive, and supportive environment. Through group work, the relationships between learners become more caring and committed. The
shared responsibility makes learners aware that they are not only responsible for their own learning but should also help other students succeed. Participant ten felt that group learning promoted her motivation to learn. She said:

> In Finland, I feel that learning is not just for grades or competitions, but for knowledge acquisition and sharing. Sometimes, in order to convince my group members, I read lots of material before the group work in the library. Although the preparation for a presentation or a discussion took me a lot of time, I did not find it tedious or overwhelming because it was something I was interested in. I liked to share my information and my thoughts with other group members. I felt that I became more initiative in learning than I was in China. (P10F)

The group work stimulates the motivation of participant ten to learn as a host or a presenter. Similar to participant ten, participant seven mentioned: “In order to be a part of the group cooperation, I worked hard to equip myself with the required knowledge. These preparations helped me have a better understanding of the material and provided me with opportunities to think critically. I felt that I was fully involved in the academic activities”. In participant ten’s and participant seven’s minds, group learning was an efficient approach to learn knowledge. Without the dominant role of the teacher, they were trained actively to seek information related to the group task, and they cared about their contribution to the group. This group work helped them form the concept of self-management.

According to participant five, his preference for group learning could be attributed to his perception that group learning provided him with opportunities to see things from a different perspective. He stated:

> Because group members come from different countries and cultures, their views on issues may be different. I think cooperating with other members has opened up my mind and improved my ability to solve problems. Let me give you an example. My teacher once asked us to develop a plan to promote a product. My plan was that if consumers bought this product, they could get a gift worth €10. Another student, who came from Germany, suggested that after the consumer bought this product, they could get a €12 product if they only paid €2. After we discussed the two promotion plans, we found that the second plan could promote more sales of this product. (P5M)

The comments from participant five indicated that group members from different cultures brought him a new sales concept. Pfaff and Huddleston (2003) pointed out that because of the increasingly close connection between various cultures of the world, students should learn to collaborate with and form relationships with others who are different from their own culture. Group learning can bring students with different cultures together and make them discover solutions from new perspectives.

Although most participants in this interview stressed the advantages of group learning which was student-centered, a few participants reported that they preferred to work alone. Just as participant nine referred:

> I do not like to participate in group work because I do not feel that I have learned much from the cooperation. Sometimes, I am assigned to work with students who have less knowledge than me. Therefore, I must undertake most of the group work, while other students contributed a little. Besides, in the discussion, I had to spend most of my time
answering questions raised by other group members. I do not think it’s fair to me. I am a student, not a teacher; I have no responsibility to spend my precious time teaching others. For those students who are not prepared for the topic before the discussion, they just wanted to rely on someone who knows better than them to complete course assignments. If the academic level of the group members is similar, I would prefer to participate in the group work. But most of the time, it is hard for course teachers to arrange this kind of group learning. (P9F)

For participant nine, the inconsistent knowledge level of the group members and the lack of contribution from other members made her feel that she did not benefit from the cooperative work. Participant two agreed with participant nine. He felt that the purpose of group learning was difficult to be achieved sometimes if the cooperation of the group members did not go well.

Although the purpose of group learning is to encourage students to interact with each other and produce more academic achievement, sometimes the reality indicates that this approach is not highly efficient. If the cooperative work is not well organized, or if some group members just wanted to work with their friends and neglected others, group learning would not yield a positive outcome. I had several unhappy experiences in group learning. I remember — once the teacher asked us to discuss something related to our course in a small group after class. I was assigned to work with the other two students from the same country. We should have met at 2:00 pm, but they were late for one hour without informing me in advance. I left before the discussion ended because I felt that I was not respected. If someone did not respect my time, why should I respect them? Later, they emailed me and told me to complete one part of the tasks in the discussion. I refused their request because the part of the tasks they wanted me to accomplish was the hardest one. (P2M)

To sum it all up, although group learning has many advantages, some participants did not seem to fully accept the cooperative work as a learning approach. Before studying in Finland, Chinese students grew up in a highly stressful educational environment and were accustomed to the model of teacher-centric and individual learning. This mismatch between the Finnish education culture and the Chinese education culture in group learning may affect the learning process and outcomes of Chinese students. However, one thing worth pointing out is that not being accustomed to the new learning culture does not indicate that Chinese students are resistant to the group learning approach. For most Chinese students, the group learning could produce more academic achievements than individual learning if it is well managed.

5.2.3 Assessment\(^1\) of academic performance

The participants in this interview reported that the forms of academic assessment at the UEF were not identical with that of their previous experiences in China. At the UEF, the assessment comes in a variety of forms, including oral presentations, learning diaries, book exams, etc., with a focus on high order understandings of the learning

\(^{1}\) Assessment in this dissertation refers to summative assessment
materials; while in China, the main form of the assessment is written tests, which emphasize memorization and reproduction.

Assessment forms influence students’ learning ability and strategies (Watkins, Dahlin, & Ekholm, 2005). Before enrolling at the UEF, Chinese students were used to the assessment modes that “are based on lessons or texts covered in class, rather than from a variety of sources” (Li, Baker & Marshall, 2002, P.145). The interview data showed most participants believed that they needed to adjust their learning strategies when studying in the new academic culture. For example, participant two stated that he was accustomed to remembering the contents of the textbook before the exam in China. But this kind of recitation did not apply to the Finnish tests because most questions in the tests were open-ended. He did not know where to find the answers.

In my first year at the UEF, I was nervous about course assessments. The questions in the tests were too open for me to answer. I did not know where to find the right answers. In China, we had a textbook. Before the examination, it was a teacher’s responsibility to tell students which parts of the textbook would be the content of the test. Students just needed to remember what the teachers said and answered the test questions based on their memory. For me, it was not a challenge to pass the tests if I reviewed the textbooks in advance in China. But here [at the UEF], memorizing the content of the textbooks for tests is impossible because there are no textbooks. And course teachers would not give us any instructions about the test’s content. They seem to have nothing to do with our examination. (P2M)

Participant fifteen had a similar feeling about the assessment. She said that she tried to avoid taking exams at the beginning of her studies in Finland because she did not know how to prepare for them. She also indicated that she needed time to develop her learning ability.

I tried to avoid any courses that require examinations in my first year. Although I understood the lectures, I still did not know how to prepare for those course tests. The Finnish assessment mode is different from the Chinese assessment mode. In China, the content of tests is closely connected to the textbooks; while in Finland, you cannot find the tests’ answers from your lectures directly. You have to assimilate information by reading a lot of material and form your own opinions. It is a good way to improve our learning ability, but in the beginning, I did not know how to adjust myself to this new examination mode. (P15F)

Being influenced by their inherited culture, participant two and participant fifteen firmly believed textbooks were the only source of assessment. Memorizing played an important role in their learning process. However, when participants were studying in Finland, they realized that they were not able to apply their previous learning strategies to the Finnish assessment mode. In the Finnish assessment, the answers to the tests’ questions could be various. There was more than one answer.

According to the study of Watkins, Dahlin, and Ekholm (2005), there are two relations between learning and assessment: an external relation and an internal relation. In an external relation, the assessment is separated from the learning process. It is a tool for measuring students’ learning outcomes and distinguishing between high and low achievers. In an internal relation, the assessment is an integral part of learning, emphasizing sophisticated strategies related to “understanding, reflecting,
interpreting, analyzing, and relating” (Watkins, et al., 2005, p.303). Wang (2010) pointed out that in China, the relationship between assessment and learning had the features of the external relation. The assessment’s questions are mainly composed of “definitions of concepts, multiple choice, and norm-referenced short answer questions” (p. 74). In contrast to the Chinese assessment, the Finnish assessment focuses on students’ critical thinking and independent learning (Zhang, 2015).

Because of the inconsistency of the Chinese assessment mode and Finnish assessment mode, Chinese international students feel uncertain about the assessment requirements and criteria in the new educational environment. Just as participant four said:

I didn’t know what my Finnish teachers expected from me in the academic assessment. For instance, at the end of the semester, some course teachers would ask us to write an essay about the course. However, they did not tell us what kind of essay they wanted us to submit and what details we were supposed to cover. After I submitted my writing, I felt worried because what I wrote might not meet the expectations of the teacher. After a few weeks, I could find out my course scores on the WebOodi (a student information system of the UEF). Although I got the scores, I still didn’t know what the assessment criteria were. Why did I get three points out of five? What aspects could I improve in my future studies? I think it would be better if course teachers could give me feedback in addition to a number. (P4F)

In participant four’s opinion, a clear assessment criterion could facilitate her to improve her academic performance. The uncertainty of the assessment criteria encountered by international students has attracted the attention of some scholars (Wang, 2010). Those scholars are gradually realizing that the hidden code or prompts included in the assessment task was obvious only to students who are familiar with academic discourse (Ryan, 2005). And they suggested that teachers should use more specific evaluation criteria in the process of assessing students (Turner, 2006). Participant ten shared a similar opinion to that of participant four. She said she was not sure about the Finnish teacher’s expectations in the assessment. The criteria of academic assessments seemed to be uncertain.

It is my first time studying at a Finnish university. In the beginning, as an international student, I was not familiar with the conventions of Finnish education, including the academic assessment. When I was studying in China, I felt everything was under control because I knew what I had to do. In the examinations, if my answers to the questions were related to the standard answers, it was easy for me to get high grades. But here [at the EUF], I have to say that it took me a long time to figure out how to “survive” the Finnish academic assessment. The assessment criteria were not clear enough. When I was providing my answers, I always felt uncertain because I was not sure what my teachers’ thoughts on these questions were. (P10F)

For participant ten, standard answers were the grading criteria for the exams. In China, students can only get scores when their answers match the standard answer points listed by the teacher. Therefore, standard answers are more important than students’ opinions. Students just need to memorize the standard answers to pass the exam. In Finnish higher education, however, the academic assessment requires higher order cognitive ability like understanding, analyzing, and comparing etc. This different
requirement made Chinese students feel uncertain about their answers which were constructed by themselves. As mentioned in section 3.1.2, in the Hofstede’s country ranking for uncertainty avoidance, China has lower scores. It means that Chinese students should be comfortable in unstructured learning situations, vague objectives, and broad assessments. However, influenced by Chinese Confucianism culture, Chinese students try to avoid strong uncertainties. They like precise objectives, detailed instructions, and standard answers.

Although the Finnish academic assessment mode is different from Chinese academic assessment mode, most participants in this interview expressed that the new academic assessment mode had deepened their understanding of their disciplinary study and encouraged them to think critically. Just as participant twelve referred:

There are no textbooks and standard answers. You must read materials critically and form your own opinions. More importantly, you do not have to worry about whether your answer is correct. As long as you make sense, your answer is appropriate. For some courses, you can book an examination date. So, you have enough time to read and think before the exam. I enjoy this assessment mode because it makes me feel that I am learning for knowledge rather than for the sake of assessment. In China, the assessments brought me a lot of academic pressure. Like many other students, I just wanted to get high scores while ignoring the knowledge itself. I seldom had my own opinions about the examination’s questions. (P12M)

Participant five indicated that although the book exam was a big challenge for him who was accustomed to the standard answers of the test, he learned a lot from this form of assessment. He commented:

The book exam made me rethink the role of the examination. When I first took the book exam, I still wanted to pass it by means of rote learning. But this book had too much content as it had more than 500 pages. It was a big challenge to pass this exam if I only memorize the book’s content. I asked one of my Finnish classmates for help. She told me that I needed to read and understand the book first. Meanwhile, I needed to carefully analyze and synthesize the information that I was reading. In China, we were not good at thinking critically. Through this experience, I learned a lot. (P5M)

The comments from participant five indicated that he benefited from the Finnish learning-oriented assessment model. He was not good at critical thinking in China, but he was not reluctant to accept this higher-order cognitive skill in the new academic assessment mode. This finding was consistent with the previous discussion in section 2.3.1. Although Chinese students are mostly influenced by Confucius learning culture, they tend to develop the new skills to suit to the Western learning culture (Wong 2004; Shi, 2006).

### 5.2.4 Classroom behavior

The classroom is a setting in which teaching and learning take place. The classroom behavior is influenced by different cultures (Zhang, 2013). Many participants in this interview reported that the Finnish classroom behaviors they came across were different from what they experienced in China. For example, participant four said that...
she was impressed by Finnish students’ courage when they gave a negative feedback to their teacher in class.

