Career Aspirations and Emotional Adjustment of Chinese International Graduate Students

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Abstract
There are more Chinese student-scholars than any other group of international students studying in the United States. Despite this, there are relatively few studies that have focused on specific educational needs and required career support services for Chinese international students. This exploratory study was conducted to determine the relationship between career aspirations and emotional adjustment of Chinese international students. Results from Chinese students were compared with those of students from the United States. Relationships between the career aspirations and emotional adjustment of Chinese and U.S. students did not reveal statistically significant differences. However, regression analysis indicated that social stress was a statistically significant predictor of career aspirations for U.S. students. Chinese and U.S. students were more alike than different on career aspirations and emotional adjustment, and observed educational similarities appeared to outweigh any cultural differences that existed when determining these outcomes.

Keywords
Chinese, emotional adjustment, career aspirations, higher education

Rationale
International study has a long and robust history since the first exchange took place between Holland and Oxford University in England in 1190; however, it has only been in the last 40 years that international study has increased significantly from 800,000 to more than 4.5 million international students worldwide (Hoffa, 2007; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2014). Asian students from China, India, and Korea make up 53% of all international students (OECD, 2014). Within this group, China sends more students than any other country to study in English-speaking countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada (Choudaha, Chang, & Kono, 2013), with about 87% of Chinese international students in the United States coming from Mainland China and 13% from Taiwan (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2014). Within this group, China sends more students than any other country to study in English-speaking countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada (Choudaha, Chang, & Kono, 2013), with about 87% of Chinese international students in the United States coming from Mainland China and 13% from Taiwan (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2014). In addition, because students from Mainland China and Taiwan share many cultural similarities, including values and language, they are often grouped together for research purposes (Lin & Betz, 2009; K. T. Wang et al., 2012; C. Wang & Mallinekrodt, 2006; Wei, Liao, Heppner, Chao, & Ku, 2012). Academically, there are more Chinese student-scholars, including those from Mainland China and Taiwan, than any other group of international students studying in the United States (IIE, 2014). However, despite large and growing numbers of Chinese students studying in the United States, there are relatively few studies that have focused on their specific educational needs and required career support services. The purpose of this study was to begin an exploration of the relationship between career goals and emotional adjustment in Chinese international students.

Review of Literature
Acculturation and Other Challenges

There have been a number of studies examining the emotional and psychological experiences of Chinese international students. Many of these have focused on the idea of acculturation and surrounding mental health issues. Acculturation refers to the process of adopting the values and behaviors of a new culture, often resulting in an internal battle between the heritage of their country of origin and the pull to fit in with dominant American culture (Berry, 1980, 1997).

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Each person must decide whether to accept or reject the host community’s cultural values and practices, while making those same decisions about their home country’s cultural values and practices (Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruinya, & Gonzalez, 2008).

Berry (1980, 1997) developed one of the most commonly used models that highlights possible acculturation outcomes. The model lists four possible outcomes: integration, assimilation, separation/segregation, and marginalization based on how a person responds to two questions: “Is it considered to be of value to maintain one’s identity and characteristics?” and “Is it considered to be of value to maintain relationship with larger society?” Separation/segregation refers to an individual decision to withdraw from norms of larger society; a cultural identity from the home country is retained, but within terms of a less value given to maintaining a relationship to dominant society. For example, a Chinese immigrant who moves into a Chinese neighborhood and continues only speaking Chinese and interacting only with other Chinese in the immediate vicinity could be viewed as experiencing separation/segregation. Marginalization is fixed upon individual confusion and anxiety about personal cultural identity and relationships to larger society. This is the most negative outcome possible, where there is no retention of cultural identity and there is no positive relationship with dominant society. Assimilation on its own is similar to the old melting pot idea that new immigrants should give up their personal cultural identities in favor of greater, more dominant societal norms. Immigrants who changed their names upon arriving in the United States would be acting within the assimilation outcome of acculturation. Thus, individual cultural identity is lost, but a positive relationship to the dominant society is established. The final outcome of assimilation is the most positive and is referred to as integration. This type of acculturation results in the retention of cultural identity and a positive relationship to dominant society. Using this model, integration is the best acculturation outcome for psychological well-being because of the balance struck between the culture of the home country and that of the new one. Studies have revealed acculturation as a predictor of mental health scores, where the more positive an acculturation outcome, the better the psychological well-being (Ogbu, 1992; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Rahman & Rollock, 2004; Yakushko et al., 2008).

