Cultural Identity in Flux: A Qualitative Study of Chinese International Students’ Construction of Being and Positioning in US Higher Education

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Accessibility
Cultural identity in flux: A Qualitative Study of Chinese International Students’ Construction of Being and Positioning in US Higher Education

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Dedication

To my daughter, Ariana,

my husband, Gibran,

and my parents, Gongkai Zhang and Liyu Deng,

and to those precious souls of my family who have passed,

whose very presence in my life

has prepared, sustained, enriched, and inspired me through it all.
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I completed the last rounds of my thesis edits in a pandemic that has been taking over the world by storm. While I am keeping a physical distance from others in my humble apartment, I am constantly reminded of my support network of mentors, family, colleagues, friends, and others who have played a role in helping me complete my doctoral journey. It truly takes a village to “raise” a dissertation.

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Abstract

Constructing one’s cultural identity in a cross-cultural context is a fundamental aspect of international students’ experiences of studying in the US. While much scholarly work on international students in US higher education has focused on individual characteristics of learning and adjustments to the host country, work on Chinese international student (CIS) identity development in the context of competing worldviews is noticeably absent.

I conducted a qualitative interview study, recruiting 20 CIS in two American universities. My findings through thematic analysis showed the heterogeneity in the CIS’ interpretation of, and strategy for, responding to perceived criticisms of their home country and its culture. Conflicting images of Chinese culture, contrasting ideas about development, different perceptions of individual agency, as well as competing viewpoints on sovereignty all contribute to students’ perception of the threats to their identity. To respond to these areas of tension, students employed four types of responses: the detached bystander, the reactive defender, the pragmatic rationalizer, and the open-minded incrementalist. Three of these typologies indicate that while students’ responses lacked a sense of personal efficacy, they revealed strong trust in China’s political leadership and, at times, with willing acceptance of the necessary individual sacrifices. The fourth typology, however, reflected a dynamic coping response, and moved beyond the initial affective response to make attempts, however limited, to signal their desire to participate actively in interpersonal debates and dialogues with others in the US.

Through the lens of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, I offered two discourses that students drew upon: Talking about home country as “family” allowed students to express affectionate feelings of closeness and to justify their automatic defense to the critics; talking about home country as “strange” allowed students to, in their speech act, talk about the policies and problems in an abstract manner, allowing them to also act as an outsider, appreciating and resisting narratives that they may have heard, witnessed, or experienced. In so doing, I am able to explore not only the patterns apparent in students’ talk about the home country but also what this talk makes possible for their identity building and their places in the world.
Chapter 1: Introduction

“I feel like in the US it’s easier to be with other Chinese students, because our common identity is Chinese international students.”—Yin

“I didn’t like my identity as Chinese here initially, because it’s always connected to problems like air pollution or copy right infringement issues in discussion.”—Ding

“It felt like all my value systems have been uprooted. Perhaps it’s not that serious, but I of course, to some degree, feel extremely surprised (about the new things that I’ve learned about China here). I began to doubt if all the things that I’ve learned (at home) were false... as if I lived in Truman’s world, and I’d be skeptical to a lot of information that I received.”—Fei³

Globalization increasingly creates international training opportunities for students all over the world (Hallak, 1998). The movement of international people, globally, is a prominent feature of universities and institutions in Western countries in our era. The number of international students at US colleges has nearly doubled during the past three decades, from 450,000 in 1993-1994 to a record high of more than 1,095,299 in 2018-2019 and now constitutes 5.5% of the total US higher education population (Institute of International Education, 2019). Increasing numbers of students are traveling to the US to pursue higher education, and contribute to its diversity academically, culturally, and economically.

In China, studying abroad has become an aspiration for many middle- to upper-class families. The number of Chinese international students (CIS) in the US more than tripled from 103, 260 in 2008–2009 to 369, 548 in 2018–2019, currently constituting 33.7% of the total foreign student population in the US (Institute of International Education, 2009; 2019). During this decade, and particularly in the past 3-5 years, both China and the US went through massive social and political shifts. In 2016, the US elected a Republican President who cast himself as the outsider to politics and appealed to populist values, tightened regulations on immigration, and began a trade war with China soon after inauguration. As

³ All names used throughout this dissertation are pseudonyms, including those of participants, universities, and others. Participants were offered the option of choosing their own pseudonym.
the politics of Washington and the fear of the return of nationalist rhetoric become ever more incorporated in the US public discourse, being an international student in American universities at this time can be confusing. For example, the current administration’s restrictive immigration policies, from demanding border walls and travel bans to caps on visas for foreign nationals, all present new concerns for international students, practitioners who work closely with them, and institutions that rely on steady streams of tuition-paying international students.

The US is under a volatile administration with policies and rhetoric that test international students’ existing perceptions of their host country as an established democracy. In this same period, China’s National People’s Congress passed a constitutional change to remove the two-term limit on its President, and state surveillance and censorship programs increased. In addition, the grip of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is reported to have strengthened its efforts abroad to mobilize its the Chinese diaspora, particularly the CIS abroad (Economy, 2018), which was then amplified by the current US president to express his suspicions of the CIS community (Bloomberg News, 2019). It is against this unique backdrop that my study is taking place.

This dissertation responds to a call for more research on international students and the experience of cross-cultural learning broadly in an increasingly globalized world. International education holds much promise for bridging nations, expanding worldviews, and creating global citizenship (Gacel-Ávila, 2005). Their meaning-making in the cross-cultural context is a complex landscape. Yet, instead of the ideal “international exchange” that promotes constructive exchange of ideas beyond national boundaries, prior research has pointed out that international students tend to segregate in groups according to race and nationality, and may end up feeling isolated and resentful towards members of the host
country (Hail, 2015). Existing literature provides several clues to the origins of this phenomenon.

First, away from familiar contexts, students come into contact with, and are expected to navigate, the different rules in the unspoken social, cultural, and political structures of a new country. Learning to adapt to a new culture, overcome linguistic and academic challenges, manage financial independence, endure separation from the comfort of a familiar home, endure stress about plans beyond graduation and immigration status all contribute to anxieties and vulnerability that international students may experience. Empirically, we have a strong understanding of the difficulties, such as language barrier, cultural difference, and acculturation process, that international students endure when coming into a new country to study. Much scholarly work on international students in US higher education have focused on individual characteristics, such as academic integration (Rienties, 2011; Zepke & Leach, 2005), learning styles (De Vita, 2001; Joy & Kolb, 2009), emotional adjustment, stress, and anxiety (Russell, 2010; Ward, 2005), and psychological changes (Bochner, 2006, Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping & Todman, 2008), as well as acculturative stress (Hsieh, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007). Due to the experience of such stress, international students tend to experience language anxiety and believe their command of English is not sufficient to sustain a meaningful conversation with students from the host country (Cheng & Erben, 2012). Such perspectives, in a way, pathologize CIS and focuses instead on their unidirectional adjustment, while actively ignoring their agency and multifaceted experiences (Ma, 2020).

Second, studies have highlighted that international students often bear the responsibility of adjusting to their new academic and host environment, perhaps due to a “superior attitude” that assumes that the host country and institutes have more to offer to
the international students than the students contribute (Heng, 2018, p. 2). As such, international students perceive the members of the host country as uninterested in learning about their home countries and cultures (Brown, 2009), and may experience racism and unfair treatments, as they are often racialized by skin color, language proficiency, and nationality (Yeo et al., 2019). Prior research suggests having more friends from, and friendship variability with, the host country are associated with higher satisfaction and contentment, reduced homesickness, and a sense of social connectedness (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013). Yet such positive outcomes must take place under certain circumstances. Anecdotal experiences of many CIS report that it is often the host country members’ particular interest in China’s political and social events that contribute to negative interactions between Chinese and host country students (Dewan, 2008). For example, in Australia, CIS complained about their colleagues, including classmates and faculty members at their universities, who often spoke with them about China yet exhibited misinformed and prejudiced views of China and Chinese events, the conflicting ideologies and views which sometimes led to intense hostility and widened the suspicion between both parties (Xu, 2017).

Third, the experience of navigating unspoken rules or hidden curricula makes cultural identity particularly salient, which is reflected in the experiences of becoming the “other” in unfamiliar contexts. Social encounters in foreign countries reveal tellingly the presence of multiple narratives about what it means to be a member of one’s home country. Because CIS may hold the perception that how they are viewed is connected to their home country by members of the host country, they hoped that people in the host country would have a positive impression of where they come from, and therefore feel compelled to act as unofficial ambassadors for their home country, with the hope to improve their interpersonal
relationships with members of the host country (Hail, 2015). Indeed, much of the internal tension is tied up with identity, and managing it requires sophistication in dealing with identity issues. (Anderson, 2016, p.6). Building on Hall’s (1996) definition, identities dynamically shape, and are shaped by, historical, social, and cultural experiences, driving specific strategies or behaviors people enact according to their positions in society, permitted by cultural norms.

Studies have documented identity negotiations for individuals, such as international students, entering a new culture. For example, Hsieh (2006) found that students negotiated identities, aiming at achieving in-person harmony. Few studies, however, investigate how international students navigate multiple and/or conflicting worldviews, and the sources of such tension culturally or psychologically (Heng, 2018b; Ong et al., 1996; Szelényi & Rhoads, 2007; Zhu et al., 2016). One such study revealed that Chinese international students are often quickly labeled by the American students as foreign or different, and are asked about political or social issues that they had learned through the media, further “reminding Chinese students that they were identified with their country” and act as its representatives (Hail, 2015, p.321).

There is a need to shift this paradigm in cross-cultural psychology from seeing the goal of international education as to have international students “adjusting” to host country norms and institutions (a deficit view), to understanding international students as forming “self-formation” between home country identity, host country identity, and a larger set of cosmopolitan options (Marginson, 2014). Indeed, while maintaining connections with their home countries, international students also come into intense conflict with the US geopolitical, social, political, and cultural contexts, which lead to increased opportunities for expanded awareness about issues that cut across boundaries. Exposure to what they had
traditionally learned about the US and its democratic process, norms, values, and social
relations, can intrigue and challenge new thinking about social issues and what being a
participating member of society means in their new intercultural context. At the same time,
forming social relationships with US peers not only helps ease social anxiety and improve
adaptation, but also introduces opportunities for international students to challenge or
reinforce existing worldviews for themselves and others. Given that the identity-making
process is primarily discursive and often hierarchical (Danielewicz, 2001), the construction of
identity in transnational contexts indicates what the students choose to be important as they
position themselves among available discourses. In this way, international students become,
or at least have the opportunity to become, more influential as agents of globalization in
their host countries and their home countries (Szlenyi & Rhoads, 2007; Ye, 2001), and are
optimally positioned to develop a globally rooted critical understanding of their senses of
selves, or may even have the potential to become effective inter-cultural activists (Barker,
2000; Tarrow, 2005; Szelényi et al., 2007).

Undeniably, there is a dearth of studies available on how CIS manage and make
meaning of their cultural identities being challenged in this new context, and the types of
discourses they have access to in their reconstruction and renegotiations of such identities
during these most formative years into early adulthood. Oftentimes, researchers focus on
superficial interventions in this process, and may fail to examine critically the underlying
factors that may have contributed to the students’ experience of tension, or recognize the
potential for taking advantage of such meaning-making processes and introducing new
opportunities for personal growth. I dedicate this dissertation to the unpacking of such
cultural and developmental nuances, and examining one particular kind of encounter that
may challenge their cultural identities in the US higher education context: cross-national
inquiries about student’s home country, in this case, China. It is my hope that I bring a focus to capture the agency of CIS, the active participation and management of the tension that they experience, and help move the conversation in the field beyond the deficit discourse to contextualize this agency to manage, negotiate, and reconstruct their challenged cultural identity.

Moreover, I hope to help practitioners who work directly with international students and wish to encourage intercultural competency of both the international students and the local students, and to assist US colleges and universities to better prepare for, and proactively address, the needs of CIS in their waking awareness about themselves and the world around them. It is critical to understand how these students navigate and negotiate the demands of their new contexts. By doing so, we may derive insights into how universities, and those who work closely with these students, can support their development, and create opportunities in their process of coming to know, their evolving selves.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

My dissertation is an exploratory study in an area that has been under-researched. It is derived from the research literature, pilot work, and personal experiences of the ways that CIS construct and negotiate their sense of cultural identity through the subjective experiences of managing critiques about China they encountered in the US, as well as what the ways of speaking might make possible for their constructions of themselves and others in their transnational context. Indeed, the years while in college, typically between ages 18 and 22 for the students in this study, are extremely formative, with many young adults

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2 By transnational, I mean that through various economic and sociocultural activities, these students create and maintain a link between their home country (China) and their current country of residence (US).
experiencing challenges to their identities, behaviors, and beliefs. As such, I wish to provide a window into the cultural dynamics of tension when one’s view of cultural identity is challenged and how one resists, renegotiates, and reconstructs one’s challenged cultural identity in a cross-cultural context during these formative years. I will do this by examining the intersection of themes and discourses, using thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017) and the integrated framework of Foucauldian discourse analysis and the neo-Vygotskian model.

In chapter 2, I present my research questions and provide a very schematic overview of the aims and analytical rationale for this dissertation. In Chapter 3, I draw on existing literature to situate the study, and argue for an integrated thematic and discourse-based approach at the intersection of themes and discourses in understanding youth identity development, and establish the foundation of this study’s goals. Further, I describe the integrated theoretical framework for this investigation and provide the rationale for using discourse analysis as a means of understanding culture for these students in their unique contexts, drawing from psychological and postmodern work around culture. Chapter 4 details the methodological approaches to this study, and I also discuss the research questions at the heart of this study, as well as the methods that I use to answer and analyze them. Chapter 5 provides an in-depth look at the analytical procedures that I took to approach the data, using thematic analysis and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA). Chapter 6 describes the first set of findings through thematic analysis, and I show what the themes tell us about students’ perceptions of their sense of cultural identities being challenged in the US higher education context, the content and nature of such tensions. This is followed by a second set of findings from the thematic analysis in chapter 7 that reveals the types of strategies that students employed to confront this tension. Chapter 8 explore the dominant discourses of home country and how these discourses shape the identity and the world of
those who draw upon such discourses. And finally, I integrate the results of prior chapters and discuss the broader significance of this study’s findings is described in Chapter 9. I describe the implications for practice in a separate and final chapter of this dissertation.
Chapter 2: Aims and Research Rationale

While there’s a growing body of literature that examines international students’ acculturation experiences and their contribution to global competency in Western academia (Lai, 2015; Li & Wei, 2013; Siczek, 2015; Yeo et al., 2019), little is known about how cultural processes and perspectives are at work in enabling, reinforcing, or constraining Chinese international students in the construction of their cultural identity through interactions with others in the US higher education context. As students live and study in a foreign country with a drastically different economic and political system, their identities are sure to be informed and contested by their consumption of varying cultural narratives in their unique positioning in both the Chinese and US contexts.

I subscribe to culture as a dynamic process of constructing selves through dialogic negotiations particular to their transnational contexts, which is then made visible through discourses (Bucholtz, 2005). Drawing on Bernstein (2016), and situated in a social constructionist perspective, I see identity as fundamentally relational in nature, as temporary positions, and negotiated through language in social interaction. In many retrospective accounts of CIS’ interactions with others in their new sociocultural context in the US, students may be asked about religious practices, cultural celebrations, or political events that take place in China, which may be interpreted as misconceptions or statements of criticism of China. My particular interest lies in understanding why these moments might matter by qualitatively exploring their perceptions of, reactions to, and renegotiations with, these questions that challenge their cultural identities as they continue their studies in the US.

As such, my overall aim of this dissertation is to understand how the CIS in my study retrospectively made meaning of interactions with others that they designated as challenging to their cultural identity, during the time they are enrolled in their American universities as
international students, in order to comprehend how these tensions were being managed, and to make visible the discourses that they used to talk about China. Through this work, I am then able to focus on the social actions done in the discourse, learn about how students were making meaning of these challenges to their cultural identity, and what these perceptions might make possible for them as evolving selves in their cross-cultural contexts: two countries with different philosophies of individual, education, and governance.

In this study, I explore how 20 Chinese international students retrospectively made sense of, and negotiated, their cultural identities in a primarily liberal sociocultural context of US higher education. I addressed this with three research questions:

1) What do the CIS perceive as representations of China that challenge their sense of cultural identity in the context of US higher education?

2) What strategies do the CIS use to confront their challenged cultural identity?

3) What discourses do four CIS use to manage their challenged cultural identity: the construction of their home country, China?

   a) How do these discourses allow the CIS to position themselves and others in relation to China?

   b) What opportunities do these discourses, positionings, and subjectivities allow for renegotiation of identity building?

To answer my research questions, I employed a qualitative research design and drew on interviews with CIS to center their perspectives on managing cross-cultural differences for identity building. I explore the ideologies apparent in the discursive resources the CIS drew upon to capture the ways that they confronted, negotiated and constructed their cultural identity, responsibilities, positionings, and subjectivities iteratively in their cross-cultural context.
CISs pursuing undergraduate degrees at American universities in the Boston, Massachusetts area are the focus of this research and the population from which I selected my participants. I made an assumption here that the first two years of university life are the most challenging for all students, international or domestic. Yet, what may make it more challenging for international students is that they not only experience challenges of living and studying on their own in the universities, but also experience significant cultural shifts in a new country as a result of their transnational journey. I had three criteria with which I used to recruit my participants. First, the CISs should be from Mainland China, excluding students from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau, and Tibet. This strategy was deliberate because research and anecdotal accounts have documented that individuals from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau, Tibet, and Xinjiang may not necessarily self-identify as politically, socially, culturally Chinese. Next, they should be either in the junior or senior year of their undergraduate study. This means they have resided in the US for at least two years, but less than five years. Finally, they must not have completed high school in the US. I hypothesized that locating my research study among the students with such characteristics would increase the chance of my discovering how students discuss core changes in their reflections on China and their identities attached to it. I will detail my reasons and how I went about recruiting the students in the methods chapter.

My analysis was threefold. First, I conducted thematic analysis to answer my first two research questions. Drawing on Braun & Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a method for “identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (p. 6),” and exercises a wide range of possibilities. In their more recent work, a school of thematic analysis scholars emphasized that their conceptualization of a theme is of “a central organizing concept,” and does not simply consist of “a descriptive summary of what the participants said about the
causes or barriers” (Clarke & Braun, 2018). They cautioned against analysts using thematic analysis but at the same time, fall short of moving analysis from summation-based description into critical interpretations (Terry et al., 2017). This type of qualitative thematic analysis is “flexible in terms of theoretical frameworks underpinning analysis” (Clarke & Braun, 2018). Because of my interest in discursive negotiation of CIS cultural identities, my use of thematic analysis was underpinned by social constructionist epistemology and sociocultural perspectives that view meaning as co-constructed through intercultural in historical and social contexts (Haste & Abrahams, 2008; Terry & Braun, 2013). This means that I am situated in the assumption that knowledge is negotiated and constructed out of perceptions and assumptions made available by the sociocultural and interpersonal context.

Following Braun & Clarke (2006), Terry et al., (2017) provided an updated procedure for conducting thematic analysis. As they noted, coding takes place at two main levels, semantic (the identification and summary of data) and latent (the interpretation of underlying patterns in the data, highlighting the theoretical frameworks the analyst chooses). Thus, it asks analysts to not take the participants’ narratives and accounts at face value, but look beyond the surface. The aim of the analysis was to use the analyst’s interpretative resources to reveal the assumptions and systems of meaning-making that underpins the participants’ accounts.

My first research question is: What do the CIS perceive as representations of China that challenge their sense of cultural identity in the context of US higher education? To answer this question, my codes were primarily semantic. The goal was to provide a rich description of where tensions lie for CIS in my sample, by looking at sensitive or controversial questions or statements that students came into contact within the US higher education context. When coding was completed, the codes were examined for broader
patterns of meaning. This thematic analysis was particularly useful because this area of investigation is often under-researched among CIS’ experiences in the US.

Secondly, I employed thematic analysis to answer my second research question: What strategies do the CIS use to reconstruct their challenged cultural identity? Here my codes were both semantic and latent, in that I produce codes that not only capture explicitly what was said, but also codes that capture implicit meanings such as ideas, meanings, or assumptions that were not clearly stated by the participants (Terry et al., 2017). While my thematic inquiry of the first research question sought to address the ways that students’ sense of cultural identity is challenged (what), the second thematic investigation of my second research question shed light on the typologies of strategies that they used to redefine and renegotiate their challenged identity (how). In my thematic analysis, I focused not only on the content of the students’ responses but also on interpretation of what they were attempting to achieve rhetorically within their answers.

My third step in my data analysis was to employ Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA). While the findings from the thematic analysis of my first two research questions were illuminating, they provided a limited understanding of why the CIS were impacted in a particular way (why). FDA furthers this inquiry. The goal is to understand what the discourses that the CIS accessed made possible, its implications, and the opportunities that the discourses, positionings, and subjectivities allowed for their negotiation of identity building.

Discourse analysis is also referred to as discursive psychology, which focuses on how discourse accomplishes and operates as social practices (Edwards & Potter, 1992), and is concerned with how individuals’ interpersonal interactions are affected by their use of language (Hall, 2001). FDA builds on this scholarly tradition, informed by post-structuralist
thought. Foucault argued that social institutions and practices made possible under such institutions are framed and reproduced by cultural discourse (1972). Individuals draw upon cultural discourses as a social practice to achieve interpersonal objectives, and to make meaning of historical or cultural events (Willig, 2013; Haste, 1993). In the context of this dissertation, students attempted to accomplish the social action of explaining, describing, justifying, or resisting their perceptions and reactions to the ways that their sense of cultural identity being challenged in the US. In the third part of the analysis that I conducted, Willig (2013) and Haste’s neo-Vygotskian framework (Haste, 2013; Haste & Abrahams, 2008; Haste & Bermudez, 2017) were helpful in approaching the data, and situating individuals agentically in their cross-cultural contexts.

FDA allowed me to make connections between local discourses that students used and broader ideological assumptions about home country, people, social practices, and affects in my students’ speech, and provided both a theoretical and methodological anchor for my analysis. Haste’s neo-Vygotskian framework helped introduce additional theoretical strength to the FDA, and highlight the parallel cultural discourses at work. I adapted Willig’s (2013) interpretation of FDA to include five stages: 1) discourses, 2) action orientation, 3) subject positioning, 4) practices, and 5) subjectivities. Following these steps in combination with Haste’s framework, I was able to reveal how students were achieving social goals through talk and, in doing so, make available certain subject positions, practices, and emotions, with them at the cross-cultural center making meaning through active dialogues and negotiations. Detailing the analysis through the steps helped showcase the discursive resources that students commanded through language, and made apparent the actions, positions, practices, and emotions that such discourses made available.
This is a very schematic overview of the aims and analytical rationale for this dissertation. In the next chapter, I will conduct a critical reading of recent work in Chinese international students’ experiences and identity in the US, as well as a detailed description of the theoretical work on narrative and identity.
Chapter 3: Review of the Literature

To contextualize this study’s exploration of the CIS experience of managing challenging questions about China from their US peers, and their growth through such experiences, I reviewed literature related to CIS and how identity development, particularly national identity, is implicated in the process of socialization in an intercultural context. I also describe the theoretical framework of Social Constructionism that guides my work. I focus particularly on the analytic framework of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA), complemented by Haste’s (2013) neo-Vygotskian model to examine how a sociocultural approach to discourse works within FDA. I also address the ways in which this integrated framework situates my argument for an expanded perspective to see CIS as actively manage the tensions that they experience and actively structuring their own identities as transnational individuals.

CIS in US Higher Education

Globalization is the culmination of economic, political, and societal forces that push higher education in this century toward greater international immersion (Altbach, 2004), and make studying anywhere in the world possible. After China’s defeat by Japan in 1895 and the early 20th century, Chinese students began to study abroad and were sent by the Qing Imperial government, or left China by their own devices with the hope that their studies in the West could help them contribute to “national salvation” and to face the “Western challenge” from colonial powers (Yan, Berliner, 2011, p.174). From this perspective, studying abroad has been linked to the project of national development since the early years. Those who returned from their travels and studies abroad often secured coveted positions in the government, schools, journalism, public health, and commerce. For example, many revolutionary leaders, such as Lu Xun and Deng Xiaoping, also benefitted from living
studying in the West in their quest to better China. Throughout the 20th century, the new Chinese government continued to send young students abroad to study technically oriented subjects and natural sciences as a way to manage the Western challenges and threats (Yan & Berliner, 2011). Although studying abroad was highly restricted during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), profound political and economic changes took place as China’s government turned to prioritizing economic growth through scientific knowledge. Since the late 1970s, the number of Chinese students studying in the US soared (Yan & Berliner, 2011).

With the global collapse of Communist ideology in the late 1990s, leaders in China began a nationwide patriotic education campaign. With carefully crafted messages of national humiliation and past glory of ancient Chinese civilizations, the goal was to instill national pride, especially in younger generations, and connect the notion of loyalty to the party to loyalty to the country (Wang, 2008). This campaign was multifaceted and mobilized through state curriculum, memory sites, and mass media.

Subsequently, following the economic reform in the early 1990s, China’s economic boom allowed families to prioritize their financial resources, and sometimes with tremendous sacrifices, to send their children outside of China for higher education (Ruiz, 2014). Slowly, self-funded students exceeded government-funded scholars, and represented the majority of CIS studying in the US³, and the government’s focus on sending students to gain skills and knowledge in Western technology for China’s modernization gradually diminished. Students’ individual goals of self-betterment became more explicit (Yan & Berliner, 2011). As a result of this shift, the desire to assimilate and the nature of interaction between the CIS and their US peers also changed; if the CIS knew they were returning to

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³ Though many may seek financial assistance from the US institutions.
China, their motivation to participate in the American life could be relatively limited compared to those who wished to remain in America (Kuo, 2014; Yan & Berliner, 2011).

Today, the US remains one of the top destinations for CIS. Thirty-one percent of international students in the US are from China, totaling 274,439 in the latest figures—a 6-fold proportional increase over the past 15 years (Chen et al., 2015) with a surge around 2007, after the financial crisis. As higher education institutions favor enrolling tuition-paying international students for the financial benefits in revenue to the universities and communities they are in, in addition to the traditional values of intercultural exchange and diversity, international students are now receiving increased attention (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

However, existing research points to the failure on the part of higher education institutions to fully understand the experience of international students and, therefore, their failure to innovate in designing their services or curricula to sufficiently respond to their students’ specific needs (Bista & Foster, 2011; Choudaha, 2017, as cited in Heng, 2019). This is manifested by international students being viewed as a “problem to be addressed,” with their voices left out of conversations around international student experience itself, and their unfamiliarity with the academic and/or social norms interpreted as deficit traits (Heng, 2017).

This dissertation responds to a call for more research on international students on the goal of cross-cultural learning broadly in an increasingly globalized world. The drastic and rapid increase of the CIS population on US campuses contributes to the diversity and vitality of American colleges and universities. Studies show that CIS are motivated by a promise to expand their worldview and to break away from the Chinese way of learning by studying abroad (Chirkov et al., 2007; Cho et al., 2008; Yang et al., 2018). While some
educators emphasize the opportunity, such diversity contributes to the educational experience of all, others point to the restorative effect of the tuition-paying students on the institution’s financial health (Moskal, 2017; Pottie-Sherman, 2018).

Yet, there may be a fundamental contradiction among these various goals. As colleges follow the money and have recruited more international students to US campuses with the promise of diversity, studies have highlighted that international students often bear the responsibility of adjusting to their new academic and host environment. This is perhaps due to a “superior attitude” that assumes the host country and institutes to have more to offer to the international students (Heng, 2018, p. 2). As such, despite the promise of international exchange providing opportunities for innovative exchange of perspectives across cultures (Gacel-Avila, 2005), international students often report feeling isolated and express hostility towards members of the host country where they studied (Andrade, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007). Existing research has explored the experiences of Chinese international students studying abroad in post-secondary programs, including their motivations, experiences and how they are perceived by their peers in the host country, to understand the cultural adaptation of CIS (Chirkov et al., 2007; Lin, 2020; Ruble & Zhang, 2013; Yan & Berliner, 2013; Yang et al., 2018; Zhang, 2015). Studies have shown that, due to maximum cultural distance, CIS in the US are likely to have more difficulties than other international students with less cultural distance, such as those from European countries (Samovar et al., 2009). As such, they are likely to have experienced painful feelings of social exclusion.

While international students who develop relationships with peers from the host country report having higher satisfaction, social connectedness and decreased homesickness (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013), this may not be the case for CIS. Many anecdotal and news reports from CIS suggest that, very often, queries by peers of the
host country on China’s social, cultural, ideological, and political matters can lead to negative interactions; when this is the case, CIS’s romanticized admirations for the many ideals that the US represents, such as freedom, democracy, human rights, collapses (Fish, 2018).

Further, faculty members report the challenge of needing to balance academic freedom while avoiding offending the CIS, yet still protecting the students’ right to voice their views at the same time (Xu, 2017). And as such, conflicting views of China’s cultural, social, and political situations can sometimes lead to hostility between CIS and others in the host country (Hail, 2015).

American higher education often carries with it a civic mission, and scholars have argued for a democratic agenda for colleges and universities (Brand, 2010; Thomas & Levine, 2011). These institutions bear the responsibility to not only attend to the linguistic, academic, psychological, or emotional needs that are very present in the lives of these students, but also to develop critical awareness about civic and social values, both local and global. In the context of this study, the university’s civic mission can be understood to include inculcating critical thinking about the value differences and conflicting narratives that the CIS experience and consume. As our tools of understanding are both internally (personal experience) and externally (cultural, social, historical) influenced, how the CIS see themselves continues to evolve, as they are caught between diverse, and sometimes contradictory, value systems. While in the US, CIS who grew up in the one-party-polity and socialist market economy, have the opportunity to bear witness to the hallmark features of democracy in action, from populist messaging to freedom of speech, from regular elections to right of the people to criticize the government. For these young adults, their university and community in the US is a powerful incubator, where they can learn how to become more aware of their interests, identity, skills and knowledge to advocate against competing perspectives. They are
supported by the curricula at the universities and influenced by their peers to exercise skills needed to investigate the world, take actions to address the challenges of our society, and to reflect the meaning they give to their involvement.

**Identity Development for CIS**

From a social constructionist perspective, meaning is produced through our experience of the world and through social interaction with others (Davies & Harré, 1990). From this perspective, individuals hold considerable autonomy and agency, and continuously construct and make sense of themselves through the cultural discourses and narratives available to them. The individual emerges through the dialogic process of socialization, and with specific influences from the cultural and historical locations of such construction (Davies & Harré, 1990; Haste, 2013).