One of my course teachers, at the end of the semester, jovially asked her students to evaluate her teaching. To my surprise, Finnish students commented that they did not learn much from her course as they had expected, and that they did not like her teaching style. During the feedback process, the teacher had a smile on her face and did not show any anger. As a Chinese student in this class, I was impressed by the Finnish students’ honesty and courage. The relationship between students and teachers was equal, and everyone’s ideas were respected. In my culture, students never express their dissatisfaction with a teacher in a direct way. I can give you an example. When I was a freshman at my Chinese university, one of my course teachers received a low rating score for his teaching course from our students at the end of the semester. Later, the director of our department talked to us and hoped that we would consider the feeling of a teacher when we made the course evaluation. Our negative comments might hurt a teacher. (P4F)

Comments from participant four indicated that she admired the way Finnish students expressed their feelings directly to the teacher. But she was not willing to practice this direct approach. In her inherited culture, it was impolite for students to express dissatisfaction with teachers in public. Similarly, participant sixteen indicated that the atmosphere in the Finnish classroom was different from that of China. She was shocked when one of her Finnish classmates pointed out the mistakes that a teacher made in teaching.

In the eyes of our Chinese students, the teacher’s status is higher than that of the student. When we were children, we were taught to respect teachers. We think that everything the teacher wants us to do is an order, not a request. We never say no to our teachers or negotiate with them. To be honest, even though most of my teachers in China were good, I was a little afraid of them. I did not know why I had this feeling. Before I came to Finland, I often heard my friends talking about the equality in the western classroom, I did not believe in that. But after I arrived here, I started to realize that the atmosphere in the Finnish classroom was different from that of China. For example, a Finnish teacher who taught me was not good at English, and the content on his PPT slides had some grammar and spelling errors. For me, these errors were not a big problem. However, one of my classmates told the teacher that he could not stand these mistakes in the PPT slides and that he would like to correct them. As a Chinese student, I was shocked. I dared not do something like that. In my opinion, pointing out a teacher’s mistakes meant a personal criticism of the teacher. In China, we do not have the option of freely expressing our real thoughts. However, in the Finnish classroom, both students and teachers were professional. They dealt with the matter on its own merits. In this classroom atmosphere, students feel free to speak up their real thoughts. (P16F)

In fact, most participants in this study appreciated these honest, courageous, intelligent, and challenging behaviors in the classroom, but it seemed that Chinese students were reluctant to practice these due to the authority of a teacher and the value of harmony relationship. This finding resonated with the core features of Chinese learners discussed in section 2.2.1. In China, the authority of teachers and the obedience of students have long been institutionalized. To correct teachers in
public may be considered personal criticism. However, in the Finnish classroom, the behavior of confrontation from students does not affect the harmony between teachers and students. Participant fifteen felt that Finnish classrooms were relaxed and equal. She stated:

I think the classrooms here are flexible and relaxed. For example, students can call their teacher’s name directly. In China, it is considered offensive for students to call their teacher by their name. We usually addressed a teacher with a title plus his or her surname. Although I have been at the UEF for three years, I still feel uncomfortable if I address my teachers directly by their names. Moreover, in my eyes, a teacher is a controller of the classroom, who wields authority and dignity. But in the Finnish classroom, I feel that I have an equal relationship with my teachers. Once, when I had asked my teacher some questions in class, he told me that he could not help me solve this problem because it was beyond his knowledge. He suggested me to contact another teacher after class and wrote me a note with the office address of that teacher. This teacher’s behavior may be normal in Finnish culture, but for me, a Chinese, I felt a little surprised and touched. Chinese teachers never admit to their students that they cannot answer students’ questions; it will make them lose their dignity. (P15F)

The hierarchical student-teacher relationship was deeply rooted in participant fifteen’s mind. Although she had been in Finland for three years, it was difficult for her to change her inherited behavior and concept. She was still not used to addressing her teachers with their names. Furthermore, influenced by the Chinese educational philosophy, she thought that the teacher should know everything. And it was not acceptable if the teacher could not answer the student’s questions. However, the situation in Finland is different. In the Finnish educational culture, Finnish teachers are allowed to say “I do not know” to their students.

Participant nine felt that there were not many strict rules for students to obey in Finnish universities’ classroom. The Finnish teachers tended to hope students to be responsible for themselves. She described:

The Finnish classroom does not have a strict discipline or rule. It seems that it is not a big problem if students are late for school or go outside the classroom to pick up calls during the class. But in China, the situation is quite different. Many teachers dislike students being late. I remember an old professor at my Chinese university who told us on the first day of his course that we should not be late or leave early in his course. If the students were late for the first time, they would have to stand outside the classroom for 15 minutes. If they were late for the second time, they would have to write an apology letter. If they were late for the third time, they would lose the chance to take the exam for this course. Due to his strict regulations, no student dared to be late for his course. And no one dared to go out to pick up their phone during class. However, in Finland, the teachers do not impose many rules on students. They think students need to be responsible for themselves. This opinion is different from that of Chinese people. (P9F)

The findings of this section about classroom behavior of students and teachers conform to previous research results on the features of Chinese learning culture (Chan, 1999; Tweed & Lehman, 2002; Wan, 2001). In Chinese learning culture, students should show respect and obedience to their teachers. At the same time, it believes that a teacher has the responsibility and authority to demand, persuade, or force their students to work
hard for a better life (Wang, 2010). If a teacher does not show this attitude, he or she would be regarded as irresponsible or lazy (Zhao, 2007).

5.3 ACADEMIC CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY THE PARTICIPANTS IN THEIR ACADEMIC LEARNING

For many of the students interviewed, studying at the UEF was their first experience abroad. The challenges they encountered during their academic acculturation included (1) language insufficiency; (2) knowledge gap; (3) interaction with supervisors; and (4) personal concerns related to academic acculturation (Table 6).

Table 6. Summary of academic challenges encountered by the participants (Note: P = Participant; M = Male; F = Female)

| Categories of academic challenges encountered by the participants | P1 | P2 | P3 | P4 | P5 | P6 | P7 | P8 | P9 | P10 | P11 | P12 | P13 | P14 | P15 | P16 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Language insufficiency | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Oral classroom interaction | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Reading academic English | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Academic writing | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Knowledge gap | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Interaction with supervisors | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Following path versus trial and error | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Strict regulation versus freedom | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Paternalistic relationship versus partnership | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Personal concerns related to academic acculturation | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Financial pressure | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Family pressure | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |

5.3.1 Language insufficiency

As described previously in section 2.3.2, language insufficiency has been identified as one of the main inhibitors that prevented Chinese students from achieving their academic goals in a Western setting. The findings of this research were consistent with the earlier literature review (Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Edwards, Ran, & Li, 2007; Mori, 2000). And the data showed that participants who studied humanities and social sciences encountered more language challenges than those who studied natural sciences. In this section, the English problems of the participants for the academic purpose were categorized into three aspects: (a) oral classroom interaction; (b) reading academic English; and (c) academic writing.

**Oral classroom interaction.** Some participants indicated that they did not get a sufficient and systematic training in English before studying at the UEF. This
insufficient training affected their oral communication in the classroom. Just as participant fifteenth commented:

> I think English education in China is not successful, at least for those of us born in the 1980s. Chinese students only have the ability to take English exams, but they cannot communicate in English. In a real English environment, many Chinese students feel too nervous to speak. When I first started my studying at the UEF, I couldn't follow the teacher in the class at all. When the teacher asked questions, I had to keep my head down, hoping not to attract the teacher's attention. I felt like an outsider, and my confidence was greatly hurt. After class, I could not hang out with my friends but instead, stayed at my apartment learning what I had missed in the course. I rarely asked my teachers questions because I was afraid they wouldn't understand what I was asking. During my initial months in Finland, my mood was just like the Finnish winter — dark and cold. One day, after I got home, I hid myself under the table and cried like a baby. I felt hopeless. (P15F)

Participant eleven admitted that his poor oral English was one of the major challenges in his overseas learning. Due to the inadequate language ability, he was not able to concentrate on listening to English for a long time. He said that he always felt depressed in class:

> Most of our Chinese students who come to Finland are not majoring in English. We have little exposure to the English environment in China. Although I passed the IELTS test, my English ability was still limited. In the UEF, many lectures usually lasted three hours. The extensive immersion into the English environment for three hours was a big challenge for me. I often felt exhausted when I was concentrating on listening to English for more than 30-35 minutes. My head was empty, only seeing the teacher's mouth opening and closing. I seldom put forward my ideas in class or communicated with other students because I was afraid that my English pronunciation might be mocked. Once, I finally got the courage to participate in a discussion, but when I finished my words, the other students gave me a very confused look. At that moment, I really wanted to escape from the classroom or find a place to sneak into. I felt very shameful. I was a good student in China. But here, because of my English, I lose the advantage. (P11M)

Participant fourteen said that she admired the Western students who were always ready to express about their complex feelings in the new learning experiences. For her, she had to practice more than 50 times in advance before a presentation. If the preparation time was short, she could be very nervous during the presentation.

> I admire those western students who can express their opinions fluently in English at any time. When they stand in the front of the classroom to make a presentation, they look confident and natural. However, I only dare to express my ideas after I practice in advance. Before every presentation or a group discussion, I had to write down the sentences which I planned to say on the paper and practiced it more than 50 times. Once, my professor wanted me to make a group presentation on the second day. Because the preparation time was too short, I could not perform well. I could hear my voice was shaking when I was speaking. Later, my professor told me to redo the presentation next week because he could not understand what I was talking about. I felt embarrassed. (P14F)
Obviously, oral communication is a big obstacle for many Chinese students (Wu & Gu, 2011). This finding echoed Wang’s (2010) that Chinese overseas students had difficulties in verbally responding to teacher’s questions and participating in academic activities in classroom. There are at least two reasons that contribute to this situation. First, in China, an oral English class usually has 40-60 students (Wu & Gu, 2011). Because the class size is too big, not every student can get a chance to practice their oral skills. It is also difficult for teachers to organize or conduct teaching activities. Second, influenced by the result-oriented teaching, the grammar-translation approach plays a dominant role in the English class. Teachers overly focus on the basic knowledge of the language and keep explaining the construction of sentences from the beginning to the end of class. Students learn grammar, vocabulary, and sentence construction passively (Greer, 2005).

The accent is another factor which impacts Chinese students’ classroom interaction. For instance, participant thirteen said that she had troubles to communicate with the foreign students if they had accents. She described:

*I can basically understand the content of a teacher’s lectures because what the teacher is talking about mainly revolves around a particular topic. And generally, the speed of the teacher’s speaking is not fast. But I have difficulties in understanding the words of my classmates because they have different accents. Moreover, when they gave presentations, they talked very fast. They didn’t seem to care whether the audience could follow them or not. I had to guess what they wanted to say by looking at their PPT slides. At the end of their presentation, they usually asked me to give comments on their performance. I always said I had no comments because I had no idea what they were talking about. If I were an English native speaker, I would understand other students irrespective of their accents. But the truth is that I am not a native speaker of English and it is difficult for me to interact with them.* (P13F)

Participant thirteen’s perceptions of English accents reflected the shortcomings of Chinese students’ English learning. Put another way, they lacked the exposure to a variety of English accent. This finding was consistent with the discussion in section 2.3.2. In China, the English teaching only focuses on Standard English materials (Xue, 2013). Chinese students are mainly exposed to the recorded model of British or American English. When they are in an international setting, they encounter difficulties to understand the accents of multicultural peers. However, the issue of accent problem would disappear as time elapses. This result was supported by the previous studies (Zhu, 2012; Fu & Townsend, 1998; Xue, 2013)

**Reading academic English.** When participants studied at the UEF, they found that their reading ability of academic English had been challenged. Not only do they need to know the new academic terminologies, but they also need to improve their reading skills. Participant sixteen reported:

*Reading academic English is very demanding. I am not satisfied with my reading ability and efficiency. In my field, there are a lot of new terminologies to learn. Those new words cause me great difficulties in understanding the content of an article. Sometimes, I have to stop several times in the middle of reading to find out the meaning of the new words. The worst thing is that I completely forget what I have read after I looked up these words. I have to start all over again. At that moment, I really want to tear the paper up.* (P16F)
Participant seven expressed that although he had learned English for many years, he still encountered many problems with academic terms. He also complained that he always had to go back and forth to get the point of the reading materials.