When acculturation studies have examined Chinese international students, the results have been relatively similar and conclusive. As with other international groups, the more Chinese international students integrate into U.S. culture, the more positive the mental health and social outcomes (Lowinger, He, Lin, & Chang, 2014; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Conversely, the more isolated Chinese international students are and the less social support they receive, the more difficulty they will have adjusting to life in the United States (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007; K. T. Wang et al., 2012; C. Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Wei et al., 2007; Yan & Berliner, 2009; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). In addition, even though Chinese international students believe they are as intelligent as their United States counterparts (Lowinger et al., 2014; T. Tan & Weidman, 2013), qualitative studies have revealed Chinese students do experience concerns about becoming “too Americanized” during the course of their international study (Valdez, 2015; Yuan, 2011). This fear is another illustration of the acculturative stress Chinese international students can experience.

Further research investigating Chinese international students has revealed other pervasive issues in addition to acculturative ones. Attending school exclusively in the English language can be particularly challenging for Chinese international students, who may feel comfortable reading and writing, but find listening and speaking increasingly more difficult (Dao et al., 2007; Lowinger et al., 2014; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yuan, 2011). English language issues can compound stress in social and classroom interactions with non-Chinese; the stress of such interactions have been well documented for Chinese international students in both the United States and the United Kingdom (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; T. Tan & Weidman, 2013; Valdez, 2015; Yuan, 2011). English language frustrations and difficulty interacting with non-Chinese culminates in the classroom experience, where Chinese students have reported experiencing culturally insensitive activities, such as a choose your favorite U.S. celebrity game, and reported a belief that U.S. faculty and students have a negative perception of Chinese students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; T. Tan & Weidman, 2013; Valdez, 2015). These perceptions were somewhat confirmed as Li and Wang (2008) reported Asian students in general receive less classroom attention from faculty and peers.

**Career Decision Making of Chinese Students**

In regard to career decisions of international students, the literature is fairly consistent noting a lack of research on the career development needs of minorities in general and Asians in particular (Chang, Chen, Greenberger, Dooley, & Heckhausen, 2006; Flores et al., 2006; Leung, Ivey, & Suzuki, 1994). The studies conducted with students across race/ethnicity typically find that self-efficacy and parental expectations play the largest roles in shaping career aspirations, especially in Chinese students (Y. B. Chung, 2002; Fuligni & Witkow, 2004; Louie, 2004a, 2004b). What past studies have failed to examine is the intersection of two issues—that is, what happens when Chinese international students must navigate their career aspirations while handling the emotional challenges associated with international study? Leong and Serafica (1995) noted that a solid theory has yet to be advanced about how outside pressure affects career goals and, ultimately, career decisions for Asian workers. Furthermore, research has not examined how emotional adjustment, which is defined as collective social stress,
anxiety, depression, sense of inadequacy, self-esteem, and self-reliance, affects the career aspirations of Asian students, and specifically, Chinese international students (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004).

Career aspirations, meaning an individual’s career-related ambitions or decisions under perfect circumstances, have consistently shown over time to be strong predictors of occupational attainment (Rojewski, 2005). Although we may never understand fully the impact of emotional experiences at school on Chinese students’ career aspirations, we can gain insights and look for patterns to better understand this phenomenon. Therefore, exploring how Chinese students balance the emotional issues surrounding acculturation with the career pressure of international graduate study can help educators and counselors better know how to support and guide these students regarding future career decisions.