Inherent in the CIS socialization and meaning-making are processes of identity development. Within the framework of social constructionism, identity is socially constructed: “the social positioning of self and other” (Bucholtz, 2005, p. 586), which means individual’s sense of selves and others are constructed through dialogic interactions within the broader contexts, within which social and cultural narratives sustain and reproduce structures, social norms, and expectations (Haste & Abrahams, 2008). In this vein, identity is produced through narratives that people utilize to make sense of, interpret, and justify their lives (Lawler, 2008). Identity is dynamic and produced through narratives, linking one to others, past and present (Haste & Bermudez, 2017).

Identity development, then, is dynamic and fluid. Recent conceptualizations in both psychology and other relevant disciplines resist the notion of identity as merely developmental and linear process. In the student affairs literature, “identity is understood as one’s personally held beliefs about the self in relation to social groups (e.g. race, ethnicity,
religion, sexual orientation) and the ways one expresses that relationship” (Torres et al., 2009, p. 577). In the higher education campus, the social construction of identity manifests in different contexts, from student’s understanding of their places and others within the institution, to how and why students are drawn to student organizations, as they learn to balance their needs with those of others who are different from them in unique ways (Torres et al., 2009).

One form of cultural identity, national identity, is particularly salient for international students. Indeed, scholars have found that studying abroad may lead to an increased awareness of one’s national identity (Dolby, 2004; Gieser, 2015), and members of the minority groups to be more keenly aware of group identity than members of majority groups (Hail, 2015; Ting-Toomey et al., 2000; Umaña-Taylor, 2004). National identity is defined as “a collective product—in the form of a system of beliefs, values, assumptions, and expectations—that is transmitted to group members in the course of their socialization and mobilized through a variety of communications over the course of their lives” (Kelman, 1997, p. 172). Put simply, it is the relationship, such as beliefs and feelings that one has with one’s nation, that is changing with the evolving social attitudes and norms. National identity and the sentiments that come with it, are powerful forces that propel individual actions, and may even override private desires or self-preservation. National identity is reflected in individual’s normatively prescribed beliefs, assumptions, and choices of how they approach these experiences in their social practices (Kelman, 1997). The degree, strength, and salience of individuals’ national identity depend on multiple contextual factors including “ethnic group membership,” “language, ideology, community demographics,” “time spent in a country,” and “strength of ethnic identity” (Batterton & Horner, 2016, p. 474). When one perceiving his/her collective group to be threatened, a stronger sense of emotional
attachment and loyalty to that group is activated, or becomes more amplified. The United States and China are two countries with drastic differences in economic policies, governance, and cultural ways (Ruble & Zhang, 2013), and it is not hard to imagine that cultural identity becomes complicated in this intercultural context, which is the focus of this study.

Social encounters in foreign countries tellingly reveal the presence of multiple narratives about what it means to be a member of one’s home country and being a member of this collective. Stuart Hall (1989) highlighted the role culture plays in the construction of “oneness” that binds a collective group of people: “our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frame of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history (p. 69).” This collective group of people shared experiences and codes that participate in the interpretation and participation of nation. He further solidified this point in his subsequent work, describing nations not only as politically binding citizens by law, but also as a symbolic community collectively and discursively constructed:

_A national culture is a discourse, the way to construct meanings which influence and organize both our actions and our perceptions of ourselves. National cultures construct identities by creating meanings of ‘the nation’, with which we can identity._ (Hall, 1994, as cited in De Cillia et al., 1999, p.155)

The consequence of the inculcation of this hidden curriculum of a national culture is reflected in the experiences of becoming the “other” in unfamiliar contexts. Because they may hold the perception that how they are viewed by members of the host country is connected to their home country, international students hope that people in the host country would have a positive impression of where they come from; therefore they feel compelled to
act as unofficial ambassadors for their home country, with the hope to improve their interpersonal relationships with members of the host country (Hail, 2015). Existing studies have documented identity negotiations for individuals, such as international students, entering a new culture. For example, Hsieh (2006) found that students negotiated identities aimed at achieving in-person harmony. Yet for Chinese international students, they are often quickly labeled by the American students as foreign or different, and are asked about political or social issues that they had learned through the media, further “reminding Chinese students that they were identified with their country” and act as its representative (Hail, 2015, p.321).

In sum, it seems, from the extant literature, that identity is a prominent element in the process of international student socialization. This process is a dynamic and interactive one—the new cultural experience of being in a foreign locale with its system of beliefs, assumptions, and practices that makes salient and challenge national identities, but so too do the existing national identities of students influence the perception of, and response to the experience of socialization in the foreign context. International students must learn the new cultural practices, implicit or explicit, about expectations in the US while also trying to prove their academic credibility to their peers and faculty members. This process may result in painful negotiations for students who feel torn between two competing worldviews. Existing research on international student identity development is noticeably absent, despite a relatively large volume of literature written on American college students’ identity development, including studies on subgroups such as African American, Asian American, biracial, mixed-racial, gay, female, and male students (Batterton & Horner, 2016; Kim, 2012).

In the next section, I turn to the theoretical framework of social constructionism that
highlights individuals’ continuous construction of themselves through discourses available to them, and which help conceptualize the impacts of meaning-making on identity.

*Theoretical Framework: Social Constructionism*

In short, this dissertation asks how meaning-making occurs and is managed by an individual’s interaction with others, particularly others from a different culture. From Vygotsky’s theory of cognitive development to Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding, the fields of cultural studies, sociocultural linguistics, and developmental psychology have investigated the ways that individuals make meaning of their experiences in culturally and historically situated contexts. Building on the constructivist viewpoint that argues individuals are active builders in knowledge production and can help examine possible ways that individuals might be understanding and using certain tools of learning, many researchers take on a constructionist framework within various branches of psychology. Such a framework helps outline how internalized learning can be complemented by an external construction of a particular construct (Vygotsky, 1978).

In Vygotsky’s seminal work, he pioneered a sociocultural approach to understanding cognitive functions in children (Vygotsky, 1930). He highlighted the power of social interaction on cognitive development for children by stating that, “The path from object to child and from child to object passes through another person. This complex human structure is the product of a developmental process deeply rooted in the links between individual and social history (p.16).” In this way, by highlighting the impacts of social interaction on development, Vygotsky shines a light on the role that external activities (including shared social experiences) play in the process of internalization. He gave an

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4 This definition of interaction is a broad one—including face-to-face direct involvements such as a routine conversation, classroom teaching, side-by-side engagements, and interaction with public figures without physical copresence.
example of the interaction between a mother and her infant. The moment that the mother recognized her child’s unsuccessful attempts at pointing as indicating something meaningful, the situation changes “fundamentally:” the child’s attempt creates a reaction not from the object that he was attempting to reach, but from his mother, who established the child’s attempt at pointing as a meaningful movement, or gesture. At this moment, the function of the child’s movement becomes that of establishing relations: “It becomes a true gesture only after it objectively manifests all the functions of pointing for others and is understood by others as a gesture. Its meaning and functions are created at first by an objective situation and then by people who surround the child” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 56-57). Here Vygotsky demonstrates beautifully the sign that a child was communicative in that, through the external context of social relations between the mother and child, who solicited some type of internalized understanding to allow it to be meaningful and regenerative. The implication from this emphasis on external social relationships points to the power of social and cultural settings on individuals and their meaning-making of the world.

Social constructionism expands on the primacy of social and cultural settings for meaning-making. According to Willig (2013), research with a “social constructionist perspective is concerned with identifying the various ways of constructing social reality that are available in a culture, to explore the conditions of their use and to trace their implications for human experience and social practice” (p.49). Meaning is made through our experience of the world, and our world is produced through our experience of it (Willig, 2013). For instance, the folktale of two shoe salesmen who traveled to an island looking for business opportunities illustrates the premises of social constructionism. They discovered that nobody on that island wore shoes. One believed this meant that the fact nobody wore shoes meant there was no chance for him to sell the shoes to the islanders, since they didn’t wear any,
while the other believed this presented an amazing opportunity to sell the shoes, for the same reason. From a constructionist point of view, neither is right or wrong, and the ways in which each salesman constructs the islander’s needs for shoes provide us with insight into the lens through which each salesman views the world, which determines every individual’s experience of reality.

The broad theory of social constructionism, as Gergen (2001) pointed out, is useful for asking new sets of questions regarding the choices one makes, and has been used by many social scientists who use it as “viable theory” concerning the production of knowledge in social and cultural domains, “emphasizing dialogue, co-construction, collaboration, community building, narrative, and positive visioning” (p.3). This perspective underlies the assumptions that I make in this dissertation about co-construction of meaning and the importance of considering contextual influences. It asserts that knowledge is historically and culturally situated and that knowledge constructs, as opposed to simply reflects, reality, and the goal of inquiries in this framework is on the interaction, processes, and social practices (Young & Collin, 2004). In the context of my dissertation, for example, the question is not just what the peers’ challenging questions posed to the CIS are doing, or invoking, in the CIS, but also how these particular students are making sense of such questions that they perceive as challenging, using the resources available to them.

Hall's (2005) influential concept of “encoding and decoding” provides a theoretical framework for understanding the process of meaning-making: The message encoded into a text by a TV producer is not necessarily the same message that will be decoded by the viewer. He noted the lack of fit between the production of the message and the reception of the message, and in doing so challenged the traditional assumptions of the mass communication model three ways and proposed: 1) meaning is not fixed or determined by
the sender; 2) the message is not transparent; and 3) the receivers of the message, the audience, are not passive receivers of meaning encoded in the message. Here the mass communication media becomes the site of ideological struggle, rather than simply the means to express ideologies.

Situated in the social constructionist framework, in my dissertation, I work from two interrelated models and am weaving together aspects of each of them to approach the analysis of my data. These models are Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) and Haste's (2013) neo-Vygotskian model.

*Analytical Framework: Foucauldian Discourse Analysis and A Neo-Vygotskian Model*

According to Willig (2013), “FDA is social constructionist in orientation” (p.407). FDA was not a unified method prescribed by Foucault, but introduced by a group of psychologists who had been influenced most notably by the work of Michel Foucault (Willig, 2013). As such, researchers who subscribe to this methodology and theoretical framework have variously realized the application of FDA. Where FDA researchers converge is their commitment to examining the ways discourse is implicated in the construction of selves and subjectivity, and how particular versions of the social and psychological realities are constructed through language. FDA provides analysts with a tool for moving between local discursive work and broader societal level work.

In this study, I specifically utilize Willig's (2013) interpretation of FDA. Willig (2013) draws on Parker (1994) and Davies and Harré (1999), and describes discourses as the ways that speakers construct discursive objects, the concrete or abstract concepts that depend on the research question and are the focus of the analysis, and an array of subject positions, “a location for persons within the structure of rights and duties for those who use that repertoire” (Davies & Harré, 1999, as cited in Willig, 2013, p. 387). In such conceptions,
discourses are fluid and the speaker may use different discourses and take up multiple
positionings accordingly. In Willig’s (2013) illustration of FDA, she analyzed an interview
transcript with a woman who was describing a romantic relationship she recently ended, and
identified how the relationship was constructed in “at least two different ways,” of the
“economic discourse” where both parties jointly consent to enter the relationship as an
investment for security and support, and of the “romantic discourse” where the relationship
was depicted as “a step on the way” towards the ultimate goal of marriage. Elsewhere, Willig
(1997) analyzed an interview excerpt in which participants used different discourses to
construct trust in the discussion of their condom use in the context of HIV/AIDS: Trust as
security, trust as practice, and trust as social-regulation. In these examples, the speakers
moved fluidly, drawing on multiple discourses in their responses, sometimes in the context
of the same interview question.

In this study, I seek to make visible the shared discourses used by CIS in describing
their home country, China, and in the context of being asked challenging questions about it
in the US, where they study. To do this, particular attention must be paid not only to the
discourse of home country, but also to the various ways that speakers construct themselves
and the worlds around them, including ethnic groups and social, cultural, or moral practices
they associate with particular perceptions of China. I will discuss the steps that Willig
introduced to approach FDA in detail in the chapter on analytical procedures.

Scholars have advocated for the need to move discourse analysis beyond just the
discourses themselves and to consider questions “about the presupposed knowledge of
cultural worlds underlying discursive positioning and practices” (Vågan, 2011, p.48). As such,
in order to understand accounts of people’s identities or attachment to certain practices or
object, analysts of discourse must be familiar with the narratives and interactions that
influence, and are invoked in, their stories. Drawing on Bernstein (2016), I see identity as fundamentally relational in nature, as temporary positions, and negotiated through language in social interaction. Therefore, I look to the production and consumption of discourses, through the lens of sociocultural perspectives in highlighting culture-individual relationships.

Studies in this tradition have long recognized that the self is socially and culturally embedded. With this framework, I subscribe to culture as a dynamic process of constructing selves during dialogic negotiations particular to their transnational contexts, which is then made visible through discourses (Bucholtz, 2005). Further, Selman’s (2003) work on interpersonal understanding highlights the importance of personal meaning-making in how individuals make decisions in situations of interpersonal conflict and negotiation. His theoretical framework for understanding interpersonal negotiation strategies incorporated meaning-making as a critical component to understanding decision making.

Haste’s Neo-Vygotskian Sociocultural model contends that individuals are situated within a cultural, social, and dialogic context (Carretero et al, 2016; Haste, 2014; Haste & Bermudez, 2017). I drew extensively on this framework of meaning-making, to help explain how the dynamics and complexity of culture, society, and individual dialogue work iteratively in concert to exert influence on, and are influenced by, the individual. This model sees the individual as an active agent for him/herself in constant, iterative negotiation of meaning, identity, and credibility within many local and social contexts. Such process takes place in three domains: the domain of available cultural, societal, and historical discourses, narratives, and explanations; the domain of dialogic interaction through conversation, persuasion, argumentation, and also scaffolding; and the domain of individual cognitive processes, identities, and subjectivity. I drew on this model to complement my adaptation of Willig’s steps to approach FDA. These are depicted in Figure 1.
Figure 1. Bringing together adapted Willig’s (2009) stages of FDA and Haste’s neo-Vygotskian framework of individual agency and meaning-making.

In each step of the analysis using Willig’s FDA stages, I asked additional questions from Haste’s neo-Vygotskian framework as I conducted my analytical inquiry, though certain questions/stages were more salient in data than some others, so each analytical stage remains unique. Situated in this model, CIS’ individual identities are being shaped not only by their past personal experiences, cultural traditions, and their future aspirations, but also by new social and cultural experiences, which include coming into contact with others (e.g., students and faculty at the university at which they are enrolled) who may question Chinese international students’ beliefs.

As Figure 1 shows, in order to make the connection between discourses and the identity building implications of these discourses, I combine the tools of FDA and Haste’s neo-Vygotskian framework. In the first stage, the researcher identifies all the discursive constructions that the speaker uses, and names the discourse they fit with. Haste's (2013)
model complements this first stage of FDA by recognizing our capacity to manage diverse points of view in our use of discourses. Haste (2013) makes explicit that there exist several parallel cultural discourses, and that we “continually operate with parallel and frequently inconsistent discourse” (Billig, 1992, as cited in Haste, 2013). For example, within the context of discussing attending family therapy, participants in Moore & Seu (2010) drew on counseling discourse when talking about the therapists as facilitator to the client with therapy as an intervention, the medical discourse to construct therapists with scientific knowledge and a powerful expert when discussing the objective of curing deviance, and the consumerist discourse when discussing a renewed perspective client-therapist relationship to elevate the power of patients. Here family therapy is constructed as a collaboration on the part of the client and therapist to equally participate in a cognitive restructuring of situations to seek new perspectives, an investigation to scrutinize and regulate potential problems, and as a consumer-merchant relationship where the consumer retains the right to evaluate the service received. The findings show how the clients “actively engage with the power of therapeutic institutions (p. 341).” Indeed, cultural narratives are available resources with “explanatory value, moral value, cultural fashion, identity salience, and as such, reflect the sedimentation of both collective memory and of cultural norms” (Haste, 2013, p. 43). As such, in this first stage of the FDA, my analysis would seek to answer: What and how is the discursive object (home country) constructed? In addition, adapted from Haste (2013), I also ask: what cultural/historical resources/narratives are constructed and drawn upon?

The stages of action orientation and subject positioning make up the vantage point from which the individual sees and perceives the world, which are often subconsciously accomplished, particularly in identity work. For example, if I say to a group of guests, “Wow, look at the time!” I am not really asking everyone to look at the time on their devices, rather,
I may be politely asking them to leave, as they are presumably lingering past my designated social hours at my home. The words are merely a description, or reflection, but the action orientation here is a deliberate request. The subject position that I assume is perhaps one of a well entertained but exhausted host who conforms to the social convention of politeness, and positions the guests as highly sociable actors who really enjoy each other’s company but are disrespectful of the host’s unspoken boundaries of time. Because cultural discourse is generated and invoked in both dialogues and individual thought, Haste’s (2013) focus on dialogue as “culture in action” (p. 41) complements these two stages of FDA and provides insights into pivotal instances of positioning and in shaping what practices and subjective experiences in the social and cultural world. As such, in the analytical stage of action orientation and positioning, the FDA questions that I ask are: What is the speaker doing deliberately? What is achieved, or hopes to be achieved from using these discourses? In addition, adapted from Haste (2013), I would also ask: What is the goal of the dialogic interaction? Is it to find consensus, acquire new knowledge, persuade, or defend one’s authority and/or allegiance?

The last two stages, practice and subjectivity, are broadly “implications” for how a particular discourse is deployed in a particular way for individual meaning-making. Constructing certain social practices as normal or given and making available certain subjectivities in terms of feelings, experiences, or interpersonal possibilities positions the individual as active. For example, in a study conducted by Robinson et al. (2013), to examine chronic pain, a rejection of the biomedical discourse justified participants’ doubting of their experience and active attempts to manage their pain, perhaps defying medical advice. The construction of their pain as optional or cancelable carried with it feelings of disempowerment, or, alternatively, of resistance or anger. The individuals experience the
larger culture through the layers of others (Haste, 2013), or in this case, the individuals access the healthcare institutions through medical professionals and healthcare workers, and by taking up or rejecting certain discourse, reinforce or challenge medical expertise, professionalism, and power dynamics. For this stage of the FDA analysis, I ask: What possibilities are mapped out by these subject positions? How does their use of the discourse they choose make certain practice possible/not possible and obligatory/not obligatory? What can be felt, seen, communicated? What are the implications of using these discourses and positions from these subject positions? And adapting from Haste (2013), I also ask, in my analysis: How do students construct different perspectives in their own contexts? How do they examine the contested questions about China that they find challenging in relation to others (e.g. those they perceive as insiders vs. outsiders, defend their country, listen to their peers)? How do they feel, what can they communicate, where are they located in this emotion?

Thus, FDA allows me to make connections between language and its role in making larger, ideological assumptions about social and psychological life of participants in their contexts. The stages of FDA provide both a theoretical and methodological framework for my analysis. Because discourse is bound up with institutional practices of regulating and administering social life, they “legitimate and reinforce existing social and institutional structures,” and these structures also “support and validate the discourses (Willig, 2013, p. 381),” mirroring the relationships between the three domains in Haste’s (2013) neo-Vygotskian model as reciprocal.

In the next chapter, I turn to my own data, detailing the methodology, the research participants, the data collection process, the analytical strategy, and the steps taken to maintain validity.
Chapter 4: Methods

I employed a qualitative research design to explore how Chinese international students negotiate and make sense of their cultural identities and experiences in a strongly liberal sociocultural context of US higher education. I sought to discover, using thematic analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis, the ways that students perceived their cultural identity to be challenged, the strategies that they employed to manage the tension that comes with such challenges, and the complex discourses that CIS accessed to talk about their home country, which made possible their negotiation of cultural identity in their transnational context.

This chapter offers a detailed depiction of the methodology and describes the research participants, the data collection process, the analytical strategy, and the steps taken to maintain validity. This study seeks to answer three research questions:

1) What do CIS perceive as representations of China that challenge their sense of cultural identity in the context of US higher education?

2) What strategies do the CIS use to confront their challenged cultural identity?

3) What discourses do four CIS use to describe the most dominant challenge to their cultural identity: the perception of their home country—China?

   a) How do these discourses allow the CIS to position themselves and others in relation to China?

   b) What opportunities do these discourses, positionings and subjectivities allow for renegotiation of identity building?

Site Selection and Participants

I drew a convenience sample of CIS from two American universities that met three criteria. First, the CISs should be from Mainland China, excluding students from Hong
Kong, Taiwan, Macau, Xinjiang and Tibet. This strategy was deliberate because research and anecdotal accounts have documented that individuals from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau, Tibet, and Xinjiang may not necessarily self-identify as politically, socially, culturally Chinese. Next, they should be in either the junior or senior year of their undergraduate study. This means they had resided in the US for at least two years, but less than five years at the time of this study. Finally, they must have not completed high school in the US. I hypothesized that locating my research study among the students with such characteristics would increase the chance of my discovering how students discuss core changes in their reflections on China and their identities attached to it. My choice of CIS with these characteristics was both convenient and strategic. I recruited students from mainland China because I am most interested in their views on their identities and responsibilities as those who have been subject to the nationwide “patriotic education campaign” since the 1990s in China (Hail, 2015), and as transnational Chinese vis-à-vis changes in the heavily intertwined global community that may force uncomfortable discussion of, and reinvention of, those identities. A generic copy of the screening survey sent via Qualtrics to those interested in participating in the study is in Appendix B.

While the leading scholars agree that acculturation is a multidimensional and dynamic process (Bucholtz, 2005), most acculturation models have been researched empirically mainly on immigrants and refugees, with few from the international student population. Here I follow Schwartz et al. (2010) and broadly define acculturation as the dynamic, multi-dimensional process by which individuals change and adapt in domains of language, behavior, social affiliation, and cultural beliefs when coming into contact with another culture. I made a temporal, arbitrary decision to choose students who had lived in the US between two and five years, with the assumption that, after two years of living in the
US, the CIS had absorbed the initial shock, such as linguistic challenges, and entered a period in which they had developed the capacity to reflect on their experiences. Because students typically graduate four or five years after their arrival, by sampling students in the junior or senior years of their undergraduate studies, I hoped to capture a period in the CISs’ academic journey when their acculturative stress had lowered somewhat and as their worldviews continuously evolved.

For similar reasons, I excluded students who completed high school in the US. Indeed, many studies have explored the challenges facing new CIS in developed western countries, such as on their learning and acculturation difficulties in the US (Liu, 2016; Yan & Berliner, 2011, 2013). However, little literature explored their roles and perceptions of managing their civic identities abroad, when they are perceived as China’s spokespeople and representatives. This provided me with further assurance that students with these characteristics would have something to say about their experiences, especially regarding challenging questions about China that they encountered in the US.

I only included universities in the greater Boston region. Convenience and necessity motivated this choice. Boston is one of the biggest college towns in the US, and the presence of many world-class universities is a big draw for CIS. This gave me relatively easy access to a large pool of CISs. I also presumed these students lived on-campus or in off-campus housing near the universities, making in-person interviews, my preferred choice, more possible.

**Data Collection Methods**

**Access.** My sample is comprised of 20 students who attended two universities in the Greater Boston Area. In building my sample, I aimed for breadth over depth by recruiting students from all schools within the university. This design allowed me to have expansive
access to potential participants. Sunflower University (a pseudonym) serves roughly 3600 international students, 47% of whom are from China. Highland University (also a pseudonym) reports having a total of nearly 7000 international students, 48% of whom are Chinese international students.

With the personal connection referred to me by my advisor, Dr. Haste, in September 2017, I began contacting international student offices at various universities with an email inviting their participation. A generic copy of that email is in Appendix A. The initial response was both encouraging and disappointing. It was encouraging because the responses were coming in volumes and swiftly. Within a week of contacting the various offices, several program coordinators responded, indicating whether or not they had secured approval to circulate the email. I also began hearing back from potential students, yet many of them did not meet the requirements that I had asked for. For example, some students were only in their sophomore year, and some had graduated from high schools in the US. I expected this phase of securing students’ participation, to be long. This was indeed the case. Begun in September 2017, it was not until January of 2018, after communicating with nearly 60 individuals, that I had a list of students who met all the desired characteristics and who had confirmed with me their availability to participate in the study during the Spring semester of 2018.

I recruited a total of 20 CIS, 10 students from Sunflower University and 10 students from Highland University in a variety of schools (e.g. economic, engineering, arts and sciences) within each university. I followed up and scheduled face to face meetings with each

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5 I obtained information about each of the universities from their websites or websites (such as collegefactual.com) that aggregate such data.
6 The office for international students at each university helped disseminate my email more widely, as they have complete contact information, through their mailing lists of all Chinese international students studying different majors across schools at each university.
student by e-mail, phone, or the Chinese social media application, WeChat. Students in my study were, on average, 20 years old, and had been in the US for three years. Most of them double or even triple majored for a total of 14 majors. Of the 20 students, 16 are female. All students who are included in the study consented to participate at the beginning of each interview; a sample of the consent form is in Appendix D. Demographic details for the participants appear in Table 1 below.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic characteristics of participants.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
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<tr>
<td>(n=10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Age at interview (Mean)</td>
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<td>Years in the US (Mean)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discipline* (with overlaps)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social sciences</td>
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<td>Applied sciences</td>
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† In this sample, many students double or triple majored.
Building rapport. In order to facilitate richer and more in-depth responses, participants need to share authentically, and the ability to build rapport is one of the most important steps to take in ensuring effective interviewing (Berry, 2005, 2006; Navas et al., 2007; Safdar et al., 2003; Ward et al., 2001). To build rapport, I met with each student for approximately 30 minutes, before our series of more formal interviews began, at a location of their choice. This typically took place at a coffee house or a student center, and the goal was to introduce myself, learn about them, and to talk about my research. During this time, I also fielded any potential questions that they may have had about the data collection and storing strategies, analytical approaches, and the final presentation of the data. I made sure that I listened attentively and patiently, giving them the space to finish their sentences, to pause, and ask questions. I was careful not to overshare about my experience, fearing that I would alter the responses that the students gave, such that they provided answers that they perceived to be what I wanted to hear later on. I focused on having the students talk about themselves, and by doing so, I learned a great deal about each of the students, their experience in the US so far, why they chose their major(s), and their hopes and dreams.

Interviews. The data for this study came from 40 individual interviews with 20 CIS. Each student participated in two one-hour interviews over the course of a semester. Interviews allow for an open-ended examination of a topic for which not much research has been done to gather participants’ thought processes and behaviors (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I conducted in-person interviews with all but two of the participants.8 For those two cases, we spoke via video calls. All other interviews were held at a place of comfort and/or convenience for the participants. This included classrooms and study spaces (individual, enclosed, private rooms) at the library.

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8 One had to travel abroad, and the other one had an infectious illness.
I used a semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol, adapted from Seidman's (2013) interview structure, which allows ample space for individual meaning-making, and for me to probe with immediate follow-up questions when participants offered a vague or unclear answer. In addition, discussing uncomfortable questions can be challenging and even sensitive; doing a second interview can sustain the rapport that I was able to build with the students from their first interview. It is with this mindset that I engaged the CIS in two interviews about their thinking, learning, and growing in relation to their experiences, both comfortable and uncomfortable, in the US. All this helped me gain visibility and a more in-depth understanding of how the students articulated examples and interpreted their experiences (Seidman, 2013)

In each interview, I sought a balance between strict adherence to the interview protocol with a more relaxed posture that allowed me to pursue emergent topics and follow up with questions. Indeed, students across the sample raised interesting points and the conversations took directions that I did not broach in my semi-structured interview guides. This typically took place in interview two, as I predicted, after they became more comfortable with me or had additional space and time to recall aspects of their experience that, to them, provided useful context, or reflect on current events that were relevant to the study. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, though there were moments when students struggled to find the right word in either English or Mandarin, that they used a language that they thought to have authentically reflected their thinking at that moment (Seidman, 2013). For example, several students used the word “identity” in English, as its Chinese equivalent is seldom used in dialogic exchanges.

Due to time constraints, approximately 15 interviews were professionally transcribed. In the case that they were, I cleaned all transcripts by removing identifiable information,
checking for accuracy by listening to the audio recordings at the same time. Below, I present a summary of the structure and aims of each interview. (See Appendix C for full interview guide).

**Interview One.** The goal of the first interview was to build rapport and gather information about the dual contexts that the CIS occupy. The context provides the foundation for understanding the meaning-making of their experiences, in this case the upbringing of the CIS in China and the moments of tension experienced by the CIS in the US. In the first interview, I gave the students an open space for them to construct, through carefully placed prompts, their past academic and extracurricular experiences that shaped who they were at the moment of the interview. I paid particular attention to places where students told a story about their experiences of tension, attached significance to an identity (i.e., of being Chinese, or being from a middle-class family, or being different, or being a student, or being an outcast), and interpreted the impacts (i.e., behavioral, social, emotional) resulting from their transnational experience. I asked students to describe the changes, if any, that they felt in their perceptions of China, having been living and learning in the US for a significant period of time. By doing this, the first interview gathers a description of the high and low points of the students’ journey thus far and how they perceived and understood it.

**Interview Two.** The goal of the second interview was to ask about the CIS’ perception and justification of their roles both in the US and China as an active member of both societies. I let the students take the lead in telling their stories, and only interrupted to elicit more details or ask follow-up questions when necessary. In this interview, I focused on the pragmatic work the students undertook to manage the tensions that they experienced, and how they saw themselves fit in both in China and in the US, two countries that despite their linguistic, social, political, and cultural differences, exerted great influence on their
journeys of personal development. In addition, I asked students to respond to a commencement speech a CIS gave at the University of Maryland that created quite a controversy among the CIS community globally. After the first set of interviews, it was apparent that the areas of tension are prominent in the participants’ minds, thus I used this case to draw out how they approached and interpreted such tension in the multiple contexts that the CIS saw themselves occupy. I closed the second interview by asking what suggestions the students would have for Yang, or other CIS, who wish to explore topics that may be understood differently at a public setting in either the US or China.

With the students’ permission, I recorded all interviews with an audio recorder. On average, the interviews lasted about 65 minutes. They ranged in length for a minimum of 36 minutes to a maximum of 1 hour and 40 minutes. The length of time between each interview ranged from 7 days to 2 months, but most commonly, students scheduled interviews for approximately 2 weeks apart.