In China, we learn English for many years from elementary school to university. But I have to say that the Chinese students’ learning outcome in English is unsatisfactory. Even though I had passed the IELTS test, I still have difficulties reading academic materials. For some academic terms, I cannot find corresponding words in Chinese. For example, the phrase “combination severity,” I knew each word separately, but I didn’t know what the term was referring to when these two words were together. When I finally figured it out, I totally forgot what I was reading before. I had to go back and forth several times to get to the point of the reading material. I felt panicked. (P7M)

For participant sixteen and seven, their limited knowledge of English vocabulary was a significant factor that hindered them to comprehend the content of the academic papers. They had to read the text several times at a slow pace. And apparently, this slow speed was not what they expected. Participant eight said that he could only focused on reading in 30-minute intervals, after which, he felt exhausted. He expressed:

Chinese and English are two different language systems. When I read Chinese materials, I could get the main points after reading the materials only once. However, for English materials, I have to read them four to five times before understanding them. The complicated clauses make me lose patience. Sometimes, I was sitting in front of the computer for a long time without doing anything. My brain would go blank. I felt that the words in the papers were dancing in front of my eyes and I could not read them at all. Although I hate reading, I have to complete reading tasks which are assigned by my teachers. In order to avoid my distraction, I write down every sentence in an article with a pen. I know that my way of reading is stupid, but I can’t concentrate on reading without this method. (P8M)

According to participant eight, “write down every sentence in an article with a pen” was his solution to overcome the reading difficulties. He did not seem to have the appropriate skills to read English materials. Effortful learning and repetitive learning were his main strategies. His incompetence in English reading might be caused by two reasons: firstly, he was less exposed to a large number of English academic readings in China; and secondly, he did not get enough training in academic reading skills. When he studied in an English academic environment at the UEF, his reading competence and efficiency could not meet the requirements of his postgraduate program. Participant two expressed that he lacked the critical attitude towards reading:

Chinese education does not teach students how to read analytically. When I read some academic articles, I always think they are right. I just want to get the main points without any doubts. But when you study in a western university, you cannot just accept the author’s ideas when you are reading. You need to ask why and check if the author’s arguments are valid or not. I am not good at these reading skills. I remember once one of my teachers told me to compare two completely opposite views on a research question. When I read author A’s article, I thought his opinion was correct. When I
read author B’s article, I thought her argument was right, too. I could not tell which view was more reasonable. I think this is my main issue. (P2M)

The response of participant two revealed that he struggled with the practice of critical thinking while reading. Because he was accustomed to the transmission model in Chinese education, he perceived every article which he read as being right. It was hard for him to critically evaluate and challenge published articles. His reading skills did not match the expectations of his Finnish teachers. The findings supported Holmes’ (2004) and Skyrme’s (2007) study, in which Chinese international students were considered as a group lacked the skills of questioning, analyzing, contrasting, hypothesizing and extracting information from materials.

Academic writing. When talking about academic writing in the forms of course papers, journal manuscripts, and conference proposals, most participants indicated that in China, they mainly wrote for tests. In order to get high scores, they often had some specific models to follow. Critical and independent thinking was not encouraged in the Chinese academic writing. Therefore, when they were exposed to graduate-level writing at the UEF, they felt that the ability to write critically was a challenge. Just as participant three commented:

_in China, I think the purpose of English writing is for examinations. In order to get high scores, Chinese students have to follow certain “successful models” or formula to write. These models and formula are “standard writing” provided by “so-called experts”. You do not need to express your own opinions on issues because no one cares about your true thoughts. All you have to do is remember the content of samples and write it out when you take the exams. This is the “safe way” of writing. Therefore, you can find an interesting phenomenon in the English writing of Chinese students. If you look at ten articles written by ten Chinese students, you will find that these articles are almost the same. Here [at the UEF], I am struggling with academic writing because the academic writing norms require students to write their own personal thoughts. I need to read articles with a critical eye and write in my own voice. However, I do not have this ability. I am accustomed to formulaic writing. I need someone to tell me if what I am writing is correct or not. (P3F)_

The comments of participant three indicated that Chinese education does not encourage critical and independent thinking in English writing. The exam-oriented educational system requires students to follow the “writing standard” strictly. In participant three’s minds, following “successful models or formula” is a “safe way” to get high scores in English tests. However, when she was exposed to graduate-level writing at the UEF, she found that there was no “standard” way to write. Participant five agreed with participant three. He concurred:

_with I studied English writing in China, personal thinking was not encouraged in tests. My English teacher usually told me that she appreciated my creative thinking but suggested me never to write something that was too different or too novel in the exam. The graders or the teachers did not have enough time to read every student’s writing carefully. They only wanted to see the standard article. If my creative thinking did not meet the expectations of graders, I might fail in an important test. Although I felt this evaluation system was unfair and showed the ignorance of the graders, I could not change anything in this exam-oriented education. Like many other students, I had to_
follow the rules and restrain my opinions in order to cater to the graders’ preferences. The norms of English academic writing at the UEF are quite different. I can write whatever I want. This freestyle made me feel confused in the beginning. There were no instructions or models. I did not know what to write and how to write. Sometimes, I feel that having a lot of freedom may not be a good thing because you have to rely on yourself to find a right way to write. (P5M)

The feedback from participant five indicated that the transformation from imitating the “successful samples” to having freedom in English writing was not easy for him. Although he complained about the writing norms in China, when he faced the new and free writing norms of Finland, he felt emotional pressure and missed the Chinese writing approach. His conflict of thought suggested that he was not well-prepared for the new academic writing requirements. He was afraid of not being able to write properly. Participant ten attributed her writing barrier to the lack of training in her previous learning experience in China. She described:

In China, the English writing topics in the tests are usually very simple. These topics revolve mainly around students’ daily lives. For example, in the College English Tests Band 4, students were asked to write an essay regarding their decision after graduation: whether they wanted to continue to go to a graduate school or to take up a job in a company. The requirements for writing this essay were not high. Students only needed to write around 120 words in thirty minutes with casual and simple sentences. But here [at the UEF], the essays of my courses are demanding. I always have to write an essay of at least fifteen pages. I have never written so many pages like this in China. Furthermore, I do not know how to express my views in academic language. I hope someone can help me with academic writing. (P10F)

The College English Test Band 4 mentioned by participant ten is the national examination for all Chinese college students. If non-English majors want to obtain their Bachelor’s degree, they have to pass the Band 4 test. In the section of writing part of this test, students are asked to write a short essay with at least 120 words but no more than 180 words in 30 minutes (Sang, 2010). Obviously, the requirements of English writing at the UEF are higher than Chinese universities. Participant ten’s comments indicated that although she encountered an academic challenge in a new education system, it seemed that she had not found much academic support available to her for writing. The finding of this section resonated with Yan’s (2008) study that the previous writing training influenced Chinese students’ academic writing in the new learning setting.

5.3.2 Knowledge gap

Notably, some of the participants mentioned that their difficulties in academic acculturation were caused by the different curriculum content and structure between Finnish and Chinese universities. For instance, participant four expressed that sometimes, the Finnish teachers assumed that Chinese students had the same knowledge background as Finnish students. This assumption made Chinese students encounter challenges. Participant four said that:
When I studied the course of qualitative research methods, I felt very frustrated. According to the curriculum designed by our department, students should study the basic knowledge of qualitative research at the bachelor's level, namely qualitative research (1). By the master's level, students study the course of qualitative research (2). This arrangement is reasonable for Finnish students. But for me, when I was an undergraduate student at my former Chinese university, I never took any courses on research methods. I didn't have the concept of qualitative approaches and I didn't know how to do qualitative research. However, in the first semester of my master program, my course teacher assumed that I had the basic knowledge of this subject, so his lecture was too advanced. I didn't understand what he was talking about in class, and I didn't know how to finish my homework. I felt like I was being driven crazy. In the end, I had to quit this course. (P4F)

Participant five indicated that he encountered some difficulties when studying the wine culture tourism because he did not have any knowledge about Western wine culture. He described:

Things that Westerners take for granted are new to Chinese students. For example, wine culture tourism is an important research area in my major. When students study wine culture tourism, they must have the basic knowledge of wines. As a Chinese student, it was hard for me to understand the content of the wine course because my Finnish teacher only focused on the Western wines during class, such as Vodka, Brandy, and Rum, which I was not familiar with. Moreover, the production method of Western wines and Chinese wines was not the same. Western wines were made by the process of distillation, while Chinese wines were made by the process of fermentation. To be honest, I didn't have any background when studying Western wines' culture. This knowledge gap had caused me to encounter some obstacles in learning. (P5M)

Like participant five, participant eight indicated that although some courses offered by his program at the UEF had the same name as the ones he had studied at his former Chinese university, the content of the course was different. Therefore, he had to study those courses again. Participant seven had a similar experience. He added:

Before I studied at the UEF, I thought I just needed to follow the original research direction and continue to do what I used to do. Unfortunately, the situation was not the same as I expected. There was a lot of knowledge that I had never studied in my former university in China, so I had to start from the beginning. I spent 10 hours in the library every day. I felt frustrated and my hair had been falling out a lot at that time. (P7M)

The feedback from participant seven showed that he was fully aware of the different curriculum content and structure existing between the Finnish educational system and the Chinese educational system. The disequilibrium state in curriculum blocked him from actively participating and achieving. In order to catch up with the other Western students, he had to study hard to overcome this obstacle.
5.3.3 Interactions with supervisors

To a large extent, the academic success of international students depends on the effective interaction with their native supervisors (Yan, 2008). The data in this study showed that participants encountered some challenges when they interacted with their supervisors. For instance, some participants reported that due to the lack of understanding of the Chinese cultural background, their supervisors were not aware of Chinese students’ learning needs and struggles. Just as participant thirteen said, “From the cultural perspective of my supervisor, he can’t understand my worry and anxiety.” And the data also showed that the participants, as international students, did not receive sufficient support to adapt to the new supervisor-student mode. For most of the participants, they wanted their supervisors to show care and initiative in their initial adjustments. In this study, the challenges faced by Chinese students in the supervision relationship had been categorized into three themes: (1) following path versus trial and error; (2) strict regulation versus freedom; and (3) paternalistic relationship versus a partnership.

Following path versus trial and error. When it comes to learning knowledge or skills, most participants in this interview expected their supervisors to guide them through a learning path in detail so that they could just imitate what was shown. However, the Finnish supervisors expected their students to learn through the process of trial and error. Participant fourteen shared her experience:

I think maybe I am too Chinese in the Finnish educational system. I’m a person used to receiving instructions. I expect my supervisor to tell me what to do and how to do it. And I also hope my supervisor can give me a heads up before I encounter problems. However, my Finnish supervisor’s thought is different from mine. When I asked him “how to do this research?” or “what approach should I use?” he always said, “It depends on you.” When I heard his responses, I felt confused and uncomfortable. In my eyes, he was an irresponsible supervisor. If I knew how to do it, why should I need studying? If you do not get what I am trying to say, I can use a metaphor to explain. For instance, my supervisor gives me a task of making fish soup. Since I have no experience in cooking, I expect that he can tell me what kind of fish is suitable for the soup, what seasoning I should add in this soup, how long the fish should be cooked, and who will eat this fish soup, etc. However, he does not give me any information about cooking. He only assigns me the task and then leaves me alone in the kitchen. Even if he knows about some potential risks that might happen or some mistakes I might make, he will not remind me in advance. Chinese supervisors have a different way to teach students. They will show the cooking process first, and then stay in the kitchen and watch their students practicing. If students make mistakes, they will correct them immediately. I think this is the biggest difference between a Finnish supervisor and a Chinese supervisor. (P14F)

The finding confirmed previous research results about Chinese students’ perception of the supervisor’s roles in how to learn a new skill (Henze & Zhu, 2012; Zhang, 2013; Zhao, 2007; Zhu, 2012). In Chinese students’ minds, supervisors are the experts in their research area. They know the right path to learn, the mistakes that may occur during the learning process, and the way of avoiding mistakes. A responsible supervisor should unconditionally impart all his or her knowledge and skills to the students. Under the influence of this culture, participant fourteen expected her supervisor to give her clear instructions and show the path step by step. She felt insecure without
the supervisor being around her. However, her supervisor expected her to explore the knowledge and skills on her own through trial and error. As a result, the different expectations of how to acquire knowledge and skills caused confusion for participant fourteen. Participant five had a similar experience. He described:

*Actually, as Chinese students, we are not accustomed to the approach of learning through trial and error. We expect our supervisors to give us a correct guidance to ensure that we do not make mistakes in the research process. However, Finnish supervisors always let us discover and explore knowledge by ourselves. They think mistakes are the part of the learning process. For example, I changed my research direction for some reason. Therefore, I asked my supervisor what I should do for the future research. I felt disappointed when he said that I should not rely on him. Contrary to his view, I think he should be responsible for my study because he is my supervisor. It took me a year and a half to determine my current research direction. For me, the absence of the supervisor’s guidance wasted a lot of my precious time. I admit that students can learn a lot by exploring themselves. But this exploration costs too much time. (P5M)*

Participant twelve felt that trial and error mode was a good way to improve students’ learning abilities, but in Chinese students’ minds, it was not efficient. He suggested that it should consider the balance between time and learning outcomes.