The purpose of this analysis was to determine the relationship between career aspirations and emotional adjustment of Chinese international graduate students. To understand whether the scores for these constructs and subsequent analysis were unique to this population, it was also important to evaluate United States students, meaning students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds who were born and maintain citizenship in the United States, on the same measures. This group did not include any other international students or Chinese American students. Chinese international graduate student or U.S. graduate student was an individual enrolled for a minimum of three graduate credit hours at a large public university in the southeastern United States during the 2010 to 2011 academic year. The Emotional Symptoms Index (ESI) of the Behavior Assessment System for Children, 2nd Edition (BASC-2; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004) measured emotional adjustment, which included measures of social stress, anxiety, depression, sense of inadequacy, self-esteem, and self-reliance. The dependent variable, career aspirations, referred to an individual’s career-related ambitions or decisions under ideal conditions (Rojewski, 2005). The primary research question framed the design and analysis for this study as a regression analysis as we sought to determine the best set of emotional adjustment variables to explain the career aspirations of Chinese international and U.S. graduate students.

Theoretical Framework

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) emphasizes that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals work in conjunction with other aspects of each person, such as family background, socioeconomic status, immigrant status, and ethnicity, to shape career goals. This means that career development is ultimately a series of interlocking processes of interest development, choice, and performance. SCCT is largely a derivative of Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory, which features the importance of individuals in facilitating their own occupations, interests, and aspirations, as well as the factors that can enhance or detract this facilitation. SCCT further postulates that positive career development depends on individual experiences resulting from interactions with the environment and personal factors (Yakushko et al., 2008).

In the SCCT framework, self-efficacy refers to individual appraisals of capabilities to take action and succeed toward a specific goal, and it is a dynamic attribute that is always changing (Lent, 2005; Lent et al., 1994). This construct is the one that best fits with the idea of emotional adjustment in SCCT, as emotional well-being is likely to influence individual perceptions of their ability to work toward and achieve personal goals. The second major component of SCCT is outcome expectations, and it refers to the question “If I do this, what will happen?” In other words, outcome expectations are the “imagined consequences of particular behaviors” (Lent et al., 1994, p. 83). In the case of this study, outcome expectations are viewed as a manifestation of internal behavior factors, such as parents, peers, and the cross-cultural experience influencing Chinese international students. The final construct of SCCT asserts that goals are an important piece of the self-regulation of behavior (Lent et al., 1994). Lent et al. (1994) also identified three major outcomes of goals: They organize and guide behavior; they can sustain behavior over long periods of time, even without external reinforcement; and their presence increases the likelihood that the individual will attain the desired outcomes.

SCCT (Lent et al., 1994) was applied in this study of Chinese international students to provide a theoretical framework for organizing variables such as career aspirations and emotional adjustment in relationships (Mau & Bikos, 2000). The three main components of SCCT—self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal expectations—align well with the constructs associated with this study. Self-efficacy relates to emotional adjustment, outcome expectations relate to internal behavior factors that will be in play with emotional adjustment, and goal expectations relate to career aspirations. A model showing this alignment appears in Figure 1, where the major constructs of SCCT each have an associated factor.

Another important consideration in the selection of a theoretical framework is its application to use with students from ethnic or racial minorities in the United States. SCCT is one of the only theories of career development that adequately accounts for the role of the individual, which means this theory allows and expects variation based on ethnicity. For this reason, SCCT is the theoretical framework of choice for many career-related studies involving students from ethnic or racial minorities in the United States (Kiang, Yip, Gonzales-Backen, Witkow, & Fuligni, 2006; Mau & Bikos, 2000; Navarro, Flores, & Worthington, 2007; Yakushko et al., 2008). In summary, SCCT (Lent et al., 1994) was applied in a completed study of Chinese international students to provide a theoretical framework for organizing variables such as career aspirations and emotional adjustment in relationships.
A comparative correlational research design, using a group-administered survey, was utilized for this study. Correlational research identifies the relationship between two or more variables from the same sample (Huberty & Petoskey, 1999). Because this study was focused on determining the relationship between career aspirations and emotional adjustment for Chinese international graduate students, a correlational research design was chosen where data were analyzed using regression analysis.