Piloting and evolving the guides. The guides are a result of iterative revisions. Before conducting interviews with students who fit the criteria for my dissertation, I piloted the interviews with other students of similar profiles as those in my dissertation study. This included those who wished to share their insights but did not meet the criteria for my dissertation, such as those who completed their high school education in the US and were currently enrolled at a local university in the Greater Boston area. By pilot testing these questions with participants, my objective was to detect possible flaws in the guides and make sure that they were adequately aligned with my research questions. Because this is an

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9 This commencement speech given by Yang praised liberty and freedom that she experienced in the US. It was received primarily negatively in China due to its negative connotation about China’s quality of air, which Yang may have intended as a metaphor.
exploratory research project, I expected to learn along the way the kinds of questions that would elicit the most generative responses.

I first conducted pilot interviews with four such CIS in the Greater Boston area as a way to assess and refine my guides. They came from a convenience sample as I had prior relationships with these students in other capacities. The pilot interviews provided the opportunity for me to remove, refine and clarify some questions in the original interview guide. For example, the original draft of the interview questions was ordered by types of activities students participated in on campus and in their communities as a way to draw out the multiple contexts that they occupied, and this made the conversation disjointed. After the pilot interview, I rearranged the questions, which allowed me to conduct formal interviews with an attuned sense of the topics that I wish to cover and the order in which to cover them.

Data management. I transcribed all interviews in Chinese and then translated into English. I used a near-verbatim approach, capturing every word that the students used, but omitting filler words such as “um”, “ah”, and “uh” and multiple false starts. I, however, did make note of significant pauses, silences, or laughter to capture the general mood of the discussion. Randomly selected excerpts were checked by one of my committee members, who is also a native of China and bilingual researcher in North America. I listened to the recordings casually at first, then intently, for each recording, making note of worthy examples or phrases that the students had said, and jotted down my reactions and thoughts by doing extensive memo-ing.

I used Dedoose, a cloud-based research software to facilitate my coding and analysis. This software allowed me to comb the data quickly, keep track of my memos, and provided
the opportunity for me to not only go in depth into my data, but also compare students’
comments across the sample, allowing me to look for patterns to emerge.
Chapter 5: Analytical Procedures

From a social constructivist (or constructionist) perspective, meaning is made through our experience of the world, and our world is produced through our experience of it (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Davies & Harré, 1990; Marshall, 1981; Willig, 2008; Willig, 2013). Within this framework, individuals are continuously constructing themselves, and making sense of their lives through the discourses and stories available to them (Davies & Harré, 1990). These discursive resources that students commanded from language helped reveal the meanings that the CIS attribute to the challenges of their university experiences in the US. The discursive resources here refer to the social or cultural artifacts, practices or meanings that come into existence through a collective act of language. Put simply, when certain features of the world around us seems to exist only because we collectively assert and agree that they exist or carry meaning, such as money or the Tooth Fairy, that thing is discursively constructed.

For my dissertation, I conducted two forms of analysis: thematic analysis (TA) and Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA). Of particular interest to me are the students’ evolving identities as they encounter questions that challenge, reinforce, or change their existing worldviews in the context of US higher education. As such, it is critical to my analytical strategy of doing thematic analysis (TA), which is a method to “systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning across a data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012). By using TA, I identify the salient topics, concepts and values, and use discourse analysis to examine, for example, students’ articulated discourses, action orientations, and positioning.

Because one of my goals for this dissertation is to look at how the goals of education, people’s position in society, and their ways of engagement as social beings within
the society were constructed in terms of the relation to the institution of schools and the state, I also built on the theoretical work of Michael Foucault to understand language and its implication for power in our social and cultural life (Willig, 2013). To do this, I used Willig’s (2013) interpretation of the analytical steps for conducting FDA. Combining both approaches helped me examine what priorities and concerns about their identities were evident in students’ answers, and how they defined what they believed their choices demanded of them. In the thematic analysis, my focus was primarily on “what” was said, rather than “how” or “by whom” or “for what purpose” (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I did this by tracking and clustering emic codes that captured ideas emergent in their responses. In conducting discourse analysis, on the other hand, my goal was to describe how students’ responses defined the boundaries, priorities and expectations of their orientations and responsibilities in the context of US higher education, and to reveal what broader discourses were made available to them through their choices of responses.

**Thematic Analysis**

Among other things, I was particularly interested in what questions about China do the CIS perceive to be challenging or thought-provoking, and why. By probing not only what the CIS describe as their parameters for determining certain questions or statements about China from their US peers as challenging, but also how they responding to these challenging questions or statements, affectively and behaviorally, we gain interesting insights into how they value, explain, and/or resist different cultural ideals, models of self, and strategies to interact with these questions. The data were analyzed adapted from Terry et al., (2017) approach to thematic analysis, which was comprised of 3 broad stages: 1) data familiarization and coding, 2) theme development, and 3) theme reviewing and definition, before producing the final write-up of the findings. The goal is to look beyond the data surface and employ the
analyst’s interpretive resources to interrogate the assumptions and frames of references that underscored the students’ sense-making.

Given the theoretically flexible nature of thematic analysis, Braun and Clark (2006) recommended that researchers clarify the theoretical assumptions underpinning their analysis. My use of thematic analysis is consistent with my theoretical framework, which is underpinned by a social constructionist perspective that views meaning as the product of human experience and social interactions while in the US (Willig, 2013). This formed the basis of an in-depth qualitative analysis.

**Stage 1: Data familiarization and open coding.** I began my analysis by familiarizing myself with the data in-depth and generating early and provisional analytic ideas. By familiarizing myself with the data, I was looking for a way to engage with, and gain insight into, the “overwhelming mass of data” that I had collected (Terry et al., 2017, p.23). At this phase, I was interested in not only the content of students’ response to my questions, but also how they constructed their narratives of conflict and the context in which the conflict was encountered. While transcribing the interviews, I made mental notes of interesting examples or phrases that the participants used, and recorded my experiences with these interviews in short memos.

The creation of codes was an iterative process. To preserve the cultural and linguistic nuances in the data, I began my analysis by reading the transcripts in Chinese. After transcribing the interviews, I immersed myself in the transcripts. In this process, I made “casual observational notes,” in which I asked questions of the data, moving through the entire data set (Terry & Braun, 2013, p.26). For example, I made observation notes such as “ambivalent about cultural ignorance”, “China’s politics being distorted”, and “feels unable to answer certain questions”. After getting a general sense of the overall dataset, I began
systematically attached meaningful labels to certain segments of the dataset that are relevant to the broad research question of “how do CIS negotiated and made sense of their cultural identities and experiences?”

After collecting a constellation of excerpts that focused on these questions, I was able to focus on what was said, rather than the “how,” or “why.” At this phase, codes vary in what they capture, from the semantic descriptions, to more latent ideas. Semantic codes include “feeling strong urge to dispute US peers,” “finding strength in conflict,” and “disputing is not worth it.” For example, I coded it as “assumptions of China’s censorship of freedom of speech,” when a student said, “When I was a sophomore, someone quietly asked me if we would be taken away if we were talking politics on the street.” The semantic codes reflect what the participants explicitly said about, and the meanings they ascribed to, being a Chinese international student and confronting tension to their identity in the US.

Latent codes, on the other hands, capture ideas embedded in the explicit content, such as “reluctance to engage in the position as ambassador/diplomatic of China,” “engaging in features of nationalist perspective,” and “primacy of winning competition.” In one example, a student did not explicitly talk about the role of a cultural ambassador in foreign relations, the notion that they must represent and protect the interests of the home country, facilitate tactical agreement, promote strategic narratives, etc., and do so without hurting the goodwill between parties. However, this concept was useful for making sense of the logic when she said, “I don’t know how to answer this question, representing a country,” an idea that’s part of the discourse of being a diplomat.

I continued to refine codes and modify their definitions to help me make sense of the entire data set. When I came across data that were relevant to the research question, but did not seem to align with a previously generated code, I created new codes. I kept note of
the emotions, experiences, and interpretations that echoed across students. When I applied a new code, I would return to the previously coded transcripts to re-read the data before applying the new code. Certain data segments might be tagged with more than one code, whereas some other data segments may not be coded at all due to their irrelevance to the overarching research question. For example, “loss in confidence of the quality of US higher education” was a category that encapsulated several individuals’ experiences, but were not central to my research questions.

I wrote memos during this coding phase to assess the codes’ relevance, keep track of the formation of emergent codes, how certain codes might fit together to represent a patterned theme across the data, and document my reflections on how my own experience was affecting the formation of these codes. After coding all data items, this phase produced a compiled list of codes that captured both “patterning and diversity of relevant meaning” in the dataset (Terry et al., 2017, p.26).

**Stage 2: Theme development.** With a deep understanding of the data that I gained through stage 1 of familiarization and coding, I began developing themes. My definition of a theme follows that of Braun and Clarke (2006), which is a patterned response participants reference that brings meaning to a recurring experience. This is a very active phase of identifying patterns that works around a core idea that underpins a theme. The research questions guided what was relevant in terms of potential patterns of meaning. Here, theme development involves both examining codes and the data associated with them, as well as “combining, clustering, or collapsing codes together into bigger or more meaningful patterns” (Terry et al., 2017, p.28).

In my data, this consists of description of behaviors, reactions to a particular idea or statement, or justifications for why something happens. For example, the idea of a “different
expressions of individual agency in China” appeared across the dataset. When faced with a question or statement that hinted Chinese government’s certain domestic policies as controlling (i.e. censorship), students spoke of their own resistance to the said policy as one that wasn’t always straightforward, or even at times, coherent. One of the students spoke of such different perceptions of individual agency in terms of having access: “we have WeChat, and many other social media [much better than yours]!” Indeed, in many cases, students described the content with having alternative options that they perceived to be superior, or better suited for the Chinese population. For others though, they noted something more subtle. Even when they shared the view that censorship, for example, was bad in controlling what people can see or hear, creative expressions of dissent was a powerful pushback against the perception that Chinese people are powerless in the face of government propaganda. For example, a student described her brush with China’s censors when she shared a photo of Winnie the Pooh on her personal WeChat. She was then censored due to the intolerance of President Xi being ridiculed as a cartoon character. Across the dataset, this candidate theme attempted to capture 1) students’ resistance to the outsiders’ perception that Chinese citizens had no power simply because they lived under an authoritarian regime, and 2) students’ resistance to claim agency through creative, individual acts within an authoritarian regime. In following a thorough coding, I was confident that I had evidence of a prevalent pattern across the data.

Three other candidate themes were generated also related to the ways in which CIS experienced tension about different perceptions of China between theirs and those in their sociocultural context of US higher education: first, there existed conflicting understandings of Chinese culture, its depth and breadth, second, there existed contrasting ideas about China’s development in various domains, and third, there existed competing viewpoints on
sovereignty, who decides the legitimacy of sovereignty? These candidate themes did not stand on their own, but eventually became subthemes to a main theme of “competing for a reference frame” in my analysis\(^{10}\), which spoke to my first research question, which was:

“What do CIS perceive as representations of China that challenge their sense of cultural identity in the context of US higher education”?

**Stage 3: Theme review and definition.** This phase is similar to that of a “quality control exercise” in that reviewing the themes alongside the dataset confirms that they, together, tells a coherent and meaningful story that answers the research question (Terry et al., 2017, p.29). In this phase, I checked to see if my candidate themes worked well across the whole dataset. This is similar to what Maxwell (2013) cautioned as “analytic blinders” that “ignores the actual relationship of things within a specific context” (p. 112). I reviewed the codes and quotations in their original transcripts and reaction memos to each interview. In this way, I was able to draw my codes and relevant data from across the interviews, effectively re-reading and analyzing each transcript in its entirety, and sometimes re-listening to the original interview. I turned my attention to the codes and candidate themes that I developed as distinct, but still related to each other in addressing my research questions.

To define and name themes, I moved away from thinking about the themes in primarily descriptive terms to a more interpretive orientation. The theme definitions are “short summaries of the core idea and meaning of each theme—like an abstract for each theme” (Terry et al., 2017, p.31). In this phase, I constantly asked whether an alternative, more refined name might better capture my themes. At first, the theme “competing for a reference frame” was originally called “facing tension”. As I developed my analysis and

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\(^{10}\) A subtheme “captures a distinct aspect of a theme, but shares the same central organizing concept” (Terry et al., 2017, p.31)
defined the theme more clearly, it became apparent that students were not passive in facing
the tensions that arose in their interactions with others in the US; they were actively trying to
argue for a winning frame of reference with those in their new sociocultural context in the
moment. As such, the final name of the theme was better suited for the content of the data,
because it needed to highlight the students’ active confrontation and negotiation for multiple
frames of reference for China, which are not fixed or stagnant, in their dialogic contexts of
interactions with their peers or faculty members in the US.

**Foucauldian Discourse Analysis**

I chose FDA as a suitable and relevant method for my analysis of CIS because
discourses are bound up with ways of organizing, regulating, and administering their social
lives both in contemporary communist China with a socialist market economy, and the US, a
capitalist democracy. By adopting this method, I was situated in the epistemological stance
that discourse constructed objects and subject positions, and in doing so, made possible
ways of seeing and being in the world, which was strongly implicated in the exercise of
power (Willig, 2013). This approach was necessary for a fuller recognition of the range of
orientations students perceived to be appropriate for them to take in the US as unofficial
spokespeople of China.

Because *discursive* language is constructive, by studying discourse, I focus on not only
what language is descriptively, but also what it can accomplish as social practice. With the
themes identified from the thematic analysis, I used Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA)
to further my inquiry. A discourse-centric approach was appealing as it allowed for an
examination of how students constructed their identities using their terms and frameworks
as they functioned in their experience and interactions (Willig, 2013). Language is not neutral
and innocent, it carries with it unspoken values, attitudes, and assessments that the speaker
wishes to communicate to the recipient. A person who is from a different origin to a new country may be seen by some as an “immigrant,” but to others, an “invader.”

Language is associated with power, and the choice of words form the context of our social community and conducts how we see and carry ourselves. For example, a son who is turning 18 in the US points to a car and says, “whoever gets this car for birthday must be a lucky guy,” and the father replies, “we are saving for your college.” A range of complex assumptions is at play in this simple example. When the son speaks, he does not merely state the joy that this car, as a birthday gift, would bring to a young man. He indicates that he wants to receive this gift from his parents by reminding them that his birthday is coming up, and as someone coming of age into adulthood, he expects this present to be big, fitting for his 18th birthday. By mentioning the expenses of college in this short exchange, the father is providing a reason for not buying the car, with the assumption that, based on the family’s educational preferences, is likely to be accepted by the son. Of course, while additional aspects such as the family’s financial background, or the father’s intonation may have differed, this example demonstrates how language can function both at the linguistic level and a level of action through processes of stating, rejecting, validating, and/or reinforcing.

In discourse analysis, people are termed *subjects*, and accomplish a particular set of outcomes through language (Willig, 2013). As such, language in action is spoken by *subjects* from particular *subject positions*. People not only choose what they say, but also how they say it. In doing so, they take up different positions. By examining *subject positions*, researchers can see how individuals construct who is agentic, who’s blameworthy, and/or who’s powerful. Further, it reveals how subjects are limited to a specific range of actions available to them by drawing upon such discourses.
In my dissertation, I used the version of FDA advanced by Willig (2013) to identify dominant discourses that students draw upon to manage challenging questions about China from their US peers. Because the goal of FDA is to connect individual subjectivities to cultural discourses by analyzing language as social action, I examined how CIS’s responses functioned as a constellation of inter-related ideas that formed emergent discourse(s), followed by an examination of how students positioned themselves drawing on these discourses, and made further inferences about possibilities for action available to these subject positions. Through such constructing and viewing and being in the world, I sought to understand the practical implications, such as the possibilities and limitations for action, what was omitted to be said or done for these students. To review, I applied the following steps in my dissertation:

i. **Identifying discourses**: What and how is the discursive object constructed?

ii. **Action orientation**: What is achieved, or hoped to be achieved from using these discourses?

iii. **Subject positioning**: What subject positions are available to the respondent through these discourses? In other words, I try to understand how participants sought to benefit from constructing this discourse.

iv. **Practices**: Because subject positions are dynamic and not permanently bound by individuals with their talk, what possibilities are mapped out by these subject positions?

v. **Subjectivity**: What can be felt, seen, communicated? What are the implications of using these discourses and positions from these subject positions?

By following the aforementioned steps of conducting FDA, I sought to determine how each of the themes—produced through thematic analysis—would collectively describe
how CIS choose to manage tension in social situations with their peers about China in the US higher education context.

Throughout this process, I continued to have academic colleagues familiar with research on Chinese education and Chinese youth check the codes, and used different excerpts of the interview transcripts to test these codes. Here we used a consensus-driven coding strategy, which means when opinions differ, we resolved our differences by in-depth discussion and reaching a consensus about what to code the excerpt as, and how this code would apply, or not apply, in certain scenarios. Lastly, I used different excerpts to test the codes. I applied the codes with the intent of identifying meaningful units of texts and examining the emerging themes, careful to interpret different cultural perspectives and linguistic issues between Chinese and English. After this iterative process—reading transcripts, coding data, drafting memos, resolving discrepancies, re-coding data, drafting memos—opened my eyes to themes that reflected a story from the perspective of the students.

Researcher Positionality

My identity, interests, and past experiences—both professional and personal—shaped how I approached and interpreted challenging moments that CISs face in this study, as well as how I was able to gain access and build rapport at the research sites. As a researcher in education at an elite university in Boston, I gained credibility with the university departments and offices that distributed the recruitment materials for my study. With the students, I emphasized my background as an CIS at the graduate level in the US, and my experience living and learning in unfamiliar places, such as the Philippines and Mexico.

From the beginning, I sought to give voice to the students. By inviting them to share their accounts on the challenging questions about China that they encountered, I was able to
help students feel empowered to share their reflections on their multiple identities—as a foreigner, a Chinese student, an employee, a volunteer, a daughter/son, a sibling. Through this process, I revisited the excitement and fears of the unknown in a new environment as an international student that I also experienced when I first arrived in the US as a graduate student, and was made aware of the wide variations of discriminations experienced by the students. Yet I was not familiar with how undergraduate CIS manage the sometimes-conflicting messages from China and the US, something that’s absent in literature. Their narratives thus painted a more comprehensive picture of how policies and news shape how they manage their emerging identities and the challenges that come with such identities.

*Procedures to Address Validity and Reliability*

Kvale (2007) describes validity as something that permeates the entire research process. It is something that “rests on the quality of the researcher’s craftsmanship throughout an investigation, continually checking, questioning and theoretically interpreting the findings” (p.4). I applied several strategies to ensure the rigor of my research and validity of my findings.

The first step that I took to ensure validity for the study was to confirm that the methods I used matched my research questions, and my theoretical framework. In doing so, I determined that qualitative interviewing was the best method for answering my research questions and for providing rich quality data for my chosen analytical methods of thematic analysis and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis.

The second step that I did to ensure validity was to develop and pilot the interview protocol before beginning the study to determine what revisions were needed, and to be certain my sample selection criteria that I proposed working with was comfortable reflecting about identity in the ways that this study asks.
Thirdly, as I began to familiarize myself with data and develop initial themes, I validated my preliminary codes in several ways: by sharing interview extracts, initial codes and candidate themes, as well as memos with my interpretive community within the academic community at Harvard—both US scholars and scholars from China (e.g. participants at the “Asia Youth Lab” organized by Dr. Selman and Dr. Haste, Master’s students at HGSE, scholars from the Harvard-Yenching Institute, etc.)—who asked critical questions that helped me refine my interpretations, provided feedback on my emergent findings, and helped assess whether alternative interpretation of my data may exist.

To maintain reliability in my coding, I recruited two Asia Youth Lab members to code a subset of my data and examined the interrater reliability. (Campbell & Osserman, 2014; Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007; Saldaña, 2016). To further identify emerging patterns, I used member checks (Maxwell, 2014; Creswell, 2013) to solicit participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations. Creswell (2013) cautions against sharing raw data and transcripts with participants and instead, asked participants for feedback on emerging themes and analyses. Therefore, every two months, I organized a joint meeting, either in person or virtually, to ask my participants to provide feedback on my emerging data analysis and findings.

In addition, I recruited a doctoral student who had no direct connection to the proposed study to serve as my external auditor. Every month, she examined whether or not the data supported the emerging findings, interpretations, and conclusions; further, she supported me in maintaining reliability in my coding, as she coded segments of my data and then we compared our results. We each coded 10% of one another’s dissertation data. I sought periodic support from other researchers, including my committee members, to check on my analytical findings.
During this analytic journey, I memo-ed extensively. In my memos, I reflected my own positionality, and asked questions of the data and myself as I was trying to reveal what the students were telling me. An analytic memo excerpt on the code “identity reconstruction” is shown in Appendix G.
Chapter 6: Competing for a Reference Frame for China

This chapter presents the first part of my findings, in which I explore the answer to my first research question:

1) What do CIS perceive as representations of China that challenge their sense of cultural identity in the context of US higher education?

Using thematic analysis, I seek to understand how the experience of encountering challenging questions about China is perceived and internalized by the CIS as they live and study in the US. I do this by interpreting CIS’ perception of, and response to the these critiques. In particular, I try to unpack how their process of meaning-making reflected their understandings of their obligations as a member of a particular society, and how such understandings influenced their identity development in the transnational context. I do this by reporting the categories of questions they faced as well as their responses to these categories.

To answer my first research question, I separated the segments of data in which students in the sample were asked about what questions, statements, or experiences that they found to be uncomfortable or challenging during their time at their universities. As I described previously in my chapter on analytical procedures, when coding was completed, the semantic and latent codes were examined for candidate themes (stage 2), and after a process of review and definition (stage 3), one overarching theme and four main themes were generated. (See Table 2).

The experience of confronting what the CIS perceived to be negative representations of China was of surprise to them, and introduced tension as they attempted to make meaning of these perceptions in the US. Such perceptions would help reveal how students assigned and negotiated meaning in their dialogic interactions, using various cultural
narratives that were familiar and available to them. The overarching theme captured the ways in which most of the participants made sense of the tension that they experienced in attempting to “compete for a reference frame for China”. Nested underneath this are four main themes: conflicting understandings of Chinese culture, contrasting ideas of development, different perceptions of individual agency, and competing viewpoints on sovereignty. These main themes form the substance of the analysis, and each are illustrated with relevant excerpts. Editing of the data is indicated by […] The main themes and their codes for this research question can be found in Appendix E.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overarching theme</th>
<th>Competing for a reference frame for China</th>
<th>Example of Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I desperately want to change how people see China, because many have stereotypes… I think they really lack information about China.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main themes</td>
<td>1) Conflicting understandings of Chinese culture</td>
<td>“My dentist is in his 60s or 70s, and he asked me things like, before you came to the US, did you know how to use knife and fork? Did you read from left to right or right to left?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Contrasting ideas of development</td>
<td>“He said China has terrible fog. He said during Beijing’s winter, there was no blue sky at all.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Different perceptions of individual agency</td>
<td>“They said with censorship, it was like we just locked our country and closed our borders.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Competing viewpoints on sovereignty</td>
<td>“They would ask questions about Hong Kong, Taiwan and Tibet.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Main theme 1: Conflicting understanding of Chinese culture

The first area where students experienced tension were conflicting understandings of Chinese culture, particularly the depth and breadth of culture. From the interview responses, it emerged that many of the references to Chinese culture from Americans was in opposition to “deep culture” (Shaules, 2007), shallow culture, which constitutes things like food, dress, customs that we can see, hear, and touch.

Students perceived certain questions about “shallow culture,” such as traditions, rituals and preferences as demonstrative of benign ignorance on the part of their American peers. These questions range from “what are mooncakes and why share them,” “what is spring festival,” to “why don’t you speak Cantonese,” or “how do you make tea.” Nearly all CIS in the study came from cosmopolitan cities in China and had high expectations about the modernity of the United States and the Americans. Despite entering into the US culture as outsiders and experiencing difficulties widely documented in existing research, such as difficulties of acculturation (Ruble & Zhang, 2013; Yan & Berliner, 2013), even though the questions seemed out of touch and reflected a primitive understanding about China, students presented these questions as positive, and saw these questions as a signal that their US peers wished to understand more.

Some questions were age-related, as a student (Yun) in the pre-dental track said,

“My dentist is in his 60s or 70s, and he asked me things like, before you came to the US, did you know how to use knife and fork? Did you read from left to right or right to left?”

Descriptions of questions that fell into this theme were presented by students as generally a friendly and thoughtful line of questioning. But they expressed surprise and discomfort at the extent of misconceptions about China and their peers’ unfamiliarity on

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11 Such as unconscious framework of meaning, value, norms, and hidden assumptions, etc.
China’s linguistic and cultural diversity. Students credited some of their peers in attempting to understand China genuinely and actively. One student (Rong) who studies Philosophy and Psychology showed her surprise, for example, at the level of sophistication that her American peers demonstrated by way of questioning,

“...Their understanding of China was not as...biased... as I imagined. Actually, they have a lot of channels, such as journalistic and academic channels. Their own analysis of the US is also often critical. They are (asking questions) out of the curiosity and intelligence.”

Not all questions were as positively perceived, however. Students’ responses in this theme assumed Americans to be familiar with the scientific achievements of ancient China and recent development of modern China. When such assumption fell short, students reported frustration in having to correct outdated and stereotypical image of China, such as being backwards, poor and dangerous. One student (Lin) who studies Communication commented,

“The questions that I get asked most is ‘is China safe?’ Of course it’s safe, much safer than the US!”

This theme also reflected pride not only in China’s economic development but also its artistic achievements. Students referenced architectural wonders, literature, inventions, and paintings of ancient China, which had significant influence over neighboring countries like Korea and Japan. As such, students ridiculed their non-Chinese peers, who believed that certain art forms had not originated in China. A student, Wang, a junior who studies Art History and Architecture described her disbelief when her American friends asked her about origins of Peking opera. In her description, she was taken aback by the extent of the misconceptions and unfamiliarity of her peers on China’s linguistic and cultural diversity. She fretted:

“Chinese Opera... it’s freaking Chinese! But they would ask me if it’s from Japan...They don’t even know that we have it. Maybe they thought that China learned from Japan instead? It's ridiculous.”
Here in her emphasis of the collective, referring to other Chinese as “we,” Wang was describing the group in the frame of “oneness,” as Stuart Hall said, that binds a collective group of people, that differentiates them from others who do not perhaps share the historical experiences or cultural codes.

The CIS’ perception of confronting cultural stereotypes still held by their American peers show the discrepancy between their expectation of American’s understanding of China and the persistence of such stereotypes. Willingly or unwillingly, when abroad, the role of being China’s cultural representative is often inescapable. Students’ narratives follow a pattern by which the expected celebration of cultural diversity in the US quickly evaporated as they struggled to make sense of their new context and the places in it. Students’ desire to understand and be understood, and my conversations with them revealed how the peers asked the questions, from a place of ignorance or inquisitiveness, mattered for them. They appreciated those who show curiosity and sincerity in their questioning. Whereas, students voiced discomfort as a function of their American peers’ archaic stereotype of China. Many of their responses justified such discomfort as a matter of simple ignorance (“They just don’t know”). This framing indicates that students did not perceive such interaction as one that is discriminatory, but saw it as evidence of their American peers’ inertia to explore the true depth and breadth of other cultures.

Main Theme 2: Contrasting ideas of development

Existing research agrees on the fact that meaningful engagement with global issues demands the participation of international students in US colleges and universities (Siczek, M. 2015). Similar to other international students drawn to the US higher education system, the CIS in their interviews conveyed high expectations about the US and the possibilities for their personal growth and success in the US. Many learned about the US and American
culture “through TV shows and movies (Feng),” and expected affluent lifestyles and world-class facilities. Yet students expressed their disappointment as they observed lackluster infrastructure (i.e., roads, bridges) and unsophisticated mass travel system they saw in the US, which presented a striking contrast to the megacities that some of these students came from, which by comparison, are smart, modern, and convenient.

Yet this perception of China, however, was not reciprocated. Students described feeling hurt that many of their American peers still imagined China to be a country that stalled in development, and lacked quality in the products it produced. By doing so, students expressed their frustration that these critics were keeping alive a perception of China “from many years ago” that was still closed, remained under strong dictatorship, and people’s standard of living was similar to that of half a century ago, under “Chairman Mao’s reign.”

Instead, many CIS faced questions or statements that reflected an outdated understanding of China’s development today. This theme reflects students’ uneasiness when the critic was less informed on China’s current command of economic and political prowess on the global stage, and instead focused on its past of deficiency, in financial capital, in cultural openness, in industrial performance, or in quality of manufactured products. Students’ perceptions encapsulated their frustration of the failure on the critic’s part to recognize a progressive duality that also exists in China’s story of modernity (poverty vs economic development) in the past century. They lamented the fact that seemingly, only negative narratives about China were mentioned by the critic. Students described feeling hurt and demanded the need for mutual respect and recognition of China as equal in sustaining global partnerships. For instance, Wang said,

“They seem to feel that China’s very backwards, very conservative, superficial, and lacks culture. They say everything is “made in China”, and think China’s just a world factory that makes low quality products. I feel that’s how they think about China.”
Even though certain students could not pinpoint a specific incident when an American person looked down on China or commented on China’s lack of development, they reported a “feeling of uneasiness” that China was still perceived as backwards. For some participants, this type of perception was particularly hurtful coming from Chinese Americans, who students expected to be allies and whose discrimination against China was surprising. Ting, who studies Finance, commented,

*American’s understanding of China is very solidified, and they hold many stereotypes. Their ideas about China is from many years ago. I don’t remember specific examples, but it just gives me this feeling... ABCs (American Born Chinese) gave me this feeling even more... them and those who migrated from China when they were little. They are Americans too... I just feel like they consider China as still left behind, in technology and everything. To me this really is the most obvious feeling.*

Ming, who also studied Finance, echoed this perception of outdatedness by recalling a comment from a Chinese American student during class, who described his experience in China from when he was young:

*I was in a Culture and Linguistics class, where a second generation Chinese American said he went to China when he was in junior high, and the restroom was incredibly dirty, he said the toilet was ‘just disgusting’. This made me really uncomfortable.*

In Ming’s description, she expressed her discomfort and hurt when the comment came from a Chinese American student, who she expected to be an ally and whose outdated misconception about China was particularly surprising. This description of China’s restroom facility from a long time ago as “dirty” and “disgusting” lead to her frustration on the failure of the American student to recognize China’s rapidly developing story of modernity.