*The approach to supervision in China is different from that in Finland. In China, the supervisor will give you a clear learning goal and show you how to reach the goal. So, students in China can complete their learning tasks quickly. In Finland, students have to depend on themselves to solve problems. In this long learning journey, they are very likely to make mistakes without timely and adequate guidance from the supervisors. When we talk about efficient supervision, I think we should consider the balance between time and outcomes. Although students can learn more through their own exploration, they have to waste time in their exploration. For most of us Chinese students, our hope is to graduate soon because we have much pressure under the Chinese culture and society. If there is more guidance from the supervisor, our learning will be more efficient. (P12M)*

The opinion of participant five and participant twelve reflected the feature of practical learning which was discussed in the previous section 2.2.1. For them, following a supervisor’s path to learning was more efficient than exploring knowledge by students themselves. Although self-directed learning was good, it could not guarantee learning outcomes. Students who learn by themselves might make mistakes or learn slowly. When they brought their heritage with them onto the Finnish campus, they found it hard to acculturate to the Finnish supervision style.

Participant fifteen commented that Finnish supervisors expected students could take the initiative to solve the learning problems, while Chinese students expected their supervisors could be sensitive to their problems and help them solve the problems actively. The mismatch in expectations posed learning challenges for Chinese students:

*I think most Chinese students may misunderstand their Finnish supervisor when they first start studying in Finland. They may feel that Finnish supervisors are not as responsible as Chinese supervisors. In China, students rely on their teachers to learn. They do what teachers say. Therefore, in the minds of many Chinese students, a good*
supervisor should take the initiative to approach students and pass on the knowledge he or she knows. The supervisor should be sensitive to the problems students encounter in their study or life, and actively help students solve problems. Unlike Chinese supervisors, Finnish supervisors do not take the initiative to approach students or to push students to study. They expect students to explore knowledge and solve problems on their own. This mismatched expectation poses learning challenges for me. Usually, I hope my supervisor can give me a detailed guidance, and then I imitate it. I also expect that my supervisor can give me answers directly instead of telling me to read relevant books. In my culture, these things are the part of a supervisor’s work. The way of Finnish supervisors’ teaching is different from what I expected. (P15F)

Chinese supervisors focus on the function of the demonstration when teaching students. They tend to establish the role of authoritative experts in the minds of students, expecting students to obey their guidance. Influenced by this hierarchical culture, participant fifteen had limited learning autonomy. She expected her supervisor to take the initiative to communicate with her and tell her how to learn. However, Finnish learning culture is characterized by the low power distance (Hofstede et al., 2010). That means — Finnish supervisors expect students to take the initiative to find their own learning paths.

**Strict regulation versus freedom.** Most participants in this study mentioned that they expected their supervisors to give them explicit and rigid supervision. However, the management model of Finnish supervisors focused on individual freedom and self-motivated learning. This new regulation mode exposed the participants to the challenge of self-management and self-discipline. Participant nine commented:

I had a hard time arranging my study after I arrived here [the UEF]. You know, in China, everything was specified by your supervisor. For instance, when I was studying for my master’s degree in China, my Chinese supervisor required all of his students, including master’s students and doctoral students, to arrive at the lab by 8:30 in the morning and leave at 5:30 in the afternoon. If a student was unable to come to the lab because of some situation, he or she had to let the supervisor know in advance. As students, we never dared to be late or leave early as long as the supervisor was in his office. Every week, we had to report our research progress to our supervisor, and then he gave us feedback or arranged the next tasks. I was not a hardworking person, so my supervisor was particularly strict with me. Although I was afraid of my former supervisor, I respected him very much. He worked all year and only took three days off. After coming to Finland, my Finnish supervisor never gave me any pressure. I could arrange my research schedule according to my requirements. Since no one kept an eye on me, I did not study as hard as I did in China. Every time I met with my Finnish supervisor, I felt guilty and ashamed. I was afraid that he would criticize me for my slackness and procrastination. However, my Finnish supervisor never showed any dissatisfaction. His support and trust encouraged me to study hard. Chinese students who have just arrived in Finland may complain that there aren’t many regulations in Finnish supervision. In my opinion, these supervision regulations exist, but they are invisible. (P9F)

The comments from participant nine indicated that Chinese supervisors appeared to emphasize the rigid and explicit regulation, while Finland supervisors focused on emotional support and implicit regulation. For most of the Chinese teachers,
rules and regulations are the prerequisite to ensure the process of imparting quality education to students. A good student should be cultivated by severity. Influenced by the strict supervision mode in China, participant nine lacked the consciousness of self-management and self-discipline. When she brought her inherited value onto the Finnish campus, she encountered problems in arranging her study.

Some participants said that they felt pressure when they had more freedom in the Finnish educational culture. For instance, participant eleven stated:

I do not like this freedom [of the supervision]. If I have more freedom, I will get distracted. Pursuing a doctoral degree is a demanding and long journey. Nobody knows what you are doing except your supervisor. I expect my supervisor to be around me and supervise me strictly. Unfortunately, he cannot keep his eyes on me. I have to study alone. Sometimes, I feel depressed because I do not know how to continue my study. I know most Western students like freedom. They do not like being over-regulated by their supervisors. But as Chinese students, we are used to being managed by our parents and teachers since childhood. We hope supervisors can maintain high interference in our learning process. When I am in this new environment which emphasizes freedom and individualism, I just feel that no one cares about me. (P11M)

In the Finnish educational system, blind regulation is devalued and self-directedness is emphasized. Just as Filippou, Kallo, and Mikkilä-Erdmann (2017) observed: Finnish students disagree that “it was the supervisor’s responsibility to select a promising topic, initiate frequent meetings,” (p.343) and that “(supervisors) should be aware, at all times, of the tasks the student is working on” (p.344). Obviously, this supervisor-student relationship is not what Chinese students expected. The feedback from participant eleven indicated that he has a hard time adjusting to the Finnish student-teacher supervision mode. Being trained by the teacher-centered style in China, participant eleven had high expectations of his supervisor. His inherited value had been challenged after he came to the new educational environment.

Participant sixteen said that when she first came to Finland, she did not realize that Finnish supervisors and Chinese supervisors had different ways of managing students. She described:

I was accustomed to the Chinese model of reporting everything to teachers. Therefore, at the beginning of my research at the UEF, I kept sending emails to my supervisor to report my research status and progress. One day, I got his email saying that he was uncomfortable with my frequent emails. He wrote: “You are a researcher and you can do whatever you want. You do not need to ask for my permission before doing things. And it is not necessary for you to let me know the details of your research”. My supervisor’s reply made me feel bad. In China, it is quite normal and reasonable for a student to keep his or her supervisor informed constantly. And this is also a way for students to show the respect to their supervisors. But in Finland, the supervisor did not feel my respect for him. Instead, he thought I wasted his time. I realize that it is wrong for me to use the Chinese way to communicate with my supervisor in Finland. After that, I only contact him once a month. I have to adjust my expectations of my supervisor. (P16F)

For participant sixteen, she expected her research process to be controlled by her supervisor. She hoped that her supervisor could devote more time to mentoring her. However, her supervisor emphasized the development of personality or the inner
self of a student. The mismatched expectations made participant sixteen feel bad. She realized that she had to adjust her expectations of her supervisor.

**Paternalistic relationship versus partnership.** In Chinese culture, a famous proverb about the teacher-student relationship is that “he who teaches me for one day is my father for life”. That is to say, in the minds of most Chinese people, the relationship between a teacher and his/her students is akin to a parent and his/her sons or daughters. Both teachers and students think of each other as members of an extended family (Wang, 2006). In this study, some participants seemed more likely to expect a paternalistic relationship with a supervisor because it gave them the feeling of safety and being taken care of. They indicated that the partnership between supervisors and students made them have a sense of distance and emotional loneliness. Just as participant fourteen referred:

> My former supervisor in China emphasized that his group is a family and that every student in his group were his children. As students, we were sisters and brothers in this “family,” and we should take of each other. If one student had not contacted him for more than two weeks, he would make a phone call and ensure that everything was going well. My Finnish supervisor is a person with strong academic ability. I respect him very much. However, I notice that he is not willing to establish an interpersonal relationship with me except academics. Therefore, I always have a sense of distance from him. I have tried to change this relationship between me and my Finnish supervisor, but it did not work out. Last Christmas, I wrote him an email. Maybe I was deeply influenced by the traditional teacher-student relationship in China. In the email, I mentioned that in my heart, I regarded him as my second father. A few days later, my supervisor wrote me back saying that he hoped I wouldn’t think of him in that way. I felt embarrassed after I got his email. (P14F)

Participant one indicated that he was accustomed to having a paternalistic relationship with teachers. The partnership between him and his supervisor made him feel unsafe and emotional loneliness. He shared his story as follows:

> I feel unsafe if I do not have a close interpersonal relationship with my supervisor. However, in the western culture, I find it is hard for me to establish an intimate relationship with my supervisor. When I realized that my supervisor was just my research partner, and our relationship was just like that between two participants in a project, I felt disappointed. Since our relationship is not close, I am afraid I cannot have an in-depth communication with my supervisor. Sometimes I am reluctant to express my real thoughts to him. Of course, my supervisor could see that I was not telling the truth, so he thought I was hypocritical. I do not know how to clear up the misunderstanding between us. (P1M)

For Chinese people, their commitments are based on interpersonal relationships, not on rules or regulations (Chung & Ingleby, 2011). In other words, Chinese people rely on personal relationships for information, resources, and support. Influenced by such culture value, Chinese students might be more eager than Western students to establish interpersonal relationships with their supervisors to reduce uncertainty and gain support in their new environment.

Participant two indicated that he was inclined to look for the interpersonal aspect of the supervisory relationship, while his supervisors only focused on the academic
aspects of supervision. The mismatch in expectations made participant two feel that he was an outsider.

*I feel confused when my supervisor doesn’t want to use me. (The interviewer: what do you mean by “use”?)* You know in China, teachers can ask students to do certain things which are irrelevant to the study. I used to help my Chinese teachers to reimburse their receipts, send letters, clean the offices, and even pick up their kids from schools. The more the teachers asked me to help, the closer I felt to them. But here, my Finnish supervisor never asked me to do anything. Sometimes, he told me that he was busy. But he refused or ignored me when I said I could help him. His refusal made me feel that there was a distance between me and him. Maybe he didn’t trust me. He just wanted to keep a professional and formal relationship between us. For him, I am an outsider. (P2M)

The concept of “insider” and “outsider” has a profound influence on Chinese culture (Chung & Ingleby, 2011). People are categorized into different groups, and the boundaries between groups cannot be crossed. Insiders and outsiders are treated differently. For participant two, he wanted to establish a close relationship with his supervisor and to become an insider. In his mind, he could get more support only if he was seen as an insider.

5.3.4 Personal concerns related to academic acculturation

In the interview, most participants mentioned that financial problems and family pressure negatively impacted their academic experience at the UEF. Two participants expressed that they were considering dropping out of the university.