Population and Sample

The abstract population for this study was composed of Chinese international students attending institutions of higher education in the United States. Chinese international students refer to students pursuing graduate study in the United States, but who maintain citizenship in China. Graduate students were selected for this study, as the university used for the sample included significantly more Chinese international graduate students than undergraduate. To understand differences experienced by international students from U.S. ones, a comparison sample of U.S. graduate students was also collected. U.S. students refer to students of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, but who were born and maintain citizenship in the United States. This group did not include any additional international or Chinese American students. Because of the cost and time challenges associated with contacting all members of the abstract population, a convenience sample of Chinese international students and U.S. students enrolled at a large, southeastern university was surveyed. Using Olejnik’s (1984) guidelines, a sample size of 66 participants was needed based on an estimated medium effect size, an alpha level of .05, and statistical power of .70.

The two questionnaires used for this study were administered to both Chinese and U.S. college students enrolled in graduate degree programs at the university. Participants completed the questionnaires in five different group administrations from October 2010 to February 2011. Surveys were administered to U.S. graduate students in a graduate statistics course and a graduate political science course, and to Chinese international students at international coffee hour, a dinner through university housing, and an open-call survey event on campus. Each participant only attended one administration. The final sample size of Chinese students was $n = 24$ and U.S. students was $n = 46$, for a total of 70 participants, once questionnaires containing incomplete responses, extraneous international student responses, and outliers were removed.

The gender distribution of participants from both Chinese and U.S. student groups was similar, with each group of students including half males and half females, even though this is not representative of the university as a whole. This difference may be a result of the convenience sampling strategy employed for this study. However, there was more variation between the groups in terms of age, department of study, and time at the university. The average age for Chinese students participating in the study was $25.4 \text{ years (SD = 3.79)}$, and more than one third ($n = 9$) were students within the College of Arts and Sciences. Other majors represented in Chinese participants included, College of Education ($n = 2$), College of Pharmacy ($n = 2$), School of Public and International Affairs ($n = 2$), College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences ($n = 3$), College of Family and Consumer Science ($n = 1$), College of Journalism ($n = 3$), School of Law ($n = 1$), and the College of Veterinary Medicine ($n = 1$). Furthermore, 67% ($n = 16$) of participants had been in the United States for less than 1 year. All Chinese students participating in the survey, except for one, had been studying at the university for less than 3 years.

Of the U.S. students who completed surveys, the combined average age was $28.74 \text{ (SD = 7.48)}$, indicating a slightly older group than the Chinese students. In terms of department of study, U.S. students were more homogeneous than the Chinese students. U.S. students who participated in the study were mainly students within the College of Education and the

![Figure 1. Elements of social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) and associated factors of emotional adjustment and career aspirations applied to the study of Chinese international and U.S. graduate students.](image)
School of Public and International Affairs ($n = 44$), a result of sampling program-specific courses for that group.