Students’ responses in this theme to the dissatisfaction that they experienced when promises to promote global perspectives in US higher education contexts failed them. Student’s reactions to such challenges to their cultural identity further points to the value of, and need for, mutual respect, beyond simply addressing the curiosity of Americans about China. Students demanded recognition from the critics that progress was being made despite
the problems, as they deemed China to be a conscious equal partner with the Western power in the global arena. Such a recognition from peers was a prerequisite for having educated, reciprocal conversations about China and its problems authentically. This theme also embodied the need to protect China’s image as a world leader, which has progressed from destitute past, is experienced an individual responsibility for the CIS as international students. This is not an ambiguous value to be negotiated for the Chinese international student community, and the core message for students who narrated this theme was that their American peers, regardless of education levels or political affiliation, needed to actively recognize and respect China’s many accomplishments in its development when pointing out its flaws.

**Main Theme 3: Different perceptions of individual agency in China**

Different perceptions of individual agency in China between the CIS and others in the US is the third area of tension. Participants described statements or questions that aimed to vilify China’s priority to maintain social order, ranging from China’s censoring policies, to China’s one-child-policy. Such negative portrayals often problematize the relationship between the State and its people, and were internalized by the CIS as if these criticisms were directed at them, as individuals without any agency in an authoritarian regime.

In some instances, students’ responses pointed to a perception that a critique of China’s controlling governance over its people meant that their American peers had a narrow understanding of China and an underestimation of individual agency for Chinese people (“They feel like our government is really controlling, and they feel like what they know is right. They feel like we have our eyes and ears covered” Lin, Communications). Echoing Long, Lin expressed her belief her American peers saw the Chinese government as controlling and authoritarian, and projected this view of the country to her as a Chinese person. In her response, she
emphasized a sense of helplessness to communicate across such differences and the feeling of unwillingness from her peers to change their views about China. She noted disappointment with the outcome of her attempts:

No matter what we say, whenever they talked about freedom of speech, they’d say China has censorship and block everything, block Facebook, block Google... they just make me feel like that I’m from a very closed up country.

For Lin, this perception of China from her peers focused not only on censorship (“block Facebook, block Google”), but also treated China’s way of governance as a form of mind control. In this way, individual action is perceived to be wholly dependent on governmental policy, and Chinese people like herself were simply too paralyzed to even realize their lack of rights. Whereas, in reality, the cases are so much more complex. There are strategies like using VPN, or being creative in wording to avoid censorship and participate in protests digitally. The perception of Lin’s peers seemed to suggest that individual agency was futile in China, a conclusion that did not ring true for Lin. This picture of powerlessness, reflected back to Lin, created tension.

Other students expressed their dissatisfaction that the critics were unwilling to change their views about Chinese people as “brainwashed,” eliminating the opportunity for any further communication. Feng shared,

I can’t even tell them [the Americans] that we use VPN, WeChat, it’s so simple, and we don’t need to use the other ones (Facebook, twitter etc.). They just think you are from a closed up country and brainwashed. (Feng, Communication)

Feng’s response resisted the critic that Chinese people were “brainwashed” in two ways. On one hand, with Virtual Private Network (VPN), she acknowledged the possibility for an individual to bypass the censorship and avoid surveillance beyond the Great Firewall, resisting domestic censorship. On the other hand, she presented the domestic software as alternative communication platforms, resisting the foreign influence in the virtual world.
Rejecting the label of being “brainwashed,” Feng described the relationship between the state and its people as not as one directional as understood by the critics, and emphasized the importance she attributed to being respected in her higher education experience in the US. The focus in Feng’s response was not on the censorship that the critics were referring to per se, but rather that individuals in China do have choice, agency, and gumption. This agency is a direct contradiction to dispute what the American peers may believe about propaganda or control in China.

Students reported juggling intense tension between wanting to justify China’s policies and attempting to be knowledgeable about issues discussed, some of which they may be unfamiliar with. When the topic of censorship came up in class, Long provided a benign explanation for why Google was banned from China, pointing to the ignorance of her American peers about China’s sociocultural complexities:

*During class we talked about how, the reason why Google left China was because there were many things that it cannot censor. Our government wanted Google to make sure there were certain sensitive words that cannot be searched. Google refused, citing incompatible ideas about doing business, and left China. My professor considered it our government’s fault.*

Long’s response indicated a perception that others could not possibly comprehend the threat to “our” (the insiders) public if censorship didn’t exist. Indeed, perception that certain critics draw their opinions along ideological or cultural lines provided extra fire power for students to discredit the critics. Ming put forth her argument that Western mainstream media was at fault for actively manipulating truth and fabricating evidence against China due to ideological differences. From her perspective, biases in popular media platforms contributed greatly to misleading the American public in unproductive ways:

*I desperately want to change how people see China, because many have stereotypes, and this come from the Western Media, like the Economist. I think the Economist is extremely biased against China. Everything they write. They said China’s under dictatorship, one*
Although many participants characterized questions on China’s governance as challenging to face, students also recognized or even sympathized with some of the criticisms they encountered in the US. For example, later in our interview, Ming admitted there was some truth to what the Economist was reporting. Ding recognized that there were indeed “heartless” journalists who worked for “dirty money” and reported false stories to glorify the government. Further, Long pointed out Chinese students had their own creative way of expressing informal dissent, such as sharing publicly censored photos of Winnie the Pooh on social media or criticizing the rise of “little pinks” (xiao fenhong, 小粉红) for their unconditional support of the regime.

Such examples demonstrated participants’ recognition that China’s government had its problems. However, simultaneously, students’ responses revealed that the tension originates from different definitions, between the CIS and those in the US, of what individual agency is and should be in China. A particular challenge to the CIS’ cultural identity was their internalization of these statements or criticism as faults of their own, or as willing participants in practices they themselves may not necessarily agreed with. With the best intentions, the CIS drew upon their own, anecdotal experiences to discredit the media or their US peers, who they saw as critics of China, and contextualized the distinctiveness of China’s situation and highlighted the nuances in individual’s responses to its problems as much as possible.

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12 A cartoon character blocked for being compared by Chinese bloggers to President Xi.
13 A pro-regime group mainly consisted of young people born after 1990s.
Main Theme 4: Competing viewpoints on sovereignty

Beyond the previous themes of questions, in which participants expressed frustration, students reported feeling intense emotions in this area of tension: competing viewpoints on sovereignty. Unlike the criticisms they depicted through the aforementioned themes, conflicting understandings of Chinese culture, contrasting ideas of development, and different perceptions of individual agency, this theme was the most vehemently resisted. To students who had spent the majority of their schooling in mainland China, they reported the idea that Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Tibet were inseparable parts of China saturated their lives through school curriculums and news, deeply bound up with national and individual identity. Disputes to the claims of sovereignty from their peers signaled an external threat to this identity. In their responses, students stressed that prior to coming to the US, they had not expected to be challenged over the autonomy of these regions. As Hong described, “[Americans] would ask questions about Hong Kong, Taiwan and Tibet, including some of my classmates. We [the Chinese students] would be very angry and dispute them.” Students indicated the unacceptability of these regions as contested, or even being recognized as countries.

Interactions that highlighted competing viewpoints created a sense of destabilization in CIS’ personal relationships. In Lin’s case, when her non-Chinese boyfriend pressed her on China’s claims of sovereignty over Tibet, she described feeling disoriented because “what they hear and what we hear are at two different directions.” Lin did not suggest that her boyfriend was being ill-intentioned, but pointed out that he, like her other American peers, may be blinded by malignant “Western powers” that would stand to gain from chaos in these contested regions:

I was asked by my boyfriend about Tibetan separatist [efforts]. He was like why do they fight back, is it your government being over the line? I said it’s not our government, it’s the western countries
that support Tibet’s separation from China… when I talk to my boyfriend, I’d feel like their information and our information are different. They’d also talk about Taiwan issues and other political issues [in this way].

Students’ responses portrayed this theme of discrediting China’s sovereignty claims to be a direct violation to students’ beliefs, and identified the critics to be flawed in judgement. Rong, a senior in philosophy and psychology, acknowledged readily her willing embodiment of the political rhetoric was a result of being drilled about such ideas through years of schooling. But she pushed back and pointed to the need for the critic to insulate their various identities, political identity, religious identity, ethnic identity, etc. to ensure their neutrality.

They think Tibet and Taiwan should be independent… like for me, the idea that Taiwan and Tibet are part of China is just part of me, deeply rooted in my stomach. Taiwan is part of China, and Tibet is an inseparable part of China.

Like other students in this sample, Rong had spent the majority of her schooling in mainland China, and went through the patriotic education campaign. Her American peers and professors may believe the issue of sovereignty is up to the people who live in the area. To her, the idea that places like Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Tibet are inseparable parts of China is “part of” her, and “deeply rooted” in her stomach. In this way, her perception of sovereignty, which aligns with that of the Chinese government, argued that territorial claims are decided by history and current administration. This perception of sovereignty saturated her life and is deeply bound up with her individual identity, triggering tension. Indeed, my analysis suggests that this seems to be particularly pertinent in a school setting, and paramount for the CIS in assessing whether one could have a rational conversation about China’s sovereignty claims with them.

Students’ accounts of their experiences of facing challenging questions or statements in this theme showed what a disorienting time it was for them, when what they considered
undisputable facts failed to gain recognition from those they respected. They presented the issue of sovereignty as undeniable, and one topic that needed little negotiation. This theme of competing viewpoints on sovereignty underscored a direct transfer of Chinese government’s message of one-ness, with emphasis on the need to conform to the guidance of legitimate authority, and the need for the critic to recognize the social contract between those in power (China) and those who depend on this power for prosperity (contested regions). Instead of focusing on why and how the claims of sovereignty were fraught with conflicted interests and historical disputes, or probe critically at the perspectives that they have long held to be true, students interpreted any attempts to recategorize these regions, regardless of purpose, as illegitimate and violation of international norms, and should therefore be shunned and even punished. Students mentioned their disappointment or anger at their peers, including those who they considered figures of authority, for failing to adopt the narratives that these students held to be true.

In this chapter, using thematic analysis, I answered my first research question: What do CIS perceive as representations of China that challenge their sense of cultural identity in the context of US higher education? I reviewed the themes of the types of questions that students surfaced, detailed the content of the questions, and explored participants’ perceptions of how such questions were challenging to their cultural identity. Thematically categorizing such questions has allowed for insight into the nature of questions that participants found to be conspicuously challenging. These areas of tension about representations of China that challenged the participants’ cultural identity generated powerful, affective impacts on them. In the next chapter, I examine closely such reactions that participants had to these tensions, and present four typologies of strategies that reveal how they confronted, interpreted, and negotiated their challenged cultural identity.
Managing Tension

In chapter 7, I explore how students manage challenged cultural identity by examining the different typologies of strategies that they used, as well as the discourses that they accessed to defend and renegotiate their cultural identity in the context of US higher education. Using thematic analysis, I explore the typologies of strategies that students used in their rationales and attitudes to confront their challenged cultural identity. I detail four typologies that students generated across the board through thematic analysis: the detached bystander, the reactive defender, the pragmatic rationalizer, and the open-minded incrementalist. The different typologies detailed different expectations and assumptions of the educational goals, governmental policies, political system, cultural practices in the US and China. When peers ask a question, or make a statement about China that the CIS perceives as challenging, such an interaction compounds on an already existing set of struggles that they go through as international students in a country drastically different from their own, adding additional complexities to their responses.

To further unpack the relationship between culture, discourses and identities, in chapter 8, I examine how the discourses of home country shape students’ cultural identity and what these ways of speaking might make possible in the world. I will address these questions by drawing from Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) and Haste’s (2013) neo-Vygotskian model, as described in Chapter 3. These frameworks will allow me to use student talk about home country to identity the discourses, positionings, and practices that they are using to describe their home country. I will use the framework descripted in chapter 8 to investigate the ways that students are discursively constructing the perception of home country in their speech, action and affect potentials.
Chapter 7: Constructing Challenged Cultural Identity

Having explored in the previous chapter the four broad areas of tension about representations of China that challenge the CIS’ sense of cultural identity in the context of US higher education, I turn to the responses, the practical effects these tensions had on the students’ cultural identity, and how students managed such tension - through interactions with their critics and/or peers, or internal reflections.

My second research question is:

2) What strategies do the CIS use to confront their challenged cultural identity?

To answer this question, I also conducted thematic analysis, focusing on the types of affective responses that students voiced to the questions that they considered to be critiques. In this second part of the findings, my research question focuses on students’ rationales, practices, and attitudes for processing the tensions to their cultural identity, and the unease that comes with it when interacting with their critics. I do this by detailing how participants, who gave accounts encountering challenging questions, statements of misconceptions, or criticism towards China, provided explanations of how they make sense of the critiques, and the justification they provided for their responses to these critiques.

Students used different strategies to manage critiques that they faced. Through thematic analysis, I arrived at four prominent typologies of strategies that students constructed to facilitate or avoid discussions with the critics. Such typologies provide a picture of the different mechanisms of coping that they chose: detached bystander, reactive defender, pragmatic rationalist, and open-minded incrementalist. I do this by reviewing the coded data to identify areas of similarity and overlap between codes and generating themes, collapsing codes that, together, reflected a meaningful pattern in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In my analysis, I noticed codes clustering around emotional responses and
justification for these reactions. Examining these in more detail, I constructed four typologies using all the codes relating to the students’ emotional responses, paying attention to the actions or inactions that they chose to take and the justifications they provided for such reactions (See table 3). The main themes and their codes for this research question can be found in Appendix F.

Table 3
Overview of theme and main themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overarching theme</th>
<th>Constructing challenged cultural identity</th>
<th>Example of Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main themes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Detached bystander</td>
<td></td>
<td>“It felt like all my value systems have been uprooted.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Reactive defender</td>
<td></td>
<td>“If that’s indeed what they think, I can’t really change them.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Pragmatic rationalizer</td>
<td></td>
<td>“They (American peers) told me that China’s press was not free, I could only say no… but I didn’t have a convincing answer.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Open-minded incrementalist</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I don’t hold much resistance to the critiques, I think I can accept it. Every country has a dark history, and you cannot hear it back at home. Now that we are out [here], it’s OK to listen [to the critiques].”</td>
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<td>“Some people know it better than me. Some people, especially about Hong Kong and Taiwan, know the difference to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland. Their understanding of the tension … Maybe not necessarily tension… but this relationship, whether cultural or political, they know more than me.”</td>
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It is important to point out that these are not themed typologies of students, but of their responses, and students could occupy multiple typologies. Within the typologies, there are different variations or orientations. In the sections that follow, I present these findings, and argue that the immersion and collision of multiple cultural narratives introduce new challenges to these students, and several aspects of this challenge make it worthwhile for us to explore the range of responses that they use to manage such moments. First, it often involves a direct challenge to the individual’s existing understanding of the self and the home country—in this case, China, as well as values that were seldom tested. Such challenges to their identity can become the focal point of conflict during interactions between students and their non-Chinese peers. Second, in the event when topics of conflict arise, student may feel powerless to influence the negative cultural narrative about China that were already salient in the Western context of democracy, which they seldom encountered back home.

*Typology 1: The detached bystander*

In this response type, the tension encountered in all four of the aforementioned areas of tension, conflicting understanding of Chinese culture, contrasting ideas of development, different perceptions of individual agency, and competing viewpoints about sovereignty, are managed with a strategy of resignation. This resignation is expressed through emotional withdrawal or lack of physical enactment. It conveys students’ faith in China’s governance and goals of development. Further, this response type is characterized by a high degree of rejection about the substance of the criticism and low dialogical interest on the part of the student.

The *detachment* here is both toward the critic – those who make the statement and the content of the statement or question that reflected a misconception or criticism about China.
In this response type, statements of misconception or criticism about China held little meaning on their own and functioned simply as a reflection of superficial ideas that the critic held. Therefore, a detached bystander expresses little interest in directly participating in dialogic interactions with the criticism or the critic. Concretely, students described first evaluating the critics for evidence of potential bias, weighing whether it would be “worthwhile” to even talk to them. In Wei’s response to questions on China’s sovereignty claims: “I don’t even feel offended, because I think politics is just fake, and I don’t care about sovereignty disputes.” In other cases, the CIS expressed their surprise in encountering critiques, and when they did not feel like they had “the right answer,” they chose to remain silent. For example, Yin did not feel as if she “was good at answering these questions, because I don’t feel like I have the right answer, or can speak for my country.”

In this theme, students described evaluating the critics for evidence of potential bias, weighting up whether it would be “worthwhile” to even talk to them. Sometimes, this assessment was relatively passive, since avoidance of social interaction was already a default. As Ting explained, “I don’t really want to talk to them (the Americans), and I feel they don’t really want to talk to me.” Other times, this assessment was more active, and students proactively decided not to dialogue about the critiques when the critics made what they perceived to be overtly biased comments about China. Feng, for instance, shared this sentiment: “honestly, how can your answers change them? I think people would still believe what they believe, and so… my explanations are not going to work on them.”

Two interesting patterns emerged when students discussed their strategies to confront such challenging questions or criticisms about China. In one scenario, the response type presented a degree of rejection towards the critiques with a sense of helplessness, as students considered conversations with peers in the US about political differences were futile
(“I can’t change you”). Students presented the critique as occurring in the context where, despite the evidence that China had made great strides in many areas, critics still chose to only focus on the negative. Students’ detached responses were constructed as self-preservation, because attempts to dialogue would be wasted efforts on those who had already made up their minds. An interesting feature for where this detached bystander response shows up, is in a context in which Chinese students are going to universities in the US alongside students from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and are put into interaction during their shared coursework. For example, Zhao described how a student from Hong Kong refused to consider himself “Chinese”:

*I truly feel like, in this case, his political standing is that HK and China are different. At moments like this, you just… don’t really know what to say. You can’t really educate him, but you just feel pissed. I don’t know how to overcome (this negative emotion), but their views simply cannot be changed. So I feel like there’s no point to discuss these political issues…they are embarrassing things for young people to discuss. If he really wants to show off (to the Americans), then I’d let him.*

Likewise, Hong’s response highlighted her belief that it would be pointless to dispute those who believed Taiwan was independent from China, having met many from Taiwan who believed they were simply “Taiwanese”:

*On the issue of sovereignty… because I’ve met some people from Taiwan, they just feel they are only Taiwanese… Even if I stood up in Class and said Taiwan was part of China, these Taiwanese people would try to dispute me way before the Americans. I would feel like it would be quite pointless to argue this with them.*

In the second instance of narrative construction, students spoke about their responses as an intentional lack of willingness to correct what they believe to be uninformed misconceptions (I don’t want to change you). Here the students still denied the critiques, but interpreted them as a positive reflection of, and an advantage for China’s rise in the global competition. Hong’s response justified some students’ current inaction through China’s ascendancy, such that in the future, such critiques about China would be irrelevant. When
working with American peers in her business class about “promoting certain products in China,” Hong credited the Americans for their “interest in China’s economy and the willingness to open the Chinese market,” but described their critiques of China’s local culture, policies, and data transparency as appalling. Yet she expressed indifference about addressing these critiques:

*Personally, I don’t want to [correct them], because I feel like the more stupid they are, the stronger Chinese people are, and the farther America falls… and also, in the future, when China’s economy is really good, these are not even questions [worth considering]. We don’t even need to explain, because even if we explain now, they won’t acknowledge us. I feel like this should be a top down approach, rather than for us to push this from the bottom up.*

Here, her expression of indifference was couched under a sense of individual helplessness that she experienced, which was why she voiced support for the “top down approach.” She further elaborated her intention, “I want to spend more time bettering myself, so that my voice carries more weight when I’m influential. The less I waste my time, the earlier the time will come when I become influential.” This response carried that “discomfort” that she experienced when others challenged her about Taiwan and Hong Kong. This strategy in her speech to focus on individual betterment instead of direct opposition was a practical call for deferral: “I don’t want to say anything, I will remember this in my heart. When I’m influential, I will make myself heard, and fight these misconceptions.”

Similarly, Ting’s response to negative perceptions of China’s progress was inaction. Ting described her discomfort when colleagues at her internship and peers from her classes asked if China was still backwards in domains such as infrastructure and technology. Ting turned the perception back on the critics and explained her reasons for disengagement:

*Actually, I feel like, if that is indeed their view, my simple words or any pictures cannot necessarily change them. Honestly, I am more like, why don’t you continue being foolish, I cannot be bothered to save you. Yah, I feel like this more. Like, whatever they believe is not going to impact China’s true progress, so whatever.*
In this quote, Ting interpreted the misconception as an advantage, a positive reflection of China’s rise in the global competition. Here she described an intentional lack of willingness to correct what she believes to be uninformed misconceptions of others. The justification for her inaction here reflected a belief that China’s rise is inevitable and whatever misconceptions others may have about China perhaps come from resentment and would be irrelevant soon in the future.

Regardless of what the students saw as critiques about China, their response reflected their perception that these criticisms or statements of misconceptions were uninvited, biased, and simplistic views that did not meet the basic requirement for students to consider engaging in dialogues about them. This type of response the students took up was inactive and politically disinterested for the present, with agentic potential for deferred action for the future.

_Typology 2: The reactive defender_

This response type was loaded with emotion. This typology was loaded with emotion. Oftentimes immediate response for students in the face of these misconceptions or criticism were both emotionally and physically felt. This typology pushes back against three of the aforementioned areas of contention: contrasting ideas about development, different perceptions of individual agency, and competing viewpoints on sovereignty. It indicates students’ strong political trust in China’s political system and way of governance, and a reactive mode of rejection of the critiques in three of the aforementioned areas of contention: contrasting ideas about development, different perceptions of individual agency, and competing viewpoints on sovereignty. In addition, it expresses anger about the perceived misinformation among Americans, and presents a strong interest to enact some
form of agency in the moment. If no actions were taken in the moment, simply expressing the wish to confront the challenging questions either publicly or privately brings solace.

The sufficiency of evidence was irrelevant in this response type, and the urge to dispute simply for the sake of argument was strong. For example, to encounter her peers’ expressed sympathy about the Chinese having to deal with the great firewall, Feng’s immediate reaction was, “we don’t need [the kind of access you have], we have other social media [much better than yours]! What you are saying is ridiculous!” Even though Feng revealed she later did follow up with research after the disagreeable encounter, her first reaction to the critique was still to argue otherwise: “I felt righteous to dispute them right then and there.” The emphasis of Feng’s reaction is not directed at how much truth there is to the statement, but her efficacy is realized by having an acute response in the moment, even if this response is of very limited utility. Anan, similarly, contended that, “They (American peers) told me that China’s press was not free, I could only say no… but I didn’t have a convincing answer. They said China’s press only reported positive things, but when I debated them, I had no examples to dispute them.”

That the CIS’ ideological views were unlike that of their peers in the US made them the other. Positioned thus, the importance of their identity as “Chinese” was heightened and with that, the visions and views of the Chinese government were foregrounded in their responses to mark this distinctiveness of identity. Feng disclosed a reminiscent example of feeling this distinction, describing her response to a critique about China that originated from a professor from HK, who she didn’t consider to share her perception of being “Chinese:”

_Sometimes what they (non-mainland Chinese) understand about China is partially right, but you just feel uneasy, you feel mad. I think we all share this feeling, that I can condemn my country, you cannot._
The immediate response for students in the face of the challenging questions or criticism can be both emotional and physical. Reactions to disputes of China’s claims of sovereignty was especially emotionally charged. For example, Yang said, “My friends and I would be so angry, and we would dispute them, Taiwan is part of China!” Whereas, Rong traced a sense of physical discomfort to her Political Education classes in China, “it’s like… if the political education classes had any impact, it’s this view. It’s deeply rooted in my stomach, that China has sovereignty over Taiwan, that Tibet is an inseparable part of China.”

One thing that stood out in this theme was the perception of inaction of those they considered figures of authority to step in, even worse, students reported some world leaders as responsible for disseminating biased views, or what students considered as “wrong” information about China. When CIS in this theme encountered challenging questions from other students, they expected people in positions of power—including prominent politicians, university staff, internship supervisors, and poignantly, professors in their classes—to intervene and correct the perceived misconceptions. In these instances, students voiced difficulty in comprehending when those with capability and responsibility to influence public opinion instead endorsed what students believed to be existing stereotypes, particularly in a classroom setting.

Students described experiencing an additional predicament in grasping criticisms from professors who they expected to be non-partisan, especially when they perceive the critics to lack the expertise to contextualize China’s problems. Yun, who is on pre-dental track, expected her professors to be apolitical, yet their public political allegiance signaled to the Yun that they were biased. When her professor declared in her class that China was “not a transparent country, and reported fake data,” Yun’s response did not contend to the fact that data fabrication might exist to some degree in China, and pointed out what the critics
referenced to were anecdotal and therefore not representative. Moreover, it shifted the emphasis on the professor’s partisanship, rather than the content of the critique. This suggests a view that it was the critic’s failure to be educated about China and its unique problems. In Yun’s portrayal, this failure stripped the professor of the credibility to criticize China:

"My professor, who is really partisan, and would diss Trump, or US politics, and also China. He’d bring out a chart to talk about some infectious disease, and point out specifically that the reason why China has a “low” infection rate, is because China ‘is not a transparent country’, that it reported fake data. He’s done this many times, saying China has covered things up, or using fake data. Like it’s not reported, or covered up…He has communicated (about China) in this way numerous times.

Students also recounted numerous examples of their professors publicly discussing their negative impressions of China during classes. For example, Na, who studies Economics, underscored the normality of such perceived discrimination and active participation by American professors in reinforcing the idea that Chinese goods were poor in quality: “American professors like to accuse Chinese people [making poor quality products]. It’s such a serious problem.”

Long, who studies Finance, offered a similar view, describing a professor who was unwilling to hear different opinions from Chinese international students, and protested the lack of openness on the professor’s part to change his opinion, and even discrediting her experience as a Chinese person to dispute his statement in class:

“He said China has terrible fog. He said during Beijing’s winter, there was no blue sky at all. I told him that it’s not that case—maybe when the smog was really bad, but most of the times we had blue skies. Even after I told him I was from Beijing, he still insisted that it’s not the case.

Long’s response showed her frustration when her professor refused to listen despite her protests. Indeed, students expressed their desire for the professors to at least recognize their points of view. They expected their professors’ expertise or social status to be useful
tools to silence the challenging critiques in a classroom setting. Yet, students’ description of their experiences showed that professors failed to meet such expectations frequently, which exacerbated the intense emotions they experienced, such as anger. Fei recounted her freshmen experience in class, when a protest of what she (and her fellow CIS) believed to be a false statement fell silent on the professor. She felt “very angry” when it came to what she considered as endorsement of a falsehood by an American professor:

*I was in a class on International Business, and we discussed international trade and trade agreement. That’s when we talked about the issues of Taiwan and HK. There was a girl who somehow listed Hong Kong (as a country) along with other countries. There was a Chinese student who was questioning this statement, but the professor didn’t really intervene.* (Fei, Math)

Similar in both Fei and Long’s descriptions of their experiences with their professors’ perspectives on China was an expressed anguish over the incompatibility between feeling the obligation to dispute and simultaneously, feeling exposed as “different” when professors, perceived to have the power to hold students’ academic performance hostage if they choose to, were involved.

The urge to dispute simply for the sake of argument was strong, and while the interest to take action, to correct or engage in debate, was present, it was not necessary. For students who persevered as good students that survived many years of competitive schooling in China and the selective admission process of the US colleges, the experience of encountering criticism or misconceptions about China challenged their identification as good students. Their responses to challenging questions sometimes demonstrated great distress despite the intensity of emotions that they may experience (to correct what they believe to be a mistaken view of China). A strategy of self-censoring was used to withhold their opinions. In some examples, students described sequestered inaction as self-imposed to an extent, and a strategy for self-preservation. Their lack of engagement of direct confrontation on the
surface does not mean any lack of reactions on their part. Ming, for example, felt extremely uncomfortable when a Chinese American student detailed his early experience when visiting China as a young child, and said China’s toilets were disgusting. She considered writing the professor of the class to express her indignation, yet decided not to. She reasoned:

I worried the professor think that I was promoting Chinese culture or something, maybe that the professor thought his class was an ‘open space, everybody has the right to say something.’ So I thought, I worried that the professor thought I was being difficult [if I said anything]... I was worried that I was being impulsive, and the professor would think I did not tolerate others’ free speech in a public setting. I had that concern. Even though I had the freedom to express my opinion, I didn’t feel ready. I did not have enough evidence to respond, so I didn’t. For me, my habit is that I need to be as ready can be when disputing something, so ready that the other person cannot find any loopholes. I didn’t want to get in an argument just out of anger.

Here Ming described the limitations she experienced with the fear of constructing herself as an antagonist for free speech in American classrooms. It wasn’t her agreement with critic, but rather, the disorientation of choosing to preserve oneself as a good cooperating student in front of the professor, instead of speaking her truth. Similarly, Long chose not to act on her emotions, but experienced a great deal of anger when she believed a professor was misinformed about China:

He never spoke positively about China in class. If you argued with him, he just would not be persuaded. So I was very angry. At times I felt like, isn’t my country great enough? Why are people still stuck at the impression that it is not? Why don’t they see the good things about us? At moments like this, I strongly want to tell others, that China is already great, it has advanced so much, that it’s not what you think. I just urgently want others to understand how great China is.

This response type treated the challenging questions or direct criticism as a way to justify and demand students’ rapid reactions, such as finding errors in the critics’ speech, and favoring the agentic need to dialogue about the critique in the heat of the moment. Yet, agentic reactions did not always manifest in a direct confrontation. Strategies to manage criticisms also included inactions as a form of self-preservation, especially when figures of
authority were perceived to disseminate or endorse views contradictory to that of the students.

Typology 3: The pragmatic rationalizer

This typology was utilized in students’ responses to rationalize the criticism or misconceptions towards China’s development and status of individual agency. There is some willingness to make concessions over the degree of accuracy. After some internal deliberation, agentic behaviors are deemed unfavorable by the student, such as engaging in some sort of dialogic exchange about the topic with the critic. This response type considers both cognitively and emotionally the evidence for and against the criticism, and chooses to rationalize the current Chinese government as already responsive in managing the problems or challenges pointed out by the critics. Interestingly, the same student might respond to different topics or areas of tension that challenged their cultural identity, with the same goal of pragmatic rationalization.

Broadly, the criticisms or misconceptions are responded to in past and future oriented ways. To elaborate, for responses that described the critiques in past oriented ways, policies, historical figures, important events were all finite, static, unable to be changed and could only be accepted and normalized. For example, evaluating China against other countries in the world, Hong assumed that all countries must face their “dark history”, and normalized the critique that she faced about Chairman Mao. While the critiques were harsh, her response welcomed the opportunity to hear them: “I don’t hold much resistance to the critiques, I think I can accept it. Every country has a dark history, and you cannot hear it (our unique dark story) back at home. Now that we are out (here), it’s OK to listen [to the critiques].”