**Financial pressure.** Compared to Finland, China is still a developing country and the average income of a Chinese family is relatively low. The data showed that students studying humanities and social sciences faced more financial challenges than students studying natural sciences. Some participants indicated that they were self-funded and depended on their parents to finance their study. Participant twelve said:

*Although I am very passionate about my research work and expect to make academic achievements in the future, I am afraid that I have to give up my doctoral study because of financial pressure. When I was two years old, my father passed away. So my mother raised me up. Last year, my mother was diagnosed with cancer and needed a lot of money to treat her disease. I felt very sad and helpless when I heard about this news. I am the only child of my mother. But I do not have the ability to save her life. My mother’s illness made me realize my responsibilities and the importance of money. Before she fell ill, I mainly depended on her to finance my various expenses. Now, I can’t continue to spend her money. As her son, I had to terminate my studies at the UEF and return to China to find a job. It was a painful decision to abandon my studies now. (P12M)*

Participant eight said that he had to quit his study at the UEF because the financial problem. He described his unpleasant experience as follows:

*I didn’t get any financial support from my department when I got here. I tried to save each penny for my living expenses. In addition to the rent, my monthly living expenses were only 100 euros. Every time I went to the grocery store, I could only afford the*
cheapest vegetables and discounted food. I liked eating grapes but the price of grapes in Finland was expensive, so I just walked away with a glance. I admire Finnish students because they have a subsidy of 500 euros per month. They do not need to be worried and anxious every day like me. Six months ago, I got an admission letter from one of the Italian universities. They could provide me with the scholarship. So I decided to quit my master’s degree at the UEF and restart my study in Italy. My parents strongly opposed my decision because I only need one more year to get my master’s degree. But I think I made the right choice because I do not want to study without financial assistance being provided. It makes me feel inferior. (P8M)

Due to limited financial support, some participants indicated that they had to finish their study as soon as possible. Participant fifteen stated:

I have been applying for different grants for two years, but in the end, I got nothing. The competition is too fierce. As an international student, I do not think I have any advantages. The last time I applied for a grant was last September. When I knew that I failed again, I felt angry and desperate. I laid on my bed and cried for three days. I barely ate anything during those three days. I doubted my academic ability and even thought of suicide. Since then, I decided that I would never apply for any grant. The application not only wasted my time but also blew my confidence. In order to save money, I only ate two meals a day. I studied harder and hoped to graduate soon. Last winter was very cold. Every day, I studied in the library until 2 am. Because the road was very slippery, I fell down several times when I was walking home. Sometimes I feel that choosing to study for a doctor degree abroad is a mistake because I do not feel any happiness. I do not want to tell my stories to my parents. If they knew about my situation, they would be heartbroken. (P15F)

When participant fifteen described her experience, she cried several times during the interview. So, the interview had to be paused until she calmed down. It can be seen that she was under tremendous economic pressure. This pressure profoundly impacted her learning experience.

Participant five said that because of the financial issue, he could not attend the international conferences which were important to him.

The budget in my department is tight. I haven’t gotten any financial support from my department since I got here. A few months ago, there was an important conference which was held in Holland. I really wanted to attend this conference and communicate with the experts in my academic area. But the cost of attending this conference was not cheap. I didn’t have extra money to afford it. So I gave it up. Right now, I ignore all the information about conferences. I just want to graduate as soon as possible. (P5M)

The statement from participant five indicated that he expected to have a better chance of communicating with the experts from outside the university. However, his financial problems limited his academic activities.

Family pressure. The ages of participants in this interview were between 25-36 years old. The reports from them showed that they were anxious and worried about their dating, marriage, or family life. Just as participant nine said:
In Chinese culture, men can get married at any time, while women can’t. If a woman is not married before the age of 27, she is a “leftover” woman who is worth less and less—like “yellowed pearls”. I am already 30 years old and I feel a lot of pressure from my parents and the society. My parents think that I embarrass them. My relatives and friends regard me as abnormal. They always say: “30? Unmarried? A female? And a female doctor? No man wants to marry you!” These words really hurt. A popular saying in China is that “there are three kinds of people in the world, the male, the female, and the female with a doctoral degree”. In the eyes of many Chinese men, I am abnormal. By the time I get my Ph.D., I will already be 34 years old. My choice of a marriage partner would be highly limited. My parents wanted me to give up my current doctoral study and return back to China to find a guy to get married. But it is hard to make this decision. I am under such big pressure that I cannot concentrate on my academic research. Every night, I cannot fall asleep when I think of my future. (P9F)

Participant thirteen was younger than participant nine. But as a female, she was still worried about her age. She described:

I was planning to apply for the doctoral program in my department after getting my master’s degree this year. But I have to return back to China because my parents are afraid that I will be a leftover woman if I continue my study. Actually, I am 26 and I do not think I am too old to find a guy. However, when I was talking to my friends in China, it surprised me that they had different opinions about me. Although I would like to continue my study, I cannot confront the reality of Chinese society. Maybe in the future, I will come to Finland again to pursue my doctoral study after I get married. (P13F)

The term “leftover woman” has been used by official Chinese media since 2007 (BBC News, 2013). This term refers to single women over the age of 27. In Chinese society, if a woman does not marry at a certain age, she will be discriminated against. The feedback from participant nine and participant thirteen indicated that their academic development had been negatively affected by this social bias.

Participant one said that he was under great pressure to take care of his family while pursuing his doctoral degree. He shared his story:

I’m a married man and I think I have more challenges than the average international Chinese student. I was planning to graduate with a Ph.D. in four years, and then find a job in a university in China. But for some reasons, my doctoral studies had to be postponed for a year. This situation is bad for me. Because my daughter is three years old, she should attend kindergarten this year. In China, kindergartens are hierarchical. Only children of people with money or decent jobs can go to good quality kindergartens. Because of my doctoral extension and because I cannot work in a Chinese university, my daughter cannot get a good education. I do not want to say bad things about China, but the kindergarten abuses that happened in recent years have shocked Chinese parents. I feel very guilty for my daughter. My wife has not been talking to me for months. In addition, my parents are getting older. There is a saying in China that “while his parents are alive, the son may not go abroad to a distance”. As the only son in the family, I should take care of my parents. However, I am not only far from my parents, but I also had to leave them alone and make them constantly worry about me. So, for...
my parents, I am not a good son; for my wife, I am an irresponsible husband. Because of these reasons, my doctoral process was more stressful. I feel like I can’t breathe. (P1M)

A family is one of the social support resources that influence students’ adaptation (Misra, Crist & Burant, 2003). For most international students who are married, a family might be a source of stress in their learning process. Compared to the unmarried overseas students, participant one was under more mental and material pressure. He needed to be responsible for his child, parents, and wife. These responsibilities and pressures posed challenges to the successful completion of his studies.

5.4 COPING STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY THE PARTICIPANTS IN THEIR ACADEMIC LEARNING

In this study, although most participants encountered many challenges, they acknowledged that these challenges were temporary and natural. Furthermore, they believed that Finnish higher education was superior to their previous educational experience in China. In order to survive in the new academic environment, they tried to cope with their stress and challenges through various strategies. They hoped that their intercultural learning experience could enable them become a competent intercultural learner in the future. In this section, I will present the participants’ coping strategies (Table 7) based on the study of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) who divided the coping strategies into two categories: problem-focused and emotion-focused.

Table 7. Summary of coping strategies adopted by the participants
(Note: P = Participant; M = Male; F = Female)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of coping strategies adopted by the participants</th>
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<tr>
<td>Problem-focused strategies</td>
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<td>Emotion-focused strategies</td>
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5.4.1 Problem-focused strategies

Problem-focused coping involves changing or managing the problems itself to improve self-efficacy (Yu, 2016). Participants in this study indicated that they generally overcame the academic challenges by the following strategies: (1) putting more efforts into learning; and (2) seeking help.

**Putting more efforts into learning.** Under the influence of Confucianism, most Chinese students hold the view that effort attributions are more important than ability attributions (Dahlin & Watkins, 2000). Fuligni (2001) and Leung (2010) found that Chinese students showed stronger efforts and perseverance than their European counterparts when they encountered difficulties. In the interview, most participants
emphasized that consistent efforts could lead them to better academic achievements. Participant eight stated:

_Studying abroad is a journey with lots of pressure. I do not want to cry when I am under the huge stress because crying does not change anything. What I have to do is to take actions to improve my abilities. For instance, my English was not good in the beginning. I had a hard time communicating with my peers, course teachers, and my supervisor. Although I felt like a fool, I did not give up. Every morning I got up at 5 a.m. to listen to the English news for one hour. I set a goal for myself to read three English articles a day and gave my own comments after reading. At first, the task was difficult for me to accomplish. But I told myself that if I wasn’t strict with myself, then I would be an irresponsible person to myself and to my parents. Sometimes I could only sleep three or four hours a day. Although I was exhausted during that period, investing efforts and time in my study was the only strategy that I could use. I believe that efforts can change my fate._ (P8M)

Participant four said that although she encountered many difficulties during her first semester, she believed that she could achieve her academic goal by the hard work.

_For the first semester at the UEF, I was so ambitious that I had registered for 10 courses. You can imagine how hard it was for me to complete those courses. The reason I signed up for so many courses was that I wanted to graduate soon. I did not have time to eat and sleep. Every day I was reading, writing, and running to the different classrooms on the campus. Although it was painful during that time, I did not regret my choice. Hard work is the only way to succeed. My ability had improved during this process._ (P4F)

Academic goals can be both the source of motivation and pressure (Zhu, 2010). The comments from participant eight and participant four indicated they had great motivation to pursue their academic success. Moreover, they believed that they could control the pressure through their efforts. This finding was consistent with the Chinese learners’ features which were discussed in the previous section 2.2.1. According to the study of Dweck (2006), different mindsets influence students’ attitudes towards learning efforts and outcomes. Specifically, students with a growth mindset believe that their abilities can be further developed through hard work and strategies, while students with a fixed mindset believe that people’s abilities are fixed, so they cannot develop no matter what they do. Leung (2010) noted that the Confucian cultural education in China made Chinese students more likely than their European counterparts to endorse efforts and the growth mindset.

Closely related to effortful learning, some participants considered that repetition and memorization were the major ways to acquire academic knowledge. They stressed that repetition and memorization could deepen their understanding or help them discover new meanings. Participant five said:

_There is one Chinese proverb that describes the importance of repetition in effortful learning, that is, “the meaning will appear automatically if you read a book a hundred times”. Reading a book a hundred times is a bit of an exaggeration, but if you read an article or a paragraph over and over again, it will help you understand what the author wants to say and gain new insights. When I first started reading English articles, I found it difficult to understand them. I knew all the words in the article, but I didn’t_
know what the author was talking about. I felt distressed. So, I decided to get up at 6 a.m. every day and read English articles aloud. I read each article eight times, then I tried to remember some useful sentences. This method is effective. My English reading ability has been greatly improved. (P5M)

Participant ten agreed with participant five. She felt that repetition was a good way for her to improve her study:

At first, it was difficult for me to communicate with my peers in the classroom because our knowledge and background were inconsistent. I did not want to ask them many questions because it would make me lose face. Therefore, I had to figure out how to improve my academic knowledge by myself. I think repetition is a useful way to study because it helps my memorization and understanding. Most of the time, I read journal articles over and over again until I understand them. I also memorize some good sentences which could be used in my academic writing. (P10F)

In the past two decades of research, many scholars hold the view that students should be encouraged to understand what they have learned rather than to memorize it (Purdie, Hattie, & Douglas, 1996). However, Dahlin and Watkins (2000) noted that there were two types of memorization: mechanical memorization (rote learning) and memorizing with understanding. They found that Chinese students with high achievement usually choose the latter type. Furthermore, they pointed out that the combination of repetition and effortful learning played a significant role in the learning process of Chinese students’ memorization and understanding (Figure 9). The result of this research was consistent with the findings of Dahlin and Watkins (2000). The feedback from participant five and participant ten indicated that they benefited from the repetition and efforts in the learning process.

![Creating a deep impression](image1.png)

Creating a deep impression → memory

Repetition

Discovering new meaning → understanding

Figure 9. The role of repetition in students’ learning (Dahlin and Watkins, 2000, p. 81).