**Instrument**

This study required instruments that measured two different variables—emotional adjustment and career aspirations. There was not a single instrument that addressed both these issues; therefore, multiple instruments were used. The BASC-2 (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004) was used to measure emotional adjustment. The BASC-2 is comprised of five different measures of behavior, including the Teacher Rating scale (TRS), Parent Rating scale (PRS), Self-Report of Personality (SRP), Structured Developmental History (SDH), and Student Observation System (SOS). The measures can be used collectively or independently, and the SRP has been used in many studies as a reliable method for determining the emotional condition of foreign students (Demaray, Malecki, Davidson, Hodgson, & Rebus, 2005; Jung & Stinnett, 2005; Z. Zhou, Peverly, Xin, Huang, & Wang, 2003). There are three different versions of the SRP specific to children, adolescents, and college students. Only the SRP for college-aged students was used because it included a specific form to measure emotional disturbance/adjustment, which was the interest for this study. The SRP took about 20 to 30 min to complete, and included True/False and 4-point Likert-type items with never, sometimes, often, or almost always response options. Once completed, the college form yielded four different composite scores: Internalizing Problems, Inattention/Hyperactivity, Personal Adjustment, and the ESI. Whereas all scores were tabulated, only the ESI scores were analyzed, as they were the most directly related to this study. The ESI is composed of the summative scores from six different scales including social stress, anxiety, depression, sense of inadequacy, self-esteem, and self-reliance. The BASC-2 manual (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004) provided reliability estimates for internal consistency and test–retest reliability. Overall, internal consistency coefficients calculated by age range and gender for SRP scores were reported in the middle .90s for the ESI, indicating the coefficient was sufficiently reliable for testing emotional adjustment (C. S. Tan, 2007). The SRP included three different indexes to evaluate the validity of individual responses, $F$, $V$, and $L$, each of which identified unlikely response patterns by participants and questionably valid results. None of the participants in this study had scores outside of the normal range on any of these indexes. Cronbach’s alpha values were also calculated to show internal consistency of scores. These values were .809 for all students together, .795 for Chinese students, and .821 for U.S. students. Values greater than .70 are considered acceptable for social science research (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Finally, the ESI from the SRP has successfully been used in other studies to evaluate the emotional well-being of foreign-born students from a non-diagnostic approach, even though the instrument was normed using the general U.S. population (Demaray et al., 2005; Jung & Stinnett, 2005; Z. Zhou et al., 2003).

In addition to evaluating emotional adjustment, we also examined career aspirations. Career aspirations were measured by an open-ended question included in the demographic questionnaire. Specifically, the question asked, “If you were completely free to choose any job in any setting, what job would you most like to have 10 years from now?” without using any specific prompts or job lists. This question allowed each participant to record a single career aspiration. To quantify the open-ended responses about desired career, answers were categorized as a continuous variable using four-digit prestige codes from the Socioeconomic Index (SEI; Nakao & Treas, 1992). The SEI includes 13 different occupational groups that are further broken down into 504 separate occupations. The four-digit prestige codes range from 17.07 (shoe machine operator) to 97.16 (physician), with higher codes reflecting higher prestige occupations and lower codes less prestigious ones. Reliability and validity were assessed for the career aspirations instrument by conducting a pilot study of eight international students who did not overlap with the sample in the main study. The pilot study served two purposes—one, it allowed for testing of the career aspirations question, and two, it provided an opportunity to become familiar with the coding and recording of responses using the SEI and the BASC-2.

The student questionnaire also included questions regarding degree level, age, major, length of time in the United States, educational and occupational information for both parents, and parental career aspirations. Although these were not the focus of this study, the literature showed these were important factors to consider when evaluating Chinese international students (R. H. G. Chung, 2001; Lee, 2007; Leung, Hou, Gati, & Li, 2011; Louie, 2004a, 2004b; Park, 2003; M. Zhou, 2009). Thus, these questions were included to provide additional context for understanding and interpreting results.

**Research Procedures**

Permission to conduct this research was granted through the institutional review board (IRB) at the university, and data collection began in October of 2010. There were three survey times for Chinese international students and two survey times for U.S. students for a total of five different administrations. Participants were recruited throughout this time period and only participated in one administration. Data collection was completed in February of 2011. Both groups of participants anonymously completed the BASC-2 and demographic questionnaire, which included the career aspirations question. A translator was available for Chinese students during each survey administration to help with any language-based questions, and all participants were reminded that if they were uncomfortable or wanted to cease participation, they could at any time.
Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to evaluate each of the research questions. Analyses were completed using the SPSS. Means and standard deviations were tabulated to compare the career aspirations and emotional adjustment between Chinese international and U.S. students. Multiple regression analysis was also used to determine the relationship between career aspirations and emotional adjustment, as well as to determine which emotional adjustment variables best explain career choice.

Results

Prestige scores for Chinese international students’ career aspirations ranged from 34.44 (housewife) to 97.16 (physician), whereas U.S. students ranged from 34.44 (housewife) to 87.49 (biological science teacher). A majority of students from both groups aspired to high prestige occupations. The most common response across both groups was professor, which has a prestige score of 86.98 when a specific field is not identified. Chinese international students had a mean prestige score of 78.76 (SD = 13.92); U.S. students reported a mean prestige score of 77.62 (SD = 13.96). An independent samples t test for group mean difference showed no statistically significant difference between Chinese international and U.S. students’ career aspirations.