Throughout the students’ schooling in China, communism and socialism were talked about positively. When these ideologies that they may have taken for granted confronted
harsh criticisms in the US, especially in the case of Mao, this response type emphasized students’ rationalization in assessing important historical figures. Wang shared that her American friends said, “communism enslaves people,” and “thought we were slaves.” She said:

*They said Mao was a massive killer, a huge murderer. I don’t think he was that bad. Sure, he made wrong political judgements and did wrong things, but he did establish the PRC. I feel like they [the Americans] might need more materials, and their understanding is not completely right. I feel like in the West there are intentional evil forces in the West, to say that communism is really bad.*

As Wang elucidated, even when she acknowledged that there were some truths to the claims made by the critic about Mao, she remained convinced that Mao’s contributions outweighed the damage he caused. When talking about Mao’s one-child-policy, which her friends again challenged her about, she surmised that it was a terrible policy that led to forced sterilization, abandonment or infanticide, but still provided her justification for it:

*I think the one child policy was reasonable. Like, you had so many people already, if you didn't (do something) to have less people, you cannot carry such a massive country. You can’t say that preventing people to have kids destroys human rights. If people kept having kids, then human rights would be in worse conditions.*

Here Wang’s response took a utilitarian perspective, and revealed her perception of resources and human rights as finite: with more people to share the pie, resources would be ever more scarce, and human rights would worsen.

On the other hand, in responses that described the critiques in a future oriented way, there was a contention that the present was one of the many potentials that it could be. In the case of China’s political system, this response type does not see the future as set. It recognizes that the party’s adaptability to serve its political and economic goals is its virtue: despite its challenges and the rapidly changing world around it, the system has worked thus far, and likely to continue be likely to work in the future, and the future itself is just full of hopeful possibilities. To understand how this response type pragmatically rationalizes the
critiques students encountered about China, it is important to recognize that inherent to this response is the argument for the need to contextualize the policies locally. When Hong was challenged by her peers about China’s one-party political system as dictatorship, her response supported the opinion that, despite the circumstances and disagreements that the people already had with the system, it was in fact working:

_I actually feel like the current system is the best it can be for China. It cannot be ruled by two party, because the country would be split right away. So I feel like the one party rule is not bad. Even though we may say bad things about the current leaders, and there might be some problems, some individual might be problematic, but I think we should be more positive._

Transferring similar scenarios of what China’s (previous and current) leaders have already accomplished to the future, Hong’s response suggests a hopefulness that the country would continue to prosper under the one-party rule. Her comments also compared China’s destitute past with that of the US’s relatively uninterrupted prosperity as a result of the industrial revolution, and concluded that, if China’s leaders could transform a “backwards’ country” into “number 2 in the world after only a few decades of reform,” then their past should be forgiven, as “faults are less than their contributions.”

A praise for concentrated power was implicit in students’ responses. When attempting an answer to her peers who challenged her with the news that President Xi had changed China’s constitution and removed the two-term limit for presidents, Lin described the impacts of this constitutional change to her as “minimal” personally, even though “the removal of the limits and change of constitution is kind of… wrong.” She echoed her family’s strong support for justifying this big policy change:

_Like my uncles said, the reason why we removed the two term limits was because we need a constituent, holistic reform. Our economy has reached a bottleneck, and it needs a strong control to keep the heart of the country strong and united. Also, the politics don’t really impact China’s overall development and stride._
Long also offered her explanation for why the current political system in China worked, and giving people the right to vote may not be as idealistic as what some of her peers in the West believed it to be: “Maybe our country had simply too many people. Honestly, I feel like if everyone participates, it’s kind of troublesome.” She acknowledged that even though the idea of everyone voting was tempting and even ideal, she questioned people’s capacity to “properly manage this form of participation.” Her response hinted that more ideas would mean more trouble: “we have 1.4 billion people with so many ethnic minorities, and people all have different ideas, those who want trouble, and those who want to be independent.” Embedded in this response was disapproval of the negotiation of diverse ideas, and rather a support to delegate the responsibility for important decisions to those in power. Long’s response expressed doubts in people’s ability to participate in civic discourse given China’s relatively short history as a republic under the Communist Party, and affirmed the grand narrative that the priority should be “stable economic development.” Any other agenda—such as advocacy for policy change—was simply energy misplaced:

I don’t know if we would have more energy for any bigger changes. Because if we did make the changes, it’s possible that… like, I’d worry about people’s level of education, you just don’t know if they could make a right decision. People are not educated in China. I can’t tell, but I have this feeling when there are a lot of people, it’s easy for chaos to occur. I always feel like riots only take place when there are a lot of people. When it’s just one person, his power is so small that nothing can be changed for a country.

Here, it is critical to emphasize that while participants varied in the intensity of their affective display in their response, the overriding sentiment was a notable mix of a couched sense of helplessness about individual agency, alongside hopefulness about China’s future. Students appeared candid and sincere about the criticism they faced about China, but were not pessimistic. Echoed across many interviews was the theme that despite the criticism that students have heard in the US from their peers, the system in China worked for its people. As Ting said, “It’s different… I don’t know what China will be, and I don’t know what I
hope it to be. I only know it works.” Similar to Long’s response, Ting extended her support for the idea that if an alternative political system were to exist in China where people had the right to vote, “the country would sink into chaos.” His response worked hard to imagine this alternative possibility for China, which revealed his doubt about people’s seriousness or sense of responsibility to exercise their potential right to vote with dignity. To him, this made the case for Xi’s, or any strong man’s, grip on power. He elaborated:

*If you gave the right to vote to those not educated, what do you think would happen? People would cast votes irresponsibly, it will be so messy. … Because, to give the rights to incapable people is dangerous. So I feel like… you can’t change how it is done in China.*

He went on to provide an even more detailed description of just how citizens in China did indeed participate in civic discussions—in the form of “gossip.” Embedded in this response was the perception that citizens already had the freedom to exercise their democratic rights, and when they chose gossip as a form of participation, they waivered their opportunities to be taken seriously, freeing the administration of blame.

*If they demanded China be like the US and all information would be accessible… well then, look at how people are in China already. I was talking to a cab driver the last time I went home, and the driver gossiped with me, like whether Qishan Wang [a famous politician] had a son or daughter (out of wedlock), they all talked about these things. They all gossiped about the politics. So really, maybe if Xi wanted to stay in power, it may be a right thing to do. In the long river of history, you just cannot really tell if something’s absolutely right.*

It is important to note that students in this study were primarily middle/upper class. That China’s economic and political policies have afforded these students’ families relative wealth and comfort may have played a big role in how much the idea of justice operated or was defined in the foreground of their consciousness. Students described that despite the “wrongness” they perceived in the ways that the Chinese government conducted itself in terms of domestic and foreign policy— and as their peer critics may have pointed out, China
had to act this way to outgrow the historical past, especially when Western imperial powers brought much humiliation to the Chinese people, a theme perpetuated through the Patriotic Education Campaign (Wang, 2008). Hong’s response signaled acquiescence, to some degree, to the idea that the Chinese government had to manipulate the political and economic system to its advantage in order to get ahead:

*If I was being honest, if I was a passionate student in that environment, I might be incited. I feel like if I was to take the country’s perspective, like if I was the leader, I’d also choose to oppress (the riots). Because the consequences are too big. If I was to think about the country’s long-term goals, while I surely would hope we can solve the problems quietly, but people might not have the patience.*

This response attempted a reconciliation of different perspectives between the oppressor and the oppressed, and imagined if she was a “passionate” student who can be “incited”, suggesting she might join the protesters and march the street. Yet on the other hand, her response suggested otherwise, siding with the powerful.

Similarly, other responses downplayed the public’s ability to participate effectively or civilly in public debates, and applauded the strategy of “fight evil with evil.” When the critics pointed to China’s censoring machine as stifling opinion, Hong’s response acknowledged the need to “address mistakes,” and that she personally “hate(d) the closing up of the country and the censoring of news.” Rather, her response argued for evaluating the mistakes against the whole picture: “[we should] not den[y] the whole thing with some mistakes”, and defended the right of the Party to censor news as it saw fit. The response made it seem acceptable, to some degree, for benign manipulation: “certain policies to fool the public.” She offered a pessimist view of the public’s ability to think critically about the truth, and rationalized her reasoning with an evaluation of whether censorship would “stabilize our society:”

*If you let the Chinese public follow the gossip, like this leader is doing X and the other is doing Y, then our country would be done. If everyone’s worried, then the society won’t be*
stable. I think this censoring and closing up is a temporary choice they [the leaders] had to make. Maybe education could solve some problems, but I don’t see many people with the ability to distinguish [what’s true versus what is not], it’s a shortcoming of humans. It’s hard to solve via education. If education is good about brainwashing people, then maybe we can solve this problem. Fight evil with evil!

In a similar vein, Na’s response imagined the scenario where “a group of people was willing to make Tibet independent,” and saw nothing but “chaos.” His response also argued for the need to prioritize stability, and even credited current Chinese leaders and other politicians for being strong-handed: “trying to contribute to the well-off society”, as Chinese people “are getting richer.” Indeed, when their responses considered the enduring impacts of some of China’s questionable policies that their peers critiqued, the participants’ argument often included mention of the benefits that they, primarily Han people, have received. These perceived financial, political, cultural, and personal benefits emboldened participants in this study to be unapologetic about China’s actions.

As an example, Na’s justification detailed a transactional perspective in action. In the response, he went one step further to demonstrate his pride regarding China’s active manipulation of policies to its advantage on the global stage:

“They said China’s biggest issue was currency manipulation. Actually it’s right, that China uses currency manipulation to make money. It’s correct. For a Chinese person like me, we are so smart, and I’m so proud. But they are unwilling, because the US government is losing money, so they always talk about this issue as if China is cheating the system. I think that’s how it should be done in the business world, whatever you can do to make money. You are the one who’s stupid and want to follow the rule. But the business has no rules. How can you blame me? We make the currency cheap because we have cheap labor. The US has such high cost of labor, and even if I didn’t manipulate the currency, you’d still have to owe me money.

Such perspectives argue that the agreed upon rules by the international community are vulnerable for exploitation if one or more players are willing to abuse the loopholes.

Responses in this theme revealed students’ desire for others to see China in a different way by highlighting that, despite its limitations, a developing country had no other
choice but to prioritize social harmony. Yin’s response exudes admiration and appreciation for the current political system in China:

When President Xi makes everyone’s life better and better, and everyone feels that their life is getting better and better, people will not complain or notice the problems. Sure, the problem will definitely exist, but people will not feel that they want to overthrow the government.... Because we are the insiders, we enjoy the benefit that the Party leads us to a better life. Like, for any normal people, if someone gave you benefits, you would not say that even though I received benefits from you, I want to overthrow you, I don’t think so...

In this excerpt, Yin personified the country in a “normal” interpersonal relationship with its people, and rationalized the pragmatic value in fair trade between people. Here the past is indicative of a future that can only get better. She does not deny the existence of problems, or that the problems will continue to exist. But she hypothesized that, because that life keeps “getting better and better,” people would opt to choose to live with the “problems” despite the challenges or problems in exchange for the continuation of a “better life.” This resonates with the theory of governance with a primary objective of social stability.

Further, China’s progress thus far is a powerful generator to sustain the students’ hope for the future. In her response, Yin applauded China’s progress and the benefits that such progress was able to bring to the majority of its people. She expressed her doubt that any other Party would be comparable in managing something so complex:

Sometimes in class the professor would ask, do you think that after 30 years in China, will it still be a one-party system? Then the foreigners [Americans] may shake their heads in the end, but we the Chinese nodded firmly...I couldn’t think of it at first, but I just know it won’t change, nor do I want it to change. Yes, that’s the feeling. One thing that foreigners may think is very surprising, in our opinion, it [the one Party system] is normal and makes a lot of sense.

In the examples presented, students’ responses displayed a strong trust in government, a grateful tone for the progresses made despite its challenges, and an impressively hopeful view for China’s future. In general, students in their interviews stressed
the paternalistic care that the state took to execute its policies; their responses to the critics focused not necessarily on the veracity of such criticism, but rather on disputing the extremity of the situations painted by these critics, and rationalizing the special contexts of Chinese history that required policies that were portrayed as repugnant by these critics. This typology offered the justification for China to bend itself to suit the demands of its development, challenging the democratic model in the West, which the critics champion as the sole model that works and argue that it should be used as the model that China should aspire to.

Typology 4: The open-minded incrementalist

This typology was relatively rare in the sample, and countered critiques in two main themes in areas of tension that challenged the CIS’ cultural identity: different perceptions of individual agency, and competing viewpoints about sovereignty. These responses also displayed willingness to concede the degree of accuracy, and revealed their interest in engaging in agentic behaviors in the present or the future. This type of response demonstrated shifts in students’ thinking and actions, and advocated for the need to humanize positive changes that are being made in the present. It is important to recognize that in this response type, the individual exhibited willingness to remain open and hopeful, and expressed a desire to become a “problem solver,” no matter how small or incremental the efforts may be. For instance, Rong admitted her blind spots in objectively evaluating information relevant to China’s sovereignty:

*Some people know it better than me. Some people, especially about Hong Kong and Taiwan, know the difference to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland. Their understanding of the tension … Maybe not necessarily tension… but this relationship, whether cultural or political, they know more than me. Some of it I didn’t know, and I didn’t expect for them to know either.*
In the case of Fei, she went one step further. In one of our interviews, she shared an impactful opportunity where she participated in a leadership training program for social entrepreneurship in her freshman year, and had an encounter with a girl from Taiwan who insisted that she was only “Taiwanese” and not “Chinese,” and felt “offended when being assumed to be Chinese” in the US. Fei was “really angry about it,” and wondered why this girl refused to be considered Chinese. In addition to seeking answers in books, Fei actually went to talk to the Taiwanese girl to understand why she said what she said:

I asked her “why did you think that, and say that you are not Chinese?” She explained to me her family had always been from Taiwan, including all of her ancestors. Throughout her growing up and cultural process, she felt that the idea that they (the Taiwanese) as Chinese was imposed. Actually, I originally wanted to change her opinion, but in the end, I opened an opportunity to let me know more about it.

Fei’s narrative began with the occurrence of a fraught conversation with someone whose ideas about her identity of Chinese-ness were completely different from her own, and ended up with the perspective that “whatever identity they believe themselves to have is their true identity.” In her response, Fei showed that she was initially fully convinced that her version of what it means to be Chinese would be persuasive, and was surprised that she ended up being the one who was changed. She reflected:

I now feel that in the process of trying to change others, I actually think that too much preaching of the education of collective honor from when I was a child, eventually made me unable to distinguish what is “us,” and what is “good,” like I used to tend to equate these two… or maybe say that only “we” were “good,” or our words can only be said by ourselves, you cannot say them.

Fei’s reflection highlighted the flaws she perceived in blind collectivism in China and the effect it has on minimizing or de-prioritizing individual values. Later on, she shared her confusion about her impulse to reject criticism regarding China’s claims of sovereignty: “do I do it because of the so-called collectivism, or do I do it because it is the right thing to do?” With an open mindset and opportunities to hear from diverse perspectives, her response
showed that she was not fixed in her perception of what it means to be Chinese and chose to not dictate how others should be. Rather her response demonstrated flexibility and welcomed incremental modifications. It was with this mindset that Fei went on to participate in various workshops and sought leadership positions on campus that allowed her to get out of her comfort zone.

Other students highlighted the desire for the world to see China from a developmental perspective, to consider that, as a republic, China is a young country with its flaws, but is attempting to better itself nonetheless. For example, Ting’s answers showed her preference for the critics to see China as “evolving.” She admitted that “China has quite a few feudal or backward places,” but was also a country where everyone is “working together to grow together.” Ding also resonated with this view. He conceded being taken aback by a remark that “China’s journalism is a joke,” and fought vehemently in his response against the blanket critique, saying “when someone spends his/her life to defend the freedom of the press, you can’t take this matter as a joke. There are still people trying to change it.”

These responses also displayed students’ varying degrees of humility and honesty when it came to their lack of knowledge or objectivity on certain issues, and showed their openness to engage in conversation with their peers who criticized China or its policies. One student’s responses illustrate in detail the desire to seek change. As someone who double majored in Statistics and Economics, Ding “appreciate(d) having more choice”, especially after coming to the US. He shared his joy in doing things that were “completely irrelevant” to his majors, and was particularly interested in helping with various social causes. For instance, he joined a Boston nonprofit for climate change, and traveled to Mexico to work on a farm. Throughout our interviews, he often expressed the desire to become a problem solver of various social problems he observed in both China and the US. Despite the
critiques about China and its policies that he encountered in the US, he experienced the US as a “very good” place to learn to “be open minded.” He remained grateful to the people that he met and the things that he learned from them. His response recognized that problems existed everywhere, and that Ding saw himself as someone who hoped to identify problems and be able to solve them, and to do so with freedom, unbounded by his nationality:

Some problems do exist, and there are still many problems to be solved, and it takes a long time to change and resolve. But at the same time, I very much hope that I can join those who does the problem solving. That’s my attitude towards China. For example, if I see that many people are trying to do something, and I know what the problem is, I will try to find the good side. Similarly, to problems that exist in the US. I would like to go to someone who is thinking about how to solve that problem. I want to be such a person, and not just yell at a group of people. I find that is kind of pointless.

As Ding’s example shows, this type of response demonstrates a strong desire to participate in change making. In Ding’s response, he showed his disdain for finger pointing and making idle complaints. He expressed his disappointment that many of the social change efforts that he participated in only focusing on the “symptoms” but not the “root cause.” What he revealed was a desire to understand not only what the problems were, but also why. His answers empathized with the critics as his “old self,” someone who in the past “used to only focus on the problem itself,” and observed them to be simply “putting themselves in polarizing camps.” With the critiques, he expressed his appreciation for the opportunity to hear different opinions, and urged himself to try to find the “bright light in darkness” and become a solution-oriented change agent, no matter how small the steps may be.

**Living the Complexity of Multiple Cultural Narratives**

In this chapter, I sought to answer my second research question: What strategies do the CIS use to confront their challenged cultural identity? Using thematic analysis, I
examined and categorized the typologies of strategies students used to counter the tension of being asked challenging questions or critiques of China by their US peers.

Students in this study navigate multiple cultural narratives and negotiate for dialogic equality in various social contexts in the US. Haste’s neo-Vygostkian model (Haste, 2014; Haste & Bermudez, 2017) locates the individual within a cultural, social, and dialogic context, and the individual is an active agent who is in constant, iterative negotiation of meaning, identity, and credibility within various social contexts. In response to the novel objections to students’ existing understanding of their country and value systems associated with it, one theme took notice of the stereotypes that their US peers still held about what China is, including its cultural practices and stagnation in development. Another theme reflected offense at the critique of what China does, such as their enactment of domestic and foreign policies, and attempts to discredit China’s of sovereignty claims over disputed territories.

The four typologies that I described in the foregoing section summarized the kind of defense and coping mechanism that emerged from the interviews about the types of questions that students identified as challenging. At least two response types that I identified through the thematic analysis, detached bystander and pragmatic rationalizer, demand no action or little action on the student’s part to engage in a dialogic exchange with the critics. While the remaining two response types both acknowledge the need to engage in conversations with their US peers when faced with ideological and cultural differences, the response type of reactive defender argues for the need for immediate condemnation of the criticism in the moment regardless of its validity. In doing so, one shows patriotism for the country, which is bound up with loyalty to the Community Party. On the other hand, the open-minded incrementalist response type is the only response type identified where there
was both a willingness to acknowledge some degree of truth to the critiques about China that peers brought up, and to engage in actions to address these critiques, such as to dialogue with the critics in an authentic attempt to learn more, and/or to profess their strong desire to participate in change-making.

While simultaneously internalizing and trying to reverse the negative ideas of China, students’ actions to assert their pride about China and its actions can be understood as patriotic, but could also be interpreted as being defensive and stubborn, unwilling to integrate new information or to compromise. By drawing out response types, I showed the heterogeneity in the CIS’ strategy of responding to critiques. Overall, three of these response types indicate that while students’ response lacked a sense of personal efficacy, they still displayed strong trust in China's political leadership, and at times with willing recognition of the necessary sacrifice of individuals. A fourth response type, however, reflected a dynamic coping response, and moved beyond the initial affective response to make attempts, however limited, to signal their desire to participate actively in interpersonal debates and dialogues with their US peers.

Taken together, in this part of the findings, I documented how the CIS in my sample revealed how they internalized to confront the threats to their cultural identity. Studying the what and how helps predate why they find such questions or critiques challenging, which I will unpack in the next part of the findings.
Chapter 8: Discourses of Home Country

In this part of the findings, I seek to answer my third research question: What discourses do four CIS use to describe the most dominant challenge to their cultural identity: the perception of their home country – China? I break this research question into two sub questions: 1) How do these discourses allow the CIS to position themselves and others in relation to China? 2) What opportunities do these discourses, positionings and subjectivities allow for renegotiation of identity building? This series of research questions relies on a theoretical understanding of the complex relationship between culture, discourses and identities, and considers how the discourses of home country shape the identity and the world of those who draw upon such discourses. To begin revealing these complex relationships, I adopt a constructionist framework and focus on four CIS’s discussions of China, drawing from Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) and Haste’s (2013) neo-Vygotskian model, as described in Chapter 3.

Discourse analysis is informed by a post-structuralist ideology and concerned with how individuals use discursive resources to achieve dialogic goals in social interaction, and discourses construct objects and an array of subject positions and in doing so, make available certain ways of seeing the world and being in the world, and are strongly implicated in the exercise of power (Willig, 2013). In addition, I complement this method with Haste’s (2013) neo-Vygotskian model. This model sees the individual as an active agent in constant, iterative negotiation of meaning, identity, and credibility within many social contexts. For this dissertation, the overarching framework is the intersection of themes and discourses, which allows me to make connections between the language use and broader institutional, cultural, or social phenomena, providing a way for me to explore the implications of individuals using discourses in their cultural contexts. Further, while other approaches to
discourse may be primarily concerned with the discursive work at the interpersonal level between speakers, FDA offers researchers a tool to move between micro-level and broader cultural level work. In this study, Haste’s neo-Vygotskian model complements FDA by situating the individual students as active agents in constant, iterative negotiation of meaning, identity, and credibility within multiple local and social contexts. Together, these two theoretical frameworks and approaches allow me to examine how the dynamics and complexity of culture, society, and individual dialogue work iteratively in concert to exert influence on, and are influenced by, the individual through discourse.

While students make meaning of their experiences, the broader social and cultural contexts also impinge on these meanings. In this dissertation, my interest is not only on how contexts are powerful and productive, but also how students within these boundaries make sense of the worlds and their positions and actions within them. Through discourses, explanations are made, positions are assumed, and actions are implied. In other words, how we structure ourselves and others through interaction (as insider/outsider, as friends/enemies, as interviewer/interviewee etc.) shape the sociocultural practices that we take for granted, and provide clues for how we make meaning and are impacted by such processes in varying contexts (Rogers et al., 2005). Because speakers bear accountability by attributing agency and responsibility in offering a particular version of events (Edwards & Potter, 1992), in the following analysis, I highlight how students draw upon different discourses of home country to shape the way they remembered, imagined, resisted, and supported the perceptions of China and their place within and away from it.

I recognize, in this way, that discourse is complex and dynamic; an individual may both utilize and resist discourses, and by doing so take up or refuse subsequent discursive positions, and the effects reach beyond individual intentions. Using Willig’s (2013)
conceptions of discourse, I look at the ways students describe concepts, ideas, and other constructs in the world. Throughout the analysis, I have attempted to use the word “discourse” when I reference to the concept of discourse. But there are places that I also use words like talk, speech, speech act, and excerpt as well.

To build on the thematic analysis that I presented in previous chapters, in this chapter I explore excerpts from individual interviews in which my participants discussed their feeling towards, and the perception of, their home country, China. I chose to focus on “home country” as my discursive object, as it helps reveal the mechanism at work that the CIS use to make meaning of their growing selves and experiences in the US. These excerpts come from their rich descriptions in our interviews of their perceptions and reflections on China, including dialogic interactions with their peers about it, problems of China that they see as pressing, and insights that they gained about it while in the US. These discourses, collectively, describe how the CIS manage and reconcile their peers’ perspectives of China in social or academic situations in the US, and the ways that students deployed these discourses for identity (re)building in their transnational context. Because individuals cannot be separated from the broader social and institutional structures that they are embedded, in approaching students’ narratives, I focused my analysis not on attributing intentions to individual students, and instead highlighted how these discourses shape their constructions of selves in the context of US higher education through dialogic practices with their peers and evolving cultural beliefs. I also do this not simply just by examining what they said, but how they said what they said, for what purpose and with what consequences. Following Willig (2013)’s analytic method, I offer my analysis and interpretations. To review, the version of FDA I am using in this dissertation is based on Willig (2013) (as represented in Chapter 5) and the steps are as follows:
1. Identifying discourses (what and how is the object constructed)

2. Describing action orientation (what is gained by using these discourses)

3. Identifying subject positioning (what discursive locations are available by using these discourses)

4. Describing practices (what actions are mapped out from these subject positions)

5. Exploring subjectivity (what are the implications of using this discourse from the subject positions)

These steps are not only the way of conducting the analysis in a structured way, but also in each step I reveal at the text level a different dimension to the analysis of how meaning is being constructed, what is being communicated by the speech acts. In other words, the social constructive theory of meaning-making is reflected in these steps, each of which examines a different aspect of the process. Together, these steps make the connection between the discourses of home country and their identity-building implications of these discourses. As described previously in Chapter 5, drawing from Haste’s neo-Vygotskian framework, I combine the FDA steps in three stages in my theoretical framework: the first stage of the analysis (identifying discourse) is to identify the different manifestation of cultural discourse; the second stage of the analysis (describing action orientation and subject positioning) is to make clear the interpersonal dialogue, or the specific social goal that the speaker wishes to achieve through talk at a given moment; and the third stage of the analysis, describing practices and exploring subjectivity, as implications of the deployment of this discourse for individuals in a particular way. This new framework will allow me to use student talk about home country to identify cultural resources and discourses that they are using to describe it. I will use this framework to investigate the ways that students are
discursively constructing the idea of “home country” in their speech. Figure 3 combines Willig’s (2013) and Haste’s (2013) models.

![Diagram of Willig's and Haste's models](image)

*Figure 3. Bringing together Willig’s (2013) stages of FDA and Haste’s (2013) neo-Vygotskian model*

My adaptation of Willig’s stages of FDA, along with additional sub-questions from Haste (2013) are included in table 4 below. I drew on the questions in this table for each FDA analysis I conducted, though certain questions or steps were more salient in the data than others, making each analytic process unique.
Table 4

*Summary of FDA stages, adapted from Willig (2013), with emphasis on meaning-making from Haste (2013).*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FDA Stages</th>
<th>Questions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1) Discourse</strong></td>
<td>- What and how is the discursive object (homeland) constructed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Adapted from Haste (2013):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What cultural/historical resources/narratives are constructed and drawn upon?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2) Action</strong></td>
<td>- What is the speaker doing, deliberately or not?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>orientation</strong></td>
<td>- What is achieved, or hope to be achieved from using these discourses?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Adapted from Haste:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is the goal of the dialogic interaction? Is it to find consensus, acquire new knowledge, persuade, or defend one’s authority and/or allegiance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3) Positioning</strong></td>
<td>- What subject positions are available to the respondent through these discourses? What/How do participants seek to benefit from constructing this discourse?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>orientation</strong></td>
<td>- Adapted from Haste:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How are the students positioning themselves and their peers directly or indirectly? What is made unavailable? How is what the participants know about cultural and historical narratives used to engage others?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4) Practice</strong></td>
<td>- Because subject positions are dynamic and not permanently bound by individuals with their talk, what possibilities are mapped out by these subject positions? how does their use of discourse they choose makes certain practice possible/not possible and obligatory/not obligatory?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Adapted from Haste:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do students construct different perspectives in their own contexts? How do they examine the contested questions about China that they find challenging in relation to others (eg. those they perceive as insiders vs outsiders, defend their country, listen to their peers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5) Subjectivity</strong></td>
<td>- What can be felt, seen, communicated? What are the implications of using these discourses and positions from these subject positions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>orientation</strong></td>
<td>- Adapted from Haste:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How I feel, what I can communicate, where am I located in this emotion?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Over the next few pages, I detail the content and use of these steps. I present examples from four representative participants to better describe the use of the different discourses, and show how it varied among the students. In the following analysis, the discursive object is the CIS’s home country. A discursive object is what is being talked about and explained in the exchange. Here I will first look at the language that students used to describe the home country as family, and then the language that they used to describe the home country as strange, as if through a looking glass. To note, I recognize that there are different kinds of family relationships, and the construct for family that I use follows that of the traditional Chinese family relationship in the sense that 1) the elders hold relative authority, and are both feared and respected by the younger members; 2) harmony as the core value that balances different things or values into one coordination (i.e., human and nature, people and society, mind and body); 3) loyalty to extended families and friends as a way to guard against foreign invasion or erosion. I use the metaphor of “through a looking glass,” drawing from Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, to describe an experience of disorientation and unfamiliarity, with the opportunity for a refreshed look to examine the context where one comes from, much like that of the CIS.

I do not intend to make claims about broader cultural characteristics or make moral judgements. Rather, I see the findings as a way to make apparent cultural tools that are available to these CIS to justify their positions and struggles in their unique contexts.

**Using the Discourse of Home Country as Family: The Case of Yin and Hong**

In table 5 below, I offer a brief overview of the excerpts to explain each of these discourses. In the second row of the table, I include excerpts from two participants to demonstrate how different use of the same discourse offered diverse subject positions and
therefore, implications for subjectivity and experience. I present these excerpts along with the five-step process for an FDA that I described in Methods chapter.