**Seeking help.** For international students, seeking help was considered a necessary strategy to overcome academic difficulties (Berno & Ward, 2003; Yan, 2008). The participants in this study expressed that the benefits and supports they received from co-nationals, teachers, international friends, and family served as mediators for them to adjust to the new cultural environment. Participant six stated:

When I encounter difficulties in my study, I usually turn to my Chinese friends for help, especially the senior Chinese students. For me, they know more about the UEF than I do. Because they probably had already experienced the same situation as me, they could understand my mood and help me solve various academic problems. For example, because the winter in Finland was long and dark, I usually was in a bad mood...
and could not study. My friends told me to take more vitamin D and exercise every day. They asked me out for a swim or work out, hoping that I could recover. I really appreciated their help. Another reason I mainly ask Chinese friends for help is language and culture. We speak the same language, and there is a mutual understanding without a need for much explanation. After communicating with them, I feel more relieved and relaxed. In general, I can’t imagine my first semester at the UEF without the help of my Chinese friends. (P6F)

For participant six, the advice and help from earlier Chinese students at the UEF were useful. Because of the language barrier and cultural distance, she felt that it was easier to communicate with co-nationals and get the sympathy. The accounts of participant six were consistent with the previous research results that senior students were the preferred source of information to help Chinese students (Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Yan, 2008). Zhang (2013) also indicated that the Chinese co-national network was an effective strategy for Chinese students to solve their academic problems. Besides seeking help from co-nationals, the support from teachers was another source for Chinese students when they encountered challenges. Participant twelve said:

As for the academic difficulties, I would like to turn to teachers for help. Some students might think that teachers are too busy to respond to students’ questions right away. In addition, due to the language barriers and cultural differences, they need the courage to approach teachers. However, I believe that when a student encounters academic challenges, he or she should ask teachers for help. Teachers’ interpretations of knowledge are more accurate and detailed than others’. (P12M)

Although participant twelve was less confident about his English ability and felt the response from teachers might be delayed sometimes, he held the view that the help from teachers was more useful. Participant twelve’s comment seemed to support Wang’s (2010) finding that Chinese students valued the communication with individuals who were in a more advanced stage of research. According to the study of Bochner (1977), international students were inclined to turn to local teachers or students for academic support, and turn to co-nationals for emotional help.

5.4.2 Emotion-focused strategies

The emotion-focused coping strategy aims to eliminate or reduce negative emotions caused by stress (Yu, 2016). The emotion-focused coping strategies used by participants in this study included: (1) acceptance; and (2) avoidance.

**Acceptance.** The participants knew that they needed to accept the inevitability of difficulties in order to fit into the new academic environment. The acceptance could lessen their stress. Just as participant three commented:

You need to change what you can change and accept what you cannot change. As an overseas student, there is no point complaining about the difficulties and differences. Only if you accept the difficulties and bad situations first, you can release the stress. Before I came to Finland, I overestimated my ability and expected too much of myself. For example, I planned to complete all credits required by my department within one year. Also, I required myself to obtain 4 or 5 points for each course even though some of
them were difficult. As a result, I always felt depressed. Then, I gradually realized that I had to admit that my ability was not as high as I thought it was. I had to accept this fact and be realistic about my goals. Otherwise, I would not get rid of the stress. (P3F)

Participant eleven expressed that he was depressed because of his inadequate English ability at the beginning of his study at the UEF. He gradually realized that only he accepted himself could change his situation.

At the beginning of my study at the UEF, I was afraid to express myself in class due to my inadequate English ability. Since I rarely communicated with other international students, my classmates thought that I was not interested in their study activities. I stressed out and felt inferior to others. I did not like this kind of feeling, so I decided to change my situation. I told myself that I had to adjust my attitude. Only by accepting the fact could I make progress. (P11M)

In the beginning, in order to save face, participant eleven tried to avoid the opportunity to express his thoughts in English. His unwillingness led his classmates to misunderstand him. Later, he gradually realized that he had to face his weaknesses. This acceptance described by participant eleven is related to the finding of Gudykunst and Kim (2003). They put forward that in the process of stress-adaptation-growth dynamics, every stress would go through a drawback, which then activated adaptive energy to move forward.

Participant five indicated that sometimes, from the bottom of his heart, he did not identify with certain values and norms in the new environment, but he would accept it nonetheless. He described:

I have been educated in Chinese culture for so many years. In a foreign context, it is hard for me to be changed completely even if I want to. It’s like learning English. No matter how hard I try, my English will always have a Chinese accent. Some values and behaviors are so ingrained in my mind that it’s hard to change them. For instance, in China, appointments are not emphasized. In Western culture, you need to make an appointment for anything. Making appointments seems to be an effective way of doing things, but sometimes it is not. I can give you an example. When I want to meet with my supervisor, I have to email him and make an appointment. But sometimes he did not reply to my email, so I had to wait three or four days before I sent another email to him. This kind of waiting made me feel anxious and I felt ignored. I wanted to come to the super’s office directly, but I was worried that this would make him unhappy. I think the appointment is only effective for teachers, not for the students. Although I dislike it, I have to follow the rules here. (P5M)

The behavioral compliance does not imply acceptance of values (Wang, 2010). According to the account of participant five, he managed to adapt to the new academic culture. However, he felt that it was impossible for him to achieve a full adaptation. Because of the inherited values and culture, he accepted the new norms at the behavioral level while resisting the value at a deeper level. This finding confirmed the study of Cao, Zhu, and Meng (2018) that emotion-focused strategies played a significant role in balancing a relationship between the requirements of a new learning environment and students’ academic stressors. This finding was also consistent with Wang’s (2010) finding that although some Chinese international students may not like certain norms
in a new learning culture, they still choose to follow when they perceive that these norms can bring them academic success.

Avoidance. Avoidance is another emotion-focused coping strategy. When an individual finds a problem is difficult to solve or beyond his or her ability to cope with, he or she will avoid the problem or pretend the problem does not exist (Carver & Conner-Smith, 2010). In a long run, avoidance strategy might have a negative impact on students’ learning (Senko, Hulleman, & Harackiewicz, 2011). For example, participant nine said that:

I have encountered many difficulties since I arrived in Finland. In the beginning, because of the knowledge gap and the language barrier, I did not understand what I studied in class and could not complete the assignments on time. Although, at that time, having only been in Finland for one month, I decided to travel to some European countries for a short break. I also skipped many classes and stayed at home, watching movies. I knew running away was not an effective way to solve my academic problems, but I did not know how to cope with my situation. Moreover, I did not share my feelings with anybody. (P9F)

For participant nine, she adopted the avoidance strategy to reduce the negative emotion which was caused by the discrepancy between the reality and the ideal state. Bandura (1977) put forward that students’ avoidance behavior was associated with their academic self-efficacy. When students with low self-efficacy considered difficulties as threatening, they were more likely to utilize avoidance strategy rather than engaging in problem-solving, which might affect their learning results (Putwain, Woods, & Symes, 2010).

Participant fourteen indicated that she tried to avoid communicating with people around her because she did not have the confidence in dealing with the interpersonal relationship. The avoidance strategy caused her to feel disintegration and dissatisfaction.

I am introverted and sensitive. Since I’m not good at interpersonal relationships, I usually avoid obstacles when dealing with people. For example, I tried to avoid my academic supervisor. I respected his academic ability, but I felt nervous when I was with him. Every time when we had a group meeting, I always sat in the back of the meeting room trying to keep a distance from him. Also, I was the first person who left the room when the meeting was over. I would say hello to him if we met on the campus, but the feeling was weird. I do not know how to improve our relationship. (P14F)

According to the study by Folkman and Moskowitz (2004), personality traits influence an individual’s perception of difficulty and choice of strategy. Specifically, extroverted and open-minded students tend to view difficulties as challenges and adopt the problem-focused coping strategy, while sensitive and introverted students tend to regard difficulties as threats and adopt avoidance strategies. In this study, the account of participant fourteen was consistent with the finding of Folkman and Moskowitz (2004).

In sum, although the participants in this study faced similar major academic challenges, the ways they tended to cope with the difficulties were different. These differences not only reflected the participants’ personality, inherited culture and the learning environment of the UEF, but also led the participants into the various learning paths and academic outcomes. It worth noting that most participants admitted that
learning in a different learning culture was painful because they had to make a lot of changes. However, they held the view that these learning shocks were temporary and passing. During the process of overcoming the difficulties, they gradually became mature learners.

5.5 SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF FUTURE CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT THE UEF

In the final part of the interview, participants were asked to provide suggestions to new students coming from China, and to give suggestions for the administrators who were working on the international cooperation. Their responses are presented in the two brief sections below (Table 8).

Table 8. Summary of suggestions for the development of incoming Chinese students and the UEF provided by the participants (Note: P = Participant; M = Male; F = Female)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of suggestions for the development provided by the participants</th>
<th>P1 M</th>
<th>P2 M</th>
<th>P3 F</th>
<th>P4 F</th>
<th>P5 M</th>
<th>P6 F</th>
<th>P7 M</th>
<th>P8 M</th>
<th>P9 F</th>
<th>P10 M</th>
<th>P11 M</th>
<th>P12 F</th>
<th>P13 F</th>
<th>P14 F</th>
<th>P15 F</th>
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<td>Developing independent learning awareness and abilities</td>
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<td>Developing the intercultural competence</td>
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5.5.1 Suggestions for incoming Chinese students

Some participants indicated that Chinese students have been trained in the Chinese educational system for more than 20 years before coming to Finland. They rely totally on external guidance and discipline to learn. Therefore, the Finnish academic culture that values independent study and self-determination will bring Chinese students a feeling of being overwhelmed. In order to become an intercultural learner, they advised
the new Chinese students to consciously develop their independent learning awareness and abilities before coming to Finland. For instance, participant one said that:

*I hope new students can study independently at the UEF. In China, we are the only child in our family, and our parents arrange many things for us. In the process of learning, our teachers also take care of most of the things for us. We do not need a plan because both parents and teachers always have a plan for us. All we need to do is to follow the plan. But studying in Finland, you need to take responsibility for yourself. All plans are needed to be made and completed by yourself. For example, Chinese teachers might determine what you are going to write in your thesis. And they follow you closely in the process of your dissertation writing. However, Finnish teachers might think that graduation is your own business and they will not force you to do anything. As a Chinese student, you might feel unaccustomed to the academic culture. Therefore, if you want to become an intercultural learner in the Finnish education, you have to learn to be independent.* (P1M)

Some participants suggested that the new coming Chinese students should be realistic about their academic goals. Under the influence of the traditional cultural values and Chinese competitive society, Chinese students always have the high expectations of their academic performances. They felt that achieving good academic performance not only brought them a bright future but also was their responsibility for their parents or family. As a result, they overestimated their abilities when they set their goals. For instance, participant fifteen stated:

*I think the study pressure of Chinese students is immense. This kind of pressure comes from the fierce competition of Chinese society and the expectations of our parents or families. To be specific, I plan to go back to China to work at a university after I get my doctoral degree. However, I am afraid that it is not easy to achieve this goal. Nowadays, Chinese universities have high requirements for candidates returning from overseas. For example, the university where you have a doctoral degree must be ranked 200 in the world. Furthermore, you must have 3-4 articles published in the famous international journals. Therefore, in order to have a good future, most Chinese students set high goals for their study and work very hard. As far as I know, many of my Chinese friends completed nearly 50 credits in their first semester at the UEF. To be honest, they study for credits, not for knowledge. I do not think this choice is wise. If you really want to learn something abroad, you should be realistic about your abilities and goals.* (P15F)

Most of the participants in this study perceived that there were contrasting gaps between Chinese learners and the Finnish educational system. They emphasized that Chinese learners should develop intercultural competence to fit into the new academic culture. For instance, participant seven commented:

*When you come to Finland, you will find that the teaching philosophy and methods here are different from your previous experience in China. For example, the Finnish education model emphasizes self-management and learning autonomy. Since we grew up under the supervision of our teachers, we do not know how to manage our study in the new environment. The mismatch between teaching and learning expectations could lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. I hope Chinese students who will come to Finland in the future will have intercultural competence. They should keep an open attitude toward cultural differences in teaching and learning. Their reflection on
learning behavior and beliefs will help them adapt to the new values and requirements of the UEF. For me, the intercultural competence plays a significant role in reducing the potential discrepancies between teaching and learning. (P7M)

The suggestions from participant seven indicated that developing intercultural competence played a significant role in his intercultural learning experience. With the constant interaction with Finnish learning culture, most participants in this study may break through the constraints of their inherited learning culture and gain a new perspective to understand the differences in the Finnish learning culture. This new learning context enabled them to reflect on themselves and acquire a new sense of learning.