Emotional adjustment scores were obtained by calculating a score for the ESI within the SRP form from the BASC-2 (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004); possible ESI scores range from 22 to 100. Chinese international students scored an average ESI score of 47.5 (SD = 6.3), whereas U.S. students reported an average score of 45.9 (SD = 6.8). Scores falling between 41 and 59 are considered average within the general population. An independent samples t test for group mean difference showed there was no statistically significant difference between Chinese and U.S. students’ emotional adjustment.

To determine the nature of the relationship between career aspirations and ESI subscales, individual correlations were calculated for each of the ESI subscales with each other and then with career aspirations. Statistically significant relationships were present for almost all of the emotional adjustment subscales with each other in all three analyses. However, there were no significant relationships found between each of these variables and career aspirations. Social stress had the highest correlation with career aspirations for U.S. students (r = .251), whereas depression had the highest correlation (r = .241) for Chinese international students.

The completed regression model for Chinese international students of all the variables revealed an $R^2 = .210$ and adjusted $R^2 = -.068$, indicating a minimal relationship between emotional adjustment components and career aspirations. The negative adjusted $R^2$ value also indicated the model included variables that were not helpful in predicting career outcomes. The omnibus test of all independent variables was not statistically significant where $F(6, 17) = 0.755$, $p = .614$ with $\alpha = .05$. Calculated $p$ values for the independent variables to test their predictive value on career aspirations showed that no ESI components were statistically significant predictors of career aspirations. The completed regression model for U.S. students of all the variables revealed an $R^2 = .228$ and adjusted $R^2 = .109$, still indicating a minimal relationship, but higher than the relationship seen with Chinese international students. In addition, the omnibus test of all independent variables was not statistically significant where $F(6, 39) = 1.915$, $p = .103$ with $\alpha = .05$. Calculated $p$ values for the independent variables revealed that social stress ($p = .011$) was a statistically significant predictor of career aspirations. Therefore, multiple regression analysis for Chinese international and U.S. students together and separately found a minimal relationship between emotional adjustment and career aspirations for this sample, but did show social stress as a statistically significant predictor of career aspirations for U.S. students. Complete regression statistics for both groups are presented in Table 1.

Discussion and Conclusion

Not unexpectedly, both Chinese international and U.S. graduate students aspired to high prestige occupations, with most students aspiring to be college professors in various subjects. The emotional adjustment scores of both groups were consistent with scores typically from the general population. Statistically significant differences did not exist between these groups on either career aspirations or emotional adjustment; rather, both groups displayed striking similarities given their divergent backgrounds and cultures. A strong relationship was not present between career aspirations and emotional adjustment, though Social Stress, one of the emotional adjustment subscales, did have a small but statistically significant predictive value on career aspirations for U.S. students.

Given that previous studies have documented unique emotional challenges faced by Chinese international students, particularly in navigating a new culture (Tan & Weidman, 2013; Yan & Berliner, 2009; Zhang & Goodson, 2011; Z. Zhou et al., 2003), it is surprising that Chinese international students in this study did not demonstrate any emotional adjustment group differences when compared with U.S. students. Although speculative, this lack of difference may be attributed to the fact that all students were graduate students with similar career goals, and as a result, any differences were mitigated. Undergraduate or high school students may exhibit emotional adjustment differences simply due to immaturity or lack of development whereas graduate students have learned how to overcome or cope with emotional issues through additional life experience (Luzzo, 2000). It is also possible, as Hsu (2010) reported, that Chinese who make the decision to attend school in the United States may
be more “extroverted and open to experience” (p. 422) than those students who choose to pursue graduate study within China. If true, then those Chinese students included in this sample may be closer to U.S. students in emotional adjustment and career aspirations than expected.