Table 5

Example of discourses and relevant excerpts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of Step</th>
<th>6 Yin</th>
<th>12 Hong</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example Excerpt</strong></td>
<td>“I was really shocked at first, but after I looked it up, I believed it. It’s understandable that something like this happened in China. It’s in the past, and we have to look at the policies now.”</td>
<td>“I don’t want to change their misconceptions because the more stupid they are, the stronger Chinese people are, and the further the US will fall.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Discourse of home country</strong></td>
<td>As family (united)</td>
<td>As family (inclusion vs exclusion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Action orientation</strong></td>
<td>Student is being acted upon, decisions are made for them by the tide of the times.</td>
<td>Student feels empowered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Subject positioning</strong></td>
<td>Positions herself as indebted to the country; unconditional acceptance of flaws;</td>
<td>China’s success gives rise to many individuals that contributed to individual’s accomplishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Practices</strong></td>
<td>Feels obligation to protect reputation; strong agency to make better</td>
<td>Feels obligation to defend criticism; challenge monopoly of western media/academia on knowledge production of China and sought ways to justify China’s actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. Subjectivity</strong></td>
<td>Rationalizes dark past and other problems over the course of development.</td>
<td>Attacking 1 is like attacking all; deeply rooted; insider outsider; habitual—part of DNA; protective, collectivist, always have one’s back;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within their speech acts, participants spoke about the home country using the same language to describe the perceptions and feelings that they held for their families. This is both in the sense of family as a unit, and family as a member. There are two ways that students in this study positioned their home country, China, as family. It is important to note
that the concept of family is a key component in Chinese society. The “family” I reference here focuses on the traditional sense of family in the Chinese culture with well-defined responsibilities and obligations, where the family includes extended family members and demands a unified front and acceptance of both the family’s success and mistakes. First, the home country is treated as a unifying force, a moral obligation that commands individual cooperation and acquiescence regardless of the course of action; this also means a lack of motivation on the individual’s part to dispute the family’s legacies. Yin was one student who used this construction to describe China when her perceptions about it were challenged, during moments of conflict. The emphasis here was the perceived patriarchal and authoritarian nature of home country to these participants.

**The Case of Yin**

**Discourse.** Yin drew on a discourse of home country as family to explain her strong belief in China’s ability to manage its problems both domestically and globally. By using this discourse, she described an inescapable pathway of development for “any country” to be problematic, especially a rising world power such as China (line 1-2). This normalization is then used to justify a reactive response to fend off those who cast doubts, and protect the country’s reputation despite the problems (line 3-4).

1 *You know, every country would have its problem. But when you leave your*
2 *country, or when you are not home, you’d really protect it. I think that’s one*
3 *(important) thing. Like your child, you could say he was bad, but if others were to*
4 *scold him, you’d be unhappy. Right?*

Through normalization, this speech act positioned problems of any country as inevitable. Yin expressed her displeasure when others spoke ill of the country, and constructed home country as a personified member of family, a child, vulnerable and
demanding of protection (line 3-4). Only other members of the family could discuss its imperfections, but those who are not in the family cannot do so.

**Action orientation.** This is another analytic tool of FDA to examine what a speaker is doing or achieving with their speech in a given context. Yin used her speech to explain, describe, or justify the ways she felt about her home country, and by doing so enacted, or constructed aspects of her identities through her interactions with me. When Yin described her experience of going home to China, she stated:

1. Every time I go back to China, and I smell the smog, I just feel particularly happy.
2. When I got into a taxi in Beijing, and the driver was talking about the smog, and I 3. would be so happy.

This use of the discourse of home country as family could be seen, within this context, as a way of emphasizing Yin’s sense of pride for everything that was within the borders of the country, without distinction. Her speech act draws upon the sentiment of unconditional love for family (country) in this case, by juxtaposing things and emotions that usually do not go together (smog and happiness, line 2-3). This active construction of unequivocal acceptance helped explain her response in choosing to ignore critiques about China without any hesitation. This talk about the smog—one thing that people don’t necessarily associate joy with, could be seen as a way of emphasizing the unconditional love that Yin had for the country as a member of the society. Constructing the discourse in this way, her response positioned Yin as a role model to be aspired to by her fellow countrymen. In her answer to the same question, she continued,

1. Maybe there’s something wrong with me, but I feel like, I am a member of
2. my country, and I’d respect everything about it. I’d wish for it to be better,
3. this is my attitude. I think it’s a correct, positive attitude. Maybe not
4. necessarily correct, but definitely positive.
Yin’s response emphasized that anything within the arbitrary border of the country should be respected and accepted (line 2). The goal of the dialogic interaction was to seek consensus with those who she was conversing with, and in this case, her interviewer, me. By admitting “maybe there’s something wrong with me,” she assumed potential pushback and used a disclaimer, which indicates a concern with warding off any judgements that she perceived that I may have about her. In doing so, her answer reversed potential negative attributions others may have about her seemingly blind optimism, and justified her loyalty to her home country.

**Positioning.** Willig *et. al.* (2013) states that discourses construct *subjects* to make available “positions within networks of meaning that speakers can take up” (p. 387). In constructing this discourse, Yin’s response positioned her as someone who chose hope, and was enthusiastic about the future of China. In talking about whether her perception of China changed after arriving in the US, Yin professed:

1. I wouldn’t necessarily consider the US to have changed me, but rather,
2. after leaving China, what I see are... and what I’m more willing to take
3. (see) are what’s good about it. I just think it keeps getting better. Every time
4. I go back, I feel like China is changing. For other Chinese people living
5. abroad, when they return to China, they also felt the same way.

Yin cited the evidence that was convicting for her as her observation of China, that as a country, it was always changing, never stagnant. In constructing this discourse, Yin’s response set a threshold of expectation for economic growth (line 3: “it keeps getting better,” line 4: “I feel like China is changing.”) This speech act of showing pride for visible success allowed her to appear neutral, and positioned her as a grateful beneficiary of China’s success, one who was appreciative of the complexity that came with managing a big country like China. By doing so, her response reserves possibilities for maintaining social and cultural
capital that may not always be feasible due to the physical distance between her host and her home country, as an international student. She contrasted this hope with what she perceived the situation that the US was in, and continued,

1. This change would not happen in the US for another decade. Now you go back to the US, it feels the same. And I feel like, my friends, American friends, are willing to go to China… I feel like more and more people are willing to know more about China. That’s because it’s getting stronger.

In this excerpt, by rejecting the perception that she was simply a lone outlier in such perception, Yin’s response positioned her as one of a growing collective that shared this optimism, and her peers as those who were coming around to support this way of thinking by showing great interest in China (line 3). China was positioned as an exciting place, compared to the US being portrayed as a place that lacked energy, and in doing so, justified admiration from members and non-members of the country alike (line 4). By focusing on visible changes (what the eyes could see) and vague actions about China’s attractiveness to non-members of the country, what’s made unavailable was the recognition of other types of growth that may not be as visible (line 1: “this change would not happen in the US for another decade,” line 2: “it feels the same.”)

When Yin reflected on her learning in the US, she elaborated,

1. I see some of China’s problems after taking some classes (in the US),
2. like China’s one-child-policy, and I’d think about how, in a decade or two,
3. there will be an aging population in China, and our GDP wouldn’t be able to handle this. That’s a real problem, and I’d wonder what policies the government will come up with.

Here, the home country as family discourse positioned Yin as an educated and reflective observer of China and the US, two countries she lived for a significant period of
time (line 1). She drew on this position as one with the capacity to understand, promote, and think about not only China’s accomplishments as she had stated previously, but also China’s problems in an informed way. This helped justify her as a neutral observer (line 4-5). This allowed her to position the government as the one responsible for the various problems that its policies created, and thus one with the authoritative power to address these problems (line 2-5).

**Practice.** This stage of analysis is concerned with the relationship between discourse and practice. In the previous excerpt, this construction of the home country as family allowed Yin to let go of some of the responsibility for her absence in addressing the problems that she saw in China’s future by proclaiming her presence in “thinking” about the problems (line 1-4), effectively claiming neutrality in her optimism about its presence. In practice, there was a clear hierarchy that dictates the order of solution making. Here the student is applying the cultural metaphor of family without explicating stating so, being part of a family in the context of China means letting the elders (in this case, autocrats, or the government) determine what seemed fit or correct, and Yin as an observer (line 4-5, “I’d wonder what policies the government will come up with.”) She continued to explain where the learning about the problems led to her thinking:

1. *I wouldn’t say my country was the best, I would see its problems. But I (now)*
2. *just know more about it, in more detail.*

This construction of the discourse justified both Yin’s ease of being excluded from participation and her sense of obligation to protect the family (China’s) legacy and its reputation against potential negative attributions. In this speech act, individuals are assigned limited power. One consequence of taking on this discourse would be to put the individuals in the back seat of enacting change, and position individuals as followers of the hierarchical
power that’s suspended above them for substantive policy making, despite their awareness of the problems that the critic alluded to. Using this historical narrative of China’s various problems served not as a precursor to further the conversation, but rather an end to potential inquiries, as individuals were absolved of responsibilities for the creation, and the solution, of the problems.

**Subjectivity.** In her work, Willig (2013) considered this final stage to be “most speculative” for the attempt to make claim between the discursive constructions and the implications for subjective experience, such as how one might feel, think, and experience from within various subject positions (p. 136). In this phase of the analysis, I try to understand what emotions are allowed, and what power the participants felt that they had by using this discourse. Yin recalled one of the instances when she was questioned by her peers about the infamous Tiananmen incident in late 1989:

1 When they asked about the Tiananmen incident, I Googled. Of course in China I wouldn’t have been able to Google this. At first, I didn’t believe it to be true, but after researching, I realized it was true. And then gradually I accepted it. I feel like when abroad, there is nothing that couldn’t be accepted. Everything around us is dramatic.

This speech act and positioning allowed Yin to explain her emotional response to her peers’ asking of challenging questions of China. This discourse of home country as family was invoked here to ease her discomfort about being hit hard about the truth of something that she did not know or considered false. But this speech act again makes making peace with China’s past obligatory, including the unfathomable, and the act of defending China imperative as insiders (“everything around us is dramatic.”)

Yin explained her choice of response to such questioning:
This excerpt positioned Yin as someone who was indebted to the “policies today” and positioned the government as having patriarchal power over its problems in the past, present, and future. This construction of the discourse shuts off doubts about the government’s credibility, and rationalizes China’s dark past over the course of its development. Through positioning herself as a mature and open-minded participant in intellectual inquiry, this discourse allowed Yin to not only forgive a government responsible for suppressing dissent, but also to feel safe in publicly expressing admiration for the realities of China today.

Yin described the optimism she experienced by learning more about China—good and bad—on the other side of the world through interactions with non-Chinese peers. She managed to speak in a reasonable and compassionate way in evaluating China’s faults. The focus here involved a sense of justification in convincing others and herself to align with the beneficence of China’s intentions and rationalize its mistakes in the name of necessary development in the past and present.

The Case of Hong

While the discourse of the home country as family that students drew on were similar, the actions, positions, and practices this discourse offered them, differed. Hong provided an example of a different use of a very similar discourse of home country as family.

Discourse. For Hong, the construction of the discourse of family was as a criterion for insider versus outsiders, and was used to include those whom the speaker considered
members of the family (as a unit), such as Chinese Americans, or people from places that were unwilling to consider themselves “Chinese” (i.e. HK & TW), and exclude those whom the speaker considered to not belong in the family, non-Chinese peers. When this criterion of insiders and outsiders was disrupted, Hong experienced distress. She spoke about being in the US as a Chinese person as meaning “to not reveal the shortcomings of our people.” In response to Yang’s commencement speech, during which she praised the quality of air, liberty, and freedom, among other things that she came to realize in the US, Hong admitted that, while she considered there was some truth to the speech, she absolutely could not accept the fact that Yang “ratted it out” and was de facto “selling out her country” to the Americans:

1 You could have said what you said in China, about China’s problems. But you were
2 at an American university, telling the Americans that we, China, have these issues,
3 and how wonderful (in contrast) the US is. These are two different things. If you said
4 this in China, that we had these problems and we should address them, that’s no
5 problem. I’d be supportive, very supportive. But she’s in the US, and many
6 Americans didn’t know China had these issues. And since she said it (in the US), it
7 was like she’s selling out her country.

Here Hong compared her approach to Yang’s approach when it comes to China’s problems, and concluded that an insider of the family (fellow CIS) was meant to protect the “face,” or legacy of the family, and not to disrupt the facade of family unity to other outsiders (the Americans). While it is acceptable to discuss the problems of China within China, Hong drew on the cultural narrative of not airing one’s dirty laundry to outsiders (line 1), especially when contrasted with all the things that others were doing well (line 3). Here all international students were constructed to be a collective that shared love and loyalty to China. This love was not only towards China as a country, but also to the Party as its administration. And Yang, the fellow CIS, who defied this universal image, was constructed
as one who betrayed the nation and the CIS as a collective. The criticism that Yang said about China, in comparison to the values that she came to appreciate in the US, was referred to as something that should be hidden from outsiders (‘many Americans didn’t know China had these issues,” line 6), as something that was acquiesced as problematic among its members, including Hong, but as something that could be manipulated for political agendas. The construction of the discourse was meant to be a selection not for truth, but for weeding out the non-patriots (“since she said it (in the US), it was like she’s selling out her country,” line 6-7).

Action orientation. In our interviews, Hong shared an experience in class when the professor of that class spoke of suspicion towards China’s economic data. She explained her reaction to this:

1 Like, we all know China’s economic data are fake, but the Americans don’t know
2 this. If I told the Americans our reported growth rate is fake, and it’s even at
3 negative growth—the positive growth is fake, even if that’s the case, when I talk to
4 the Americans, I’d say we are growing positively. I wouldn’t tell them the truth.
5 From my country’s perspective, I would not reveal the shortcomings of our people.

Here Hong’s response did not shy away from acknowledgement that fraud might exist in China’s economic data and that this may be perceived as “shortcomings.” She drew a clear distinction between us versus them as a protective mechanism, and expressed comfort in using deception as an appropriate tool to interact with those who she considered outsiders. On one hand, our discursive object, home country, was constructed as actively doing the “deceiving” work to manipulate perceptions of it (line 1, “we all know… data are fake.”) On the other hand, the same discursive object was constructed as something passive that needs to be protected and hidden so that the “shortcomings of our people” would not be taken advantage of. These two constructions of home country were then located within wider discourses surrounding competitiveness among international players. Both of these
constructions resonated with the *transactional discourse*. Notions of financial investment in various parts of the world in return for respect, alliance, and benefits are prominent in contemporary talk about the economy. Here the truth (economic data) was subsided to make way for a greater collective image as an economic power, which comes with political power, in exchange for the added values in China’s reach as a new world power that could challenge the order established and maintained by the west. This discourse was frequently recycled as the evidence for Hong that China needed to do whatever it takes to remain, or be seen to remain, flourishing economically, and individuals like herself, in this construction of home country as family, to rally their support for it. Such discourse was readily available in the new public outlets such as “We-Media”, or grassroots journalism.

In this excerpt, Hong’s use of the discourse of home country as family could be seen, within this context, as a way of rejecting negative attributions about the policies in-force and realities of the family’s members. Within this discourse, the normalization of the properties of insider versus outsider was used to justify her willingness to sacrifice her integrity, to lie, in protection of the positive perception of the home country. By normalizing the necessary deception that China and Chinese individuals like herself are willing to engage in, the dialogic goal for Hong, then, was the ability to portray her as an unsung hero in this act that otherwise would be condemned. By deploying this discourse, the action orientation of emphasizing the length that she would go in the name of the country, thus, was to feel empowered, and to shift responsibility for the promotion of the family legacy to its individual members in accordance with the current reality of Chinese society.

**Positioning.** This construction of home country as family allowed Hong to position herself as both the beneficiary of, and contributor to, China’s economic development. In our
interview, Hong expressed her desire to help combat the issue of poverty in China, a criticism raised by her American peers:

1 I hope to help ‘pull up’ China’s economy with everyone. If I can make a lot of money, 2 like when I’m in my 40s and 50s, I’d like to invest in schools. Not even, I want to 3 donate to schools. I don’t think China’s problems originate from poverty, but it’s in 4 people’s mindset.

By assigning the problems of poverty to “people’s mindset,” the positioning of citizens as those capable of making reasonable and rational decisions for their own well-being was made possible, regardless of any challenges that may exist at the systematic level. Those citizens with more agency and a different mindset, like herself, can contribute to the flourishing of the home country by “investing” or “donating” in education. Those who choose to credit China’s problems to poverty are positioned to be on the receiving end of the generosity of her and people like her, powerless and helpless. She elaborated on this a bit further, by detailing a story of her volunteering in rural China for two days and her surprise, when she found out that two of the top students that she donated to had no clear plans about graduation and going off to college. She was “kind of angry:”

I was kind of angry, because I donated money to them. I had wanted my money to be for their future development after college, but they just wanted to spend it, and that’s it… like, I think their way of thinking is problematic… they have no idea why they do what they do, and they didn’t spend the money in the right places, just on clothes and meals, or on their farm. I think mindsets (such like this) needs saving

Citing this encounter with rural students in poverty in China, Hong positioned herself as educated, caring, and resourceful. The subjective position offered by this discourse was that family members should help each other and be united, but members were responsible for their own fate. In relying on this discourse, Hong was able to contrast her expectation of her monetary donation with the use the rural students put it to. Constructing
the students’ decision as short-sighted allowed Hong to position her and people like her as having the agency that freed them from poverty, and shift responsibility for deeply entrenched inequality from national policies, and onto individuals.

In another section of the interview, Hong shared her sympathy for China’s leaders as having to make unpopular but necessary, limited choices for the benefit of the country. In doing so, Hong was able to explain why she felt convinced or even support to the decision from the leadership to censor information as a way to “stabilize the public.”

Being part of a society that prioritized economic development meant that the government would demand things that it deemed fit or correct, and constantly evaluate and punish those who may participate to reverse this power dynamic and get ahead.

1. Look at where China started, and where the US started... there’s a huge gap.
2. China’s previous leaders were able to take China—from such a poor unenlightened country, spent only couple decades of reform and highly efficient operation, to No. 2 in the world. How much hardship and effort did they spend? Obviously, they had 5 more contribution than faults.

Here, in positioning the leaders as filling the gap between a poor, developing China and a rich, developed power like the US despite its retched beginnings, Hong was able to downplay the blame that critics may place on the government, and instead highlight the credibility and respect the leaders deserved from the Chinese people.

Practice. This stage of analysis was concerned with the relationship between discourse and practice. Continuing her discussion about addressing the “faults” as a result of the policies China’s previous leaders made, she added,

1. Even though we have to change the faults, we cannot categorically deny
2. these leaders because of these faults, saying things like the Party always censors
3. information, that things are forbidden.
The discourse of transactional discourse was bound up with the practice of appreciating the painful choices that previous leaders had to make in the past. This stage of analysis mapped the possibility for citizens to continue support the leaders’ choices in the name of providing stability and prosperity of China’s citizens, censorship included. Such a practice makes it more likely for individuals to accept policies that would demand of things that would chip away individual’s capacity and efficacy to participate in the system.

Hong continued to share her reasons for agreeing with the government on certain policies.

*I think to some degree, a policy to fool the public is acceptable, but we have to control the degree to which it’s done. Although we all hate the censorship, the closing up of country and locking up of information, but this to some degree, stabilizes the public.*

This section of the text that constructed the relationship between government and its people as transactional made clear a judgement for how the public should react despite disagreement with certain policies that limit the free exchange of information. The subject position of Hong was one who was educated, resourceful, and agentic. as the construction allowed Hong to side with China’s elites, the leaders, as an insider, and position the “public” as the outsiders, those who were uneducated, lethargic, and easily manipulated. In doing so, the responsibility of control falls to the Party elites. Because Hong’s response relied on a norm of a country as economically developed and socially stable, the government was expected to prioritize what it deemed fit or correct in the name of stability, and to preserve what it has accomplished despite all odds. Hong juxtaposed her observation of the public to this norm, and was then able to transfer some the blame to the public themselves, and claimed her identification with the elites.
Subjectivity. This stage of the analysis helped make links between the discursive constructions used by Hong and implications for her subjective experience (i.e. what can be felt by Hong from her subject position). This discourse and positioning allowed Hong to make meaning of the economic and political decisions that China’s leaders make for its people.

1 I used to spend a lot of time to convince people, but then I realized it was kind of wasteful. Given my level now, I want to spend more time bettering myself;
2 so that my voice carries more weight when I’m influential. The less I waste my time, the earlier the time will come when I become influential. So I would not say much, they can say whatever that pleases them. But I’d remember. I 6 will remember this in my heart. When I’m influential, I will make myself heard, and fight these misconceptions

Hong provided one illustration of how she used her construction of this discourse of home country as family to position herself and China’s leaders, leveraging specific expectations and responsibilities. Here Hong expressed the strong desire to be “influential” and to change the perceptions of the critics (line 2-3, “I want to spend more time bettering myself, so that my voice carries more weight when I’m influential.”) And by persevering through her own efforts and determination, she could live up to that of those who could influence or empower substantive change. By positioning herself as a reflective and strategic insider of the Chinese society (line 6, “I will remember this in my heart,”) she spoke in empathetic tone in identifying her place, and further justifying her temporary “inaction” as a form of calculative self-preservation in bringing about change to misconceptions of China held by the outsiders. Still, it could also be argued that feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction are available to those positioned with this transactional construction of home country as family, by making individuals choose the conditions under which they wished to live in, despite at the cost of temporary uneasiness or even sacrificing one’s values.
Using the Discourse of Home Country as Through the Looking Glass:

The Case of Jia and Rong

In table 6 below, I offer a brief overview of the excerpts I use to explain each of these discourses. Here I again offer these examples along the five-step process for FDA that I described in the Methods chapter.

While not as common as the previous discourse described above, this construction described home country as though through the looking glass. In talking about this kind of distance, they noted that they no longer saw the home country in the same light.
Table 6

Overview of theme and main themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of Step</th>
<th>9 Jia</th>
<th>2 Rong</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example Excerpt</strong></td>
<td>“…I know we all have a knife above our head, but it wouldn’t fall right away, so we can still move on with this weight… because it won’t collapse yet. Hopefully (the gov) stops when it still can.”</td>
<td>“feel a sense of distance. But because I feel this distance, when I learn something, I have a more emotional response. For example, the incident on RYB Kindergarten scandal, or like the “clearing” migrants incident in Beijing. There are many shocking news coming out of China, and after I learn about it, I have such a strong emotional response in my stomach, in my heart.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Discourse of home country</td>
<td>As distanced (sobering realization, hope for new personal possibilities).</td>
<td>As distanced (disillusioned, empathy for the people).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Action orientation</td>
<td>Expects to not be accountable for not being an upstanding member of the Chinese society that she considered less than ideal.</td>
<td>Active in making own decision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Subject positioning</td>
<td>Positions herself as being able to access different possibilities in her new context and experiment with ways of being a better self.</td>
<td>Informed, justified, at the same time feel ethically obligated to tell others about her “facts”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Subjectivity</td>
<td>Feels safe about being defiant to the government’s narrative; Comforted by the possibility the government would realize the dangers of restraining liberty.</td>
<td>Strong desire to make better but experiences little efficacy to enact systematic change.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Within their speech acts, students spoke about the home country as through a looking glass, and described a “distance” between their expectation of China and the new understanding of China as a result of the critiques that they encountered, through interactions with peers or by being exposed to multiple new sources of information. This is both in the sense of constructing this refreshed perception as a springboard for opportunities, or as a motivation for personal betterment. Jia was one student who used this construction to describe China after moments of conflict when her perceptions of it was changed. The emphasis here was the transactional nature of being a CIS in the US higher education context.

The Case of Jia

Discourse. As a business major, Jia’s interactions with peers about China were often limited to discussions about financial policies, such as the existence of insider training, or the consequence of banning Bitcoin in China. Yet, since arriving in the US, Jia expressed personal interests in, and were exposed by friends to books in the major of International Relations that were forbidden in China. The writings covered the Party, Chairman Mao, and the June 4th student movement in 1989. When asked to describe the challenges that faced China she considered at the time of the interview, Jia provided the following answer.

1 We have little passion to participate in politics or discuss politics. Like, there is no
2 passion or will to participate in politics, because there’s not a goal to work to, and
3 you do not hold the possibility for change.

In this excerpt, using the discourse of through the looking class, home country was seen as a place that provided no pathway for lay people to participate in enacting any form of change. People in the home country were referred to as politically lethargic (line 1), as a result of the systematic suppression of agentic behavior (line 2-3). This did not pertain to any
particular individual, but was something that people collectively experienced. Further, home country was constructed as a place where individual agency as futile and investment in youth participation was nonexistent.

This construction of home country resonated with the discourse of international standards. People’s participation in politics that Jia heard about and witnessed in the US may have contributed to her expectation that China’s citizens act accordingly to such international standards. In describing what was absent, Jia’s construction of this discourse revealed her expectation of what a country should be, and inferred agentic behaviors to be something desirable. Because “we,” the people, are constructed as passive actors to be acted upon by the government, this discourse of through the looking glass was used to explain Jia’s disillusionment.

Action orientation. This analytical tool considers what the speaker accomplishes by speaking, or not speaking in a certain way. In this short excerpt, Jia constructed people in home country as a helpless group with predetermined fate and little agency to change it (line 1).

1 You know well from ten years ago who the chairman was gonna be, so you wouldn’t
2 think too much about the politics.

Jia described the country’s leaders as those who were decided by the previous administration a decade in advance. People were constructed to be in unspoken agreement with the government and had limited opportunities for change, and were therefore absolved of the responsibility to exercise their obligation to participate in any election. Using this discourse could be seen, within this context, as a way for Jia to emphasize her sense of responsibility, an awareness of the need for citizens to have a say about their country’s governance and future, for her country’s wellbeing. The talk about the justifications for lack
of civic participation for her and other Chinese citizens, whether the lack of collective passion, or absence of path of change, or the inevitability of the leadership choices, created an impression that any form of change that the citizens seek was out of reach for ordinary citizens, and reserved for those in authority and with professional or insider knowledge. From this discourse, the student then was expected to not be held accountable for not being an upstanding member of the Chinese society that she considered less than ideal.

**Positioning.** In this excerpt, Jia described how she would share her observation of the US with families or friends back in China.

1. It’s freer here, and you could meet people of different levels in various fields.
2. You could even hear their thoughts, which they defend seriously. Also people here
3. are more democratic, but it’s decided by their political system. And people around
4. me are like, they are led to move forward by their passion, so they feel more
5. rational.

By linking individual’s agency and the home country, the positioning of citizens as those capable of making democratic and rational decisions for their country was strengthened. People in the US were positioned as ready to engage in civil debates despite their various backgrounds (line 1-2), but this was not a function of their personal attributes, but rather what’s *allowed* by the political system (line 3). Here, by comparing what she observed in the US and what she experienced in China, this discourse positioned Jia as knowledgeable and with a global perspective, as a result of her experience that placed a physical and conceptual distance between what she used to know in China and what she now knows in the US. This construction of an alternative society that in many ways offered “more” than what she considered members of the Chinese society had, allowed Jia to position herself as being able to access different possibilities in her transnational context.
Practice. Positioning Jia as global and flexible compared to her Chinese peers, this subject position functioned to help explain her desire for a more democratic and free society in China, and an upward outlook on her life. In the previous excerpt, the mention of the difference in political systems that Jia observed could be seen, in this context, to serve two purposes. First, it was constructed as the deciding factor that determined the level of individual freedom in a society. Positioning the political system in this way allowed Jia to place the responsibility for social change in the hands of those in power as opposed to individual citizens. Second, the talk about the political system was constructed as a protective mechanism for her individually in the context of this interaction, to absolve her of the liability of being critical to what was absent in China and to prevent a potential backlash. This construction allowed Jia to appear neutral and unbiased in her speech despite her professed admiration for certain aspects of the US society.

In this section of the text, construction of the home country as distant, through the looking glass, empowered Jia to envision a future self to act with a similar mindset for change, at least at the individual level.

1 Because people around me all have some small goals of their own, and they
2 all fight for their goals, so I feel like in this environment, I am pushed to move up
3 and better myself in this environment.

Here she spoke in admiration of the freedom that people in the US enjoy to pursue their dreams, and by doing so, this speech act constructed her dissent for the absence of freedom in China. This construction allowed her to partake in activities that compel her for self-betterment (line 2-3), and to further prove to herself, and an ambiguous future society that she hoped to occupy, that she’s a worthy member that should be valued. This discourse contrasted Jia’s expectation of a more ideal society she saw in the US with the less democratic and free society that she knew in China. It juxtaposed the passion that she
expected of individuals to follow their dreams with the involuntary “push” from her peers that she surrounded herself with in the US. In so doing, Jia described a dissonance between her expectation of the government to fix the social problems and realization that it was up to individuals, and she needed to first experiment with ways of being a better self before considering enacting any changes for the collective good.

**Subjectivity.** This construction of the home country as strange allowed Jia to make meaning of the distinctive experiences she’s had in both China and the US. Jia explained that she learned that she still must move forward despite the sobering new information she has learned about China, such as lack of civic pathway and exploitative development. Her positioning of the government opened Jia up to the realization that the government was the sole institution responsible for the damage and has the ability to halt the current dangerous course that it was on.

*1 I know we all have a knife above our head, but it wouldn’t fall right away, so we can
2 still move on with this weight… because it won’t collapse yet. Hopefully (the
3 government) stops when it still can.*

Feelings of independence and empowerment can be felt by the psychological reality constructed by this discourse, which positions home country as through the looking glass in the presence of new information and experiences. Positioning herself within this discourse as lucid of the potential danger of being content (line 1) allowed Jia to not only feel safe about being defiant to some degree with regard to the government’s narrative, but to make peace with the reality of carrying the “weight” forward, a metaphor she used to warn about the dire consequences should the government continue its current policies and practices (line 2). In this way, it can be argued that she felt less guilty about not enacting change personally, but was comforted by the possibility that, with time, the agency where she still assigned true power
to enact change, the government, would realize the dangers and the prospect for China and its people could be different.

Students also juxtaposed how they expected others to perceive China with the critiques about China that they encountered in the US higher education context, and drew on different types of expectations in constructing this comparison. This affected what positions they could accommodate and how they could navigate what they made of these experiences. Rong provided a different example of a similar discourse to Jia’s.

**The Case of Rong**

**Discourse.** In our interviews, Rong often stressed how much dissonance she experienced as a result of the conflict between her own embodiment of traditional, “oriental” values and the intensity she experienced of the US as the complete “opposite” of such values. At the same time, she felt tremendous distress when learning about scandals in China, and used the discourse of home country as through the looking glass:

1 I feel a sense of distance. But because I feel this distance, when I learn something, I
2 have a more emotional response. For example, the staff malpractice scandal at RYB
3 Kindergarten, or the “clearing” migrants incident in Beijing. There are many shocking
4 news coming out of China, and when I learn about it, I have such a strong emotional
5 response in my stomach, in my heart.