5.5.2 Suggestions for the UEF

Participant thirteen indicated that the university should conduct psychological and intercultural competence evaluation for newly arriving students. She said that:

> When a friend of mine applied to a university in Canada, this university sent her and her referees an evaluation questionnaire. The applicant should self-assess his or her mental health and intercultural competence. Meanwhile, the referees should also evaluate the applicant’s mental health and intercultural competence from their perspective. I think this evaluation questionnaire can be applied to the admission system of the UEF. On one hand, the university and teachers can learn more about Chinese students’ information. On the other hand, this kind of evaluation can make Chinese students pay attention to their psychological state and cross-cultural competence. (P13F)

In addition to providing pre-departure service for the incoming students, participant eight felt that the UEF should attach importance to developing relations with the Chinese embassy in Finland. He explained:

> Compared to the University of Helsinki, the University of Tampere, and the University of Turku, the University of Eastern Finland is not well known among Chinese students. I think it’s because these three universities are in big cities and they have more contact with the embassy of China. Many educational activities between Finland and China are held at those three universities. As far as I know, the education team of the Chinese embassy has not officially visited our university in about 7–8 years. I think our university should invite them to come over and get to know us so that our university can increase its popularity among Chinese students. (P8M)

Participant four held the view that exchange programs between universities should be extended to the teacher level. She suggested:

> I hope the UEF can strengthen its ties with Chinese universities. In addition to students from both sides, teachers from Finland and China can also communicate and learn from each other. For example, Chinese teachers can participate in the teaching courses of the UEF to experience the educational culture of Finland. At the same time, Finnish teachers can visit Chinese universities to see what Chinese teaching methods look like. I think the students’ exchange program is not enough. (P4F)
Participant sixteen had a similar opinion. She suggested that the institute should invite more teachers from other countries or universities.

I hope my department can invite teachers from other countries and universities to teach or give lectures at the UEF. At present, 70–80% of the compulsory courses in my major are taught by two professors. You can imagine how similar these courses are. Because every teacher has his or her fixed thinking pattern, if we only learn knowledge from those two professors, our research vision gets limited. Inviting outside teachers can equip the students with different ideas, knowledge, and research perspectives. But so far, our department only held this kind of lecture once. Most of the time, the main academic source we learn from is articles. (P16F)

The main goal of international education is to foster students into intercultural learners who are able to deal with the diversity of different learning cultures (Gilbert, 1995). However, when considering how to develop students’ intercultural learning competence, higher education institutions should also provide teachers with more intercultural awareness training and information. The participants’ suggestions indicated that the development of intercultural awareness of educational institutions could enable them to become international learners.

5.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter synthesized the content of the interviews with sixteen Chinese postgraduate students from the UEF. The content was analyzed and then categorized according to the five research questions, which include: pre-departure situation (reasons for studying abroad and preparation), pedagogical differences, academic challenges, coping strategies, and suggestions for incoming students and for the UEF. These findings were interrelated and mixed together in the responses of the participants. Generally speaking, the participants’ final decision of studying at the UEF was based on a combination of social, cultural, financial, and personal factors. Participants indicated that their pre-departure preparation was hurried and focused mainly on daily-life orientation, rather than academic orientation. As a result, most of students were not psychologically well-prepared for potential academic difficulties before coming to the UEF. The participants also expressed that they encountered many academic challenges in the new learning environment due to the significant pedagogical differences between Finnish education and Chinese education. Although the process of academic acculturation was painful, participants in the interview indicated that they were satisfied with their learning outcomes and benefited from their intercultural learning experience at the UEF.
6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I will conclude this study with respect to the following five key aspects. First of all, the main findings of this study will be reviewed and summarized with respect to the stated research questions; secondly, the contributions of this research to the existing research on international Chinese students will be presented; thirdly, I will highlight the pedagogical implications of this research for the intercultural education; fourthly, I will point out the strengths and limitations of this study; and lastly, some suggestions for the future study will be provided.

6.1 REFLECTIVE SUMMARY OF THE MAIN FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore the learning experience of Chinese postgraduate students at the UEF and represent their meaning making. The data analysis revealed that studying at the UEF provided the participants an opportunity to confront a new learning culture, to see and reflect on themselves from another value perspective, and to form a new learner identity within a new learning context. For the participants of this research, their intercultural learning experience at the UEF is an ongoing negotiation between Chinese learning culture and Finnish learning culture. Through this process of constant comparison and reflection, most of the participants gradually become confident and competent intercultural learners (Figure 10).

Figure 10. The development of the intercultural learning process
In this study, although the participants demonstrated a sense of strong motivation towards their overseas studies at the UEF, they had relatively little knowledge about Finnish universities’ academic norms and conventions before their arrival. Psychologically, they demonstrated overconfidence in managing their future studies at the UEF and had not expected many potential challenges. As a result, their preparation before coming to Finland mainly focused on orientation to daily life rather than academic considerations. This insufficient information about Finnish educational norms, customs, and values directly led to a hard landing for the participants in the new learning environment.

The lack of preparation for Finnish learning culture exacerbated the participants’ initial academic difficulties. When they began their learning journey at the UEF, they gradually realized that their academic transformation from “studying at Chinese universities” to “studying at Finnish universities” was not as simple as they thought. They found that what they had always considered “right” in the Chinese learning culture turned out to be “wrong” or “inappropriate” in Finnish higher education. The pedagogical differences and academic challenges led the participants to constantly struggle with their habituated comforts. Psychologically, it was difficult for most participants to make changes when they encountered a new learning context because their inherited cultural identity was deeply ingrained in their mind map. However, in order to achieve their academic goals, they had to compare the present experience with their previous experience, reflect on themselves, argue with themselves, and question their inherited learning beliefs.

The data showed that by the process of learning culture negotiation, the participants not only gained effective coping strategies to deal with problems they encountered, but also formed a new sense of self and acquired an intercultural learner identity. This new identity not only differed from their former inherited the Chinese learning culture, but also from their host learning culture; it was a compromise between the two. This eclectic intercultural learner identity enabled the participants to connect their past experiences with present situations and to function well in both learning cultures.

The data in this study also showed that the change process of some participants tended to be slow and difficult because they lacked the necessary resources and skills to take full charge of their learning performance. In this regard, perhaps the assistance from the UEF, such as seeking to understand students’ cultural background, providing financial and emotional support, and helping students understand the values behind Finnish teaching norms, is invaluable for students’ academic transformation.

6.2 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE FINDINGS TO THE EXISTING THEORIES

Based on the findings of the study, this section will discuss the contributions of the study to the relevant theories.

6.2.1 Contributions to the understanding of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions model

The results of this study supplement the existing body of knowledge relating to Hofstede’s cultural dimensions model. Three contributions were identified from the
findings of this empirical study. First of all, Hofstede holds the view that culture, as the software of the mind, influences cognition process of individuals (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). According to Hofstede, people process information and take actions based on their cultural software. However, in emphasizing the one-way relationship between culture and cognition, Hofstede appears to overlook the impact of cognition on culture. This study provides an indication that intercultural learning experiences led some participants to constantly compare and explicitly reflect on the learning culture that they have inherited. This cognitive negotiation between their inherited learning culture and Finnish learning culture made it possible for them to create a new learning culture. Secondly, the results of this study suggested that the cultural dimensions in Hofstede’s model seem to be interwoven and interdependent rather than separable. For example, the participants from the collective culture were often reluctant to participate in group discussions because the power distance made them accustomed to speaking only on the invitation of the teacher. Thirdly, the findings support the previous literature (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Kennedy, 2002; Sanderson, 2007) which argues that the Hofstede’s cultural dimensions model was too simplified to predict individual’s behaviors based on national cultural norms. Indeed, the Chinese culture certainly influences Chinese students’ learning concepts and beliefs, however, when Chinese students interact with the different learning culture, it is impossible to fully predict or explain all Chinese students’ learning behaviors and beliefs from the perspectives of these dimensions (collectivism, power distance, masculinity, etc.). It could be possible that some Chinese students are not “typical” products of Chinese culture and hence their educational values and behaviors differ. It could also be possible that some Chinese students are more likely to absorb a new learning culture and create a new learner identity when they are physically distanced from conventional Chinese learning culture.

6.2.2 Contributions to Berry's acculturation model

Academic acculturation is a dynamic and interactive process that takes place between individuals and target academic culture. As one of the four acculturation’s orientations (marginalization, separation, assimilation, integration), academic integration is the top level of acculturation, which refers to “the processes by which one becomes a part of a group (e.g. institution, department, etc.) and integrates with its members, while possibly influencing the host group with one’s own life experience and academic expertise” (adapted from Jiang, et al., 2010, p.157).

According to Berry’s acculturation model, the distinction between the four acculturation’s orientations was founded on the two basic issues, namely “(1) a relative preference for maintaining one’s heritage culture and identity, and (2) a relative preference for having contact with and participating in the larger society along with other ethnocultural groups” (Berry, 2005, p.704). It can be seen that although there are many factors affecting acculturation’s orientation, in Berry’s research, acculturation is still mainly conceptualized as a desire or preference for either maintaining one’s inherited culture, or contacting with the host culture, which leads to four distinct possible outcomes (Berry, 2008). However, this study found out that the preference for contacting the host academic culture might not be the primary factor resulting in an acculturation’s orientation. Taking academic integration as an example in this study, the lack of language ability or intercultural competence, the pressure of the economic
situation, the students’ personality, the academic supervisors’ attitudes, and behavior might lead to the failure of academic integration. Thus, although international students may not be able to ultimately integrate into the host academic culture, the assumption that this is merely because they prefer not to make the contact with the host academic culture not only misrepresents their intentions but also fails to capture the richness of their intercultural learning experiences.

The findings of this study also indicated that although the acculturation process is a two-way change, the influence of the host group on foreign students and that of foreign students on the host group may be different in speed and extent. The participants in this study indicated that the impact of their culture and educational backgrounds on the target academic culture were limited. They felt that their influence was mainly to bring the diversity to the host group. It is possible, however, that it might take time for changes in the target group to mature and become apparent.

6.3 IMPLICATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

6.3.1 Implications for Chinese postgraduate students in Finnish universities

The academic journey in Finland is a dynamic and complex process. On one hand, obstacles and challenges fluctuate throughout the whole learning journey, which causes the learning shock for Chinese students. On the other hand, the academic differences and obstacles, to some extent, stimulate Chinese students to have a realistic self-perception of their learning ability in the new educational culture. Any Chinese student who successfully navigates the higher education system in Finland should be considered to have made significant personal development in the process of academic acculturation, even if this process varies in speed and degree.

The academic learning in a new learning culture is also a cultural learning process. Chinese students who are from relatively distant learning culture should be sensitive and receptive to the differences between Finnish learning culture and Chinese learning culture and thus make adjustments accordingly to meet the expectations of Finnish higher education. However, the transition from the inherited learning culture to the Finnish learning culture is not easy. Just as Bennett (2004) pointed out, the underlying aspects of culture are difficult to identify or change. In this study, some participants indicated that they did not know the appropriate behaviors in the Finnish learning environment. Due to this lack of knowledge, their behavior did not meet the expectations of the Finnish higher education even when they were willing to follow the rules of the Finnish learning culture. In contrast, another group of participants demonstrated different problems. Although they knew the norms of Finnish learning culture, they held a negative or skeptical attitude toward these norms due to the deep influence of their inherited culture. For instance, Finnish teachers expected students to actively participate in group discussions, but some participants doubted the benefits of the discussion and chose to avoid it.

There are at least two possible reasons for the above phenomenon. Firstly, some Chinese students are narrowly focused on obtaining a degree. They are immersed in their academic struggles and less concerned about appropriate behavior in the Finnish academic environment. Bennett (2009) found that people could acquire information about another culture while still sticking to their inherited culture. Likewise, Chinese
students might learn academic knowledge or skills without learning the culturally appropriate behavior. Secondly, some Chinese students lack a full understanding of what intercultural competence is, and how it impacts their behavior. They might make faulty assumptions about Finnish learning culture through their cultural lens. In order to integrate into the Finnish academic culture, Chinese students should develop intercultural competence, which includes:

1) Having an open mind to the values and norms of different learning cultures;
2) Preparing for differences and challenges;
3) Maintaining a reflective attitude toward one’s inherited learning culture;
4) Integrating with new values and norms of different learning cultures.

It is important to note that for Chinese students, the successful academic acculturation means that they neither abandon their inherited learning culture, nor completely embrace the Finnish learning style, but develop the ability to become intercultural learners according to their academic needs. As Ehlers and Hemmingsen (2011) pointed out, the process of combining an individual’s original academic culture with the target academic culture to develop international academic culture is a process of opening one’s potential universe.

6.3.2 Implications for Finnish universities to improve their practice for Chinese postgraduate students

The term intercultural education has been distinguished from international education by Selby (2008). He described that “international education leads students to learn about the objective, material culture of others—their political and social institutions, their language, art, and literature—while intercultural education leads students to learn about the subjective meaning people ascribed to events and relationships with institutions and other people, and ultimately to themselves” (p.4). Jiang and his colleagues (2010) point out that intercultural education is the best way to deal with globalization and interdependence.