A few studies have reported that the graduate school experience can transcend other factors, such as socioeconomic or immigrant status. Moss (2005) found socioeconomic status and cultural capital were not statistically significant predictors of graduate student achievement. Fuligni and Witkow (2004) found that immigrant students performed as well as United States-born students in postsecondary settings regardless of type of degree pursued or grade point average, with East Asian students having the most positive academic achievement. This is particularly interesting given graduate school in and of itself is a stressful experience, particularly regarding academic performance, work, and finances (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007)—stressors that certainly transcend cultural barriers. In any event, it appears that the select groups of Chinese and U.S. students in this study were more alike than different on the factors examined, and for graduate students, educational similarities appear to outweigh cultural differences. This outcome is especially interesting when considering the role of culture and education on the development and implementation of career aspirations.

The lack of difference is also interesting given that a majority of Chinese students in this study (66.7%, *n* = 16) had been in the United States and at this specific university for less than 1 year. Acculturation studies have revealed that the first year is often the most difficult for an immigrant adjusting to a new country and culture (Lo, 2010; Tong, 2010; Tsai, Ying, & Lee, 2000). Language barriers and difficulties finding a strong friendship community are further challenges to the early immigrant experience (Chae & Foley, 2010; Hsu, 2010; Zhang, Mandl, & Wang, 2010), plus the hardship of being away from family and friends. Other studies that have examined the experiences of Chinese international students have also found “culture shock,” language differences, and interactions with non-Chinese students as additional hurdles (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; T. Tan & Weidman, 2013; Valdez, 2015; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). The challenges associated with the immigrant experience would subsequently lead to the conclusion that members of this group would have shown heightened emotional issues simply given the nature of their current life stage and limited time living in the United States. However, the results of this study are consistent with the results of K. T. Wang et al. (2012), who found the majority of Chinese international students did not experience strong levels of mental stress during their cultural transition into the United States.

The limitations of this study should also be acknowledged, perhaps the greatest of which is the sample of students. This was not a random sample, and the sample size was smaller than one would expect in a regression analysis. Furthermore, by only sampling one southeastern university population, the study is limited by the responses from this group and is less generalizable. The responses from students at smaller colleges could be drastically different and more stressful, in the same way student experiences in larger Chinese communities may have been better due to more community support. There is also the chance for bias given that even though the instruments were tested with international populations, they were not normed for use with Chinese students. Chinese undergraduate students could also offer greater variance in career goals than graduate students, who often have more similar occupational ambitions.

### Table 1. Regression Statistics by Group.

| Variable                | B    | SE B | β     | R²   | Adjusted R² | p     |
|-------------------------|------|------|-------|------|-------------|-------|
| Chinese students        |      |      |       |      |             |       |
| Social stress           | .300 | .677 | .171  | .210 | -.068       | .663  |
| Anxiety                 | -.769| .502 | -.502 | -.502|             | .144  |
| Depression              | 1.40 | 1.075| .411  | .994 |             | .210  |
| Sense of inadequacy     | -.005| .668 | -.002 | .144 |             | .994  |
| Self-esteem             | .139 | .726 | .067  | .851 |             | .519  |
| Self-reliance           | .292 | .444 | .170  |      | .519        | .011* |
| United States students  |      |      |       |      |             |       |
| Social stress           | .917 | .344 | .594  | .228 | .109        | .340  |
| Anxiety                 | -.276| .285 | -.189 | .486 |             | .217  |
| Depression              | -.392| .557 | -.138 | .486 |             | .845  |
| Sense of inadequacy     | -.565| .450 | -.274 | .217 |             | .556  |
| Self-esteem             | .085 | .430 | .041  | .217 |             | .845  |
| Self-reliance           | -.209| .351 | -.119 |      |             | .556  |