In this excerpt, home country was referred to as deeply personal, something that was emotionally connected to Rong (line 1-2), as a place that she now was able to observe with clarity, given the physical space she had from it (line 3-4). Home country was constructed as something associated with a mystified trigger on her physical and emotional wellbeing, which I interpreted as resisting the outside perspective that certain practices in China were not policed according to law, but under negative influences such as corruption and loopholes. This, in comparison to what she observed in the US, as a country with a drastically different
system, regulation, and policing, exerted additional toll on her as a Chinese national living abroad. She continued to elaborate,

1 I’d look at these things and think that they are not just individual cases, but (a reflection)  
2 of the interrelated problems in our society, and I myself experience these too… maybe it’s  
3 not a problem only existent in China, it’s this phase of development (everywhere).”

In this excerpt, home country was constructed as a prism that allows for the existence of multiple perspectives. Unlike Jia, Rong’s speech act did not describe her disillusionment about the absence of individual civic possibilities in China, but focused on the inevitability of social costs that come with any form of development anywhere. This response expressed a belief that the scandals were merely the symptoms of a series of social problems, not the cause. Here, a disillusionment came with a lucid sense of helplessness, that this is something universal, something that all countries go through at this particular “phase of development” (line 3).

**Action orientation.** Rong’s use of a discursive construction of the home country as through the looking glass could be seen, within this context, as a way of reclaiming individual agency. This sense of agency does not necessarily mean the compulsion to address every challenge in the country in any substantive way, but it invites the opportunity to look at things from multiple perspectives by testing the official narratives, giving individual the opportunity to make his/her own decisions. In this excerpt, Rong described her response to critics who challenge her on China’s sovereignty claims.

1 It’s hard to say whether they are right or wrong. Because what they say may not be the  
2 fact, just their interpretations. And you could give an interpretation from any  
3 perspective. Maybe they are just using one way of interpretation, so it’s hard for  
4 anyone to convince anyone, because it’s not disputes about facts, but rather which  
5 aspects of the facts did you decide to focus on, in what ways.
Here, Rong’s use of a discursive construction of China’s problems as a prism, reflecting multiple perspectives, can be seen, within this context, as a way of emphasizing the neutrality of individuals, proponents and opponents alike. The talk about the interpretive nature of personal opinions created an impression that the issue at hand was not about facts but various interpretations as a result of people’s different cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. To respond to such an impression, such a discursive construction drew attention to the agnostic nature of these critiques and Rong’s neutrality within them, and in doing so, avoid having to put her stake in any particular camp or perspective.

**Positioning.** Continuing her interview with me, Rong elaborated on how she approached criticisms of China that her peers raised with her,

1 These are where I see the differences come from, and I’d try to understand them (the critiques), and tell them something about the facts (from my perspective). But the way they think about certain things are just as deeply rooted and hard to change like how we think about certain things.

Here, the diagnosis of the correctness, and response, to these “critiques” were attributed to the individuals themselves. In doing so, Rong was then not held accountable for acknowledging the difficulty of changing “deeply rooted” value system and expressing sympathy to the critiques for they are the products of their sociocultural contexts. The talk about Rong’s own behavior of perspective taking and being empathetic (“I’d try to understand them,” line 1-2), and offering her side of the “facts” (line 2), created the impression that she was incapable of being persuasive towards those considered outsiders to China. To reverse such an impression, a construction of the home country as through the looking glass drew attention to its reflective nature, its promise for possibilities, and the students’ awareness of the significance of multiculturalism.
In this excerpt, Rong appeared careful in her response to avoid ethnocentrism, which is to not impose a value judgement from one’s own perspective on that of another without understanding how those perspectives and practices make sense to the people in that community. Here such a careful construction was positioned as one who had the clarity and freedom to take multiple perspectives as a result of her transnational experience, despite her own sociocultural upbringing in China. By doing so, it opened up the freedom to position the critics of China she encountered in the US as fair—not necessarily guilty of lying due to their ideological differences, but also capable of making reasonable and agentic choices about the information that they consumed in the context of pervasive cultural narratives. Individuals on both sides of the value system were positioned as empowered to see multiple perspectives of facts. By admitting that not everyone could see beyond what was conditioned of them, Rong was positioned as one who was open-minded and reflective, and justified in her perceived obligation to share her truth, even if it may be seen as biased by the critics.

**Practice.** Like Jia, Rong’s response situated her in a global, comparative perspective, as she often invoked her reflections of China and US in the same thread of thought. She described the impacts of going to the Women’s March with her American roommate.

1 I was overwhelmed by what I saw. It was like a family affair for those who came …
2 it felt like they were fighting to keep their shared values… their concept of the country was tied closely with that of the individual rights. For them, individual rights
3 was their country, and loving their country meant loving their human rights, and
4 loving their own individual units. These things were not in opposite.

Rong’s answer positioned her as a hopeful observer in both the Chinese and US society through her experience as a CIS. The construction of home country as strange opened her up to welcome new experiences that could overturn or significantly challenge values that she once held dear. In using this discourse and positioning, Rong’s behavior was
justified; she was able to explain her awe for the opportunities for human flourishing in a collective act, people protesting for a common cause (line 1-3). In this section of the text that constructed home country as strange required a vigilant preoccupation with the participants’ awareness that patriotism does not mean supporting everything the government does. Her position as a hopeful observer allowed her to attempt, without shame, to understand the cultural and political differences that would explain a potentially alternative outcome had similar acts taken place in China, while at the same time openly express admiration for the power potential of individuals. She contrasted her experience with her reflection on China, her home country:

1 But in China that’s two things, you either sacrifice yourself for the country, or you
2 sacrifice your family. It’s extremely hierarchical and you’d feel torn. But over here,
3 the more individualistic you are, the more you love your country, because that means
4 you respect human rights... this is the core of this country. I think it’s amazing.

Here Rong described this either-or decision that Chinese citizens must make, neither of which were pleasant (line 1-2). This discourse positioned Chinese citizens as having little choice, and shifted the blame of their inactions towards the cultural ways of being. In practice, Rong did not make a clear judgement or definition as to how citizens in China could mobilize for a common cause, but offered sympathetic justifications for them not to do so in her own context. The subject position as a hopeful observer who wishes to see the best of two worlds involves a focus to balance both the flourishing of individuals and the sociocultural and political conditions that they are in. In this excerpt, this means that the subject position of the hopeful observer was associated with cultural awareness, careful deliberation, and a consideration of the effects of potential decisions and outcomes upon the wellbeing of individuals.
**Subjectivity.** The relationship between discourse and subjectivity made available ways of being in the world and seeing the world. Further, it offered a perspective into what could be felt, thought, and experienced by Rong from within her subject position. In our interviews, Rong often spoke candidly that she experienced little efficacy for her and those like her to act as a result of sociocultural upbringings that already predetermined their fates. When she talked about responding to criticisms about China, or causes that she felt passionate about, she said:

1 I’d preserve the spark, the discomfort, the anger, the anxiety… and I’d preserve the
2 sparks in my heart. And these emotions would help you preserve your thinking about
3 these things into your life. You’d feel this weight, it’s not on you but you should carry
4 it. You can’t solve it right away, but you can use your own ways to carry it in your life.
5 I think this is what a citizen, or any person should do.

By positioning her as a mature, neutral, and hopeful observer, Rong conveyed a compassionate tone in appreciating the civic participation and its power for change. The focus of the internal negotiation was constructed to involve a need for preservation in arriving at the goals that she deemed worthy (“I’d preserve the spark… in my heart,” line 1-2). Feelings of intense emotion can be felt by the psychological reality that positions subjects as hopeful observers of the presence of challenging questions or critiques that are perceived as unjust. Positioning herself within this discourse allowed her to not only forgive those who presented the critiques, but also to feel safe in publicly expressing admiration for those who enacted changes as agentic citizens, and praising this as. She continued:

1 I believe you are responsible for other people’s suffering, even though indirectly. And you
2 should think about how to change it—not right away, but over the course of your life.
3 You should recognize opportunities to change when the time or situation allowed.
In continuing to position herself as an empathetic, hopeful observer, Rong was freed to be critical of the absence of civic efficacy in China without appearing as a threat to the government. Further, she was able to make meaning of the challenges that exist in the Chinese society as a result of its culture by explaining, how the sobering experience of living outside of China and in the US, was able to prepare her for what she believed to be her ethical responsibility that’s connected to her personal flourishing in the future, a universal quality that “any person” should aspire to. It could be argued that feelings of righteousness about carrying “other people’s suffering” as an ethical responsibility and a lifetime’s work are available to those positioned within this construction of home country.

Conclusion

In this chapter I sought to answer the third research question:

3) What discourses do four CIS use to describe the most dominant challenge to their cultural identity: the perception of their home country – China?

This research question considers how available discourse of home country makes possible for CIS for identity-building. Using the integrated framework of FDA and Haste’s neo-Vygotskian model, I analyzed the ways that two discourses of home country, as family and as strange, were used in constructions of patriotism, duty, ethics, and hope in their transnational context. Using the Foucauldian Discourse Analysis and examples of the variation within each discourse, I highlight some of the ways that these discourses function for identity-building. Drawing on FDA, I have shown how these different discourses carry with them a focus on different social practices: home country as family created a focus on community maintenance: allegiance and obligation to China and members of the ingroup; home country as through a looking glass led to a focus on community renewal: using the refreshed perceptions or new insights to create more opportunities for change. They further made
available particular subjective possibilities such as shame, anger, embarrassment, pride, and creative expression of dissent.

The four examples of two discourses offer an illustration of how the students in the study made meaning of their home country, China, as a result of interacting with their peers while living in the US. These discourses are related and students moved fluidly between the discourses. At times, one may even use both at the same time to create multiple possibilities. This fluidity is important because of what these kinds of talks made possible for the students who were using them. Put simply, talking about home country as family allowed students to express affectionate feelings of closeness and justify their automatic defense to the critics. On the other hand, talking about home country as strange (through the looking glass) allowed students to talk about the policies and problems in an abstract manner, thus able to also act as a bystander, appreciating and resisting narratives that they may have heard, witnessed, or experienced. For my purpose as a researcher, this allowed me to distinguish between when students were speaking more emotionally of challenging questions about China they encountered in the US, and when they were empathizing with the critic and speaking critically to social problems unique to China.

It is important to note that these discourses are a representation of the student’s use of language to 1) explain their evolving perceptions of China as a result of living in the US and 2) shape discursive possibilities for identity-building in these discursive contexts. The discourses do not explain the actual behavior of the students. Instead, they gave us a picture of how the students came to understand their home country and used language to make meaning of it as a part of their personal upbringing and growth.

Drawing on Haste's (2013) neo-Vygotskian model, I have explored some of the ways that participants' use of these discourses derived meaning actively from dialogue and cultural
resources but also contribute through dialogic interactions to the meaning-making and identity-building process. The examples provided in this chapter paint a picture of the consequences that the utilization of different discourses of home country has for meaning-making and identity development for these young international students when reflecting on the relationships and attitudes that they have with, and about their home country.

My analytic approach combining FDA and a neo-Vygotskian model provides a unique lens for understanding how discourses can shape possibilities for meaning-making and identity-building. Although the particular findings may not apply to other groups of international students, the methodological approach to looking at such processes can be reproduced and may result in providing the field with more insight into the kinds of cultural and ideological negotiations that are prevalent among international students at American higher education institutions.
Chapter 9: Discussion and Implications of the Findings

International students’ meaning-making in their transnational context is a complex landscape. For all Chinese students who embark on the journey of studying in a Western higher education institute in pursuit of an alternative education, life, and career, the quest requires much bravery and endurance for facing the unfamiliar challenges, linguistic, cultural, emotional, intellectual, immigrational (such as visa issues), among many others. Since the Chinese government first sent its students abroad in the late 19th century, students of many generations have dealt with these challenges in various ways. While the content of the challenges may have evolved across eras as China went through drastic sociopolitical changes from then to the current 21st century, the nature of difficulty remains. How students manage these challenges in their cross-cultural context provides clues as to how the broader institutional, cultural, or social phenomena is at work to influence, and is influenced by, meaning-making in individual’s dialogic interactions with others.

This dissertation responds to a call for more research on international students and the goal of cross-cultural learning broadly in an increasingly globalized world. While many studies highlight the benefit this diverse groups of student body contribute to the university and society where they study as a whole, studies have also highlighted that international students often bear the responsibility of adjusting to their new academic and host environment, perhaps due to a “superior attitude” that assumes the host country and institutes to have more to offer to the international students than they contribute (Heng, 2018, p. 2). And research that focuses specifically on Chinese international student identity development in a context of competing worldviews is noticeably absent (Batterton & Horner, 2016b; Kim, 2012).
Previous research on Chinese international students globally falls into two broad approaches: those that draw primarily on survey-based methods, and those with ethnographic and case study methods (Fish, 2018; Hail, 2015; Heng, 2017, 2019; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013). Studies from the first approach have focused on stressors, motivations of the CIS in studying abroad, and perceptions held by members in the host country (Bai, 2016; Chao et al., 2017; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Ruble & Zhang, 2013; Wei et al., 2007). These results showed that students were motivated by a promise to expand their worldview and to break away from the Chinese way of learning by studying abroad. They also showed that their choice for the US as the preferred destination of higher education provided much needed source of financial revenue for the universities (Chao et al., 2017). However, while much has been written about their presence on the US college campuses, studies on how they are accommodated or how they experience their campuses are limited. Further, this approach tends to have a low response rate from participants, lump undergraduate and graduate students together despite their different characteristics (e.g., life experiences, education level, financial capacity, etc.), and often group CIS along with other Asian groups, and thus miss the nuances of the differences of CIS from other groups of international students, or assumes homogeneity of students from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China when they may not see themselves as unified).

Research from the ethnographic tradition has provided much richer descriptions of CIS experiences and show how students cope with the challenges and cultural shocks that come with studying and living in a Western society. This body of research has also shown the difficulty in overcoming the dissonance between their preconceived ideas about the host country and their actual experiences. For example, in the classroom setting, students struggled with a new teaching approach that values group-work, classroom participation, and
individual perspectives; when interacting with faculty members, their limited command of English and unfamiliarity with self-directed learning and advocacy also contributed to their stresses (Heng, 2018b); in social settings, CIS are often perceived to be associated with undesirable traits such as needy, intrusive, passive, socially awkward, and tending to congregate with other Asian students, and therefore unmotivated in acculturating (Jenkins, 2000). Despite well-intentioned designs, these negative portrayals of CIS experiences may partly be due to the methodology that existing research uses (Heng, 2018b). Due to the lack of a conceptual framework that analyzes how students personal journeys and sociocultural contexts influence their challenges and coping mechanisms, research may be unintentionally reproducing deficit perceptions of Chinese students or frame their sociocultural backgrounds as a burden (Cho et al., 2008). While limited recent research has placed more emphasis on contextual understanding of Chinese students, more work needs to continue to disrupt such existing discourse and place and to amplify the voices of students’ motivations and aspirations (Heng, 2018b; Page & Chahboun, 2019).

To address these issues, this study helps make visible the ways that CIS today construct and understand their subjective experiences of managing critiques about China they encountered in the US, and what those ways of speaking might make possible for their constructions of themselves and others in the world. By examining the intersection of themes and discourses, using thematic analysis and the integrated framework of Foucauldian discourse analysis and the neo-Vygotskian model, I have been able to better describe the ways that discourses, dialogues, positionings, and subjectivity around managing differences connect with each other in a meaningful way for the CIS in the transnational context.

In this study, by analyzing the ways that CIS talk about and position themselves in dialogic exchanges with their peers in the US higher education setting, I was able to build a
grounded argument for describing what questions asked of them about China were challenging, how they managed these questions through their response, and why students perceived and managed these questions in the way that they did. Further, I was able to make visible what such ways of meaning-making makes possible in the world.

My research questions are:

1) What do CIS perceive as representations of China that challenge their sense of cultural identity in the context of US higher education?

2) What strategies do the CIS use to confront their challenged cultural identity?

3) What discourses do four CIS use to describe the most dominant challenge to their cultural identity: the construction of their home country, China?

My aim in this chapter is to integrate the results of prior chapters. I will demonstrate how the three analytic chapters work together coherently to answer my research questions and to provide insight on the ways that CIS interact with US peers and the ways that they construct their experiences with these peers in the context of challenging questions about China. I will then discuss the implications of these findings both for research and practitioners such as faculty and staff at a university, and those working with Chinese international students in the US.

The first research question dealt with identifying what representations of China that the 20 CIS identified as challenging to their sense of cultural identity in the context of US higher education. Thematically categorizing the questions provided insight into the nature of the questions that participants found to be challenging. The second and third research questions had an analytic lens towards meaning-making. The second question dealt with the different response types the CIS had to manage interactions with the challenging questions. The third research question focused on the ways that discourses the CIS used to construct
notions of patriotism, duty, ethics, and hope in their cultural contexts, how their speech acts were connected to the broader institutional, cultural, or social phenomena, and how their talks made possible for identity-building.

One of the goals that I hoped to achieve through this study was to “decode” one of the least addressed elements in understanding Chinese international students today, their cultural identity in tension and in flux. While in the US, their connection with China through families, mass media, sociocultural capital remains strong. In Part I of the findings, I focused my attention on the connotations that having to act as their home country’s unofficial ambassador held for the participants in the dialogic interactions with their peers. From a social constructionist perspective, the construction and development of identity is situational, and manifests in different contexts on college campuses. For the CIS, the new cultural practices, together with implicit or explicit expectations of the social and academic norms in the US introduce much stress and lead to painful negotiations within themselves and with others. As this analysis has indicated, an understanding of their struggles caught between two cultures and their resistance and negotiation with this struggle (including the resources they accessed to manage this struggle), is essential to comprehending the linkage among individuals, their social relationships, and the grand discourses or “deep cultural narratives” in their sociocultural contexts.

In response to my first research question, I conducted thematic analysis, and found four salient areas of tension that students shared with me that they considered challenging while interacting with their US peers in the context of higher education: conflicting understanding of Chinese culture, contrasting ideas of development, different perceptions of individual agency, and competing viewpoints on sovereignty.
Many students repeated a mantra: “the more/farther you leave, the more you love your country” (越出国越爱国), suggesting the salience of national identity may increase after moving to a new country. This also affirms the result of existing research, as students came to the disillusioned conclusion that the US was no utopia and had its share of problems, and that they would always be seen as foreign (Hail, 2015). Some students took offense at questions that reflected misconceptions of what China is, including stereotypes of cultural practices and stagnant development, while some others found criticisms of what China does, such as its way of governance (domestic) and claims of sovereignty (global). The variety in the nature of these questions means that one cannot label these students as simply nationalistic, irrational, or acting as tools of Chinese government in advancing its global dominance.

These negative connotations of portrayal of China led to powerful emotional reactions on the part of the students. In part II of my findings, I explore how students manage challenged cultural identity by examining the different typologies of response that they used, as well as the discourses that they accessed to defend and renegotiate their cultural identity in the context of US higher education.

In chapter 7, I showed that students relied on different strategies to manage the challenge to their cultural identity based on their understanding of social expectations and through their experiences with their US peers. I identified four response types of reacting to these criticisms of China, which I term detached bystander, reactive defender, pragmatic rationalizer, and open-minded incrementalist. These four response types summarize the kinds of defense and coping mechanisms that emerged from the study. Haste’s neo-Vygostkian model (Haste, 2014; Haste & Bermudez, 2017) locates the individual within a cultural, social, and dialogic
context, and the individual is an active agent who is in constant, iterative negotiation of meaning, identity, and credibility within various social contexts. Among the responses types, while the expressions of these two response types varied (engage versus not to engage), the reactive defender and the detached bystander both displayed varying degree of hostility toward the criticism itself and the critic. One way to explain such hostility is that it may have emerged as a consequence of various subjectivities, perhaps anger at being confronted with an external manifestation of their own helplessness, or the display of force that is a perception of power that one feels by feeling connected to their home country, or a strategic undermining of the US’ competitiveness by withholding information from its future elites.

Another notable feature for the response type of reactive defender was the sense of disappointment towards the professors. When professors in the US displayed public partisanship, or failed to meet the CIS’ expectation to step in at the correct moment, and address the misconceptions that students perceived their US peers to have, some CIS were deeply disheartened/let down/aghast. By championing of their national identity, this response type showed little willingness to alter their existing views on China. Presumably, professors would seem to be the appropriate figure of authority responsible for their intellectual growth and knowledge on navigating unfamiliar academic and social norms for the international students. Yet, the power that the professors are perceived to have, when colliding with newly injected academic expectations to challenge them, meant that despite some heat-of-the-moment impulses that students in this response type experienced to defend their home country, the expressions of their responses varied: some chose to actively dispute the criticism in or after the class, while some others chose self-preservation as compliant students by suppressing the intense emotion they may experience.
Both the pragmatic rationalizer and open-minded incrementalist were likely to recognize elements of truth in the criticism they encountered about China. Yet enacting agentic behavior is viewed unfavorably for the former, while the latter is the lone response type that is likely to express interest in engaging constructively with the critic. The open-minded incrementalist was the only type that was looking to convince the critics that they were wrong, and thus more willing to assume benevolence and engage in dialogues with the critics.

In trying to demonstrate the relationship between the openness of CIS towards criticism or misconception about China—their willingness to concede, and the expressions of their response type—inclination to engage in dialogues with their peers about the criticism or misconception itself, I present an illustration of these two attitudes as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action: Interest to engage</th>
<th>Reactive Defender</th>
<th>Open-minded incrementalist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Detached bystander</td>
<td>Pragmatic rationalizer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4. Matrix of Attitude and Action**

The “Willingness to concede” attitude axis illustrated in figure 4 is a representation of how likely the CIS used their responses to that even though they may not like the criticism, there was some truth to the statement. The “interest to engage” action axis indicates whether or not the participant would be likely to dialogue about the critique with the critics, or contemplate it. These two axes of attitude and action that the students revealed through their responses can be thought of as working simultaneously to construct what it means for them to be a Chinese student managing the critiques about China in their social contexts in the US.
In short, the typology of detached bystander expresses little interest to address the misconception or criticism about China both psychologically and in actuality, the typology of reactive defender operates in a reactive objection to misconception or criticism either externally or internally, the typology of pragmatic rationalizer shows willingness to concede over the degree of accuracy but rationalizes the misconception or criticism and resists agentic behavior, such as direct confrontation, and while the typology of open-minded incrementalist also displayed willingness to recognize elements of truth in the criticism, but demonstrates shifts, or openness to shifts in their thinking, and expresses desire to participate in agentic behavior such as problem solving. Just as culture and ideas are dynamic, adaptive, open, and in flux, these typologies of strategies students employed are also fluid, and one person may occupy multiple corners of the matrix depending on the context (i.e., the nature and venue of the interaction, sensitivity or familiarity with the topic and peers, or even over time).

The experience of encountering critiques about China engendered conflicts in how students evaluate peer relationships with classmates, colleagues, and faculty members. Both the reaction and inaction on the part of the students pose risks to the acculturation of CIS in the US. That is, these reactions and responses of inaction can allow misconceptions of China to continue, and as these misconceptions appear unchanging, contribute to a sense of isolation for CIS who feel their home country, and also who they are, is being maligned. The response type of “detached bystander” is neither likely to acknowledge the truth of critiques or to engage in dialogues, and reflected students’ management of the critiques with a transactional view. The likelihood to persuade the other, and likelihood to gain from the loss of the other seemed to determine the *active inaction* on the part of this response type to claim victory in the face of the critique. Similarly, while the intensity of emotion that a particular
critique generates was deterministic for some students to indicate action potential in participating in dialogue about the critique at the moment, such as the case of the response type of “reactive defender,” their immediate reactions did not necessarily manifest in a direct confrontation, often for the purpose of self-preservation.

On the other hand, as a defense mechanism, rationalization is used to explain or justify controversial decisions of the Chinese government. In the case of the response type of “pragmatic rationalizer,” expressed strong trust in the government and grateful tone for the progress it was able to make, justifying the necessary “evil” that China must take to serve a utilitarian goal for its people. The caveat here is that while this response type acknowledges some truth to the criticism, it is less inclined to engage in dialogues with the critic directly. In contrast, the type of “open-minded incrementalist” is more likely to acknowledge the truth of the criticism, and engage in dialogues with the critics about it. While it does show some degree of helplessness, the incrementalist is not hopeless. It indicates flexibility and movement within individual awareness and often intense interest on broader social issues across borders.

This study also takes an extended look at the faculty’s roles in the experiences of CIS in the US. Students noted the disbelief, anger, and hurt when they perceived a faculty member amplified or refused to mitigate what students characterized as misconceptions about China. Students reported feeling torn and disappointed when someone who they trusted as a credible figure of authority such as a professor failed to participate in discussions about China in a fair manner, or ignored CIS’ protests in or after class. In line with existing research on CIS cross-cultural adjustment, students pointed to faculty playing a decisive and facilitative role when it came to their cross-cultural experiences and overall perception of the higher education institutions in the US (Heng, 2018a; Jenkins, 2000; Yan & Berliner, 2009).
Especially in certain classes that were presumed to take a universal lens, such as international finance or global health, students expected them to be politics-free. Students looked to their professors for guidance and suggested a fair perspective on all countries should be inherent to the coursework. In the case where this vision or support did not deliver as expected, it was emotionally challenging.

Indeed, while many students in this study chose to speak up in the face of perceived unjust descriptions of China and its policies, their professors instead chose silence. Fortunately, for some students in this study, they did experience careful facilitation of sensitive topics, or genuine concern of their safety from some faculty members that they worked closely with, providing a venue for perhaps uncomfortable conversations (i.e. a discussion about China’s ethnic diversity) or expressed genuine concern for the students conducting what may be considered politically risky behaviors (i.e. taking pictures of Falun Gong members in Boston).

In chapter 8, I sought to answer my third research question, which is to unpack the discourses that CIS used to describe and respond to critiques about China, their home country. Using an integrated framework, drawing from the Foucauldian Discourse Analysis and Haste’s (2013) neo-Vygotskian model to analyze the ways that students talked about and positioned themselves, I was able to build a grounded argument for describing how students identify with varying perspectives of their home country, China, and what this identification makes possible for their meaning-making and identity building in the world.

I argue that different discourses carry with them a focus on different social practices. Two discourses, home country as family and home country as strange, were used in students’ constructions of patriotism, duty, ethics, and hope in students’ transnational context when talking about their perspectives on China. I also argue that the discourses of home country
that I have identified are useful for future research into the ways students relate to their home country and to the host country. My analysis provides additional insights into ways to investigate international students’ experiences through a constructive lens, and supply additional forays into implications for practitioners who work with and support international students. By including Haste’s neo-Vygotskian framework, I was able to describe how individuals act agentically and in constant, iterative negotiation of meaning, identity, and credibility within many social contexts.

Students constructed home countries either as familiar or as strange. These two constructions lead to the discourses of home country as family or as through a looking glass. As with all discourses and positionings, students move between these discourses fluidly. Depending on the kind of discourses that students are using, they have different actions and positionings available to them. For instance, if the CIS was talking about home country as family, then the action available to him/her are allegiance and obligation. They can summon strong emotions such as pride or anger, without feeling ashamed, and discuss their affective attachment at an individualized local level. On the other hand, if the CIS was talking about home country as through the looking glass, then the actions available to him/her are the actions of breaking away. This means he/she is able to make his/her own decisions, show their knowledge about certain facts, and be free from accountabilities that would otherwise be expected of him/her as a member of a particular ingroup.

Students used the discourse of home country as family when directing their perspectives on China on the need to maintain the cohesion of the Chinese community abroad. In this way, their language describing their perception of China, including its problems, resembled the language that they would use when talking with or about, a relative or friend. Because of this, I was able to use their speech act not just to describe the ways that
this talk might be important for their construction of China, but how it might matter for their dialogic interactions with their US peers.

At the same time, the home country as through a looking glass discourse was used to focus on the need to refresh certain knowledge or ideology, and to seek or create new opportunities for change. When they express their defiance of certain policies or events that take place in China—which may be the very thing that the challenging question about China that their US peers asked of them, they are not talking about the consequences of these challenges or problems as set in stone, but as carefully constructed opportunities that have the potential to an outcome that they deemed desirable. The way in which the students constructed their defiance and their place within it differed, however, and expressed greater or less efficacy.

By constructing or identifying with practices of the home country in a certain way in conversation with the critics, students are positioned in at least two ways. First, their responses positioned the CIS as those with special understanding and credibility of the country. As “a Chinese person,” for example, a CIS is able to contextualize and rationalize the intention and operationalization of certain policies. Secondly, such a construction or expressed affinity may allow the speaker to affirm the qualities that they share with other that they considered members of the ingroup. Students spoke about certain policies, events, or values that the critics consider negative, but which they related to and saw as positive—at least under certain conditions.

For example, seeing the perceived misconceptions about China as harmful, the desire to protect against the misconception may have played into Long’s defense of the banning of Google in China:

*We don’t have the same ratings system in China to determine the nature of products, like in media. Here when you watch certain videos, they’d ask you for your age. We don’t have*
things like this in China. If people can search and find whatever they want on Google, it would be problematic: How then can we protect our children?

By using the extreme scenario of harming the “children” and her own experience of using media in both China and US, Long used a discourse of human right to push back against the critics calling China’s censorship of Google as problematic in its own right. This allowed her to see her own places within this cross-cultural context in a more positive, and optimistic light.

Findings from this study also suggest that discourses are deployed in unique ways as part of each participant’s active meaning-making and identity development. Haste (2013) propose that identity is emergent and is interactively co-constructed through dialogic interactions and grand cultural narratives. For example, the discourse of home country as family allows Yin and Hong to authenticate themselves firmly as being Chinese first, a subject position which carried cultural norms and ethical confines of obligation and responsibility with some practical and emotional consequences. Positioning herself as having access to multiple possibilities in both China and the US protects Jia for being critical of what was absent in China in case of a potential backlash, while also creating spaces for her to feel comfortable in seeing her agency within both contexts as fluid. For Rong, the same positioning as having access to different possibilities stresses the responsibility that individuals have to each other as a collective, unbounded by nationalities or ethnicities, and carries with it a moral calling to seek ways to understand cultural and political differences in multiple contexts.

Assuming the goal of international education is to promote constructive discussions and exchange of ideas across the globe, having an open mindset and a willingness to engage in critical and perhaps difficult conversations is a necessity. This applies to both the
international students and the American students, and difficult conversations would have to also include American students to disabuse them of the “shallow knowledge” of China that is perhaps stuck in the past, or be provided with additional contextual clues to understand the complexity of China, its people, and its aspirations now and in the future.

There is a need to attend to international student experiences and their emergent identity development as they construct their new sociocultural contexts through dialogic interactions with their peers and the grand cultural narratives. This discussion of themes and discourses about CIS’ home country offered in this dissertation is an additional step toward designing thoughtful curricular for international students, and research in higher education institutions interested in building on this work.