The recruitment of international students itself cannot simply bring intercultural education to the universities of the host country. Some scholars hold the view that when international students come to study in the host university, they should make the best efforts to change themselves, not the host university (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). Smith and Smith (1999) criticize that such concept “runs the danger of being new colonialists who assume that the organizational knowledge and belief structures that we develop in the English speaking West will transfer without adaptation to another culture” (p.77). According to this, Finnish universities should make changes to facilitate the academic acculturation of international students. However, it is worth noting that the changes made by Finnish universities should not be at the expense of academic standards.

The study suggests that the Finnish universities have a responsibility to guide Chinese postgraduate students in becoming aware of the different learning norms in their host institutions and encourage them to explore a new way of learning. This means that rather than simply introducing academic norms without a clear explanation, Finnish universities should help Chinese postgraduate students to understand the values behind Finnish teaching standards and norms.
The study also suggests that in the context of intercultural education, Finnish universities should attach importance to cultivating the intercultural competence of their employees. The development of employees’ intercultural competence is helpful for Chinese postgraduate students to function well in a new learning environment.

Furthermore, it is important for Finnish universities to learn about the educational difference rather than making unexamined assumptions about Chinese students. Although some Chinese students may rely on teachers, attach importance to books, emphasize authority, and lack learning autonomy and critical thinking, their core belief in learning is compatible with the learning culture of Finnish higher education. The core features of Chinese postgraduate students, such as effort, diligence, and modesty, can help them overcome the difficulties in an intercultural learning environment. In other words, Finnish universities should trust that Chinese students have potential abilities to integrate well into Finnish learning culture.

6.4 THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the intercultural learning experiences of Chinese postgraduate students at the UEF in light of the growing educational cooperation between Finland and China. Knowledge of Chinese students’ perspectives of their learning experience is essential for establishing successful future programs. There are three main strengths of this study. Firstly, because I shared the same cultural background with the participants, it was easy for me to approach them and obtain their trust in the study. Meanwhile, my learning experiences in China and Finland privileged me in understanding and interpreting these participants’ thoughts and feelings. Secondly, previous studies have paid little attention to the pre-departure situation of international students, which may have a key influence on international students’ in the host universities. Against this background, this research explored the participants’ reasons for studying in Finland and their level of pre-departure preparation. The findings revealed that the participants were not psychologically well-prepared for potential academic difficulties when they arrived. Thirdly, this research used the qualitative approach to collect descriptive data which provided rich information for educators and administrators to gain a better understanding of Chinese students’ subjective experience, such as their feelings about learning differences and challenges, and the ways that they deal with the problems they encounter. Some common patterns revealed from the accounts of participants provide a useful starting point for understanding and exploring the learning experiences in the Finnish learning culture.

Although this study achieved its research goal, I still recognize that it had some limitations. Firstly, due to the relatively small sample size (sixteen participants), it is important to be aware that perceptions and experiences of the participants in this study cannot represent all Chinese students on this campus or in other universities. It might run the danger to generalize the findings of this research. Secondly, this study only focused on the perspectives of Chinese postgraduate students rather than the views of other groups of people. The Chinese students’ perspectives may not fully or truly reflect their learning situation. Thus, future research should explore the intercultural learning experiences of Chinese students more comprehensively from the perspectives of Finnish university teachers and local students. Thirdly, during the interviews, some participants could not clearly remember some important information regarding their
intercultural learning experiences. There might be differences between their actual experiences and their reports. Thus, the additional use of participants’ diaries or blogs would have increased the effectiveness of capturing their learning experiences at the UEF. However, these instruments were not used to collect data in this study. The main reason was that most of them did not have the habit of keeping diaries or blogs in their daily lives. If I asked them to write diaries for my research purposes, it seemed an unreasonable request.

6.5 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Based on the findings and statement of limitations of this research, future studies which are dedicated to getting more clear and holistic pictures of Chinese international students’ academic acculturation should address at least the following four issues.

Firstly, this research mainly explores the learning experiences of Chinese students from the perspectives of Chinese postgraduate students. It is necessary for future research to include the voice of Finnish university teachers and students from other cultural backgrounds as well. Their opinions about Chinese students’ learning behaviors and values can provide a valuable dimension to complete the picture of academic acculturation of Chinese international students.

Secondly, a longitudinal qualitative study or a follow-up study should be undertaken. Academic acculturation is a long and complicated process. If future studies can follow one group of Chinese international students through their entire study in Finland, more details can be reported which are not included in this study. The longitudinal study might help researchers know better about the changes in Chinese students’ beliefs, feelings, and the way how they deal with problems at different acculturating stages. Follow-up studies are also important in future research. When Chinese international students study in the Finnish educational culture, they may create a new belief system about what knowledge is, how to learn knowledge, and why to learn knowledge. It is not sure whether this new belief system will be sustained or reversed after their return to China.

Thirdly, future research could adopt different research designs. For example, in addition to Chinese students, the learning experiences of students from other countries can be included as well. Some common or different academic acculturation patterns might be found by comparing samples of international students in Finland. Moreover, the future study might be conducted to compare the learning experiences of Chinese overseas students in different Western host countries, such as the comparative studies between Finnish universities and British universities. The data will enhance the validity of the research findings on Chinese international students.

Last but not least, future research should take into account the impact of social changes on academic acculturation. In the interviews, some participants indicated that the dramatic changes in China made Chinese students’ academic learning in the Western higher education easier than in the past. Therefore, the academic experiences of Chinese international students from different generations can be further investigated.
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亲爱的同学们：

您好！您被邀请参加一个名为“中国研究生在东芬兰大学跨文化学习经历”的调查研究。您之所以被邀请是因为您的经历对这个研究很有价值。在您参加访谈之前，我诚挚地请您读完这封信。如果您有什么问题，您可以和我联系。

这个项目的研究员是东芬兰大学应用教育科学和教师教育学院的博士研究生王晓。此项目的研究目的在于了解中国研究生在东芬兰大学的学习经历。如果您同意参加这个研究，我将对您进行大概90分钟的录音访谈。这个访谈是无薪的，但是在访谈期间会提供饮料和巧克力。

这个项目的参与是完全自愿的。在访谈中，您可以拒绝回答任何问题。同时，您也可以在任何一个环节随时退出。您的决定不会对您以后的学习或生活有任何的影响。

关于您的任何信息都是保密的。您的名字将以代码形式呈现。您的录音内容将加以密码保护。所有的信息只有研究员才能接触到。

如果您有任何疑问，请您联系此项目的研究员王骁:+358465599191或者liwa@student.uef.fi。

同意陈述：

我已经阅读了以上信息。我同意参加这次访谈。

_________________________________  ______________  __________________
姓名                  日期                  邮箱

_________________________________  ______________  __________________
研究员姓名              日期                  邮箱
APPENDIX 2: CONSENT LETTER IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Dear students:

You are invited to participate in a research study titled the learning experiences of Chinese postgraduate students at the University of Eastern Finland. You are selected as an interviewee because you are qualified and willing to participate in the research. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before the interview.

This study is being conducted by Li Wang, a doctoral candidate in the School of Applied Education and Teacher Education, University of Eastern Finland. The purpose of this research is to learn about learning experiences of postgraduate students from China enrolled in the University of Eastern Finland. If you agree to participate in this study, I will conduct an interview with you, which will be audio-recorded and last 90 minutes. There is no payment to be given in the interview. A beverage and chocolate will be provided during the interview sessions.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any questions. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time if you do not want to continue. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your benefits as a student.

Your information will be kept in confidential. Your real names will be replaced by a study number. And research records will be stored securely under password protection and only researcher will have access to the records.

If you have any questions, you can contact the researcher, Li Wang, by telephone +358 46 559 9191 or via email liwa@student.uef.fi.

Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information. I consent to participate in the study.

__________________________  ___________________________  ___________________________
Signature                      Date                          Email

__________________________  ___________________________  ___________________________
Signature of Researcher        Date                          Email
APPENDIX 3: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FORM IN CHINESE AND ENGLISH TRANSLATION

1. 姓名 (Gender): ______
2. 专业 (Your major): __________
3. 在芬兰的学习时间 (The years in Finland): _____年 (Years)
4. 学历 (Your degree): ______
APPENDIX 4: ORIGINAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL IN CHINESE

研究问题 1: 您是怎么来到东芬兰大学学习的?
1) 您是如何选择这个大学的?
2) 您还有其他选择吗?
3) 在出发前您是怎么准备的?
4) 您还有其他问题要补充吗?

研究问题 2: 您如何看待东芬兰大学与您之前就读的中国大学在教学上的差异?
5) 您可以描述一下您做项目学习计划的经历吗?
6) 您是如何看待您在东芬兰大学的学习形式 (小组学习、循环学习、研讨会、讲座或网络学习)?
7) 您对这个大学的学习评估有什么样的看法？和国内学习评估有什么不同？
8) 您怎样描述在新环境下的课堂学习氛围？
9) 您觉得您过去的学习文化对您在这里的学习有影响吗？为什么？是怎么影响的？
10) 您还有什么要补充的吗？

研究问题 3: 您如何看待东芬兰大学的学术挑战?
11) 在东芬兰大学学习期间您遇到的困难或者挑战是什么？
12) 您的英语能力 (听、说、读、写) 是怎么样影响您的学习的？
13) 您如何看待学习内容的难度级别？
14) 在师生关系上您是否遇到过一些困难？如果有，请您具体描述。
15) 目前你有哪些方面的担忧或者不习惯 (比如经济，家庭，毕业，论文，天气，食物，健康，住宿等)？如果有，请您具体描述。
16) 您还有什么要补充的吗？

研究问题 4: 您如何应对转型过程中的学业困难？
17) 你用什么方法来克服学习上的困难？
18) 你所继承的文化是否会影响你对未来的策略的选择？如果是，是如何影响的？
19) 您还有什么要补充的吗？

研究问题 5: 根据你的学习经验，你对中国留学生和东芬兰大学有什么建议？
20) 对于想在这里学习的中国学生，你有什么建议？
21) 您对东芬兰大学有什么建议？
22) 您还有什么要补充的吗？
APPENDIX 5: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL IN ENGLISH
TRANSLATION

Research question 1: How did you end up to study at the UEF?
1) How did you choose this university?
2) Did you have any other options?
3) How did you prepare yourself before your departure?
4) Is there anything you want to add?

Research Question 2: How do you perceive pedagogical differences between the UEF and your previous university in China?
5) Could you describe your experiences of making study plan for your current program?
6) How do you think of learning forms (group learning, study cycle, seminar, lecture, or online study) of your program at the UEF?
7) How do you think of academic assessments of your program? Are they different from your previous learning experiences?
8) How do you describe the atmosphere of your class in the new learning environment?
9) Do you think your Chinese inherited learning culture affects your study at the UEF? Why or why not? How?
10) Is there anything you want to add?

Research Question 3: How do you perceive academic challenges at the UEF?
11) What are the major academic difficulties or challenges during your studies at the UEF?
12) How does your English ability (such as understanding, speaking, and writing) influence your academic studies?
13) How do you think of the difficult level of your learning contents?
14) Have you ever encountered some difficulties in dealing with the student-teacher relationship during your study at the UEF? If yes, please describe it.
15) Do you have any personal concerns related to your learning experiences (such as economic situation, graduation, article publication, the family pressure, weather, food, accommodation, job----)? If you do, please describe it.
16) Is there anything you want to add?

Research Question 4: How do you cope with the academic difficulties in the transition process?
17) What strategies do you utilize to overcome the academic difficulties?
18) Does your inherited culture affect your choice of coping strategies? And how?
19) Is there anything you want to add?

Research question 5: According to your learning experiences, what suggestions do you have for incoming Chinese students and the UEF?
20) What suggestions would you give to someone from China wanting to study here?
21) What suggestions do you have for the UEF to improve its practice for international Chinese students?
22) Is there anything you want to add?
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<th>No.</th>
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<th>Year</th>
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<td>1.</td>
<td>Taru Viinikainen</td>
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<td>2011</td>
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133. Niko Flink. Early maladaptive schemas, chronic depression and suicidal ideation. The role of maladaptive cognitive structures among patients with depression. 2018.
The aim of this study was to explore the learning experiences of Chinese postgraduate students at the University of Eastern Finland. Although the participants in this research encountered various challenges, their learning experiences at the UEF were of great benefit to their personal growth and academic development. The negotiation process between inherited learning culture and Finnish learning culture made it possible for the participants to acquire an intercultural learner identity.