*p < .05.*
Chinese students who were more socially isolated, thus skewing results to represent only more outgoing, well-adjusted students (i.e., Chinese students having a more difficult time adjusting would not be as likely to attend an open survey call). This would be consistent with the findings of Zhang and Goodson (2011), who found no depressive or psychological issues in Chinese international students who felt they could successfully navigate U.S. culture and remained connected in a community of other Chinese. Another possible explanation for Chinese responses is positive outreach programs sponsored by the university that are designed to help students make the transition to study in the United States. For example, there are six different student organizations specifically dedicated to the needs of Chinese students on campus, not to mention other services available to all international students through the Office of International Education and International Student Life, such as socials, information sessions, and trips. However, because the Chinese international students did not demonstrate any problems and inquiries to students’ specific experiences were not a part of this study, it certainly makes a compelling case for future research to provide in-depth study of the experiences these students have while studying in the United States.

In terms of career aspirations, the literature is fairly consistent in noting that little research has been conducted on the career development needs of minorities and Asians in particular (Chang et al., 2006; Flores et al., 2006; Leung et al., 1994). The studies that have been conducted with students across race/ethnicity typically find that self-efficacy and parental expectations play the largest role in shaping aspirations (Y. B. Chung, 2002; Fuligni & Witkow, 2004; Louie, 2004a, 2004b). Furthermore, Liu (2009) reported acculturation was a statistically significant predictor of career self-efficacy for international graduate students. Self-efficacy refers to individual appraisals of capabilities to take action and succeed toward a specific goal, and it is a dynamic attribute that is always changing (Lent, 2005; Lent et al., 1994). This construct relates to the idea of emotional adjustment, as emotional well-being is likely to influence individual perceptions of their ability to work toward and achieve personal goals.

Subsequently, given the results of other studies and the nature of SCCT (Lent et al., 1994), we expected to find some relationship between career aspirations and emotional adjustment. The regression model found a minimal relationship between these variables, showing that the aspects of emotional adjustment accounted for roughly 10% of career aspirations for domestic students and did not account for career aspirations of Chinese students. This opens many more questions about what factors contribute to how these students make career decisions. For example, what is the role of parents in career decision making, particularly for Chinese international students? If parents were guiding students’ career aspirations, then career aspirations could lead to emotional adjustment issues, ultimately making emotional adjustment dependent on career aspirations—the inverse of how these variables were explored in this study.

The supplemental information collected on the demographic questionnaire showed Chinese international students’ parents had higher than average occupational levels than U.S. students, but U.S. students’ parents had higher educational attainment. Therefore, it is difficult to know exactly how much influence parents were exerting in students’ decisions because parental relationships were not significantly explored. This lack of information could cloud results given parent–child relationships have been strong career predictors in other studies (Chung, 2002; Y. B. Fuligni & Witkow, 2004; Louie, 2004a, 2004b). Also, these results confirm little about the group of students itself, whereby the entire population of this study acts perhaps as an outlier because of the homogeneous nature of graduate students. Thus, whereas some career theories (e.g., Lent et al., 1994; Super, 1990) suggest culture and emotional well-being should play a significant role in career decision making, this study showed that the educational similarities of graduate students seemed to overshadow the influence of cultural and psychological differences.

Although this study was more exploratory than explanatory in terms of better understanding the relationship between emotional adjustment and career decision making in Chinese international students, it does open interesting avenues to guide future research and practice. Because of the importance of personal relationships in recruiting participants, it would be interesting to see similar questions about the experiences of Chinese international graduate students through qualitative research and focus on in-depth interviews with a few students. This study would also be interesting to see evaluating all international students, not just Chinese. In terms of practice, it is important for career counselors and educators to make sure Chinese students are not being overlooked in terms of counseling and educational services that are currently available. Literature has shown Asian students receive less classroom attention from teachers and peers and have less access to resources for psychological and career needs, as well as face potentially negative perceptions by faculty and other university students (Kim & Yeh, 2002; Li & Wang, 2008; Valdez, 2015); thus, it is important to be sure Chinese students on college campuses have equal access to services as their U.S. peers. Because social stress was a significant predictor of career aspirations for all of the students in this study, it is important for college administrators to be aware of the social stress associated with graduate school and to provide necessary resources to help mitigate any negative effects this may have on graduate student performance.

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