*Study Limitations*

I worked throughout the entire research process to enhance validity, I also worked to limit additional validity threats, including my reactivity (influence on the participants), and my bias as a researcher (impact of my frames of references on my analysis) (Maxwell, 2013). While qualitative research recognizes that the analyst’s beliefs and bias cannot be completely eliminated, but they can be limited. For example, I am cognizant of the lens that I bring to this study and a personal understanding of an international student experience in the US as one myself. While I know that this bias is always present, I have done my best to foreground the language of my youth, so that my readers will have the opportunity to come to their own conclusions. To limit my reactivity in participants during the data collection phase, I pilot tested and refined my questions to be open-ended that centered on participant’s own definitions and experiences. Surely, in the same way that it is impossible to completely eliminate researcher bias, it is impossible to eliminate the ways that my presence could have impacted the response received from students. Another researcher with a different
background, gender, familiarity with the student, or another time, talking to the same
students might get different answers. But through the strategies that I used in my data
gathering and analysis to address both researcher bias and reflectivity, their answers are
credible, reflecting the multiplicity in social constructionism framework.

While I worked to ensure validity, limitations to the work that I was still able to do
still exist. To start, the conclusions that I have drawn about students, their coping with, and
renegotiation of, their challenged cultural identity about China is not generalizable. Not
every citizen bounded by nationality and border, especially one as large and diverse as
China’s, shares the affection or loyalty to the party or the country. As such, I am cautious
and aware of the danger in portraying the CIS experiences or perceptions as homogeneous
across the group. Further, the data were collected from two private universities in the greater
Boston region. This region is an extremely liberal and wealthy area that is known for its
world-renowned universities, different from the conservative and more rural regions where
some other universities also are located. The social and economic contexts where these
conversations took place are not representative of all the Chinese international students who
study in various colleges and universities across in the US. The students who study at this
region, for example, tend to be ambitious and well-resourced. However, students from the
wider population may share similar views as my students. Indeed, many of the areas of
tension to their cultural identity that my students narrated, and their beliefs about how they
would manage such tension are relevant to many other CIS who pursue degree programs in
the US. As such, my findings offer a glimpse into the lives of CIS in the context of US
higher education that extends beyond my sample of 20 students.

The low participation of male students in my study is astounding. Of the 20 students
who participated in this study, only 4 were male. As I did not pursue and structure this study
with an intentional gender analysis in mind, it is difficult to speculate why so few males volunteered for this study. Increasingly, research has explored gender variations in the context of tension (such as racial discrimination) for international students, including differences in the resilience and coping strategies (Tsai & Wei, 2018). Given that I set out to understand students’ experiences and reconstruction of challenged cultural identity in tension, that more women volunteered for this study may reflect, for example, a perspective of gender role socialization in a particular strand of culture. Or, taking a sociocultural perspective, men may have been reluctant to participate in this study related to implicit pressures of the discourse of masculinity, where to acknowledge adversity may be interpreted as a sign of weakness.

This research is designed to provide windows into students’ perception of the challenging critiques asked of them by their peers, through their eyes, and how they manage such critiques in their role as Chinese students studying in the context of US higher education. Under different circumstances, I would have liked to triangulate my interview data with other sources, such as observation and documentations, or interviews with other members in the universities who interact with these students (professors, staff, domestic students, etc.)

*Implications for Research*

Exploration of Chinese international students’ identity development in the sociocultural context of US higher education, is still nascent. The findings in my study reveal that the tension that students experience does not only come from cultural misunderstanding, differences in values, or lack of language ability, but also occurs as part of a struggle on the part of the themselves to act as unofficial ambassadors, and to defend national reputation and assert loyalty to one’s nation in the new context. The areas of
tension that students identified are primarily situated in what China is, including different perspectives on culture and development, and what China does, which is primarily on the conflicting ideas of individual agency and views on sovereignty (global). As China is going through unprecedented economic, cultural, social and psychological processes, what it means to be Chinese both inside and outside of China is being reconstructed and renegotiated in ways that are historically and culturally specific. As such, for all of its diversity across different regions, ethnicities, and social classes, it is important that future research on the topic of Chinese international student identity development to further disaggregate differential experience within China, and add to categories traditionally invested by studies on international students, such as ethnicity and nationality.

Additionally, given that all of my participants attended private universities in the Greater Boston area with a large presence of international students, their institutions were generally liberal leaning, well-resourced and well-intentioned in terms of their support for Chinese international students. As such, the subset of students included in this study likely represent those who were both relatively comfortable in a cross-cultural setting that is also relatively rich in resources and support. This study revealed that even students in such broadly supportive institutional and social circumstances, still face tensions that challenge their cultural identity. Additionally, my findings indicate CIS undergo identity development at their own speed. Future studies should expand the composition of participants across multiple dimensions to include, but not be limited to, students from more gender identity, college type, socioeconomic status, and length of stay in the host country. Such attributes contribute to students’ perception of their experiences of their international education, and also how the tension they experience in the US is understood by themselves and perceived by others. Future studies might also include representation across a greater variation of
disciplines and arrival time in the US (High school, undergraduate, or graduate) to further elucidate how varying academic and social norms and expectations impact student experiences and identities differently. Going back to the matrix, if we value open-mindedness, perspective taking, and virtue in participating in change making, then one of our objectives as educators is to move international students towards the upper right corner of the matrix as they live and study in an unfamiliar sociocultural context. A future study might look at the accumulative effect of different variables (relationship with peers, meaningful extracurricular activities, mentorships, etc.) that could facilitate the students’ movement in their thinking towards the open-minded incrementalist space.

There is still work to be done investigating international student identity development through a qualitative lens. The findings indicate that CIS respond to different areas of tension differently, and manage their cultural identity in various ways over the course of a semester. Future research can perform a longitudinal study by collecting data at various points in international students’ journeys of studying in the host nation, as the socialization patterns, challenges, responses, and discourses available to students change over time. Additionally, investigating the variety of networks that the students access, family, academia, friendship, professional, would help enrich the overall understanding of CIS expectations and experiences in the US.

I have only used a fraction of the interview data gathered in 2017-2018 in my analysis for my dissertation. The depth with which I needed to go into one segment of the data, how students made sense of and renegotiated their challenged cultural identities, meant that a great deal of data were left unexplored. This also includes analyzing the data gathered that related to their evolving attitude towards China after having lived in the US, understanding of global citizenship, focus group discussions that explored three hypothetical social
dilemmas that are particularly relevant to Chinese international students in the US, as well as their plans and rationales after graduation. I plan to continue working or collaborating with other interested researchers on this data over the next few years.

Additionally, I plan to continue doing a systematic in-depth Foucauldian Discourse Analysis across the group to reveal more discourses that are available to, and make possible for, Chinese international students in my sample. I believe my framework of Home country as Family and Home country as Strange might be a useful tool for looking at the ways that international student communities speak about their home countries, where home country evokes different subjectivity and action orientation, and where community members might position their home country in a variety of ways.

This study offers up multiple avenues for future investigation. It could take the form of further use of, and inquiry into, the analytical method used, further work with existing interpretations of Foucault’s analytical approach with a sociocultural perspective, and further investigation into the discourses that students use when speaking about their identities in relation to their home country.
Chapter 10: Implications for Practice

While this study is important for multiple possibilities of future research, it also holds important insights for institutions that host international students, and those working with international students in these universities.

In the previous chapters, I have demonstrated students’ strong motivation to view and present China positively in the sociocultural context of the US. The tension that students experience does not come only from cultural misunderstanding, differences in values, or lack of language ability, but also occurs as part of a struggle on the part of the themselves to act as unofficial ambassadors. The impulse to defend national reputation and assert loyalty to one’s nation can be seen as a way to manage the tension they experience as their cultural identity is challenged. Yet my analysis showed that both the reaction and inaction on the part of the CIS pose risks to their acculturation in the US. That is, these reactions and responses of inaction can allow misconceptions of China to continue, and as these misconceptions appear unchanging, contribute to a sense of isolation for CIS who feel their home country, and also who they are, is being maligned. While this study cannot, and will not generalize from such a small sample of data to the CIS in the US as a whole, the findings are important to promote intellectual and intercultural understandings between Chinese international students, and both students and faculties at the host country.

Assuming the goal of international education is to promote constructive discussions and exchange of ideas across the globe (Gacel-Ávila, 2005), having an open mindset and a willingness to engage in critical and perhaps difficult conversations is a necessity. This applies to both the international students themselves and both the American students and faculty. Appreciating the complexities of Chinese students’ experiences and positions can help minimize the deficit discourse that American faculties and students hold about China
and Chinese students, and enrich their “perceptions of, provisions for, and relations with Chinese students” (Heng, 2018, p. 33). This means that such difficult conversations would have to also include American students to disabuse them of the “shallow knowledge” of China that is perhaps stuck in the past. This also means facilitating such difficult conversations between students from mainland China, and students from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau, Tibet, and Xinjiang, regions of Great China where they may not necessarily self-identify as politically, socially, culturally Chinese to find common ground in interrogating their cultural past and facing aspirations in the future.

The Chinese international students are a complex coalition of different groups and ideas. In this study, their responses showed that they took on the role of “unofficial ambassadors” willingly or unwillingly, and that they carry with them their cultural identity and even national interests. While these responses of typologies reflected traces of the patriotic educational campaign that they were subject to while in China, it is only one facet of the education that they receive. The large presence of Chinese international students in the US also subject to the diverse culture and information from their universities. It is vital to recognize that abilities, attitudes, behaviors, and values are not stagnant but can change iteratively. The different response types reveal that they make deliberate calculations and efforts to evaluate the situations that they are in, and these efforts are aided by perception of benevolence of their peers, and increased contextual familiarity. Using the Matrix of action and attitude that I proposed in the previous chapter, if educators value open-mindedness, perspective taking, and virtue in participating in change making, then one of the objectives for those working with the CIS should be to move the CIS towards the upper right corner of the matrix as they live and study in an unfamiliar sociocultural context in the US.
Further, the discourses of home country put forward in this study would be an excellent way to conceptualize identity when talking to Chinese international students. Identifying moments when the students are talking about home country as family versus talking about home country as through the looking glass, can act as a baseline to help those working with the Chinese international students to know how students are conceptualizing their cultural identity. Increased use of the discourse of home country as through the looking glass might imply a more critical stance and could act as a metric for educators.

Using a social constructionist framework with students, might be helpful in teaching them to question the status quo, and to analyze the ways that text or speech positions particular populations. For example, this framework could be used with coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic before and after it spread beyond China to help students analyze the ways that a particular messaging is embedded to position different individuals within the story and what positions might be achieving and propagating. Unpacking and challenging the discourse can help students understand debates such as interpretations of historical events, ethnic tensions, same sex marriage, the legality of territorial disputes, legitimacy of government in Eastern and Western societies.

Particularly poignant is existing research showing that the majority of the Chinese international students will actually return to China and potentially take on important positions in academia, technology, business or government (Hao et al., 2017). If the American universities are indeed committed to support the large numbers of international students they enroll, and educators are serious and committed to strengthening individuals’ capacities in their positive change making, then universities and educators must be more attentive to use culturally appropriate tools and pedagogies to create opportunities (i.e., forming meaningful relationships with host students, providing opportunities to participate...
in reflection or perspective generating activities/clubs/coursework without directly referencing their country’s problems in areas that generates most tension.) while they are in the US to facilitate these students’ success as future leaders in an even more globalized and integrated world.
Appendix A: Recruitment Email

[Recruitment Email to distribute through official channels, student associations and social media]

Dear student,

My name is Siwen Zhang 14(My legal name was changed to Siwen Zhang Minero after data collection was completed), a doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. I am wondering if you would be interested in participating in a research study. For my dissertation, I am interviewing Chinese international students like you who are in their junior years at an undergraduate program, to understand more about your experiences as an international student in the US. I would like to learn what your experiences transitioning from China to your university, how you made the decision to come to the US, your educational and community experiences in the US, global issues that concern you, and how you see yourself as a contributing member of both societies.

If you would consider participating in this study, please email me to find out more. Participation will involve meeting for two 60-minute interviews over the course of 11/2017-04/2018 at a time and place of your choosing. Additionally, to converse with your peers about issues that concern or are relevant to you, I may also invite you to participate in a focus group discussion. If you agree to be interviewed, I will keep your interview responses confidential and will assign both you and your university pseudonyms to protect your identity. I hope this research will give you the opportunity to tell your story and reflect on your experiences. Participation in the study is voluntary, even if you agree to be interviewed, you will maintain the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

I hope you will agree to participate in this study. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me. I have also included the contact information for my dissertation chair, Professor Helen Haste, and for Harvard’s Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Research, which has approved this study. Thank you so much for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Siwen Zhang, Doctoral Candidate, Harvard Graduate School of Education
Siz072@mail.harvard.edu15 818-270-0601.
Professor Helen Haste
Helen_haste@gse.harvard.edu 617-354-1544
Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Research, Harvard University
cuhs@harvard.edu , 617-496-2847

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14 My legal name was changed to Siwen Zhang Minero after data collection was complete.
15 With my name change, this email was changed to siwen_minero@gse.harvard.edu
Appendix B: Screening Survey (via Qualtrics)

Information on school standing:
- Name of university where you are currently studying:
- What is your departmental affiliation?
- What year did you enter the undergraduate program?
- Is there any other background information regarding your education you would like to share? (E.g. If you transferred from other schools, if you came from an international high school, etc.)

Study Participant Info:
- Name:
- Email Address:
- Phone Number:
- Current age:
- What is your gender:
- What is your nationality?
- I preferred to be reached via: Email/Phone/Text.
- If you are eligible to participate in the main study, the full study design involves 2 interviews across 3 months, and to be randomly selected for a focus group interview, totaling approximately 3 hours. All interviews will be scheduled at your convenience.
- Is there any other information that you wish to provide at this time?
- Please check below and click the next arrow to submit your answers and confirm that you provide permission to the researcher to contact you regarding participation in the main study if you are eligible. If you would like to withdraw interest in this study, please close the survey window.
  - Yes, I agree to be contacted by the researcher if I am eligible for the study.

Thank you for your interest in the study on the tensions of critical global citizenship. Following the receipt of this screening survey, I will contact you regarding eligibility for the study. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researcher, Siwen Zhang, at siwen_zhang@gse.harvard.edu, or 818-270-0601.
Appendix C: Interview Guides

Interview 1 Guide

[Warm up] I want to start by asking you a bit about your schooling experiences in China.
1. How long have you been in the US? Where do you consider home and what do you miss about it?
   你在美国多久啦？你觉得对你来说，哪里是家？你最想念关于家的什么？
2. Whose decision was it for you to study in the US? What did you want to get most out of your experiences at a US university?
   当初是谁决定让你来美国读书的？你最希望通过在美国读书学到什么？
3. Why did you choose BU/NEU? (e.g. University’s reputation? Location? Program? Family?)
   为什么选择 BU/NEU？
4. I understand that in high school, there were classes on political education as part of the curriculum. What were your biggest takeaways?
   我知道咱们在高中都上过一节课，叫做“思想政治”或者“社会与生活”，你觉得这堂课你最大的收获是什么？
5. In thinking back, what was your first year at BU/NEU like (cultural, social, academic, etc.)?
   能描述一下你在学校第一年的生活吗？
6. What resources or programs that helped you adjust to BU/NEU?
   学校有什么样的资源或者项目帮助你更好的适应学校生活呢？
7. Can you share a highlight/sad moment after your arrival?
   是否可以和我分享一下，在你留学过程中特别难忘的一个时刻（特别开心/难过）？
8. Do you spend any time on activities/volunteering related to school? How active are you on campus and in your communities? What motivated you to participate in these activities?
   你在学校是否参加社团或者志愿者活动？觉得自己积极吗？你为什么参加这些社团活动呢？
9. What have you learned? (e.g. About learning expectations and teaching styles in the universities in the U.S.? About the U.S. culture?)
   留学这段时间，学到了什么呢？（比如关于老师的上课风格/期望啊/美国学校/美国文化呢？）
10. Do you feel particularly Chinese here in the US? Why or why not?
    你觉得你特别中国吗？为什么？
11. Has being in the US change how you think about China?
    你的留学经历对你对中国的看法会有什么影响或者改变么？
12. Are there things that you couldn’t do in the China but you can do in US? Can you give me an example?
    有没有某些事在中国不可以说或者做，在美国可以的呢？
13. What if any, examples can you think of when you were asked by your American friends about China (religious practices, cultural celebrations, or political events) that made you think twice about how to answer them?
    是否有这样的情景，当你的美国朋友问你关于中国的（宗教，文化，或者政治）事情的时候，让你需要想一想再回答？
how informed/uninformed are these American peers? 你认为他们有多了解中国？

If/when you thought they were misinformed about China, what actions did you take, if any, to address their misconceptions? Why or why not? 如果你认为他们对中国不了解，你采取了哪些行动，来改变他们这些错误的想法？为什么？

In your attempt to address your friends’ questions about China, what, if any, new pieces of information or evidence did you come across? How were they similar or different from your original understanding of your friend’s questions? What were your reactions? 在纠正你的美国朋友这些关于中国的误解时，你是否有遇到一些新的信息或者数据，和你原来的了解不一样的呢？他们和你朋友对中国的理解是否有出入？你的反应是什么？

14. Finally, which country do you think is currently more powerful in the world? What about in 10 or 20 years? Why? 最后，你认为世界上最强大的国家是哪个？再过 10 年、20 年呢？为什么？

[Potential follow-up prompts]:

- Can you give me any example of an occasion when…?
- Can you say a bit more about…?
- Can you think of similar incidents of the example you gave about…?
Interview 2 Guide

[Warm up] Today I am going to ask you a few questions about your experiences at your university.

1. How would you describe life as an undergraduate student in the U.S. to your friend and family back home?
   如果你要给国内的家人或者朋友描述你在美国的本科生活，你会怎么说？
2. What makes a successful student at your university? How successful would you say you are as a student so far? Why?
   在你们学校，怎么样才是一个成功的学生？你觉得自己是一个成功的学生吗？
3. What are your aspirations after college? Do you see the connection between what you are learning and what you want to do after?
   毕业以后你的打算是什么？现在你在学习的东西和你毕业以后想做的事有什么联系呢？
   There is a buzzword in China termed by President Xi, the “Chinese dream”, can you tell me about it? (if they do not know, ask about their own understanding). What kind of changes do you hope to take place in the context of the “Chinese dream”?
   国内这几年有一个热门词汇，叫做“中国梦”，你能告诉我这个“中国梦”指的是什么吗? (如果说不出来，问学生自己的理解)在这样的情形下，你希望中国有什么改变？
4. Do you feel that as an US student returnee, that you have a higher chance of making the “Chinese dream” a reality than those who didn’t study abroad? Why or why not?
   作为一个海外留学生，你觉得你比国内那些没有留学的人更有可能帮助把你说的这个“中国梦”成为现实吗？为什么？
5. Do you follow any US or China news? What types of current political events in the US and/or China, if any, do you pay attention to? How do you learn about them?
   你平时看美国或者中文的新闻吗？一般会关注什么样的新闻或者事件？都是怎么知道的？
6. What do you think makes a good citizen? What about that of a good person?
   你觉得什么样算是一个好公民？好人呢？这两者有区别吗？
7. What differences do you think are there between being a member of the society in the US vs in China?
   你觉得在美国和中国，作为社会的一分子/一个公民，有什么样的主要区别？
8. What current social issues do you care about in China, why?
   你现在比较关注中国什么样的社会问题？
9. Wherever you are in the future, no matter in the US or China, if you really care about something, or are against something, how can you participate in conversations or movements to change the outcome?
   不管将来你在美国还是在中国，如果有你特别在意或者反对的话题，你会怎么样更好的参与一些对话，帮助推进它们的改变？

Vignette:
The case of Yang Shuping
1) Did you know about the case of Yang Shuping? Did you read her speech? (If not, hand them a speech transcript)
   知道杨舒平的事件吗？有没有读她的演讲稿？
2) What do you think of her decision to use the air as a metaphor to describe freedom?
   你觉得她这个演讲有什么样的问题？你对这个用空气来比喻自由，你对这个比喻的评价怎么样？
3) Given your experience studying in the US, what do you think is the importance of academic freedom?
   你在美国留学这么长一段时间，你觉得自由重要吗？
4) If you were Yang’s parents or friends, would you worry about? What do you worry about and why?
   如果你是杨的朋友或者家长，在演讲传播开后，你会为她担心吗？为什么？
5) If you had a friend like Yang, would you advise her to approach this speech in another way?
   如果你有杨这样的朋友，你会怎么样建议她来用同样的材料来组织她的演讲稿呢？

[Closing]: Thank you so much for taking the time to share your experiences with me!

- Is there something else you’d like to add?
- Do you have any questions for me?
Appendix D: Individual consent forms

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Please consider this information carefully before deciding whether to participate in this research.

Purpose of the research: As I mentioned in my email, the purpose of this study is to learn more about how you learn more about your experiences as an international student in the US. Before we get started, I want to mention that there are no “right” or “wrong” answers. I am interested in learning about how and why you make certain decisions, your experiences as a transnational individual, and not just what you do. So, you should not feel like you have to speak in generalizations about the experiences of all Chinese international students; instead I would like to know about your own experiences and reflections. I hope to be able to share these findings with the research community as well as with people in government agencies and non-profit organizations that offer support to international students. I would also like to share the findings with you and will make sure that you get a copy of all the reports.

What you will do in this research: If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate one formal interview of 90-minute at a time and place of your choosing. You will not be asked to state your name on the recording.

Time required: The interview will take approximately 90 minutes.

Risks: No risks are anticipated.

Benefits: This is a chance for you to tell your story and reflect on your experiences learning in the US.

Confidentiality: Your responses to interview questions will be kept confidential. At no time will your actual identity be revealed. You will be assigned a pseudonym. Anyone who helps me transcribe responses will only know you by this pseudonym. The recording will be destroyed one year after the research study is completed. The transcript, without your name, will be kept until one year after the report for this research is completed. The key code linking your name with your pseudonym will be kept in a locked office, and no one else will have access to it. It will be destroyed when the report for this research is completed.

The data you give me will be used for a report to the district about the impact of lesson study on professional learning, my dissertation for my Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) program, and may be used as the basis for articles or presentations in the future. I won’t use your name or information that would identify you in any publications or presentations. However, due to the small nature of this sample, it is possible that you may not be completely anonymous due to your role, so I ask you to keep this in mind while you answer the questions.

Participation and withdrawal: Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You may withdraw by informing me that you no longer wish to participate (no questions will be asked). You may also skip any question during the interview, but continue to participate in the rest of the study.

Confidentiality, Audio Recording, and Consent
With your permission, I would like to audio record this interview. It is important for me to capture your thoughts and ideas and using the recorder will allow me to do this more accurately than writing up your responses as we talk. Do you mind if I record this interview?

I will be the only person who has access to the interview materials in which you are identified. In order to protect your identity from others, I am using a pseudonym for the university’s name and will assign all study participants a pseudonym as well in any written communications about my study. The year of data collection will also be vague (2013-2018) in order to provide for confidentiality.

I want to make sure that I have your consent to participate in this study. This consent form goes over the same things we have just talked about. Once you have read the form, please sign it to document that you have agreed to be part of this research. You should feel free to ask me questions about the research at any time. If you decide that you would not like to participate in the research, you can say “stop,” and we will stop at any time.

To Contact the Researcher: If you have questions or concerns about this research, please contact: Siwen Zhang, Phone: 818-270-0601. Email: siz072@mail.havard.edu. You may also contact the faculty member supervising this work: Helen Haste, Phone: 617-354-1544. Email: Helen_Haste@gse.harvard.edu.

This research is being reviewed by the Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Research at Harvard University. They can be reached at 617-496-2847, 1414 Massachusetts Avenue, Second Floor, Cambridge, MA 02138, or cuhs@fas.harvard.edu for any of the following:

- If your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team,
- If you cannot reach the research team,
- If you want to talk to someone besides the research team, or
- If you have questions about your rights as a research participant.

Statement of Consent
I have read the information in this consent form. All my questions about the research have been answered to my satisfaction.

SIGNATURE
Your signature below indicates your permission to take part in this research. You will be provided with a copy of this consent form.

Signed name of participant
Signature of participant
Date
Date
**Statement of Consent**
I have read the information in this consent form. All my questions about the research have been answered to my satisfaction.

**SIGNATURE**
Your signature below indicates your permission to take part in this research. You will be provided with a copy of this consent form.

__________________________________________  ______________________________________
Printed name of participant                    Signature of participant

__________________________________________  ______________________________________
Date                                           Date
Appendix E: Main themes and codes for RQ 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1: Conflicting understandings of Chinese culture</th>
<th>Theme 2: Contrasting ideas of development</th>
<th>Theme 3: Different perceptions of individual agency</th>
<th>Theme 4: Competing viewpoints on sovereignty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Consulted as experts on culture at superficial level: food, rituals, language, etc.</td>
<td>• Slow to change misconceptions of China’s development</td>
<td>• Being asked to explain China’s controversial domestic policies</td>
<td>• Hard to fathom why anyone would disagree with China’s territorial claims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• American’s mystification of “Asian” culture</td>
<td>• Understand China’s development as ignoring all costs (i.e., environmental, human)</td>
<td>• China’s harsh treatment of defiant citizens</td>
<td>• Difference in opinion in “who” decides sovereignty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Misplaced cultural origins</td>
<td>• China’s manufacturers as poor in quality</td>
<td>• Americans’ understanding of China’s domestic policy as frozen in time</td>
<td>• Anger as emotionally and physically felt when question of sovereignty is challenged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Arguing for culture as dynamic (not stagnant)</td>
<td>• Chinese people’s mindset as backwards</td>
<td>• China’s CCP as one-dimensionally authoritarian</td>
<td>• “Lacks” the power as an individual to change certain Americans’ advocacy for contested regions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Balancing desire of deep communication with Americans about Chinese culture with discomfort of not knowing enough about Chinese culture.</td>
<td>• Seeing China’s progress as based on copyright infringement</td>
<td>• Assuming Chinese people to be powerless</td>
<td>• Looking down on those who do not consider themselves as “Han/Mainland” Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Assuming Chinese people to be helpless</td>
<td>• Western media as biased against China’s protection of its land due to ideological disagreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Assuming Chinese people as “brainwashed”</td>
<td>• Americans’ own lack of willingness to hear the other side of the story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Chinese people expected to adapt to American’s idea of liberty</td>
<td>• Lack of understanding of the full history of certain regions of China</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix F: Main themes and codes for RQ 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1: Detached bystander</th>
<th>Theme 2: Reactive defender</th>
<th>Theme 3: Pragmatic rationalizer</th>
<th>Theme 4: Open-minded incrementalist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engagement as wasteful (“not worth my time”)</td>
<td>Disagreeing automatically on statements that contradict previous understanding</td>
<td>Acceptance of “dark past” as inevitable</td>
<td>Has to focus on “what really matters”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengagement as strategic (to blindside opponent)</td>
<td>Disagreeing for the face of the country</td>
<td>Limited personal rights (liberty, freedom, etc.) as normal price to pay for collective stability</td>
<td>Need to examine problems in contextualized ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displaying inaction (let it pass)</td>
<td>Feeling strong urge to dispute</td>
<td>Stability as important in sustaining current prosperity</td>
<td>Willingness to embrace discomfort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reluctance to engage in position as China’s diplomat abroad</td>
<td>Engaging in features of nationalist perspective</td>
<td>Attaching political leaders as ungrateful</td>
<td>Open mindset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal empowerment conditions engagement</td>
<td>Importance of winning an argument</td>
<td>“Best possible scenario” for China</td>
<td>Ability to question as virtue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding conflict to preserve interpersonal relationships</td>
<td>Evidence as irrelevant</td>
<td>Need not focus on negative or past mistakes</td>
<td>OK with having existing values “uprooted”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism as disrespectful</td>
<td>Anger as inevitable</td>
<td>Western paradigm unfit with China’s unique situation</td>
<td>“Others” can know about “my” culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Western bias”</td>
<td>Normal for government to want to censor for maintaining good “face”</td>
<td>Question “collective” value as the benchmark for individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trouble getting China’s perspective recognized</td>
<td>Collective power to propel evolution of all nations</td>
<td>Problems exist “universally”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal discrimination against China</td>
<td>“Nothing is absolutely right or wrong” in history</td>
<td>Feeling empowered to participate in problem-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intentional sabotaging of China’s reputation</td>
<td>Normal for people to have different perspective</td>
<td>Problems need to be examined holistically</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Arriving at Code: identity reconstruction

Being in a new country, making new friends, and facing uncomfortable questions, bring many contradictions that one’s experience, especially when it comes to existing worldviews. This is especially true for Chinese singletons, who grew up in a culture that prioritizes and advocates for the “collective” ideals. Yet the domestic policies and teaching do not leave much room for collective ideas or democratic principles, and instead attend to a narrow idea of the collective: us versus them. This student, Fei, is caught in a web of contradictions in her development. This is a familiar sentiment that I also shared, growing up in China. Fei’s chosen labeling of the groups are “Chinese”, “we”, “the informed”, and she’s coming to the acknowledgement that such labeling are not universally accepted, that there are different interpretations and exceptions to these groups by others through their labeling. She recalls an emotional response to disputes of her original criteria about being “Chinese” (people)—this includes not only those in mainland China, but also HK and Taiwan. This is something that she grew up with, and therefore finds great difficulty when her Taiwanese friend insists on her identity as being “Taiwanese” but not “Chinese”, or when the professor ignores a Chinese classmate’s comment that HK is part of China. Fei reports discomfort in being challenged by this new information and as if she “lived in Truman’s world”, she begins to question everything, having a significant part of her value system destroyed.

It is difficult to admit self being wrong—or at the very least, not entirely right. For CIS in US higher education, they not only adopted social group labels passed onto them through tradition, influence of media, education and observation from home country (China), but are simultaneously experiencing this on their US campuses. This means the potential for two different value system to collide and create conflict, and demands the individuals in the midst of it to acquire more information and the ability to see things from different angles, to then reconstruct a new way of being. Fei seems very aware of such differences, and uses the word “destroyed” to describe her value system, when facing new information about China and identity. She seems to be learning by reconstructing—from the shattering of the original worldview that she believed to be part of her own identity, to changing cognitively with the challenges/new interpretations, and reconstructing her own ideas about one’s identity.
References


Terry, G., & Braun, V. (2013). “We have friends, for example, and he will not get a vasectomy”: Imagining the self in relation to others when talking about sterilization. *Health Psychology, 32*(1), 100–109. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029081


https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12084